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The Iraq War: a Story of Deceit

By Vijay Prashad
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On July 28, 2002, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote a memorandum to American President George W. Bush about Iraq. “I will be with you, whatever,” Blair wrote with teenager’s diction. It was a pledge that Blair would keep through the year and into the illegal war against Iraq that the Bush administration prosecuted in 2003. Not only did this war break Iraq—a country weakened by the sanctions regime and its earlier wars—but it also severely threatened the legitimacy of the West in the eyes of the world. It took six years for an inquiry to be opened in Britain.

Finally, after much delay, the Chilcot Report—all of 2.6 million words—has been released. It tells a great story of deceit. There is no Chilcot inquiry in the United States, where perhaps it is most needed. Both of the major political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, are damaged by their unity on this war. Bush led the way, but Democratic front-runner for the presidency, Hillary Clinton, voted for the war in Congress. Controversy over the lead-up to the war remains in the U.S., but none of the major political parties would like a Chilcot inquiry in the U.S.

In the U.S., the debate over Iraq has been placed on mute. Hillary Clinton's vote for the war means that Democrats do not want to make this an issue in the presidential election. Donald Trump, the Republican candidate, had supported the war in 2003. He now says he opposes it. But his entire party bears culpability for the war. In a primary debate, Trump attacked Bush for the war. It was an unusual moment. Bush's brother Jeb Bush was on the stage then. He defended his brother, and also stood up for his party. Trump has since been silent on the Iraq war.

No major U.S. newspaper is willing to conduct its own inquiry. The New York Times' own complicity in the build-up of fear around Iraq's weapons of mass destruction will not be fully investigated. Its reporter—Judith Miller—routinely produced stories that reproduced the government's agenda. No other paper did the due diligence required on what the Bush administration was saying. When over one million people marched against the war in New York City, their dissent received minimal coverage. The U.S. media's complicity in that period makes it less than willing to take a firm position now for the creation of a U.S.-version of the Chilcot inquiry.

Longer timelines

One of the grave limitations of the Chilcot inquiry is that it opens its timeline in 2001. That is when the U.S. sent feelers to Britain about joint action against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell sent a secret memo to Bush that "Blair will be with us should military operations be necessary". Powell told the British Prime Minister (to check?) that the U.S. "is convinced the threat is real"—by threat he meant Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. was clear then that "success against Saddam will yield more regional success". But even here there is fog. The U.K. and the U.S. had struck Iraq several times in the previous decade. They had not waited for multilateral action or for unimpeachable evidence of such weapons.

In 1991, after the U.S.-led war on Iraq, the United Nations Security Council put forward a series of resolutions to push Iraq to disarm. On the basis of these resolutions, the U.K. and the U.S. (with the French at times) struck hard at Iraqi targets. The most dramatic of such bombing run was conducted by the U.K. and the U.S. in December 1998. This operation, called the Operation Desert Fox, hit a hundred Iraqi targets over four days. It took place just after the U.N. body tasked with monitoring Iraqi disarmament (UNSCOM) released its report. UNSCOM had complained that Iraqis had not cooperated to the fullest extent. Even as the Security Council discussed the UNSCOM report, the U.S. and the U.K. bombed Iraq. They did not wait for the discussion or its findings. This bothered China and Russia, who had wanted to have a debate about the UNSCOM report before taking any action. Itchy fingers had been in place in Washington and London in the 1990s. It did not take 2001 for this history to begin.

Why is the longer history important to this story? A backward glance at the 1990s will show how the widest political consensus had been built in the U.S. and the U.K. for armed action against Iraq. Certainly, Bush and Blair played an outsized role in the deceit that led to the final destruction of the Iraqi state. But it was not merely Bush and Blair. The entire Democratic establishment in the U.S. (under Clinton) and the Conservative party in Britain (under John Major) had been part of the rush to war against Iraq. Chilcot's report narrows the framework. It

does not have the appetite to condemn the entire political class. It points a finger at Blair, who will find it hard to defend his record in view of the detailed material in the report. Other British politicians hide behind Blair. They would like to stay in the shadows.

Hollywood Intelligence

By 2002, the U.S. government had begun to make it clear that it had irrefutable evidence that Saddam Hussein's Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. U.S. intelligence chiefs briefed the British but did not reveal that their sources were few, and most of them had said things of great falsehood under torture. Sir Mark Allen, who headed MI6's counter-intelligence branch told Chilcot, "Actually our knowledge of Iraq was very, very superficial. We were small animals in a dark wood with the wind getting up and changing direction the whole time'. Without proper sources, intelligence analysts on both sides of the Atlantic took refuge in Hollywood movies. A film called The Rock had shown nerve agents in glass spheres. This was the Hollywood villain version of Saddam. Chilcot points to how this film influenced the intelligence and suggests that 'glass containers were not typically used in chemical munitions'. U.S. intelligence, using torture testimony and Hollywood fantasy, dazzled some sections of British intelligence. They are the ones who participated in the hallucination about Iraq's threat to world peace."

Threads in the Chilcot inquiry point towards the U.S. Who manufactured some of these stories? What was the role of the U.S. intelligence services, along with German intelligence, in the creation of Curveball (one of the sources)? Who among the U.S. government's lawyers insisted to the British in February 2003 that no new U.N. resolution would be necessary for the war? Were they taking cover behind the 1998 Operation Desert Fox, which had seemingly given the U.S. and U.K. the view that the U.N. resolutions of the 1990s had been sufficient for armed action? Such questions cannot be answered in Whitehall. They should bother the White House. A truly forensic assessment of the run-up to the U.K.-U.S. war on Iraq should take place in Washington, D.C. That is where the plot was hatched, and that is where the answers to these questions lie.