

Yes, Minister!

By Uri Avnery

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In one of the episodes of the outstanding British TV series “Yes, Minister!” the Permanent Undersecretary, Sir Humphrey, teaches his minister how to use Commissions of Inquiry: Take an honorable retired judge, a doddering old fool, and put him in charge of the inquiry, with a sizable honorarium. Help him to arrive himself at the required conclusions. Feed him the appropriate facts and hint at a peerage. From there on, everything will work out as desired.

At this moment, three parallel but separate commissions of inquiry are at work: one American, one British and one Israeli. All three are supposed to find out why the intelligence community supplied the government with false information about Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Of course, the commissions are not really intended to discover the truth. Their purpose is whitewash. In order to understand what has happened, no honorable judge, Lord, former senator or retired Mossad operative is required. Simple common sense will do.

Clearly, he who appoints a commission of Inquiry decides in advance what the conclusions will be. When a member of the Establishment is appointed to investigate the Establishment, the conclusion will be that the Establishment has committed no wrong.

In Israel, for example, we had the Agranat commission. Shimon Agranat, a respected Supreme Court judge, was appointed chairman of a commission and asked to apportion blame for the fateful failures of the 1973 Yom Kippur war. The inquiry was limited in advance to the first days of the war, so the events leading up to the war (including government decisions) were excluded. The result: The Prime Minister (Golda Meir) and the Minister of Defense (Moshe Dayan) came out white as snow. All the blame landed on some military officers.

(The conclusions were so scandalous that the general public rose up against them. The commission’s report was thrown into the waste basket, Golda and Dayan were forced to resign.)

In the UK, Sir Humphrey’s method still works. Lately, an honorable etc. etc. judge was charged with the investigation of whether the Prime Minister has “sexed-up” an intelligence report in order to drag the country into war. The honorable judge concluded, of course, that

Yes, Minister! | 2

the Prime Minister was completely blameless, and that the hostile media (in this case the BBC) were to blame for everything.

In Britain, unlike Israel, when a Supreme Judge makes his decision, everybody stands up and sings “God Save the Queen”. A few young people donned judges’ wigs and threw white paint at Downing Street buildings, in order to suggest that the Lord judge’s report was a whitewash. But the Prime Minister was not forced to resign, instead, the chairman of the BBC did.

Now three commissions are at work. The Israeli one, which was appointed in secret and works in secret, will finish first. After that, it will be the turn of the British one (which is required to investigate only the intelligence community, after the honorable Lord judge has investigated the political structure). In the end, well after the election in the US, the American commission will publish its report. All three resemble each other: they were appointed by the political leaders, they are forbidden to investigate the political leadership and tasked with inquiring only into the quality of the information supplied by the intelligence agencies to the political leaders.

President George W. Bush dragged the United States into war on the basis of the contention that Saddam Hussein had WMD that endangered America. Saddam, he said, would turn over such weapons to al-Qaida terrorists, who would use them to cause mass slaughter in American cities.

Prime Minister Tony Blair told his people that Saddam could use WMD against British cities within 45 minutes (Not 40, not 50, but exactly 45).

In Israel, the Sharon government distributed gas masks to the population and created panic, saying that Saddam would shower us with missiles carrying chemical warheads.

Well, the Americans and British occupied Iraq and no WMD were found. No chemical, no biological, no nuclear. None at all.

So, how come all these illustrious intelligence agencies were wrong? What made them feed their political leaders with false information and cause Bush, Blair & Co. to start a war in which a country was devastated and many human beings killed?

Common sense would say: Bush & Blair were “deceived”, because they wanted to be deceived. Bush and the Neo-cons who have taken over Washington had decided from the beginning to attack Iraq, mainly in order to control the oil, and the tales of WMD were designed to provide a pretext that would frighten the masses.

Did the political leaders explicitly demand that their intelligence organizations supply them with mendacious reports? Perish the thought! The commissions of inquiry will affirm that no such thing happened. And correctly so. The leaders did not ask for this, because there was no need to ask. The American, British and Israeli intelligence chiefs knew perfectly

Yes, Minister! | 3

well what was required of them and delivered the goods. They knew which side their bread was buttered on.

Did the intelligence people deliberately falsify their information to achieve this? There was no need. The intelligence community collects enormous quantities of information. From this huge pile they are supposed to extract the items that they consider credible. Surprisingly enough, the credible material is always that which the political leaders desire.

The decisive function of every intelligence agency is not the collecting of the information, but its evaluation. How do the mosaic stones form a picture? That is a matter of judgement and intuition, both subject to a general “concept”. This is a mental pattern in the mind of the intelligence chief. And since the intelligence chiefs are appointed by the political leaders, no wonder that their concepts almost always suit the concepts of the leaders.

I predict that all three commissions of inquiry, each in its own country, will come to the conclusion (a) that the political leaders did not ask the intelligence people to falsify their reports and did not exert any pressure on them, (b) that the intelligence people acted honestly and supplied intelligence evaluations according to their best knowledge and abilities, (c) that everybody acted according to the best information available at the time, and (d) that there was a lamentable professional failure.

Neither of the three commissions will state the obvious: that the intelligence agencies are under the jurisdiction of the President (in the US) or the Prime Minister (in the UK and Israel), and that these bear the responsibility for their deeds and misdeeds. They appoint the intelligence chiefs and are supposed to supervise them. Therefore, in view of this colossal intelligence failure, all three of them should resign. That will not be said and will not happen.

If all the blame is laid at the door of the intelligence people, they should be looked at. All over the world, they are admired. The mystique that envelops them creates an almost religious cult that feeds a large flock of journalists and writers. The intelligence operative pictured in their stories is a superman like Smiley, John Le Carre’s hero, a brilliant man endowed with almost superhuman intelligence, a cold-blooded, sophisticated genius who weaves his nets with incredible patience.

Unfortunately, such a person does not exist. As one says in English: “army intelligence” is an oxymoron.

How do I know? There are some simple tests, which every logical person can apply for himself.

First test: human quality. All intelligence people are eventually pensioned off, and then they can be viewed from close up, without censorship and the cover of mystery. And what does one see? Among them there are some highly intelligent people. There are also quite a

Yes, Minister! | 4

number of complete fools. But most of them are very average, superficial people, with very ordinary, conformist views. We would not rely on such people to give us advice on our investments. It is quite shocking to realize that these people have decided the of nations.

In Israel this is especially obvious, because retired intelligence people star as political commentators in all our media. It appears that their average IQ is not higher than that of Knesset members. And, since one cannot assume that before that they were geniuses, and only on retirement some mysterious neurological process eliminated their mental superiority, there is no escape from the conclusion that even before, their IQ was average-minus.

In an apparatus in which such people dominate, an intelligent person has to assimilate himself. He adapts in order to survive.

Second test: results. By now it is banal to mention the classical intelligence failures of World War II. The Russians were surprised by the German attack on their country, the Americans by the Japanese bombardment of Pearl Harbor. American intelligence was surprised by the collapse of the Soviet Union. American and Israeli intelligence were totally surprised by the Khomeini revolution in Iran. Israeli intelligence was surprised by the Egyptian army concentrations in Sinai on the eve of the 1967 “Six-day” war, by the Egyptian-Syrian attack on Yom Kippur in 1973, by the advent of Hizbullah in South Lebanon, by the first and second Intifadas and the Rabin assassination. American intelligence did not even dream about the September 11 attack. The list is long.

The American, British and Israeli intelligence agencies did not have the slightest idea about what was happening in Iraq, and whether Saddam had WMD or not. They guessed. And if one guesses, it is best to guess what the government wants to hear.

“Does Saddam have weapons of mass destruction?”

“Yes, Prime Minister!”

Uri Avnery is a journalist, writer and peace activist. A former publisher and editor-in-chief at Ha'olam Haze newsmagazine, he served three terms as member of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament).