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ColdType

How Bush and Blair
chose war and
then the justification

BY DAVID EDWARDS / MEDIALENS.ORG

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How Bush and Blair chose war and then the justification

Sometimes it really is possible to fail to see the wood for the trees. We need to be clear that Tony Blair is claiming that the threat of Iraqi WMD justified a massive war against Iraq. We are to believe that after a major conflict in which 88,500 tons of bombs were dropped in 1991, after eight years of inspections, and after more than a decade of continuous bombing raids, and of crippling sanctions imposed under the most intensive and sophisticated surveillance operation in history, both Blair and Bush received intelligence suggesting that Iraq was a “serious and current threat”.

As we now know, this alleged intelligence is said to have been related to WMD and links with al-Qaeda that did not exist. We are to believe, then, that a rush of terrifying information relating to non-existent perils – a rush so overwhelming that long-standing policy was abandoned – suddenly emerged to lead Bush and Blair to believe that nothing less than war was required to avert the danger.

This truly is remarkable. We might expect one or two erroneous reports warning of something that isn't there – but a weight of evidence sufficient to actually revolutionise policy? Beyond the possibility of some kind of mass hysteria, it seems almost unbelievable – this just isn't how the world works. Of course it could be argued that the threat was always “serious and current” – in which case why do nothing for ten years? And in which case why did Colin Powell say of Saddam on February 24, 2001: “He has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction. He is unable to project conventional power against his neighbours.”? (*Quoted, John Pilger, Daily Mirror, September 22, 2003*)

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On the BBC's News At Ten (February 2, 2004) reporter Gavin Hewitt suggested that the inquiry into the failure to discover Iraq's alleged WMD would likely focus on two issues: 1) Did the intelligence services "get it wrong"? and 2) Did politicians "fail to ask the people here [MI6] the right searching questions?"

In other words, were politicians at worst merely indolent in failing to challenge the wild intelligence claims they dutifully passed on to the public?

Consider Hewitt's range of possible questions in light of comments made by Greg Thielmann to CBS News last October. Thielmann, an expert on Iraqi WMD and former senior foreign-service officer for 25 years, claims that key evidence presented by Colin Powell to the UN on February 5, 2003 was misrepresented and the public deceived:

"The main problem was that the senior administration officials have what I call faith-based intelligence. They knew what they wanted the intelligence to show. They were really blind and deaf to any kind of countervailing information the intelligence community would produce. I would assign some blame to the intelligence community, and most of the blame to the senior administration officials." (*The man who knew*, October 15, 2003, www.cbsnews.com)

Ray McGovern, a former high-ranking CIA analyst, told John Pilger last year that the Bush administration demanded that intelligence be shaped to comply with political objectives: "It was 95 per cent charade", he said. (*John Pilger, Blair's Mass Deception, Daily Mirror, February 3, 2004*)

Almost identical complaints have been voiced on this side of the Atlantic. Weapons expert David Kelly told the BBC's Susan Watts that "lots of people" were concerned, that "people at the top of the ladder didn't want to hear some of the things" and "in your heart of hearts you must realise sometimes that's not actually the right thing to say". (*Beyond doubt: facts amid the fiction*, Vikram Dodd, Richard Norton-Taylor and Nicholas Watt, *The Guardian*, August 16, 2003)

Kelly added: "The 45 minute point was a statement that was made and it got out of all proportion. They [the government] were desperate for information. They were pushing hard for information that could be released. That was the one that popped up and it was seized on and it is unfortunate that it was. That is why there is the argument between the intelligence services and Number 10, because they picked up on it and once they had picked up on it you cannot pull back from it, so many people will say 'Well, we are not sure about that' because the wordsmithing is actually quite important."

Curiously, in declaring BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan's claims "unfounded" in his January 28 report, Lord Hutton said merely of Watts' report: "Ms Watts recorded this conversation on a tape recorder and the recording was played in the course of the Inquiry." (*The Hutton Inquiry, Statement by Lord Hutton, January, 28, 2004*,

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<http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk>)

Brian Jones, a top analyst in the defence intelligence staff, told the Hutton inquiry how the “shutters came down” in government, preventing experts on chemical and biological weapons from expressing widespread disquiet about the language and assumptions in the September 2002 dossier. Jones told Hutton: “My concerns were that Iraq’s chemical weapons and biological weapons capabilities were not being accurately represented in all regards in relation to the available evidence. In particular ... on the advice of my staff, I was told that there was no evidence that significant production had taken place either of chemical warfare agent or chemical weapons.” (*The whistleblower*, Richard Norton-Taylor and Vikram Dodd, *The Guardian*, September 4, 2003)

Jones wrote in *The Independent* of February 4: “In my view the expert intelligence analysts of the DIS [Defence Intelligence Staff] were overruled in the preparation of the dossier in September 2002 resulting in a presentation that was misleading about Iraq’s capabilities.” (*Hutton report: the aftermath – there was a lack of substantive evidence ... We were told there was intelligence we could not see*, Brian Jones, *The Independent*, February 4, 2004)

Responding to Colin Powell’s February 2003 speech to the UN, former chief UN weapons inspector, Scott Ritter, said in an interview at the time: “He just hits you, hits you, hits you with circumstantial evidence, and he confuses people – and he lied, he lied to people, he misled people... The Powell presentation is not evidence... It’s a very confusing presentation. What does it mean? What does it represent? How does it all link up? It doesn’t link up.” (*Ritter dismisses Powell report*, *Kyodo News*, February 7, 2003)

In his speech, Powell described as “a fine document” the Blair government’s February 3, 2003 dossier. Glen Rangwala of Cambridge University quickly spotted that much of the dossier had been copied word for word (including punctuation and spelling errors) from an article written by an American PhD student twelve years earlier and available on the Internet. The only changes involved the doctoring of passages to make them more ominous: the assertion that Iraq had been “aiding opposition groups” was changed to “supporting terrorist organisations”. The comment that the Iraqi intelligence agency Mukhabarat had been “monitoring foreign embassies in Iraq” was changed to “spying on foreign embassies in Iraq”. (*Jonathan Rugman, ‘Downing St dossier plagiarised*, February 6, 2003, *www.channel4.com*)

It’s hard to argue that the politicians merely misinterpreted intelligence in this case – the dossier was put together by a four-man team in Downing Street reporting to Alastair Campbell, then the prime minister’s director of communications.

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Glenda Jackson, the former Labour minister, pointed out at the time that the government was misleading parliament and the public, adding: “And of course to mislead is a parliamentary euphemism for lying.” (*Downing St admits blunder on Iraq dossier*, Michael White, Ewen MacAskill and Richard Norton-Taylor, *The Guardian*, February 8, 2003)

All of this was beyond the remit of Lord Hutton, of course, who consequently cleared Blair and his Keystone Cops of all wrongdoing. Recall that Hutton was one of five law lords who accused their colleague Lord Hoffmann of acting as “a judge in his own cause” by failing to declare his links with Amnesty International when deciding whether the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet, was immune from arrest and extradition in 1999. The Guardian reported: “Lord Hutton said public confidence in the integrity of the administration of justice would be shaken if Lord Hoffmann’s deciding vote that General Pinochet could be prosecuted was allowed to stand.” (*Law lords condemn Hoffmann*, Clare Dyer, *The Guardian*, January 16, 1999)

Pinochet was released and, on arriving in Chile, rose miraculously from his wheelchair to embrace well-wishers.

Former cabinet minister, Clare Short, insists that Tony Blair was guilty of “honourable deception” using “various ruses” and “a series of half-truths, exaggerations, reassurances that were not the case to get us into conflict by the spring”. (*Short: I was briefed on Blair’s secret war pact*, Patrick Wintour, *The Guardian*, June 18, 2003) Short has described how a small cabal around Blair ignored normal procedures of cabinet government, and ignored the advice of the intelligence and diplomatic community, which she claims privately opposed the war.

Former foreign secretary, Robin Cook, describes how “there was a selection of evidence to support a conclusion... intelligence was not being used to inform and shape policy, but to shape policy that was already settled”. (*Ibid*)

Like most of the media, the BBC’s Gavin Hewitt chose to ignore comments made by Paul O’Neill, former US Treasury secretary, last month. O’Neill, who attended countless national security council meetings, has explained how the Bush administration came to office determined to topple Saddam Hussein, using the September 11 attacks as a pretext: “It was all about finding a way to do it. The president saying ‘Go find me a way to do this’... From the very beginning, there was a conviction that Saddam Hussein was a bad person and that he needed to go.” (*Bush decided to remove Saddam “on day one”*, Julian Borger, *The Guardian*, January 12, 2004)

O’Neill reports seeing one memorandum preparing for war dating from the first days of the administration. Another, marked “secret” said, “Plan for Post-Saddam Iraq”.

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O'Neill also saw a Pentagon document entitled "Foreign Suitors For Iraqi Oilfield Contracts", which discussed dividing Iraq's fuel reserves up between the world's oil companies.

The BBC's Matt Frei chose to ignore these claims and instead instantly smeared the man and his message: "If you remember, Paul O'Neill was sacked mainly because he was incompetent, and he was more infamous for his gaffes than his insights on economic theory. He once famously said that the collapse of the energy giant Enron was an example of the genius of capitalism, and perhaps more accurately that the tax code in America was 9,500 words of complete gibberish." (*Matt Frei, Newsnight, BBC2, January 12, 2004*)

But the issue, clearly, is the credibility of what O'Neill has to say as supported by the 19,000 government documents he claims to have in his possession, one of which he revealed on live TV. US media analyst Alexander Cockburn comments: "What bothers the White House is one particular National Security Council document shown in the 60 Minutes interview, clearly drafted in the early weeks of the new administration, which showed plans for the post-invasion dispersal of Iraq's oil assets among the world's great powers, starting with the major oil companies.

"For the brief moment it was on the TV screen one could see that this bit of paper, stamped 'Secret', was undoubtedly one of the most explosive documents in the history of imperial conspiracy. Here, dead center in the camera's lens, was the refutation of every single rationalization for the attack on Iraq ever offered by George W. Bush and his co-conspirators, including Tony Blair." (*Cockburn, 'The O'Neill/Suskind Bombshells - Bush, Oil & Iraq: Some Truth at Last', Counterpunch, January 14, 2004*)

And consider O'Neill's revelations in the light of Tony Blair's claims in the infamous BBC Newsnight interview of February 7, 2003:

"When people say you're hell bent on this war, I've tried to avoid being in this position and I honestly thought there was some prospect last November when we passed the UN Resolution that he [Saddam] would realise we were serious about this and that if he didn't cooperate he was going to be in trouble." (*Tony Blair on Newsnight - part one', The Guardian, February 7, 2003*)

It's the use of the word "honestly" that is interesting.

IN THE DREAM ZONE

Returning from a visit to Baghdad in late January, Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton of Detroit described how he was "shocked and discouraged" by what he had seen: "I was

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overwhelmed with sadness over what is happening to the people of Iraq, and also to the US troops there.” With unemployment approaching 60 percent and food supplies dwindling, Gumbleton reported, ordinary Iraqis “are humiliated and feel degraded” as they try to cope without electricity, telephones and – in some places – running water: “Without exception, people said things were worse now than before the war.”

Gumbleton noted that US officials live and work in the Coalition Provisional Authority’s compound, nicknamed the “Dream Zone”: “Inside the Dream Zone, they don’t know what is going on in the city... They don’t know the deprivations the people are putting up with. They don’t have jobs. Right now, people are getting the same amount of basic food as they have been getting through the oil-for-food program, but there is the fear that could be running out. The city is just very depressing.” (*Iraqis still suffering, says Bishop Gumbleton after visiting Iraq*, Robert Delaney, Catholic News Service, January 29, 2004)

Also in late January, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported an increase in cases of encephalitis in Baghdad over the preceding two weeks, “raising concerns about the state of children’s healthcare in the country”. This followed a recent report by a leading health organisation which found that youngsters remained vulnerable to malnutrition. The UN reported the despairing views of one doctor, Rada, at the Children’s Teaching Hospital: “You can see the children here. There is much suffering among them. No one seems to be helping them. We have been to the ministry of health for assistance and to the Americans. We have received nothing so far.” (*IRAQ: Encephalitis affecting children*, IRIN, January 26, 2004, www.reliefweb.int)

Qasim Ali Abid, chief resident doctor at the same hospital, explained that the leading cause of death among his patients was from secondary infections caught while undergoing in-patient treatment. Hospital statistics put the secondary infection rate at 80 percent – a staggering rate for a Middle Eastern country like Iraq.

A prime cause, Dr. Abid said, is open sewage on the premises mixing with drinking water: “There is sewage blocking the pipes. It is now in the water supply.” (*Some hospitals become breeding ground for disease*, IRIN, January 28, 2004, www.reliefweb.int)

Rubble from pre-war maintenance also remains inside the building and there are only two toilets per floor of the four floor building for all patients, nurses, doctors and family members. Iraqi hospitals have been chronically short of medical supplies, trained doctors and money since the toppling of Saddam on April 9 last year.

All of this is reflexively blamed on Saddam’s regime. Unbeknownst to the public, in 1996 the Centre for Economic and Social Rights reported of pre-Gulf War Iraq: “Over 90% of the population had access to primary health-care, including laboratory

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diagnosis and immunisations for childhood diseases such as polio and diphtheria. During the 1970s and 80s, British and Japanese companies built scores of large, modern hospitals throughout Iraq, with advanced technologies for diagnosis, operations and treatment. Secondary and tertiary services, including surgical care and laboratory investigative support, were available to most of the Iraqi population at nominal charges. Iraqi medical and nursing schools emphasised education of women and attracted students from throughout the Middle East. A majority of Iraqi physicians were trained in Europe or the United States, and one-quarter were board-certified specialists.” (*UN Sanctioned Suffering, May 1996, <http://www.cesr.org>*)

These are small glimpses, almost never reported in the media, of the cataclysm inflicted on Iraq by the West. Desperately short of even the most basic medicines and facilities since the invasion, no questions have been asked on TV news, there have been no calls for emergency donations of medical supplies from the US or UK.

The war has so far claimed some 55,000 Iraqi lives, including 9,600 civilians, with 1,000 Iraqi children killed or injured by unexploded cluster bombs every month.

It would be wrong to suggest, however, that Iraqis are the only victims of this tragedy. Writing from the media’s own “Dream Zone” in *The Guardian*, Polly Toynbee notes: “Wars either make or break prime ministers, according to the pollsters – and this war is all but breaking Tony Blair... It is turning into a classical tragedy because it is one of his own making, wrought by his own fatal flaw.” (*‘Revenge or victory’, Polly Toynbee, The Guardian, February 6, 2004*)

Toynbee adds: “Blair’s personal tragedy is the squandering of his political capital over Iraq.”

In her article, Toynbee has not one word to say about the “personal tragedy” suffered by literally hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of Iraqis.

On the other hand, all of these grisly means are surely justified by the uniquely moral nature of the ends, at least if the post-Hutton BBC is to be believed. On its February 3 lunchtime news, the BBC featured a clip of Sir Harold Walker, former ambassador to Baghdad, saying of Saddam Hussein’s regime: “It was the most brutal tyranny, I think, in human history.”

The Independent’s Johann Hari puts the BBC’s performance in proper perspective, suggesting that “much of the BBC’s crisis derives from an attempt by the corporation to mimic the attack-dog culture of the British tabloids”, with Andrew Gilligan having “the single mission to dig up dirt on the Government”. This “anti-politics” has undermined the whole purpose of the BBC: “to provide a more sober, less hysterical, more informed forum for debate.” (*Hari, ‘Why the BBC-bashers must not be allowed to destroy public service broadcasting’, The Independent, January 30, 2004*)

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To be clear, the BBC ceases to be a “sober, less hysterical” forum when it “digs up dirt” on the government”. There is no problem when it shovels dirt *for* the government by ranking Saddam above Hitler and Stalin in the league of tyrants, by failing for ten years to expose the genocidal impact of Western sanctions, by failing to make even the most obvious challenges to the government’s pre-war lies on WMD, and when the BBC’s Andrew Marr emotes that Tony Blair “stands as a larger man and a stronger prime minister as a result” of invading Iraq.

As ever, the only tragedy that matters is the suffering and damage inflicted on powerful interests – the vast horrors inflicted by them on others barely register. Anyone who tries to buck the trend is reviled, slandered and sentenced to career death.

EVOLUTION OF A THREAT: HOW BLAIR LEARNED TO FEAR SADDAM

As we know, the human catastrophe inflicted on Iraq went ahead against huge domestic and international opposition. Tony Blair’s support, in particular, was crucial in affording George Bush the required fig leaf of international legitimacy. Without Blair on board, it is conceivable that Bush might not have been able to wage his war.

On Channel 4 News (February 4, 2004), former senior US intelligence officer, Greg Thielmann, said: “I believe, and again not based on first-hand experience but conclusions that I was reaching then and since, that the decision to go to war was made in the fall of 2001 – we were oblivious to that decision having been reached at the time. And I have to conclude that that decision was shared with prime minister Blair in August of 2002.” (*Channel 4 News, February 4, 2004*)

This fits quite well with what we known about when Blair began focusing on the idea that Iraq’s non-existent WMDs were a threat.

In 1998, according to the Guardian/Observer website, Blair had next to nothing to say about the threat posed by Iraq. In December 1998, for example, Blair branded the Iraqi president as merely a “serial breaker of promises” as he justified the launch of a joint US-British strike to “degrade” Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. (*Missile blitz on Iraq, Julian Borger and Ewen MacAskill, The Guardian, December 17, 1998*)

Then, just three days of air strikes were deemed sufficient to keep Saddam ‘in his box’. No invasion was needed to avert a “serious and current threat”.

Throughout 1999 and 2000, the Guardian/Observer record next to no mention of fears of Iraq’s alleged WMD (understandable, as we now know they didn’t exist) or of its

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supposed links to terrorism (also understandable, as there were none).

The Guardian/Observer record the following number of articles containing the words 'Blair and Iraq and weapons of mass destruction' for the following years:

1999: 7
2000: 7
2001: 29
2002: 379
2003: 1,078

'Blair and Iraq and chemical weapons':

1999: 3
2000: 4
2001: 21
2002: 77
2003: 235

'Blair and Iraq and biological weapons':

1999: 1
2000: 1
2001: 24
2002: 95
2003: 304

'Blair and Iraq and nuclear weapons':

1999: 9
2000: 10
2001: 24
2002: 140
2003: 202

In February 2001, just two years before the invasion, the UK Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, and the then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, justified a further series of bombing raids against Baghdad. No mention was made of WMD. Instead, the Observer reported, "the strikes were necessary to eliminate a threat to the planes patrolling the 'no-fly zones' in the north and south of Iraq." (*Bush signals a deadly intent, Jason Burke and Ed Vulliamy, The Observer, February 18, 2001*)

Blair described the raids against air defence systems as a "limited operation with

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the sole purpose of defending... pilots". They would stop, he said, "if Saddam stopped attacking us". (*Blair and Bush defy world fury*, Jason Burke, Kamal Ahmed and Ed Vulliamy, *The Observer*, February 18, 2001)

Again, a few raids were deemed sufficient.

Blair has claimed that September 11 changed everything, that he agreed with Bush that the risk of Iraqi WMD falling into the hands of al-Qaeda or similar groups was just too great. And yet in October 2001, Blair's official spokesman rejected the idea that military action should be extended from Afghanistan to Iraq, saying: "Such an extension was being proposed only by 'fringe voices' in the US." (*Blair: we know the game you are playing*, Matthew Tempest, *The Guardian*, October 11, 2001)

Later that month, when asked if there would be a "wider war" against Iraq after the attack on Afghanistan, Blair answered that this would depend on proof of Iraqi complicity in the September 11 attacks: "I think what people need before we take action against anyone is evidence." (*Blair on the war: the Observer interview in full*, *The Observer*, October 14, 2001)

That same month Blair talked of the need for "absolute evidence" of Iraqi complicity in the attacks. (*Michael White, 'Blair goes public to quell Arab fears of wider war'*, *The Guardian*, October 11, 2001)

In late November, the Guardian reported Tony Blair literally standing shoulder to shoulder with President Jacques Chirac of France as they "reaffirmed their demand for 'incontrovertible evidence' of Iraqi complicity in the attacks on America before they could endorse US threats to extend the anti-terrorist campaign to Baghdad". (*Blair and Chirac cool on taking war to Iraq*, Hugo Young and Michael White, *The Guardian*, November 30, 2001)

In other words, fully two and a half months after September 11, Blair demanded, not just evidence, but "incontrovertible evidence" of Iraqi involvement in the attacks as a pretext for war. Clearly, at this time, he did not deem Iraq's alleged WMD, Saddam's alleged links to al-Qaeda, or Saddam's human rights record, sufficient grounds for war.

Significantly, a few days after the press reported, "Blair and Chirac cool on taking war to Iraq", an article appeared in the Observer titled, 'Secret US plan for Iraq war'. Peter Beaumont, Ed Vulliamy and Paul Beaver wrote: "America intends to depose Saddam Hussein... The plan, opposed by Tony Blair and other European Union leaders, threatens to blow apart the increasingly shaky international consensus behind the US-led 'war on terrorism'." (*The Observer*, December 2, 2001)

This was December 2. By February 28 the following year all talk of "incontrovertible evidence" had vanished. Instead, Blair had this to say of Saddam Hussein: "Heavens above, he used chemical weapons against his own people, so it is an issue and we have

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got to look at it, but we will look at it in a rational and calm way, as we have for the other issues.

“The accumulation of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq poses a threat, a threat not just to the region but to the wider world, and I think George Bush was absolutely right to raise it. Now what action we take in respect of that, that is an open matter for discussion...” (*Blair edges closer to Iraqi strike*, Matthew Tempest, *The Guardian*, February 28, 2002)

The interesting question then arises: what stunning new evidence emerged of the threat from Iraq’s non-existent WMD to change Blair’s mind between November 30, 2001 and February 28, 2002? Clearly, it should be a simple task for an inquiry to focus on these few weeks to see what amazing new erroneous evidence emerged to bamboozle Blair.

What we will find, of course, is that there was no new evidence. Instead there was a decision made in Washington to go to war, and a decision made in London to initiate a propagandist campaign to fool the public and so facilitate an illegal and immoral invasion of Iraq.

A SHORT NOTE ON THE RED HERRING OF WMD

The focus on WMD is itself a red herring. It is clear that peaceful means of resolving the disarmament issue had not remotely been exhausted by March 17, 2003. The UNMOVIC weapons inspectors had found nothing in three and a half months of unrestricted searching, and they had requested just a few more months to complete their task. The Charter of the United Nations, Chapter VI, Article 33 declares: “The parties to any dispute, the continuance of which is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security, shall, first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice.”

The media are currently professing their shock that no WMD were found. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (*FAIR: www.fair.org*) reported that some UNMOVIC inspectors believed that Iraq might indeed have been free of all banned weapons: “We haven’t found an iota of concealed material yet,” one unnamed UNMOVIC official told a Los Angeles Times reporter on December 31, 2002. The reporter added: “The inspector said his colleagues think it possible that Iraq really has eliminated its banned materials.” (*Fair, Media Advisory: ‘Iraq’s Hidden Weapons: From Allegation to Fact*’, February 4, 2003 <http://www.fair.org/press-releases/iraq-weapons.html>)

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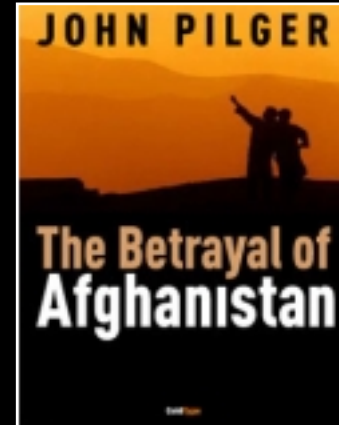
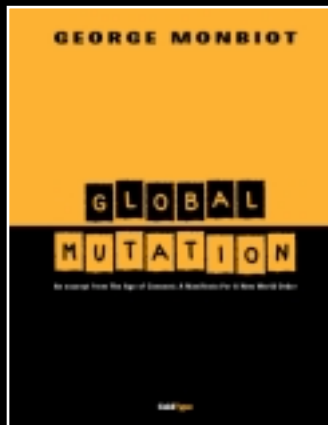
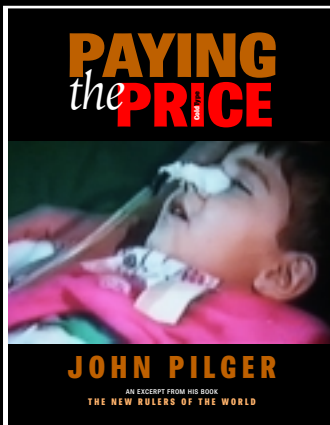
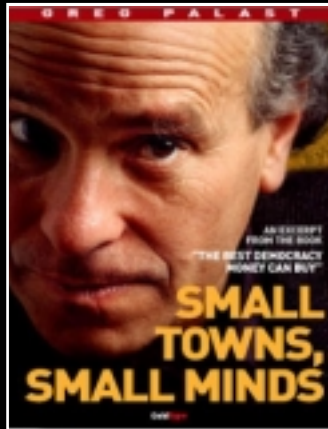
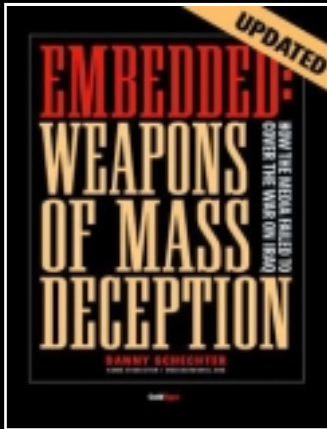
Former head of UNMOVIC, Hans Blix, said in June 2003: “If anyone had cared ... to study what UNSCOM was saying for quite a number of years, and what we [UNMOVIC] were saying, they should not have assumed that they would stumble on weapons.” (*Miles Pomper and Paul Kerr, ‘An Interview With Hans Blix’, Arms Control Today, June 16 2003*)

Blix also said in September 2003: “I don’t think anything will come to light in Iraq that will justify the invasion.” (http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&cid=535&ncid=535&e=4&u=/ap/20030921/ap_on_re_eu/greece_iraq_blix)

Given international law, 100% UNMOVIC access to suspect sites, vast global popular opposition to war, the US’s possession of an overwhelming deterrence in the form of 6,144 nuclear warheads, the decision to go to war on March 17 requires real explanation. Were we living in genuine democracies, it would also require that Bush and Blair face a war crimes tribunal.

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