

Britain: Straw admits may never find Iraqi WMD

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16 May 2003

Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has admitted that allied forces may never find "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq.

After having just overturned the entire basis on which the Blair government justified its decision to join the US-led attack, Straw maintained that this failure was "not crucially important" claiming that evidence of Iraqi wrongdoing was overwhelming.

"Whether or not we are able to find one third of one petrol tanker in a country twice the size of France remains to be seen," he told Radio 4's *Today* programme. "We did not go to war on a contingent basis. We went to war on the basis of the evidence which was fully available to the international community."

Straw's remarks were clearly intended to deflect criticism of the US and Britain for the failure to have uncovered any sign of WMD almost two months after launching their attack on Iraq. But despite Straw's claims, publicly at least, both the Blair government in Britain and the Bush administration in the US had made Iraq's supposed ability to produce nuclear and chemical weapons central to their war drive. And they were not referring to a minimal capability as indicated by Straw's somewhat obscure reference to a third of a petrol tanker.

According to the US and Britain, Iraq represented a major, immediate threat to the safety and stability of the entire world and anyone who disagreed or questioned this were gutless appeasers, on a par with those who had attempted to placate Hitler in the 1930s.

Both countries circulated intelligence material that they said constituted conclusive evidence of Iraq's possession of WMD.

In September 2002 the Blair government issued a 50-page document it claimed proved Iraq had the

capacity to "deploy nuclear weapons within 45 minutes" and alleged that Saddam Hussein's presidential palaces were in fact "large compounds which are an integral part of Iraqi countermeasures designed to hide weapons material".

In parliament Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted that the aim of the US/UK was "disarmament" and that "[Saddam's] weapons of mass destruction programme is active, detailed and growing".

Just four months later, the government issued a second dossier, billed as a product of up-to-the-minute British intelligence gathering on the state of Iraq's WMD. The document *Iraq—its infrastructure of concealment, deception and intimidation* was regarded as crucial in US and British efforts to gain international support for their attack on Iraq.

It was quickly exposed as having been extensively plagiarised from three articles, one written by an American graduate student, all of which were months and even years old—but not before US Secretary of State Colin Powell had famously praised it at a crucial meeting of the UN Security Council.

At the same meeting on February 5, Powell charged that Iraq had tens of thousands of litres of anthrax, botulinium toxin, mustard gas and nerve gas, along with mobile bio-weapons labs, hundreds of bombs and artillery shells and secret facilities for the development of nuclear weapons.

As evidence Powell played virtually inaudible tape recordings of conversations between unidentified males speaking in Arabic, whom he claimed were conspiring to hide weapons. He went on to display blowups of satellite photos, which he said showed "active chemical weapons bunkers" and trucks being used to conceal weapons materials.

Straw himself, just before the outbreak of war, said,

“We know that this man has got weapons of mass destruction ... what we are talking about is chemical weapons, biological weapons, viruses, bacilli and anthrax.”

Yet Saddam Hussein’s palaces have been searched, bombed and searched again and no weapons found. And despite having occupied the country for weeks, the US and the UK are no closer to finding any proof of their charges. Since its takeover of the country, the US has refused to allow a return of UN weapons inspectors in flagrant violation of the terms of UN resolutions on Iraq.

In truth, both Bush and Blair never really believed they would find Iraqi WMD. Having laid siege to the country for more than 12 years, they were well aware that any military capability was negligible. The threat from WMD was nothing more than a pretext for the US, with British backing, to establish its hegemony over the oil-rich resources of Iraq and the Middle East.

They had hoped that a successful and speedy onslaught against the country and its occupation would silence their critics, and that with the help of a pliant press, people would quickly forget their claims.

But the ongoing social and political catastrophe within the country, with extensive looting, internecine feuding and tens of thousands of people denied basic necessities, has only intensified public disquiet over a war that was always deeply unpopular.

The Blair government’s sophistries are now rebounding against it, as it is exposed as having lied and deliberately mislead public opinion, at home and abroad. Straw’s cavalier dismissal of the significance of their failure to recover WMD will only make matters worse.



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