

Bush hangs Blair out to dry over Iraqi nuclear claims

Prominent MPs call for Blair to resign

Chris Marsden
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In admitting US doubts over British intelligence reports concerning Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the Bush administration has deepened the political crisis of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. In particular, Blair has been hit by recent statements from Washington distancing Bush from British reports, exposed months ago as having been based on forged documents, of Iraqi efforts to purchase uranium from Niger.

Proving the old saw that there is no honour amongst thieves, CIA Director George Tenet was made to take the blame for the inclusion of the uranium charge in President Bush's State of the Union Address in January. Tenet, in turn, made sure that the blame was laid at the door of Britain's Labour government, which first made the accusation public in an intelligence dossier issued in September 2002.

In February 2002, the CIA dispatched former US ambassador to Gabon Joseph Wilson to investigate claims circulating among intelligence agencies of an Iraqi effort to purchase uranium from Niger. Wilson concluded that the alleged Iraqi procurement programme did not exist.

The British claim to the contrary was based on documents that the CIA had deemed to be crude forgeries—said to have been obtained by Italian authorities (though this is denied by Italy) and passed on to Britain's MI6, which, in turn, passed them to the CIA. When the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna examined the documents, it also found them to be forgeries.

The claim that Bush did not know the allegations were unfounded is ludicrous. It seems everyone else involved in spinning the lie had been told. The CIA had apparently warned US Secretary of State Colin Powell against using the Niger evidence in his speech to the United Nations Security Council in February, and had also told MI6 of its doubts on the documents.

But the Blair government and the Bush administration still used the claim in their propaganda, with the difference that

Washington cited Britain as its source. Tenet recently said CIA officials "in the end concurred that the text in the [State of the Union] speech was factually correct, i.e., that the British Government report said that Iraq sought uranium from Africa." This is a remarkable example of sophistry in defense of using lies to manipulate public opinion.

The Blair government does not feel it can so easily admit to a mistake on the Niger claim. It has been subject to an inquiry by Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee that cleared Blair and others of deliberately lying over the threat posed by Iraqi WMD, but still raised questions it said the government had to answer, including the date it had learned from the US administration that some of the documents relating to the Niger claim had been forged. Its report stated, "We conclude that it is very odd indeed that the government asserts that it was not relying on the evidence, which has since been shown to have been forged, but that eight months later it is still reviewing the other evidence."

Following Tenet's statement, the British government has chosen to brazen out being caught in a lie by claiming its allegation of a Niger link was not based solely on the forged documents, and that it was unaware of Wilson's trip and the reasons for the CIA's misgivings. In a letter to the Foreign Affairs Committee, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said the CIA's stated reservations were "unsupported by explanation." He added, "UK officials were confident that the dossier's statement was based on reliable intelligence which had not been shared with the US. A judgment was therefore made to retain it."

Straw's claim that MI6 decided not to share intelligence with the CIA over Iraq's supposed efforts to acquire a nuclear potential is as bizarre as any to have been made in the course of this sordid affair. Britain's former foreign secretary, Robin Cook, commented, "From all I know of the intimate relationship between the CIA and the Secret Intelligence Services, I find it hard to credit that there was such a breakdown of communication between them."

This is all the more so, given that both countries were engaged in a concerted effort to drag reluctant European powers behind their war drive. One can only surmise that Straw is making a desperate attempt to counter the fallout from Washington's efforts to pass the buck to London for their shared WMD lies.

The willingness of top Bush personnel to hang Blair out to dry in order to save their own necks is a painful reminder for the prime minister of the true value attached by the US to the so-called "special relationship". It has been made clear to Blair that whereas he is considered a useful ally, he is still expendable.

The lesson in political duplicity provided by the Bush administration could not have come at a worse time for Blair. It has placed his very political survival in question, with demands being made for his resignation in the face of the continued failure to find any evidence of Iraqi WMDs.

Former international development secretary Clare Short, who resigned from the Blair cabinet over Iraq, said on GMTV's July 13 *Sunday* programme that Blair should stand down as Labour leader before things get "even nastier". She said that the degree of trust for Blair in the country has gone down considerably and the trade unions are very unhappy with him. She warned of "a big nasty split" that would damage the party, making it unattractive to the electorate if Blair stayed, and reiterated her call for "an elegant handover" of office.

Short was echoed by Glenda Jackson, the well-known actress and Labour member of Parliament, who said Blair must resign if WMD are not found. Jackson stated: "Now he is saying that only weapons 'programmes' will be found. Does that mean we went to war because Saddam Hussein could launch chopped-up pieces of paper—effectively confetti—within 45 minutes? Tony Blair placed British troops in clear and present danger on the basis that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction and was ready to use them."

Short denied that she was lobbying for Chancellor Gordon Brown to become party leader, but in an interview for the *Sunday Telegraph* she drew an analogy to the replacement of then-Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1990 by her chancellor, John Major. "We all lived through Thatcher going and Major being there. It was like a new government," she said.

Home Secretary David Blunkett denounced what he called a "plot" to remove Blair from office, while the pro-Blair *Sun* newspaper of Rupert Murdoch wrote that "friends of the Chancellor are plotting to ensure Mr. Brown is the next PM."

To make matters worse for Blair, the former head of the UN weapons inspectors, Hans Blix, told the *Independent on Sunday* that the prime minister had made a "fundamental

mistake" in asserting that Iraq could deploy weapons of mass destruction in 45 minutes in the September intelligence dossier—a claim he said was "pretty far off the mark." And Richard Butler, the executive chairman of the UN inspector force in Iraq from 1997 to 1999, said that anyone who had claimed there was a link between Niger and Iraq should resign from office.

Donald Anderson, the chair of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, has insisted that the government make available more information about the source that said Iraq was trying to obtain uranium from Niger.

Blair still retains the support of the media, with one of his sternest critics over Iraq, the *Daily Mirror*, warning, "The vultures hovering over the prime minister should put the interests of their party and the country before spiteful revenge—Clare Short please take note."

But the vultures continue to gather, nevertheless. The *Mirror's* own opinion poll notes that two thirds of the electorate believe Blair misled them over the war in Iraq, and only 22 percent of respondents said they would most likely vote Labour at the next general election.

The prime minister is due to fly to Washington on July 17 and will thereafter be on holiday and out of the country for three weeks. His US trip, meant to be an occasion for celebration and self-promotion, now promises further political embarrassment.

Blair is being urged to raise concerns over the future of nine British citizens held at the Guantanamo Bay camp, including Moazzam Begg and Feroz Abassi, who are to face trial by a US military tribunal. More than 200 MPs signed a parliamentary motion calling on the two to be returned home because they have no chance of a fair trial and could face the death penalty. There are also demands that Blair defend the rights of two London-based businessmen jailed without charge at Guantanamo, Bisher al-Rawi and Jamil al-Banna.

It was initially planned that Bush present Blair with a congressional medal for his support during the Iraq war. But the domestic and international criticism of both leaders is so severe, the award ceremony has been called off.



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