

As Iraq war lies disintegrate

Australian government tries to discredit former intelligence analyst

Mike Head
12 September 2003

As the US occupation of Iraq becomes an increasingly disastrous morass, the lies told to justify the invasion continue to unravel. After six months, not one biological or chemical weapon has been found, no nuclear arms program has been discovered and no links to Al Qaeda or any other terrorist group have been established. Nor have the Iraqi people welcomed the occupying troops as “liberators”.

In the US, the Bush administration confronts a growing political crisis as the costs of the US operations in Iraq—both financial and the toll of American casualties—keep mounting. In Britain, in the wake of the tragic death of weapons expert Dr. David Kelly, the Blair government is under siege over its concocted claims about the threat posed by the former Hussein regime in Iraq.

So far, however, Australian Prime Minister John Howard and his government have escaped the political fallout relatively unscathed, despite the massive opposition that existed to the war. His ability to do so is largely due to the complicity of the media and the official Labor Party opposition, which have refused to in any way challenge Howard’s regurgitation of the Bush administration’s lies.

But there is growing unease, both among ordinary working people and in some ruling circles, including sections of the military and intelligence community. The more the opposition in Iraq grows and the more Bush and Blair come under fire over their fabrications, the less tenable the Australian government’s position becomes.

Now, in an effort to shore up its position, the Howard government has been caught out using the same methods it resorted to in the lead-up to the war—manufacturing evidence and manipulating intelligence reports—in a dirty tricks campaign to discredit former senior intelligence analyst Andrew Wilkie, who resigned from the Office of National Assessments, on March 13 in opposition to the invasion.

Despite a vicious official and media vendetta against him, Wilkie has remained a thorn in the government’s side. Although others in the military and security establishment are thought to share his concerns with the government’s flagrant distortion of intelligence material, he is the one person who has continued to consistently expose the government’s crimes.

When Wilkie resigned, he used his intimate knowledge of the intelligence reports on Iraq, to accuse the government of deliberate exaggeration the material. He insisted that Saddam Hussein’s regime posed no security threat to any country, because its “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) program was limited, disjointed and contained. Moreover, the Howard and Bush governments falsely asserted that Iraq had links with Al Qaeda.

Wilkie spoke with considerable credentials. He was a senior military officer—an army lieutenant colonel—seconded twice to ONA to work at senior levels with the highest security clearances. He had represented

ONA internationally at conferences on WMD and terrorism, and was the ranking analyst in the “transnational issues branch,” which tracked high-level intelligence on terrorism. One of several ONA officers monitoring Iraq, he was on standby to join the National Intelligence Watch Office group assigned to the looming war.

The government’s immediate response to his resignation was to orchestrate a character assassination campaign. Using ONA and military sources, Wilkie was depicted as an emotionally disturbed, publicity-seeking individual with no knowledge of issues relating to Iraq. One journalist recalled this week: “The Prime Minister’s office began spreading the word around the media: Wilkie was not in the loop at ONA, was mentally unstable, was not to be trusted. It was very nasty and quite false.”

Undeterred, in mid-June Wilkie gave evidence before legislative committees in London and Washington. He told the British House of Commons foreign affairs select committee on June 19 that the Blair and Howard governments had “deliberately doctored and distorted evidence” about Iraq’s weapons program to back up a series of “ridiculous”, “preposterous” and “fundamentally flawed” allegations.

Significantly, he testified that both governments had ignored the warnings of their own intelligence agencies that the US was intent on regime change in Iraq for “strategic and domestic reasons”. His remarks pointed to clear knowledge in intelligence and government circles of the real reasons for the invasion, namely, US control over Middle East oil, wider American economic and military hegemony and pursuit of the Bush administration’s right-wing domestic agenda.

By the time that Wilkie appeared in London, the Labour government was already being shaken by BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan’s May 29 report, based on conversations with Dr. Kelly, that Blair’s Director of Communications Alastair Campbell had presided over the “sexing up” of a September 2002 security dossier. At the centre of the crisis was the exposure of Blair’s false claim that Iraq could launch WMD within 45 minutes, hyping the case for a war most Britons opposed.

Wilkie’s testimony, combined with the fact that all the official lies on Iraq were beginning to collapse, triggered a new level of retaliation by the Howard government, delivered through the pages of the Murdoch-owned press. On June 23, Melbourne *Herald Sun* journalist Andrew Bolt, a vociferous government supporter, published a column titled “Spook misspoke,” denouncing Wilkie. Bolt openly informed his readers that his remarks were derived from reading a classified report that Wilkie wrote for ONA in December 2002 on the possible humanitarian fallout of an Iraq invasion. “When I go through the only secret report Wilkie ever wrote about Iraq as an Office of National Assessments analyst, I wonder just who fell for a ‘fairytale’,” Bolt wrote.

In his report, Wilkie apparently warned of a “worst-case” scenario, in

which, faced with a US-led assault, the Iraqi regime might use chemical weapons against the civilian population, causing a humanitarian catastrophe. That Wilkie would have issued such a warning was hardly surprising. It was in line with his assessment, restated publicly since he resigned, that the regime may have retained a limited WMD capacity.

But the leaking of the ONA report, reportedly stamped “top secret, for Australian eyes only,” and its use by Bolt involved a serious breach of the “official secrets” provisions of the Crimes Act. Unauthorised release, receipt or possession of such a classified document—whether by a cabinet minister, ministerial adviser or journalist—is punishable by up to seven years imprisonment. On the face of it, whoever handed the document to Bolt, and Bolt himself, are liable to prosecution.

ONA reports are normally circulated within the Prime Minister’s and Foreign Affairs departments. Yet, both Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer declared that neither they nor any of their staff had provided the report to Bolt. On July 9, Wilkie wrote to Howard raising his concern over the leak. “My concern is to ensure appropriate action is taken in regard to what appears to be a serious security breach,” Wilkie wrote to the prime minister. “I would expect the government to treat this matter most seriously.”

Wilkie’s letter arrived during the same week that the British government named Dr. Kelly as the source of Gilligan’s BBC report. Blair’s administration publicly vilified the whistleblower, threatened him with prosecution and secretly coerced him to perjure himself before the foreign affairs committee in order to exonerate the government. Just three days after his July 15 appearance before the parliamentary committee, Kelly was found dead.

On July 31, more than three weeks after receiving Wilkie’s letter, Howard’s office finally replied, stating that his correspondence had been simply handed to the ONA. On August 6, the ONA wrote to Wilkie to say that Bolt’s article had been referred to the Australian Federal Police for investigation. Clearly, in the light of the furore triggered by Kelly’s death, the government decided to stonewall any serious inquiry into the leak to Bolt.

Nine weeks later, the AFP has still not questioned Bolt, nor announced whether it will conduct a formal investigation into the case. Asked about the issue in parliament this Tuesday, Howard absurdly claimed that the ONA had informed him that Bolt did not specifically quote any intelligence material in his column. His reply cannot be reconciled with Bolt’s own boast that he was “going through” Wilkie’s document.

Whereas Kelly’s death in Britain forced the Blair government to call a limited judicial inquiry headed by Lord Hutton, the Howard government has managed to prevent any public inquiry into its role. With Labor’s support, and the acquiescence of the Australian Democrats and Greens in the Senate, in mid-June the mounting allegations that Howard deceived the Australian public were referred to a closed-door, government-controlled parliamentary committee.

Nevertheless, Wilkie appeared before the Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD (which monitors the budgets of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service and the Defence Signals Directorate) on August 22, the only day of public testimony. The remainder of the inquiry is being conducted in secret, the committee cannot force the government or any agency to give evidence or hand over documents, and there is no guarantee that its findings will be made public.

In his opening statement to the committee, Wilkie charged the government with “misrepresenting” intelligence material. “The Government deliberately skewed the truth by taking the ambiguity out of the issue. Key intelligence assessment qualifications like ‘probably’, ‘could’, and ‘uncorroborated evidence suggests’ were frequently dropped. Much more useful words like ‘massive’ and ‘mammoth’ were included, even though such words had not been offered to the Government

by its intelligence agencies.

“The Government even went so far as to fabricate the truth. The claims about Iraq cooperating actively with al-Qaeda were obviously nonsense, as was the Government’s reference to Iraq seeking uranium in Africa.”

Government Senator Sandy Macdonald immediately sought to undermine Wilkie’s testimony. Following in Bolt’s footsteps, he asked two questions based directly on Wilkie’s secret December 2002 report, apparently reading from the document itself. When Wilkie observed, “You are obviously quoting from the report,” Macdonald did not deny the fact.

Labor MPs quickly joined the assault on Wilkie, underscoring Labor’s fundamental support for the Iraq war. Former defence minister Robert Ray, backed by ex-parliamentary Speaker Leo McLeay, accused Wilkie of distorting the government’s record by stating that Howard had called Iraq’s weapons capability “massive” and “mammoth”.

Ray declared that he had thoroughly checked every claim made by the government and found not one example of those words being employed. Wilkie refused to back down, insisting that he remembered Howard’s use of those words “very clearly”.

In fact, these words were pivotal to the speeches that Howard delivered to justify participating in the invasion. Addressing parliament on February 4, the prime minister declared that Saddam Hussein had maintained “Iraq’s massive program for developing offensive biological weapons—one of the largest and most advanced in the world”. In a televised address to the nation on March 20, he asserted that Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” were “capable of causing death and destruction on a mammoth scale”.

Later in the committee session, Ray was forced to concede that Howard had indeed used the words. Nonetheless, he defended Howard, arguing that the word “massive” referred to Iraq’s “program” not weapons, and that Howard had specified that even small quantities of weapons could create “mammoth” damage. Three days later, Howard recorded his appreciation for Ray’s efforts. He issued an August 25 media release, in which he praised Ray for “very effectively” countering Wilkie’s assertion on the word “mammoth”.

In the same statement, Howard redoubled his attack on Wilkie, claiming that he was “guilty of distortion, exaggeration and misrepresentation”. Howard taunted Wilkie with the claim that he had “offered no evidence” for his allegations. According to Howard, it was “absurd” to suggest that Wilkie could not submit documentary evidence of the government’s misuse of intelligence without breaching the law.

But for Wilkie to have retained classified documents from the ONA, or to quote them in public, would expose him to prosecution under the Crimes Act. Howard and the government, on the other hand, have the power to release all the relevant documents—something they refuse to do.

For more than two weeks, Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer scoffed at the suggestion of any leak to Macdonald, with Howard insinuating that Macdonald’s information drew from Wilkie’s public comments and his evidence before the British inquiry.

On Tuesday, however, their line began to wobble. They admitted for the first time that Downer’s office had prepared briefing notes for Macdonald. Downer’s spokesman claimed that the briefing notes did not include classified material—yet refused to table the notes in parliament.

Howard was forced to announce that the police had decided to extend their investigation to Macdonald. At the same time, he sought to deflect attention from the government by stating that 300 copies of Wilkie’s report had been distributed among authorised people within the government and public service.

Earlier in the day, Howard gave a signal that the government intended to respond by stepping up its attacks on Wilkie. “If he calls any member of this Government a liar, any member of this Government has a right to retaliate,” Howard told the House of Representatives.

New slanders soon followed, behind the protection of parliamentary privilege. West Australian Liberal Senator David Johnston, a long-time Liberal Party official, told the Senate that Wilkie was “very unstable”. “At the very best, he is unreliable; at worst, he is flaky and irrational”. Johnston’s other epithets included: dishonourable, low, flagrant, outrageous, grandiose, incongruous and inconsistent.

Various media commentators have lined up behind the government’s vicious vendetta, echoing Howard’s charge that Wilkie has failed to produce the “evidence”. Murdoch’s tabloids have been far from alone in this crusade, which is reminiscent of the methods used against Dr. Kelly in Britain prior to his untimely death—either by suicide or something more sinister.

Another example appeared this week in the Fairfax press—the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age*. Columnist Gerard Henderson falsely reported that Ray had shown Wilkie’s quotes to be taken out of context. Then, without actually examining a single statement made by Wilkie, he declared: “An examination of Wilkie’s testimony indicates that he provided no evidence to support his extremely serious allegations.”

Henderson cynically demanded that Wilkie prove that the government hyped-up the case for war, which he knows Wilkie cannot do so unless the government releases the intelligence assessments. Why not demand that Howard provide the evidence to support his government’s criminal actions in joining an unprovoked war of aggression? None has been produced, despite specialist troops and CIA agents scouring Iraq for more than six months.

Henderson’s column depicted Wilkie as a self-serving “media star,” who was “dreaming” if he did not expect the Howard government to denounce him. In reality, Wilkie has courageously persisted in trying to bring the truth to light, sacrificing his career in the process. That is precisely why the government is so preoccupied with discrediting him.

The Wilkie affair is far from over, but already it has provided a revealing portrait of the techniques upon which this government increasingly depends for its political survival: selective leaking of secret intelligence documents to handpicked journalists, use of government agencies to orchestrate mud-raking attacks on political critics, reliance on parliamentary privilege to launch defamatory attacks.

The witchhunt against Wilkie, the establishment of a whitewash closed-door inquiry and Labor’s solidarity with Howard are not signs of political strength or confidence. Rather, they are symptomatic of a desperate, discredited government that will stop at nothing to cover its tracks.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact