

Blair caught out again over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction

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Prime Minister Tony Blair has come under renewed attack for his support for the US-led war of aggression against Iraq, following a damning admission by Paul Bremer, US head of Iraq's puppet Provisional Authority, that US and British troops have found no evidence of weapons of mass destruction.

Bremer has inadvertently caught Blair out in yet another lie over Iraqi WMDs.

During the course of an interview on ITV1's *Jonathan Dimbleby* programme on December 28, Dimbleby asked Bremer whether the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) had unearthed "massive evidence" of clandestine laboratories capable of producing such weapons.

Bremer interjected, rejecting the claim as untrue. "I don't know where those words come from but that is not what (ISG chief) David Kay has said," he said.

"I have read his reports so I don't know who said that," he went on, accusing those responsible for making such misleading statements as being motivated by an antiwar agenda.

"It sounds like a bit of a red herring to me," Bremer said. "It sounds like someone who doesn't agree with the policy sets up a red herring then knocks it down."

In fact, Blair himself made the claim during his televised Christmas message to British troops stationed in Iraq. In his adjective-laden remarks the prime minister had claimed, "The Iraq Survey Group has already found massive evidence of a huge system of clandestine laboratories, workings by scientists, plans to develop long range ballistic missiles.

"Now, frankly, these things weren't being developed unless they were developed for a purpose."

When told that the citation came direct from the prime minister, a clearly embarrassed Bremer sought to retract his previous admission. "There is actually a lot

of evidence that had been made public," he said, including "clear evidence of biological and chemical programmes, ongoing".

The damage had already been done, however.

Blair's predicament was made worse when former United Nations Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix said in a TV interview that the ISG had failed to find any concrete evidence of WMD programmes. In a scarcely veiled reference to Blair, he continued that those who claimed the discovery of laboratories was proof of an Iraqi WMD programme were resorting to "innuendo". Blix has previously stated that it was "increasingly clear" that Iraq did not have any WMD capability at the time of the US-led attack.

Bremer's interview came just as Blair had left Britain for a seasonal family break, still bathing in the political afterglow of Saddam Hussein's arrest. In response, a spokeswoman for Blair argued that the prime minister had been referring in his broadcast to "already published material" in the ISG's interim report.

This again is not true. The ISG's interim report does not make the same grandiose claims as Blair. Whilst citing evidence of "clandestine" laboratories, it does not describe them to be part of a "huge system" for developing biological and chemical weapons capabilities. More cautiously it alleges that the labs contained equipment "suitable for continuing" research into weapons development. Contradicting itself, the report also states that these supposedly hidden laboratories were in fact "subject to US monitoring".

The ISG report, it must be stressed, admits that "no weapons of mass destruction" had been uncovered.

After the momentary shock of his faux pas, Bremer went on to attack Dimbleby for his obsession with what he called minor "details". He ordered the reporter to "Listen!" As a historian he knew that in the future

people would not care about the failure to find WMDs. “Weapons of mass destruction or no weapons of mass destruction, it’s important to step back a little bit here, to see what we have done historically,” he said.

But Blair sold the war to the British people on the strength of Iraq’s supposed threat to world peace and cannot simply switch to hailing the benefits of “regime change”. Bremer’s interview consequently provoked renewed criticism of the prime minister by leading Church of England representatives and Labour MPs.

Interviewed by the *Times* newspaper Dr David Hope, the Archbishop of York and Britain’s second most senior church leader, said, “We still have not found any weapons of mass destruction anywhere.

“Are we likely to find any? Does that alter the view as to whether we really ought to have mounted the invasion or not?”

Referring to Blair’s own pronouncement that he would answer for his actions before God—a statement designed to deflect from his refusal to answer to the British people—Hope warned that the supreme being could also find the prime minister wanting! “There is a higher authority before whom one day we all have to give an account,” he said.

The Bishop of Durham, Dr Tom Wright, went further calling Blair a “vigilante”. Blair and US President George W. Bush did not have the credibility to deal with the problems facing Iraq, Wright said.

“For Bush and Blair to go into Iraq together was like a bunch of white vigilantes going into Brixton to stop drug-dealing,” he told the *Independent* newspaper.

“This is not to deny there’s a problem to be sorted, just that they are not credible people to deal with it.”

Criticisms by the clergy were backed by Labour MP Clare Short, who resigned as Blair’s international development secretary following the attack on Iraq. Short repeated her allegation that Blair had lied when he claimed that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and called on Blair to resign. “If you are going to start getting into deceit when you are going to war and risking human life it has gone too far,” she said.

The intelligence agencies and the prime minister knew that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction but continued to claim this was the case to justify a pre-emptive strike. “No one thought there was some imminent danger,” she said. “That was all talked

up and talked up to a point of deceit.”

Blair had been driven to go to war by his obsession with “his place in history” and in order to satisfy an agreement he had made with Bush some months before that his government would stand by the US regardless of international law.

What followed was “a complete disaster for the Middle East, for Iraq, for the world,” Short said. Blair must not lead Labour into the 2004 election, she continued, urging him to resign for the “honour of Britain”.

Former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who also resigned his position in advance of the war, was more cautious, urging Blair to recognise that he had lost public trust and should admit he was wrong about the threat posed by Iraq.



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