

# The Washington Post and the Downing Street memo

Joseph Kay, Barry Grey  
22 June 2005

On June 16, Representative John Conyers, the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, held a hearing in the Capitol on what has become known as the Downing Street memo.

The “memo” consists of minutes of a British cabinet meeting held in July 2002 in which the chief of Britain’s intelligence service MI6 reported on his recent discussions with Bush administration officials in Washington. The intelligence head, Sir Richard Dearlove, said that in Washington war “was now seen as inevitable” and that “intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy” of removing Saddam Hussein “through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD.”

The document, labeled “secret and strictly personal,” first came to light in the May 1 issue of the British *Sunday Times*. It ignited a political firestorm in Britain and played a significant role in the May 5 election, fueling anti-war sentiment and contributing to a sharp reduction in Prime Minister Tony Blair’s parliamentary majority.

The enormous publicity given the memo in Britain stood in the sharpest contrast to the virtual silence it evoked in the American media—a silence for which there is no innocent explanation. The “mainstream” media made a calculated political decision to bury the memo and keep the American people in the dark.

The memo provides irrefutable evidence, from the highest levels of the British state, that the March 2003 invasion of Iraq was launched on the basis of lies concocted to justify a predetermined policy. Among the lies were the repeated assurances of Bush and other top US government officials in the months and weeks preceding the war that no decision had been made to go to war and the US was exhaustively pursuing all peaceful alternatives.

It would seem that a senior congressman holding a hearing on such a document—more than two years after the US invasion, with US troop deaths topping 1,700, tens of thousands of Iraqis killed, some \$200 billion already expended on the war and occupation, and the primary pretext for the war, Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, exposed as a fiction—would be considered the minimum, if long-delayed, response in a democracy. All the more so under conditions where a raft of opinion polls show that a large majority of the US population is now opposed to the war.

But the *Washington Post*, the capital’s leading “liberal” newspaper, not only relegated Conyers’s hearing to its inside pages, it published a sneering and derogatory account that did not seek to conceal the newspaper’s fury over the congressman’s attempt to break through the wall of silence on the memo.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is no political supporter of Conyers, a Democratic politician who has worked for decades to maintain the subordination of American workers to the two-party system. Nevertheless, his treatment at the hands of the *Post* is quite extraordinary. The newspaper casts Conyers, one of the most senior members of Congress, as a buffoon, in order to denigrate the anti-war and anti-Bush sentiments expressed by the participants at his hearing.

To underline its attitude to both the hearing and the Downing Street memo itself, the *Post* published its account in its June 17 “Washington Sketch” column—a feature usually devoted to lighthearted commentary on the peccadilloes and curiosities of political life in the nation’s capital. Written by veteran *Post* journalist Dana Milbank, the column was headlined “Democrats Play House to Rally Against the War.”

The derisive headline captured the flavor of the text. Conyers and a number of other House Democrats, Milbank wrote, “took a trip to the land of make-believe.” The “dress-up game looked realistic enough,” he continued, for “two dozen more Democrats to come downstairs and play along.” The “hearty band of playmates” indulged themselves, according to Milbank, in a “fantasy.”

Milbank found it particularly uproarious that Conyers was forced to hold the hearing in a small room in the basement of the Capitol, and that he lacked the power to issue subpoenas: “...subpoena power and other perks of a real committee are but a fantasy unless Democrats can regain the majority in the House,” he chortled.

As Conyers subsequently pointed out in a letter to the *Post*, “Despite the fact that a number of other suitable rooms were available in the Capitol and House office buildings, Republicans declined my request for each and every one of them.” Conyers added that the Republican leadership in Congress took other measures to derail the hearing, including the scheduling of “an almost unprecedented number of 11 consecutive floor votes, making it next to impossible for most Members to participate in the first hour and one half of the hearing.”

Such anti-democratic practices by a majority party determined to deny any minority rights and block any discussion of the administration’s war policies are evidently of no concern to Milbank and his superiors at the *Post*. On the contrary, they seem to find it amusing that such methods are used to silence anti-war sentiment and suppress public discussion of the British memo.

Milbank continued: “But that’s only one of the obstacles they’re up against as they try to convince America that the ‘Downing Street Memo’ is important.” In making the case that the memo is of no importance, Milbank introduced as exhibit one: “A search of the congressional record yesterday found that of the 535 members of Congress, only one—Conyers—had mentioned the memo on the floor of either chamber. House Democratic leaders did not join in Conyers’s session, and Senate Democrats, who have the power to hold such events in real committee rooms, have not troubled themselves.”

That such an argument should even be adduced to “prove” the insignificance of the memo bespeaks not the political import of the memo, but the miserable level of what passes for journalism in today’s “mainstream” American press. The virtual silence of the Democrats on the memo is an indictment of the Democratic Party. If anything, it proves the opposite of Milbank’s cynical assertion. The conspiracy of silence speaks to the enormously damaging and explosive political implications of the memo not only for the Bush administration, but also for the

Democratic Party, which has fully backed the Iraq war.

Milbank attempted to further discredit the hearing by associating it with anti-Semitism. He cited the testimony of one witness, Ray McGovern, a former intelligence analyst, who, in Milbank's words, "declared that the United States went to war in Iraq for oil, Israel and military bases craved by administration 'neocons' so 'the United States and Israel could dominate that part of the world.'" Whatever McGovern's political agenda might be, there are no grounds, simply on the basis of this summation of Washington's real war aims, to brand him an anti-Semite.

Milbank then employed the tactic of the political amalgam to bolster his "anti-Semitic" smear, citing flyers suggesting Israeli involvement in 9/11 that were handed out to people gathered at Democratic headquarters to watch the Conyers hearing on CSPAN.

There was one obstacle to explaining the Downing Street memo to the American people that Milbank chose not to mention: the refusal of the *Washington Post* and the rest of the US media to give the story the extensive and prominent coverage it merits.

The unstated political agenda behind Milbank's June 17 piece was spelled out more openly in a *Post* editorial published two days earlier, entitled "Iraq, Then and Now." In that commentary, the *Post* resorted to a combination of absurdities and outright lies to dismiss the significance of the Downing Street memo.

The editors declared that the original memo, together with a subsequent memo made public earlier this month, "add not a single fact to what was previously known about the administration's prewar deliberations. Not only that: They add nothing new to what was publicly known in July 2002."

Really? The fact that intelligence was being "fixed" to provide a pretext for war is something everyone knew? And it was "publicly known" in July 2002—eight months before the invasion?

Here the *Post* seems to be confusing what it knew with what was known by the public at large. Certainly the *Post* did nothing to blow the whistle on what constitutes one of the most monstrous violations of democratic rights in US history!

The *Post* editorial continued: "It was argued even then, and has since become conventional wisdom, that Mr. Bush, Vice President Cheney and other administration spokesmen exaggerated the threat from Iraq to justify the elimination of a noxious regime."

Exaggerated? Here the choice of words is exquisitely cynical and dishonest. The US weapons inspectors who combed Iraq after the invasion did not find 20,000 liters of anthrax instead of the 30,000 alleged by Bush and his co-conspirators. They did not find 10,000, or 1,000, or one. They found, in round numbers, *zero* weapons of mass destruction!

This is not "exaggeration." It is fabrication—on a massive scale, and for the filthy purpose of launching an unprovoked war of conquest.

The *Post* went on to state that the memos "provide no information that would alter the conclusions of multiple independent investigations on both sides of the Atlantic, which were that US and British intelligence agencies genuinely believed Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and that they were not led to that judgment by the Bush administration."

More lies! Every one of these "multiple independent investigations" were government-organized whitewashes—something that is well understood by many millions in the US and around the world.

No pressure from the Bush administration on the intelligence agencies? What about Vice President Dick Cheney's numerous visits to CIA headquarters, where, according to documented accounts, he attempted to strong-arm analysts into altering their assessments of Iraqi WMD in order to scare the American people and make a stronger case for war?

What about the Pentagon's infamous Office of Special Plans, which was set up to bypass the CIA and other intelligence agencies and publicize bogus reports of Iraqi chemical, biological and nuclear programs that were supplied by Ahmed Chalabi, a paid agent of the US government?

*Post* to whitewash such principle? There this, in instance, the broad consensus within the American political and media establishment in support of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the general policy of militarism and US global hegemony being pursued by the Bush administration.

There is, as well, a considerable element of self-interest. The *Post* has reason to fear the Downing Street memo, because it is an indictment not only of the Bush administration, but also the government's accomplices in the media, who promoted uncritically the administration's lies and war propaganda.

But there is something else—namely, fear. The *Post*'s rabid response to the Downing Street memo reflects mounting concern, even panic, within American ruling circles over the growth of popular opposition to the war.

This is an adventure to which the entire ruling elite is committed, and in which both parties and the whole media establishment are implicated. The opinion polls, the disastrous fall-off in military recruitment, the military and political quagmire in Iraq itself, the increasingly fragile and untenable financial situation—taken together they point to the emergence of enormous political shocks and social upheavals within the US.

Interestingly, Milbank, in his column, called Conyers's hearing a "mock impeachment inquiry over the Iraq war." It was, as far as Conyers and other Democratic politicians who took part were concerned, nothing of the kind. They did not raise the "I" word. But others who testified, including the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq, are calling for Bush's impeachment.

Will the sclerotic two-party system be able to withstand such convulsions? Will a movement of protest against war and social reaction assume anti-capitalist and revolutionary forms? These are the questions that plague the more thoughtful elements within the ruling elite.

It is a measure of their crisis that they can for the present respond only with more lies, combined with attempts to defame and intimidate. Other measures are being prepared, from the promotion of left-talking demagogues to divert discontent into safe channels to the use of state violence and terror.

In the meantime, the *Washington Post* will continue to grind out its dishonest and absurd rationales for a criminal war, and do its best to conceal the truth from the American people.



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