Tony Blair's testimony before Iraq inquiry: One war criminal amongst many

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Former British prime minister Tony Blair's second appearance last week before the Chilcot inquiry into the lessons of the Iraq war again branded him as a war criminal.

Blair was asked to return to the inquiry due to discrepancies between his earlier testimony, the documentary record, and other testimony such as that of his attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, as to when the prime minister had committed Britain to war, and what advice he had received as to its legality.

Previously, Blair had insisted that Resolution 1441, passed unanimously by the United Nations Security Council in November 2002, authorised military action and that he had received advice to this effect from Goldsmith. In fact, when sponsoring the resolution, US and British officials had stressed that the resolution contained no "hidden triggers" or "automaticity" with regards to the use of force against Iraq, which must be discussed by the Security Council.

Resolution 1441 was made the supposed "legal" basis for the invasion only after it became clear that a second UN resolution could not be obtained. On March 7, 2003, Goldsmith sent a memo to Blair in which he concluded that "a reasonable case can be made that resolution 1441 is capable in principle of reviving the authorisation [of the use of force] in Resolution 678 without a further resolution".

Goldsmith's testimony before the inquiry, headed by Sir John Chilcot, focused upon the events leading him to reverse his original advice in a January 30, 2003, memo to Blair, which argued that Resolution 1441 did not sanction the use of force and a further resolution would be required. He stated that during the intervening period, Blair had made clear to President George W. Bush his support for an illegal war with the aim of regime change.

It is well known that Blair assured Bush of his commitment to regime change in February 2002. In 2005, a secret March 2002 Foreign Office document was leaked to the *Sunday Times*. The "Downing Street Memo" stated, "When the prime minister discussed Iraq with President Bush at Crawford in April he said that the UK would support military action to bring about regime change, provided that certain conditions were met".

Documents obtained by the *Sunday Telegraph* and published in 2009 reveal that planning for a military attack on Iraq to effect regime change was underway from early 2002, while Blair was publicly denying any such plans. One document notes that "Formation-level planning for a [British] deployment [to Iraq] took place from February 2002", and cites Major General Graeme Lamb, director of special forces during the war, stating, "I had been working the war up since early 2002".

These issues were explored, very politely, by the inquiry.

It established that in June 2002, US Central Command held a special Iraq planning conference involving Britain and Australia, while in August of the same year, discussions took place on British troops invading Iraq through Turkey. But in July 2002, Blair informed parliament, "There are no decisions which have been taken about military action".

In September 2002, he repeated to parliament, "In respect of any military options, we are not at the stage of deciding those options".

Crucial notes sent by Blair to Bush, which Chilcot argued provided "important and often unique insights into Mr. Blair's thinking and the commitments he made to President Bush", were withheld by Sir Gus O'Donnell, the cabinet secretary, after consulting Blair.

One note has been leaked, however, relating to a two-hour Blair-Bush meeting at the White House on January 31, 2003. Sir David Manning, Blair's chief foreign policy adviser, states that Bush was determined to invade Iraq without a new UN resolution and that "Our diplomatic strategy had to be arranged around the military planning…. The start date for the military campaign was now pencilled in for 10 March.... This was when the bombing would begin…the prime minister said he was solidly with the president and ready to do whatever it took to disarm Saddam".

A previously unpublished personal memo written by Blair to his chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, on March 17, 2002, explains that "the immediate WMD ["weapons of mass destruction"] problems [posed by Iraq] don't seem obviously worse than three years ago. So we have to re-order our story and message".

But war preparations continued apace, on the basis of repeated US and UK government claims that Iraqi WMD represented a real and growing danger.

Blair's March 17 memo complains that the Labour Party, having gone to war in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Sierra

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Leone "and is prepared to change regimes on the merits should be gung-ho about Saddam".

He continues, "I do not have a proper worked-out strategy on how we would do it.… I will need a meeting on this with military folk".

In regard to the legality of the war, Blair told parliament on January 15, 2003, that if France blocked a second UN resolution, Britain could still legally join an invasion. At the inquiry, Goldsmith made clear that he did not hold this view at the time, that Blair knew this and ignored his opinion—making him [Goldsmith] "uncomfortable" over the prime minister's statements. Goldsmith told Blair in a draft legal opinion in January 2003 that Resolution 1441 was not enough to justify an invasion.

During questioning, Blair stated, "Regime change was their (US) policy so regime change was part of the discussion". He admitted he had told Bush by telephone in December 2001 that "if [regime change] became the only way of dealing with this issue, we were going to be up for that".

He felt entitled to ignore initial advice from Goldsmith that the war would be illegal because it was provisional: "I had not yet got to the stage of a formal request for advice and neither had he got to the point of formally giving it. So I was continuing to hold to the position that another resolution was not necessary".

Blair offered as explanation for not making public Goldsmith's reservations the damaging impact it would have had on relations with Washington. But in any case, when Goldsmith "saw the Americans it moved him over the line, to the position where he said, 'on balance it is lawful' ".

The revelations from the Chilcot inquiry fill out the picture already painted of Blair's manoeuvres with Washington to prepare the way for a previously agreed and illegal war of aggression against Iraq, using the pretext of a WMD danger the prime minister knew to be spurious. But the proceedings again throw into focus why Blair feels able to make such extraordinary admissions.

First, Blair understands that the Chilcot inquiry is a fraud—one in a long succession of similar frauds, such as the Hutton inquiry into the death of whistleblower David Kelly. The parameters set by the previous Gordon Brown Labour government gave Chilcot a remit of establishing the "lessons that can be learned" from British involvement in the Iraq war. All those testifying were assured that no prosecutions or legal proceedings would arise as a result.

As was made clear with regard to Blair's notes, government figures retain the power of veto over what documents can be made public or handed over. The inquiry cannot disclose matters considered "essential to our national security", or "likely" to "cause harm" to "defence interests or international relations". The inquiry's final report will also be vetted, allowing any government agency or department to remove any sections they wish.

Just as importantly, Blair knows that those others whose testimony is being taken are as culpable as he—no matter how they attempt to portray themselves as victims of his machinations and subterfuges. The suggestion that Blair almost single-handedly bamboozled parliament and the security services into supporting war is patently absurd. He is only the first among equals in the ranks of the guilty.

They include Sir John Scarlett, the former chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, who complains of "being bulldozed...by the military timetable".

And they include Goldsmith. He admits that he knew in October 2002 that Blair had "indicated to President Bush that he would join the US" in a war without a UN resolution, and that when Blair told the Commons in January 2003 that a fresh UN resolution was not necessary, he "thought that such action by the UK would be unlawful". This only underscores the dubious character of his "conversion" to Bush and Blair's position in the second March 7, 2003, memo.

The same is true of every member of the Blair Labour cabinet who signed off on the war and the MPs who then voted for it. When questioned as to whether it was understood in cabinet that military preparations were under way, Blair replied, "Yes". He "would be astonished" if the Cabinet did not know military preparations were underway.

Asked, "Did they take collective responsibility for the policy", Blair again replied in the affirmative. It defied "common sense and logic" to suggest that there were people in the cabinet who did not know what the consequences would be.

On this score there is no reason to contradict Blair. The Labour government and the then Conservative opposition voted to support a war they knew to be illegal on the basis of "dodgy dossiers" that everyone knew to be a pack of lies and used Goldsmith's "advice" to cover their exposed rears.

Parliament would do the same again. Blair knows this and put the political elite on notice. Warning of "a looming and coming challenge" from Iran, he declared, "At some point—and I say this to you with all the passion I possibly can—the West has got to get out of what I think is this wretched policy, or posture, of apology for believing that we are causing what the Iranians are doing, or what these extremists are doing. The fact is we are not. The fact is they are doing it because they disagree fundamentally with our way of life and they will carry on doing it unless they are met with the requisite determination and, if necessary, force".

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