

Intelligence failures

The weapons that weren't

Jul 15th 2004

From The Economist print edition



How the Americans and British got it all so wrong

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ON THE evening of July 11th, George Tenet lit a fat cigar and loitered in the compound of the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Virginia. His last hours as America's spy chief were passing painfully. According to the Senate Intelligence Committee, in a report released two days earlier, America invaded Iraq on the strength of intelligence that was out-of-date, inaccurate, badly analysed and, in short, did not justify the nub of George Bush's case for war.

America did not, as Mr Bush had claimed, have conclusive evidence that Iraq had retained and replenished its chemical and biological weapons, or that it was reactivating its nuclear programme. Nor, from any angle, could the agency find an alliance between Saddam and al-Qaeda. Mr Tenet was seen to pause by a garden feature: a hefty slab of the Berlin Wall. Perhaps the CIA's failure to predict the Soviet Union's collapse seemed suddenly less burdensome. On that, the agency was merely short-sighted. On Iraq, it appears to have been hallucinating.

Mr Tenet's decision to resign "for personal reasons" last month now looks wise. His farewell party was held on the eve of the report's release. But for John Scarlett, the best known British spy, the price of failure seems to be promotion. On July 14th, a British inquiry into intelligence on Iraq's putative weapons of mass destruction (WMD), headed by Lord Butler, a former top civil servant, delivered a broadly similar verdict to the Senate committee's, but in a kinder tone. Where the senators' report barely contained their dismay at the CIA's ineptitude, his lordship's criticism was more of a finger-wagging, with much talk of collective responsibility.

Mr Scarlett, the newly appointed head of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (known as MI6) and former head of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), was one of the few officials named in the report. In his old role, Mr Scarlett was responsible for the government's "dossier" on Iraq's WMD, published in September 2002, which has proved to be misleading and substantially false. There have been calls for Mr Scarlett's head, which Lord Butler urged the government to ignore.

The British agency's record on Iraq does withstand scrutiny a bit better than that of its American counterparts. The Senate found that the flotilla of intelligence agencies under Mr Tenet, the director of central intelligence, were gullible and incompetent, reflecting a "broken corporate culture and poor management". They had no agents in Iraq since 1998, and even before then relied heavily on information supplied by UN weapons inspectors (some of whom were moonlighting as spies). By September 2002, when the agencies were told to draft a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, which were a key exhibit in Mr Bush's case for war, most of what they "knew" about weapons programmes pre-dated the first Gulf war in 1991.

MI6 did have five agents inside Iraq, but they seem hardly to have improved its intelligence. According to Lord Butler,

only two of those agents were wholly reliable; their assessments of Iraq's WMD capabilities were "less worrying than the rest". Intriguingly, Lord Butler notes that intelligence obtained from another agency on Iraq's biological weapons was withdrawn after it was found to be seriously flawed, owing to "misunderstandings".

Making the most of a hard case

In the autumn of 2002, British and American intelligence services found themselves in a similar fix. For years, they, like every other western intelligence service, had advised their governments that Iraq's WMD programmes were a persistent menace. Now, they were being instructed to make that case fully and publicly, and suddenly it didn't look quite such a "slam-dunk," as Mr Tenet is said to have described it.

This was for two reasons. First, spies rarely produce the sort of clinching evidence beloved of investigative journalists and fictional detectives. Intelligence tends to be fragmentary and accretive. It does not lend itself to Powerpoint presentations. Second, due to the difficulties of operating in Iraq and their own deficiencies, both services were pitifully wanting in good current intelligence. In addition, the CIA's job was made especially difficult by Mr Bush and his more warlike followers. They were already making fiery claims about Saddam Hussein and his alleged alliance with al-Qaeda which the agency was unable to substantiate.

Nonetheless, the CIA tried not to disappoint. Into the NIE, according to the Senate report, went a shower of dodgily-sourced and overstretched intelligence. In the estimate's declassified version, possibilities became probables, and caveats were cut, as scraps of potentially alarming intelligence emerged as terrifying facts.

Numerous qualifiers—"we judge that", "most analysts believe that"—were excised. Thus were reasonable, though wrong, intelligence suppositions reborn as erroneous facts. To the (now discredited) claim that Iraq was developing its ability to deliver biological weapons was attached the dread phrase, "including potentially against the US homeland."

Much of the intelligence used in the British dossier was also denuded of important qualifiers. This was "a serious weakness", according to Lord Butler, which put more weight "on the intelligence than it could bear". In a perverse example of this, an original statement that the JIC had little information about Iraq's WMD programmes since 1998, was rewritten to suggest that the resulting uncertainty was itself a cause for suspicion. Lord Butler found that the dossier's judgments "went to (although not beyond) the outer limits of the intelligence available."

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Mr Powell's smoking guns

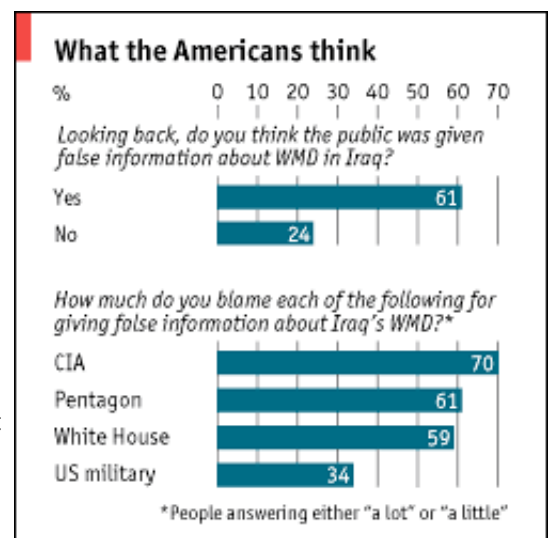
In February 2003, Colin Powell, the secretary of state, delivered a presentation to the UN Security Council that has been credited with convincing many sceptics of the case for war. Mr Powell outlined "many smoking guns" in Iraq, including a fleet of mobile biological weapons laboratories. All of these, he said, had been identified with the use of solid intelligence, corroborated by multiple sources. But the Senate committee found otherwise.

Shortly before Mr Powell delivered his speech, a CIA agent read a draft version of it, and reacted with horror. According to e-mails provided to the committee, the agent identified himself as being the only American agent to have interviewed the main source behind the mobile-lab intelligence. He considered the source, codenamed Curve Ball, an unreliable drunkard whose identity was not yet established. Three additional sources who were supposed to have corroborated Curve Ball's claims were either known "fabricators" or had not, in fact, corroborated the claims at all. In reply to these concerns, the agent was told by a senior CIA official: "Let's keep in mind the fact that this war's going to happen regardless of what Curve Ball said or didn't say, and that the Powers That Be probably aren't terribly interested in whether Curve Ball knows what he's talking about."

Similarly slapdash, the British dossier contained the hair-raising claim that Iraq could deploy WMD in a mere 45 minutes. This triggered apocalyptic newspaper headlines across the country. "Brits 45 mins from Doom," screamed the *Sun*, a popular British tabloid.

The dubiousness of the 45-minute claim (which, it later emerged, applied only to battlefield weapons) has dominated several earlier inquiries into Britain's pre-war intelligence. Hours before Lord Butler's report was released, Iraq's new prime minister, Ayad Allawi, sheepishly told the BBC that his émigré group was behind the claim. Speculation lingers that Mr Allawi's supporters lifted it from the user-guide for a Soviet missile. Lord Butler said that it should not have appeared in the form it did in the dossier.

Both the American and British reports put the agencies' mistakes down to incompetence, not intent. Though consistently wrong on almost every count where Iraq's WMD were concerned, the spies apparently thought they were right. Lord Butler attributes this partly to the fact that Mr Hussein had made fools of the spies often before. There was, he said, "a tendency for assessments to be coloured by over-reaction to previous errors," ensuring



Faith-based intelligence

The Senate committee explained this phenomenon in a colder light. It diagnosed a severe case of "group-think": that is, that the spies were failing to test the general assumption that Iraq had a growing WMD programme. To have done so would have been considered heresy; which may be why Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector, accused America of positing "faith-based intelligence."

Thus programmed, America's spies tended to reject any intelligence that didn't support the thesis. Whatever did corroborate it, they embraced, with little regard to the credibility of the source. Accordingly, defectors who claimed that Iraq had abandoned its pursuit of nuclear weapons by the mid-1990s, were dismissed as untrustworthy. Exiled opposition politicians and their relatives—including the dubious Ahmed Chalabi who had not visited Iraq in decades—were considered more reliable. And egged on by men with a keen interest in demonising Saddam, the CIA (and to a lesser degree the British agencies) were compromised at every stage of their intelligence collection and analysis.

When, in 2002, Iraq was found to be importing aluminium tubes that could theoretically be used to make uranium centrifuges, both the CIA and the JIC decided that this was probably the case. Investigators from the International Atomic Energy Agency then pointed out that the tubes could not be used in centrifuges without modification, and that they were in fact being used to make artillery rockets. The CIA dismissed them as naive.

In the face of such conviction, any evasiveness from Iraq—one of the world's most corrupt and incompetent regimes—was taken as an indication of guilt. In particular, where Iraq tried to hide deliveries of dual-purpose material, western spooks always assumed the worst. In fact, Iraqis typically used front companies to evade UN sanctions, and maximise the potential for corruption, on even their most harmless imports.

In response to the report's criticisms, both Mr Bush and Mr Blair reiterated their opinions that the war remained right. They would hardly have said otherwise. But both had argued a case for war based on the threat of Iraq's WMD. Mr Blair persuaded the British parliament to vote for war on the basis of Iraq's weapons—which the prime minister termed a "serious and current" threat—and the connected argument that Saddam had consistently breached United Nations resolutions. Had MI6's intelligence been a little more accurate, he could not have claimed that Britain was under threat.

Mr Bush did not make quite such a specific argument for war. In the slipstream of the outrages on September 11th 2001, he also suggested that Saddam was too bad a man, and too full of hate for America, to be left in power. But, contrary to what some Bushites now claim, the weapons remained the cornerstone of his case.

This was why he ordered Mr Tenet hurriedly to prepare the NIE in time for Congress to read before voting on whether to authorise the war. Similarly, when the CIA failed to find a link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, the administration relied on the threat of WMD to keep fears of such a link alive. Saddam "could decide secretly to provide weapons of mass destruction to terrorists for use against us...it would take just one vial, one canister, one crate to bring a day of horror to our nation," said the vice-president, Dick Cheney, a few weeks before the invasion of Iraq began.

By the time the Senate judges Mr Bush in the next phase, the verdict will be in from a bigger jury, America's voters. Mr Blair, too, is preparing to face voters next year.

Bruised, not mauled

On the face of it, neither Mr Blair nor Mr Bush was mauled by the inquiries. Lord Butler found no evidence that the prime minister's staff "sexed up" the dossier, though he does show that the intelligence was hardened for public consumption as it went through the system. He blames no individual and does not find any sign that Mr Blair doubted the intelligence he was being fed by the JIC.

In signing off, Lord Butler recommended that greater care be taken to maintain the distinction between intelligence and political persuasion. He also pondered the thought that WMD could still be found in Iraq, a good-sized country, with "lots of sand".

For Mr Bush's supporters, the Senate report's best sentence was the one that appeared to absolve his administration of the charge that it coerced and co-opted the nation's spies. The Republican-led committee found no evidence that the "mischaracterisation or exaggeration of the intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capabilities was the result of political pressure." But the president is not off the hook yet.

The report is bad news for Mr Bush because it has given Americans yet another reason to regret supporting him over Iraq. The committee's lead Republican and lead Democrat both said that they would not have voted for the war knowing what they know now. However Senator Pat Roberts, the committee's chairman, nuanced this, saying that he would have considered voting for a conflict more "like Bosnia and Kosovo", which did not involve American ground troops.

Small wonder that an *Economist*/YouGov poll released this week suggests that 61% of Americans believe they were given false information about WMD in Iraq; 70% blame the CIA for misleading them; and 59% blame the White House. Short of the under-the-sand miracle that Lord Butler mooted, Mr Bush's distrust rating seems destined to rise.

For the Senate committee will now embark on the "second phase" of its inquiry, to consider how the administration used

the intelligence agencies and their information to make its case for war. It will not complete this task until after Americans have voted in November. But there is already a good deal to suggest that the administration employed strategies to mould the intelligence to its purpose.

Certain statements, by Mr Cheney in particular, tempt the thought that sometimes the administration could not even be bothered with this formality. And Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defence, had little use for qualifying evidence when he announced in September 2002 "We know they have WMD. We know they have active programmes. There isn't any debate about it."

The report contains comments by the CIA's ombudsman, a figure appointed to investigate allegations of political interference in the agency. After interviewing intelligence analysts involved in the drafting of a June 2002 agency paper, which examined possible links between Iraq and al-Qaeda, the ombudsman found that about half a dozen spooks complained of coming under intense pressure from officials. Mostly, this involved being asked the same questions again and again. After conducting a July 2003 investigation into the pre-war intelligence processes, a former deputy chief of the CIA concluded that such "repetitive tasking" was partly aimed at eliciting the desired response.

A more insidious example of the administration's whip-cracking ways was the intelligence-scanning cell established by Douglas Feith, an under-secretary of defence. In mid-2002, Mr Feith detailed two researchers to double-check the CIA's files for links between Iraq and al-Qaeda. Mr Feith has denied that his men had any influence over the gathering or analysis of intelligence. But, in an appendix to the report, John Rockefeller, the committee's vice-chairman, claims that the Pentagon team offered a hawkish alternative to the CIA's analysis, firmly linking al-Qaeda to Iraq. When Mr Tenet rejected the team's presentation, they took it, says Mr Rockefeller, directly to the White House.

Chasing after fragments

Perhaps most tellingly, Mr Rockefeller accuses the administration of putting pressure on its spies to conform to the certainty contained in its own strident pronouncements. The CIA was faced with the risk of failing to support its government, or of failing to anchor its conclusions in the evidence to hand. In the absence of any substantial intelligence linking Iraq and al-Qaeda, for example, the CIA's agents declined to parrot Mr Bush's characterisation of Saddam in October 2002 as a man "who would like to use al-Qaeda as a forward army." But the president would not have thanked them for their restraint.

By the time the Senate judges Mr Bush in the next phase, the verdict will be in from a bigger jury, America's voters. Mr Blair, too, is preparing to face voters next year. The Senate report concludes thus: "While analysts cannot dismiss a threat because at first glance it seems unreasonable or it cannot be corroborated by other credible reporting, policymakers have the ultimate responsibility for making decisions based on this same fragmentary, inconclusive reporting."