

INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

No weapons of mass destruction

STEPHEN DORRIL

THE NEWS that the 75th Exploitation Task Force, having found no weapons of mass destruction, is leaving Iraq is proof of one of the great intelligence disasters of the last fifty years. Despite the CIA and MI6 spending hundreds of millions of pounds targeting intelligence-gathering efforts on Saddam and the massive media campaign on WMDs, not a single weapon has been discovered.

The media response to this disaster has been, surprisingly, not to blame the intelligence services but to accuse the politicians of spin. The idea that the politicians 'over-hyped' the intelligence and forced the services to 'politicise' their intelligence has become the standard and accepted explanation—see Rachel Sylvester (not a journalist normally connected with intelligence stories) in *The Telegraph* (29 April), 'Spies want to be allowed to spy—not to spin for politicians', and in *The Guardian* (30 April), 'An insult to British intelligence'. This is, however, another intelligence line—a defence to pre-empt the possibility of an official inquiry into this intelligence debacle.

This line of defence first surfaced when the Joint Intelligence Committee-sanctioned dossier on WMDs was released into the public domain against the wishes of MI6, but at the insistence of Tony Blair and Jack Straw. Senior MI6 figures made it known to correspondents that they viewed the dossier as being 'politically motivated'. They had been unwilling to release material which, they argued, might identify the original source. The evidence suggests, however, that the reason for their reticence in releasing intelligence-derived material was that the services knew that it was, at best, weak.

The story began shortly after the

election of New Labour to government in 1997. The Paddy Ashdown diaries include an intriguing entry. Blair told Ashdown, a former MI6 officer, that he had seen 'intelligence about Saddam and what has happened to these weapons. I can tell you, it's so scary I can't believe it.' He added: 'I don't understand why the French don't get it.' Clearly, MI6 had presented its own dossier and Blair had swallowed it whole.

At the end of the year, with divisions on the UN Security Council over sanctions on Iraq and the hindering by Baghdad of the weapons' inspectors, MI6, according to Seymour Hersh (*New Yorker*, April 2003) 'resorted to spreading false information about Iraq' through its I/Ops unit. An agent within the UN inspection team funnelled to MI6, 'intelligence that was crap'. This was subsequently planted on MI6's media contacts and outlets throughout the world.

Some of this disinformation was obvious at the time. There was a flood of articles, particularly about the transfer of nuclear material and weapons to Iraq, and also to al-Qaida. According to George Jones in *The Telegraph* (19 April), throughout 1998 Blair was in receipt of more intelligence which fuelled his worries about WMDs. Even before September 11, Blair was warning the Americans about the dangers of the 'marriage' between terrorists and rogue states with WMDs. Iraq was identified as a state developing a ballistic missile capability which could be weaponised with WMDs.

The reality is that MI6 had been pushing the WMD agenda for a number of years, partly to persuade the UN and, particularly the French to do something about Iraq. They used

intelligence which they knew to be 'crap' and some of which was undoubtedly forged, as in the case of the Niger documents on nuclear supplies to Iraq. They used the testimony of Iraqi defectors which was tainted and unreliable, and falsified the intelligence from other defectors who stated that Saddam ordered the destruction of WMD warheads some years previously (see Hersh, *New Yorker*, May 2003).

Politicians certainly spin and pushed the intelligence services to provide the evidence of WMDs in Iraq, but the services had already been spinning their tales for a few years before September 11. The untangling of the origins of the war on Iraq begin with the election of Tony Blair and in the trail of disinformation which followed in the newspapers and other MI6 Information Ops outlets.



Photo by Stefano Cagnoni



The BBC's War

DAVID MILLER

THE BBC, as the national broadcaster, has always found it difficult to resist government pressure in war. During the Falklands war, for example, it was attacked as traitorous for airing doubts about the war, but its senior management was clear that the bulk of its output had either not reported Argentinian claims or had 'nailed' them as 'propagandist lies'.

The level of public opposition to the war in Iraq was difficult for the BBC to navigate. The war exposed a serious disconnection between the political elite and the public, so the usual method of ensuring 'balance'—interviewing politicians—was never going to be enough. Other channels, including even ITV's lightweight Tonight programme, tried new ways of accessing opposition, while the BBC cautioned its senior management, in a confidential memo dated 6 February, to 'be careful' about broadcasting dissent. Once the war began, the BBC restricted the range of acceptable dissent yet further.

The BBC argues that its reporters are not perfect and make mistakes on a 'daily basis'. 'We don't only make them in (a pro-war) direction,' the deputy head of news, Mark Damazer, protested last month. But in the first half of the war almost all the false stories, such as those about non-existent Scuds or the capture of Umm Qasr, Nassiriya or Basra, reported by the BBC, originated with the US and UK military.

According to Damazer, 'It's perfectly proper for

us to say 'a British defence source has said...' and not report it as gospel truth... The secret is attribution, qualification and scepticism'. But it is a secret with which news teams are not always familiar. According to Sambrook, the 10 O'clock News is more 'solid' than rolling news because editors have time to 'weigh up material'. Yet, on the first night of the war, the 10 O'clock News stated on 12 separate unattributed occasions that Scuds had been fired by the Iraqis. There were no examples of the BBC repeating unattributed information from either the Iraqi's or the anti-war movement as fact.

Sambrook says it is 'important (to) correct' false stories. But this doesn't mean that they will actually say 'and not as the BBC wrongly stated earlier' or 'and not as the military told us yesterday'. Indeed serious discussions of misinformation are all but impossible on the BBC network. Radio Four's The Message postponed a discussion with Stephen Dorril, an expert on MI6 misinformation, because it was deemed too 'sensitive' (4 April). The programme finally went out on 2 May.

The fundamental orientation of the BBC is towards UK and US forces. The use of terms such as 'liberation' to describe US and UK victories continued after Damazer noted it was 'wrong' on 27 March, cropping up as late as 7 April in a John Simpson dispatch. Iraqi actions, against US troops, have been defined as 'terrorism' (23 March). Defending this Newsnight's Gavin Esler refers critics to the dictionary. But by any definition, many Iraqi's have been 'terrorised' by UK forces, and cluster bombs and Depleted Uranium are indiscriminate weapons of terror. Yet, the 'balance' of the BBC ensures that the UK government will

not be referred to as 'terrorist'. Casualties have also been a sensitive issue. The international study for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung shows that the BBC has devoted 52% of its coverage of casualties to US/UK casualties and 45% to Iraqi's, even though Iraqi casualties far outnumber those of the coalition. On German television the proportions were reversed.

Pro-war assumptions were also revealed in the failure to use warnings when reporting was restricted by the coalition. According to Sambrook, 'We do preface our reports from embedded reporters, saying that they cannot give operational details or location. That is the only constraint on their reporting.' This was not true. There was no consistent prefacing of embedded reports with warnings, as there was in Baghdad. In the Iraqi capital, reports were said to be 'monitored' and reporters sometimes 'restricted' in their movements. With the coalition, no 'restrictions' are said to be in place. In fact, embedded reporters signed a contract requiring them to 'follow the direction and orders of the government'.

As Baghdad fell on 9 April, BBC reporters could hardly contain themselves in their haste to endorse the victors. This was a 'vindication' of the strategy and it showed Blair had been 'right' and his critics 'wrong'. Here the BBC enunciated a version of events very similar to that of the government. According to the BBC, 'dozens' witnessed the statue pulled down by US marines in Baghdad on 9 April, while 'thousands' demonstrated against 'foreign hegemony' in the same city on the 18th. Yet the footage of the former was described as 'extraordinary', 'momentous' and 'historic', while the larger demonstration was greeted with scepticism. Are they 'confined to a small vocal

minority?' the newscaster asked. Sambrook says that the BBC stands by the 'judgement' of its reporters, but this has little to do with objectivity or balance. The fact is that there are other 'judgements' about the significance of the events which the BBC systematically excluded. The BBC is required by law to report on such matters dispassionately, not issue judgements on matters which align closely with the propaganda of one or other side in conflict.

After the fall of Baghdad, the images of 'liberation' gave way to scenes of 'occupation' in the killing of significant numbers of unarmed civilians. But broadcasters blithely ignored the evidence of their own eyes and did their best to excuse the slaughter. In Falluja (22.00, 29 April) the US killed 13 and injured close to 100. Iraqis claimed that the protestors were peaceful and unarmed. According to the BBC though 'shots were exchanged and they soon grew out of control'. To say that shots were exchanged is to accept the US version. Later the reporter stated 'it's clear a ferocious gunfight followed. The walls of homes opposite pockmarked by machine gun rounds'. But from the evidence shown it is not clear that a ferocious gunfight followed. The pockmarked wall was opposite the School which the US had commandeered and was evidence only of US bullets being fired. This kind of misreporting is all very reminiscent of the conflict in Northern Ireland, but this time the most worrying development is that British reporters should so unquestioningly accept propaganda from the US army.

Embedding propaganda

DAVID MILLER

EMBEDDED journalists are the greatest PR coup of this war. Dreamt up by the Pentagon and Donald Rumsfeld the 'embeds', as they are now routinely described, are almost completely controlled by the military. Embeds agreed to give up most of their autonomy in exchange for access to the fighting on military terms. Most importantly embeds were afforded protection from physical harm by the military. So far in this war the main danger for journalists has come from western military. So the protection on offer is more of a threat than a reassurance for independent reporters.

Each embedded reporter has to sign a contract with the military and is governed by a fifty point plan issued by the Pentagon detailing what they can and cannot report. The list of what they can report is significantly shorter than the list of what



Terry Lloyd, ITV News journalist—killed in Iraq when US soldiers open fired on his vehicle. US military have agreed plans for an inquiry. Thirteen other journalists/media workers were killed during the war, two are still missing—presumed dead.

they cannot.

According to reports there were 903 embedded reporters including 136 with UK forces. The PR genius of the embed system was that it allowed unprecedented access to the fighting and, also, unprecedented identification by the reporters with the military. British minister of defence Geoff Hoon has claimed: 'I think the coverage... is more graphic, more real, than any other coverage we have ever seen of a conflict in our history. For the first time it is possible with technology for journalists to report in real time on events in the battlefield.' It is certainly true to say that it is new to see footage of war so up-close, but, it is a key part of the propaganda war to claim that this makes it 'real'. In fact, the aim of the embedding system is to control what is reported by encouraging journalists to identify with their units. To eat and drink together, to risk danger and to share the same values. Ted Koppel of US network ABC, told *The Washington Post* that his feelings towards the soldiers were 'very, very warm'.

This identification with the soldiers works to ensure self censorship is generally effective. Phillip Rochot a respected reporter for France 2, currently working independently in Iraq: 'Embedded journalists do a fair amount of voluntary self-censorship, controlling what they say. In any case their views are closely aligned with the anglo-american position. They are soldiers of information, marching with the troops and the political direction of their country. They won't say anything wrong, they feel duty-bound to defend the anglo-american cause in this war.' Hoon also acknowledged the effect of this reporting in appearing to reduce opposition to the war in the first days: 'The imagery they broadcast is at least partially responsible for the public's change of mood.'

But towards the end of the first week of the war US and UK officials started to blame embedded reporters and the pressure of 24 hour news cycles

Continued on back page

Continued from page 3

for circulating misinformation. This was a straightforward propaganda manoeuvre designed to distract attention from the fact that the false stories have all been authorised by military command structures and also to warn journalists not to get out of line.

Some embedded reporters fell over themselves to explain that they only reported what the military allow them to. Late at night with very few people watching Richard Gaisford an embedded BBC reporter said 'If we ran everything that we heard in the camp then certainly there would be a lot of misinformation going around. We have to check each story we have with them. And if they're not sure at the immediate level above us-that's the Captain who's our media liaison officer—he will check with the Colonel who is obviously above him and then they will check with Brigade headquarters as well.'

This open acknowledgement of the system of control is rare and was provoked by official criticism. Gaisford's comment is interesting for the acknowledgement it makes that reporters are actually fully integrated into military commands structures. This complements the identification revealed by phrases such as 'we' and 'our' in reports of military action. Reference to the 'level above' as the press officer does indicate a fundamental subordination to military propaganda needs. But this is hardly surprising since the contract that reporters sign explicitly requires reporters to 'follow the direction and orders of the government' and prohibits them from suing for injury or death even where this 'is caused or contributed to' by the military.

The unprecedented access is the carrot, but the stick was always on hand. Two embedded journalists who have allegedly strayed over the line were been expelled and during the second weekend of the war 'many embedded reporters found their satellite phones blocked for unexplained reasons'. Moreover, some embeds were, according to Christian Lowe of US military magazine Army Times, being 'hounded by military

public affairs officers who follow their every move and look over their shoulders as they interview aviators, sailors, and maintainers for their stories.'

Each military division in the gulf had 40 to 60 embedded journalists, and between five and six public affairs officers 'behind the scenes'. They reported up to the Coalition Press Information Center (CPIC) in Kuwait and the \$1 million press centre at CentCom in Doha. From there the message is co-ordinated by the Office of Global Communications in the White-house in consort with Alastair Campbell, Blair's top spin doctor in Downing Street. The fanciful notion that the misinformation of the first weeks of the campaign were been due to journalists having conversations with 'a squaddie who's shining his boots', as a British MoD official spun it, is itself a key part of the propaganda war. All of the myriad misinformation coming out of Iraq in the first two weeks has been fed out by the US/UK global media operation. As one reporter in Doha noted 'At General Tommy Franks's headquarters, it is easy to work out whether the day's news is good or bad. When there are positive developments, press officers prowl the corridors of the press centre dispensing upbeat reports from pre-prepared scripts, declaring Iraqi towns have been liberated and that humanitarian aid is about to be delivered. Yet if American and British troops have suffered any sort of battlefield reverse, the spin doctors retreat into their offices at press centre and await instructions from London and Washington.'

As the war became bogged down at the end of the first week, The Russian website www.aeronautics.ru with links to Russian intelligence reported an intercepted report from the US Psychological Operations Tactical Group for the Special Ground Forces Command. The report was concerned about the development of a 'resistance ideology' in Iraq. Its solution was 'A more active use of the Iraqi opposition was suggested for propaganda work... The same opposition members will be used to create video footage of the "repented" Iraqi POWs and footage of

the local (Iraqi) population 'opposing Saddam.' (www.aeronautics.ru, March 29, 2003, 0924hrs MSK [GMT +4 DST]). As the US tanks rolled into Baghdad 11 days later footage of Iraqis was indeed transmitted around the world. But the propaganda coup was short-lived as Iraqis quickly came out to protest against 'foreign hegemony', leading to the US and UK military shooting and killing unarmed demonstrators. The propaganda war must go on.

ANSWERING BACK

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Media Workers against the War, billed as: 'The best global source on the web for anti-war news, views and updates on the international peace movement-updated daily' www.mwaw.org/

Media Watch: Holding the media accountable. Our purpose is two fold: 1. To circulate recent info on war and propaganda/media and 2. To encourage people to complain about misreporting. To sign up on the web go to:

<http://lists.stir.ac.uk/mailman/listinfo/media-watch>

Archive at:

<http://lists.stir.ac.uk/archive/media-watch/>

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