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# Learning from the Chilcot report: Propaganda, deception and the ‘War on Terror’

## **ABSTRACT**

*The 2016 Iraq Inquiry Report (the Chilcot report) was highly critical of the British government and its involvement in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent occupation. Drawing upon the authoritative material in the report, this article provides the most comprehensive and conceptually grounded post-Chilcot assessment of the empirical evidence now available regarding whether deception and propaganda were used to mobilize support for the invasion of Iraq. Employing a conceptual framework designed to identify deceptive organized persuasive communication (OPC), it is argued that the Chilcot report supports the thesis that, through distortions and omissions, deceptive OPC campaigns presented a misleading impression of both the threat posed by Iraqi WMD and Britain’s commitment to a peaceful resolution via the ‘UN route’. Moreover, based upon UK-US communications in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the Chilcot report also provides suggestive but highly significant evidence of a broader and covert geo-strategic policy, including action against Syria and Iran, and which was underpinned by a ‘close knit propaganda campaign’. In light of this, it is argued that a major expansion of scholarly inquiry is necessary involving sustained analysis of the establishing phase of the ‘War on Terror’, the role that deception and propaganda might have played with respect to*

## **KEYWORDS**

deception  
War on Terror  
Chilcot  
Iraq  
WMD  
UN route  
Iraq dossier  
propaganda

*its enablement, and, more broadly, the implications of this for our understanding of propaganda and deception in liberal democratic states.*

The long-awaited Iraq Inquiry Report (2016), more often referred to as the 'Chilcot report', into UK involvement with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the ensuing war and subsequent occupation was finally published on 6 July 2016. It was widely viewed as offering a highly critical appraisal of the way in which the UK government and military had conducted themselves and, in particular, delivered significant criticisms of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Chilcot made clear that the war was not one of last resort, that more time should have been given to weapons inspectors, that the way in which the legal basis for war had been established was far from satisfactory, and that Blair had failed to engage fully his cabinet and other officials during the decision-making process. It seems inevitable that criticisms and condemnations of Blair will harden further over time.

This article explores three interrelated issues concerning deception and organized persuasive communication (OPC), all of which have been prominent parts of the controversies regarding both the Iraq War and western foreign policy throughout the post 9/11 'War on Terror'. Information in the Chilcot report speaks directly to these three issues which are: (1) the apparent misuse of intelligence regarding Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD), especially during the production of the UK government's *Iraq Dossier* published in September 2002 (UK government 2002); (2) UK government claims to have been genuinely seeking a peaceful resolution through UN-based inspections and disarmament in the run-up to the invasion which might have allowed Saddam's regime to remain, and (3) broader questions surrounding the 'War on Terror', its underlying purpose, and the roles of *deception* and *propaganda*. Regarding issues (1) and (2), two earlier studies (Herring and Robinson 2014a and 2014b) explored the role of deception based upon evidence available prior to publication of the final Chilcot report. Building upon these earlier studies, this paper provides the most comprehensive and conceptually grounded post-Chilcot assessment of the empirical evidence to date, providing an authoritative assessment of earlier hypotheses and identifying limitations in the Chilcot report itself. As we shall see, much of the Inquiry Report either confirms (in the case of deception over WMD) or strengthens (in the case of the UN route/regime change deception) existing hypotheses, although important questions are raised regarding the extent to which Chilcot appears to have avoided reaching more critical conclusions about the honesty and probity of the officials involved. Of even greater importance, however, is the information presented by the Chilcot report with respect to the wider 'War on Terror'. As we shall see, Chilcot provides important preliminary but highly significant indications suggesting that official deception and propaganda extend well beyond the specifics of WMD intelligence and 'the UN route' to include a broader propagandistic OPC campaign based upon exploiting the 'War on Terror' in order to pursue, through aggressive wars, geopolitical goals. This finding, it is argued, demands a major expansion of scholarly inquiry to now investigate the formative stages of the 'war on terror' and the role that deception and propaganda might have played with respect to its establishment.

This article starts in Section One by reviewing key debates over Iraq, deception, OPC and propaganda. The existing state of knowledge regarding

deception over WMD and the UN route is described before detailing the concepts of non-deceptive and deceptive OPC and their relationship to *propaganda*. The research approach and methods are also set out. Section Two evaluates official claims regarding Iraq's WMD (with particular reference to the UK government's Iraq Dossier) and the UN route deception through a review of the Chilcot report findings. Section Three addresses new information concerning both the origins of the 2003 Iraq War in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and 'phases 1 and 2' of the 'War on Terror'. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these arguments with respect to the role of deception and propagandistic OPC in western society, our understanding of the 'War on Terror', and the research questions which now need addressing.

## **SECTION ONE: EXISTING CLAIMS AND COUNTER CLAIMS: WMD, THE UN ROUTE AND THE QUESTION OF DECEPTIVE AND PROPAGANDISTIC OPC**

### ***The controversies***

Ever since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 widespread controversy has persisted over the question of whether or not western publics were misled. One common argument has been that the US and UK government lied with respect to the presence of WMD in Iraq. Debate about this in the United Kingdom has focused upon the Iraq Dossier, published by the UK government in September 2002, which claimed that Iraqi WMD production was active and that weapons could be launched within 45 minutes. A less common criticism has been that the UK government was deceptive regarding its desire for regime change and that officials misled with respect to their claimed commitment to the so-called 'UN route' through which Saddam could be disarmed peacefully via UN inspections and allowed to remain in power. Since then, multiple inquiries (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee 2003; Intelligence and Security Committee 2003; Hutton Inquiry 2004; Butler Inquiry 2004 and Chilcot Report 2016) have examined these questions whilst a number of academic studies (e.g. Aldrich 2005; Bluth 2004; Davis and Persbo 2004; Danner 2005; Doig et al. 2007; Humphreys 2005; Kettell 2008; Mearsheimer 2011; McHugh 2013; Ralph 2011; Wither 2003–04) have, in a limited fashion, addressed the question of deception. We have reviewed these inquiries and studies previously (Herring and Robinson 2014a: 553–57 and 2014b: 215–17) and, in summary, none have adequately resolved the lying/deception issue.

In two articles published in 2014 (Herring and Robinson 2014a and 2014b), we argued that the evidence then available indicated that, with respect to WMD, the British government had engaged in a campaign of 'deceptive organized political persuasion' whereby, through a process of omission and distortion, the UK government crafted the Iraq Dossier in a way that presented a deceptive view of Iraq's assessed WMD capability. In particular, deliberate omissions and distortions enabled the British government to create the impression of there being certainty over the presence of an active, and threatening WMD capability in Iraq. The second article (Herring and Robinson 2014b) evaluated a less well-known alleged deception concerning the role of the UN route and the issue of regime change. Ever since the invasion of Iraq, officials have maintained that they sought a peaceful solution to the WMD issue by attempting to use the UN to disarm Iraq, in which case Saddam's regime would remain in power, and that they only resorted to force when this route was exhausted. That article, based

upon the limited documents then available, indicated that, rather than being a serious attempt at seeking a peaceful resolution to the 'crisis' with Iraq, the UN route was primarily aimed at both building support for war and gaining legal cover for UK military involvement. It was provisionally concluded that officials appeared to have engaged in distortions and omissions in a way that presented a deceptive impression of the UN route: people were encouraged to believe it was a real and genuine chance for peace, when in fact it was largely about getting the country to war. The hypotheses explored in these two papers are, in this article, assessed against the material now available in the 2016 Chilcot report.

### **Deception and propagandistic OPC**

In order to evaluate the question of deceptive OPC, we employ a conceptual approach that distinguishes between non-deceptive and deceptive persuasion campaigns. 'Organised political persuasion' (OPP) (Herring and Robinson 2014a and 2014b), or 'organised persuasive communication' (OPC) (Robinson 2014), are terms developed to capture the essence of the array of euphemisms in circulation used to described persuasion and influence campaigns: these include terms such as *propaganda*, *public relations (PR)*, *strategic communication*, *political communication*, *public diplomacy*, *psychological operations (pys ops)*, *perception management and information management*. The terms OPP and OPC were originally coined in order to avoid the euphemistic and value-laden nature of existing terms. Our conceptual approach draws upon the literatures on deception (e.g. Arendt 1973; Bakir et al. 2017; Carson 2010; Cliffe et al 2000; Mearsheimer 2011) and on propaganda and persuasion (e.g. Corner 2007; Jowett and O'Donnell 2012; Miller et al. 2017). It distinguishes between non-deceptive and deceptive persuasive communication through the use of the categories of *deception through lying* ('making a statement one knows or suspects to be untrue in order to mislead'), *deception through omission* ('withholding information to make the viewpoint being promoted more persuasive') and *deception through distortion* ('framing a statement in a deliberately misleading way to support the viewpoint being promoted') (Herring and Robinson 2014a: 558–59). Alternatively, non-deceptive OPC refers to persuasion that is conducted honestly and without involving an effort to deceive, in particular by avoiding, lies, distortion and omissions. This conceptual framework is subject to ongoing development and refinement but, for the purposes of this article, broadly the same conceptual framework is employed as was used in Herring and Robinson (2014a) and (2014b), albeit with one important modification: In this article *deceptive* OPP/OPC is referred to, at times, as a form of *propaganda*. As such, we employ the widespread and common understanding of the term propaganda that defines it as a form of *manipulative* persuasion that violates rational or free will. Not all propaganda involves deception; other forms include communicative strategies involving incentivization and coercion (see Bakir et al. 2017 and Miller et al. 2017). However, for the purposes of this paper, it is important only to remember that *deceptive* OPC is understood as one form of propaganda.

### **Research approach and methodology**

The principle research approach involved applying the conceptual framework to available evidence in order to identify the presence/absence of

deceptive OPC, defined through reference to the categories of lying, distortion and omission as set out above. The research proceeded by establishing whether official claims contained untruths or distortions or involved important omissions, and then assessing whether they resulted from a deliberate intent to deceive about the essence of the situation. Of course, establishing that government communications are misleading is an easier task than establishing intentionality, and due consideration was given to the possibility of self-deception and misperception on the part of those involved. Where uncertainty or lack of information prevented a clear assessment regarding intentionality, this was duly noted. With respect to data sources, initial research (Herring and Robinson 2014a and 2014b) drew upon a review of statements and information from key actors that had been made available through the main inquiries, including the Select Committee Inquiries of 2003, the Hutton Inquiry 2003, the Butler Inquiry 2004 and the 2016 Iraq Inquiry Report (referred to here as the Chilcot report). The key actors focused on initially were Tony Blair (UK Prime Minister), Alistair Campbell (Chief of Communications and Strategy), Sir David Omand (Security and Intelligence Co-ordinator), Sir John Scarlett (Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee [JIC]), Jack Straw (Foreign Secretary), Julian Miller (Head of assessment staff) and Jonathan Powell (Special Advisor to Blair). As part of a systematic check on the evidence, transcripts of their evidence were compiled and then searched for key references using a research assistant. A combination of testimonies, leaked contemporaneous documents and released contemporaneous documents were also analysed. This body of research (Herring and Robinson 2014a and 2014b) was evaluated against the relevant sections of the Chilcot report itself (Sections 3.1–4.3). In addition, primary accounts by ex-officials (e.g. Dr Brian Jones [Defence Intelligence Staff, DIS] and Paul Pillar [CIA and National Intelligence Council]) informed analysis as did information provided via the Iraq Inquiry Digest and further official documents (both leaked and obtained under the Freedom of Information Act).<sup>1</sup> Finally, the investigative journalism of Chris Ames (Iraq Inquiry Digest) and email discussions with Dr Brian Jones were drawn upon as were relevant secondary sources. All documentation and methodology details are available upon request.

We now turn to a review of arguments regarding deception over WMD and the UN route in light of the Chilcot report and its final conclusions. We address first the WMD issue and then the UN route deception. The final section addresses new evidence and issues (pertaining to the nature of the ‘War on Terror’ and the role of propagandistic OPC) that were identified during the review and analysis of the Chilcot report.

## **SECTION TWO: DECEPTION OVER WMD AND THE ‘UN ROUTE’**

### ***The story of the September dossier on Iraqi WMD: Deception through omission and exaggeration***

The Chilcot report confirms that the Iraq Dossier was the end product of a lengthy process designed to ‘prepare’ public opinion for military action in Iraq. Following President Bush’s ‘axis of evil’ State of the Union Address on 30 January 2002, when he identified North Korea, Iran and Iraq as key threats due to their alleged sponsorship of terrorism and WMD, Blair commissioned a set of papers on WMD proliferation in February 2002 (Chilcot 4.1: 166; 45).<sup>2</sup> In March 2002, John Williams, a Foreign and

1. Iraq Inquiry Digest, Chris Ames (ed.) <http://www.iraqinquirydigest.org>.
2. References to the Chilcot report start with the section, then paragraph and then page number.

Common Wealth Office (FCO) communications official, described the strategy as follows:

The process of preparing media and public opinion for possible action on Iraq is underway ... We should exploit this interest by feeding newspapers and broadcasters with information on WMD, diversion of imports for military use, and human rights abuse: all of it presented as evidence from the Government's forthcoming dossier. By doing so, we can build momentum.

(Chilcot 4.1: 342; 77)

Mirroring Williams, another FCO official noted that '[i]n the build up to any action, we would need an aggressive PR (public relations) campaign emphasizing ... evidence of WMD reconstitution and other crimes (making maximum use of intelligence)' (Chilcot 3.2: 101; 404).

Chilcot also confirms that there was, almost immediately, concern that the first dossier draft, which examined four countries of concern (Iraq, Iran, North Korea and Libya), failed to present a convincing case with regard to the WMD threat from Iraq. In particular, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw 'stated that the WMD paper had to show that Iraq posed an exceptional threat, and did not yet do so' (Chilcot 4.1: 283; 63). In response, Sir John Scarlet, Chairman of the Joint Intelligence committee, suggested a strategy of *deception through omission* by suggesting that it be considered 'whether the paper could achieve more impact if it "only covered Iraq": Scarlet stated '[t]his would have the benefit of *obscuring the fact* that in terms of WMD, Iraq is not that exceptional' (Chilcot 4.1: 332; 76, emphasis added). Indeed, because of the weakness of the intelligence, Blair even considered finding alternative ways of justifying action against Iraq: 'Mr Blair acknowledged that "the immediate WMD problems don't seem obviously worse than 3 years ago"'. Blair concluded: 'So we have to re-order our story and message. Increasingly I think (these) should be about the nature of the regime' (Chilcot 4.1; 355; 79).

When, at this stage, it was decided to both focus the dossier on Iraq and postpone its publication, Straw was advised that the 'evidence would not convince public opinion that there was an imminent threat from Iraq' (Chilcot 4.1; 386; 83). Memos dated 22 March expressed relief at the decision to postpone, the weakness of the intelligence case, and the need to ensure that any final dossier met 'presentational needs':

I am relieved that you decided to postpone publication of the unclassified document ... even the best survey of Iraq's WMD programmes will not show much advance in recent years ... we need to be convincing that: the threat is so serious/imminent that it is worth sending out troops to die for ... We now have a bit more time to prepare the public dossier of material on Iraq. We need to use it to ensure that the material is accurate and meets the presentational needs of Ministers.

(Chilcot 4.1: 392 & 395: 84-85)

As the United States moved closer to military action throughout the summer of 2002, concerns over the weakness of the WMD intelligence and the dossier persisted. For example, Mr Edward Chaplin, FCO Director for Middle East and North Africa, wrote that:

‘(a)though the dossier includes some good material, it presents little new evidence of Iraq’s WMD to justify a move away from our policy of containment/deterrence’. Chaplin had also discussed the issue with SIS (Secret Intelligence Service/MI6) who took ‘the same view’.

(Chilcot 4.2: 68; 126)

On August 20, one month prior to publication, Jack Straw informed US Secretary of State Colin Powell that ‘[t]he UK’s draft dossier on Iraq did not in his [Blair’s] view lead inexorably to the conclusion that military action was the only way to deal with Saddam Hussein. A better case for action could be made’ (Chilcot 4.2: 80; 127).

As argued previously (Herring and Robinson 2014a: 565–68), and now corroborated by the Chilcot report, these pressures came to a head in the final weeks before the dossier was published. Following the decision by Blair at the start of September 2002 to publish the dossier within the next few weeks, officials were aware of the urgent need to strengthen it. Straw’s Special Adviser Dr Michael Williams noted that it was ‘certainly not a killer dossier’ and that ‘[we] need, I believe, to regard the publication of the strongest material as a political imperative’ (Chilcot, 4.2: 168; 144–55). With SIS (MI6) tasked with searching through intelligence that might be used in the dossier (Chilcot 4.2: 195–200; 149–50), Alastair Campbell (Chief of Communications and Strategy), noted that the dossier ‘had to be revelatory and we need to show that it was new and informative and part of a bigger case’ (Chilcot 4.2: 209; 151). At the JIC meeting of September 11, it was minuted that the dossier needed to have *dramatic* impact:

the part of the draft that looked at what was known or assessed from intelligence was at the heart of the dossier with the potential to have a significant impact. It needed to be as factual as possible, and to convey accurately but *dramatically* the rising concern about Iraq’s weapons programmes.

(Chilcot, 4.2: 335; 177, emphasis added)

The need to strengthen the dossier was also noted in a memo from No. 10:

But No. 10 through the Chairman want the document to be as strong as possible within the bounds of available [*sic*] intelligence. This is therefore a last (!) call for any items of intelligence that agencies think can and should be included.

(Chilcot Report, 4.2: 365; 183)

It was in this context of pressure and urgency that the most significant example of *deception through distortion* occurred. On September 11 a piece of late breaking intelligence was issued, just thirteen days before publication of the dossier, claiming that there was active chemical agent production in Iraq. We refer to this as Report X, following Dr Brian Jones’ (Defence Intelligence Staff [DIS]) account of these events (Jones 2010). The Chilcot report and the Butler Inquiry referred to this variously as the ‘September 11 Report’, the ‘SIS Report’ and the ‘compartmented intelligence’: for clarity we refer to it as Report X. As set out in ‘Report X Marks the Spot’ (Herring and Robinson 2014a: 569–71), this piece of intelligence was from a ‘source on trial’ and speculative in that it only promised substantial evidence at a future date. Moreover the intelligence was ‘sub-sourced’: that is to say the source was claiming to be in contact with

another source who was making the claims. Ultimately, despite the flimsy and speculative nature of this intelligence, and the fact that it had not been assessed by the relevant intelligence experts (DIS), it was used to strengthen the leading claim of the dossier that there was active chemical and biological agent production in Iraq (Herring and Robinson 2014a: 571–74). It was also used to underpin the claim that WMD could be launched within 45 minutes (Herring and Robinson 2014a: 574–576). Chilcot confirms that it was the use of Report X that led to the dossier reaching beyond the bounds of the available intelligence (4.2: 653–57; 239): Chilcot states

the Inquiry shares the view of the Butler Review that the dossier contained a stronger assessment in relation to Iraqi chemical weapons production than was justified by the intelligence. The SIS report of 11 September was a factor in that.

### *Who was responsible for using Report X?*

Despite confirming the distorting/exaggerating impact Report X had on the dossier, Chilcot regrettably fails to clarify who was responsible for deciding to use it and, critically, the extent to which Blair himself was involved. Consistent with the analysis provided in ‘Report X Marks the Spot’, Chilcot does note the contrasting statements from Sir Richard Dearlove (Head of SIS/MI6), who insists he *did not allow* Report X to be used in the dossier, and both Campbell’s claim that he (Dearlove) had authorized its use ‘through assertion’, and Scarlett’s confirmation that the report was used to underpin the claims that WMD production was judged to be active (Chilcot 4.2: 403–43; 190–96). Chilcot also confirms the precise chronology of events surrounding the use of Report X: It was issued on September 11 when Dearlove briefed Scarlett about it but agreed it should not be incorporated into the dossier; ‘Sir Richard believed that it would be too risky to include the material from the new source [in the dossier] ... Mr Scarlett agreed that the report would not be fed into ‘today’s discussion of [the draft dossier]’ (Chilcot 4.2: 408; 190–91). Then, on 12 September, Blair was briefed about Report X and, with respect to this meeting, Chilcot repeats the Butler Inquiry statement that:

Nevertheless, it may be that, in the context of the intense interest at that moment in the status of Iraq’s prohibited weapons programmes, and in particular continuing work on the dossier, the concurrence of events caused more weight to be given to this unvalidated new source than would normally have been the case.

(Butler Report cited in Chilcot 4.2: 436; 195)

Present at this meeting were Blair’s special advisors Sir David Manning and Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell, Dearlove and one other individual from SIS(MI6). As already noted above, Campbell claims that the new intelligence (Report X) was offered by Dearlove to be used ‘through assertion’. The following day, Chilcot indicates that Campbell then communicated current thinking on the dossier, which would presumably include any decisions made at the 12 September meeting, to Julian Miller (Scarlett’s second in command re the dossier):

381. When Mr Miller asked to talk to someone in No. 10 about the latest thinking on the dossier, ‘without getting into circulating copies just so

as they are on the right track', Mr Smith suggested he should speak to Mr Campbell or Mr Tom Kelly on 13 September.

382. On 13 September, Mr Campbell wrote: 'Meeting with Julian Miller ... to go through the new structure'.

(Chilcot Report: 4.2: 381–382; 186)

What can we, then, conclude about responsibility for the decision to use Report X? Overall, the chronology of events, and the decision by Chilcot to reiterate the statement from the Butler Report that circumstances 'caused more weight to be given to' Report X 'than would normally have been the case', strongly suggest that the key decision was taken by officials at the 12 September briefing. So far as we are aware, neither Scarlett nor Miller, who were in charge of the dossier and the intelligence judgements, were present at the 12 September briefing. The following day, Miller spoke with Campbell when he was briefed as to the 'latest thinking on the dossier' and it seems likely that decisions made during the 12 September briefing were passed on to those in charge of the dossier, communicating, in Campbell's words, Dearlove's permission to use Report X 'through assertion'. Chilcot, however, does not clarify who ultimately made the decision to use Report X in the dossier. This continues to be of major concern because, as explained in 'Report X Marks the Spot', if Blair or his advisors played any role in the decision, then the dossier would no longer be purely the work the intelligence services (as has always and rigorously been maintained by the government) and there would have been clear and demonstrable political contamination of the intelligence assessment process.

#### *Failing to consider the honesty and probity of officials*

This shortcoming is indicative of a broader failure of Chilcot to pass judgement on the individuals involved. Overall there is now a convergence of evidence (Chilcot Report 2016; Herring and Robinson 2014a; Butler Inquiry 2004) demonstrating that the dossier evolved over many months and involved deception through exaggerations/distortions and omissions. Discussed here, the decisions to *omit* other more threatening countries from the dossier (Scarlett's 'obscure' advice, see above) and, most significantly, the decision to use a flimsy piece of intelligence from a source on trial that led to clear *distortion* of claims regarding the certainty of intelligence regarding active WMD production (the leading claim in the dossier), are only the most prominent examples of decisions that led to the creation of a deceptive dossier. In a recent commons hearing, Chilcot supports the analysis that the overall problem (including presumably both the dossier and Blair's related statements re WMD and Iraq), was one of exaggeration (i.e. distortion): 'It was exaggeration, placing more weight on the intelligence than it could possibly bear is a conclusion we reached' (House of Commons 2016). Chilcot also stated that Blair used 'all the powers of advocacy' and in doing so went 'beyond the facts of the case and the basic analysis of that can support' (House of Commons 2016). All of this occurred in the context of it being widely understood that the intelligence base was weak and immense pressure to generate a more credible basis for action against Iraq. In other words, there was little evidence of self deception or misperception about the Iraqi threat and the strength of the intelligence (Herring and Robinson 2014a). Moreover, Chilcot believes that these kinds of exaggerations and omissions were *intentional*. He describes the focus on

WMD as a 'tactic' by Blair 'to emphasize the threat which Iraq might pose, rather than a more balanced consideration of both Iraq's capabilities and intent' (Chilcot 3.1: 4; 312). Recently, Chilcot stated:

I absolve him of a personal and demonstrable decision to deceive Parliament or the public ... to say falsehoods knowing them to be false ... However, he also exercised his very considerable powers of advocacy and persuasion rather than laying the real issues fairly and squarely.

(House of Commons 2016)

In other words, deception through exaggeration rather than deception through lying. And yet despite all of the evidence regarding exaggeration, omission and intentionality, Chilcot avoids either reaching the logical conclusion, or properly evaluating its likelihood, that officials (including but not restricted to Blair) bear responsibility for having misled and deceived with respect to their claims regarding intelligence and Iraqi WMD. As we shall see next, when discussing the UN route/regime change deception, a similar reluctance to address the probity of officials is apparent.

### ***The UN route: Obfuscating the regime change objective***

The second hypothesized deception concerned the issue of regime change and the 'UN route'. Throughout the build-up to the war it had been maintained by officials that the British government genuinely sought a peaceful resolution to the situation with Iraq by disarming it via UN weapons inspections (see Blair 2010: 50–51 and Greenstock 2009: 9), an outcome that would leave Saddam in power. The problem with this public line is that it is difficult, arguably impossible, to square with the knowledge that the US government had been committed to regime change in Iraq ever since the passing of the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998. According to many commentators (e.g. Battle 2010; Prados and Ames 2010), 9/11 presented officials with the opportunity to realize this objective. Of course, if the United States was committed to regime change, and provided the British government was aware that this was the case, suggestion that there was possibility of a peaceful solution via Iraqi compliance would have been a deception.

So, what do we now know about the matter of regime change and the UN route? First, the Chilcot report supports the thesis that a policy of regime change came first, and that only after this did the UN route then emerge as a way of building a coalition in support of attacking Iraq and ensuring British involvement was legally defensible. It was not, according to the bulk of the evidence provided by the Chilcot report, a sincere effort to peacefully resolve the crisis through disarmament. According to Chilcot, UK policy coalesced around regime change in early 2002, following Bush's 'axis of evil' State of the Union address in January. In February 2002 a meeting was held to which Alastair Campbell referred to as a 'Phase 2 War meeting'. Although there was no official record of this meeting, the Chilcot report uses a *Guardian* newspaper article to relay its contents:

A 'senior No. 10 official' was reported to have said that the meeting between Mr Blair and Bush in April would 'finalise Phase 2 of the war against terrorism'. As with Usama Bin Laden and the war in Afghanistan, it would be necessary to maintain public and international support for

military action against Saddam Hussein. That was a 'public persuasion' issue which would be tackled 'in the same way' as the unprecedented 'indictment' against Usama Bin Laden published in October 2001.

(Chilcot 3.2: 67; 398)

In March 2002, the leaked 'Iraq: Options Paper' stated that UK policy was to 're-integrate a law-abiding Iraq which does not possess WMD or threaten its neighbours' but that this 'implicitly [...] cannot occur with Saddam Hussein in power' (UK Defence and Overseas Secretariat [DOS] 2002: 1). It concluded that 'the use of overriding force in a ground campaign is the only option that we can be confident to remove Saddam'. Sent only to some members of Blair's Cabinet, the Options Paper indicated the emergence of a regime change policy as the only way to deal with Iraq. Because of the way in which some members of the Cabinet, and indeed the public, were kept in the dark about its existence, it can be understood as an instance of *deception through omission* (Herring and Robinson 2014b: 221). Further important evidence that regime change, and not disarmament, was the British goal comes in the form of a memo sent by Blair to his advisor Jonathan Powell in March 2002. In this memo, referred to earlier, Blair acknowledges that the 'immediate WMD problems don't seem obviously worse than 3 years ago' before discussing other justifications for action:

So we have to re-order our story and message. Increasingly, I think it should be about the nature of the regime. We do intervene-as per the Chicago speech. We have no inhibitions-where we reasonably can-about nation-building i.e. we must come to our conclusion on Saddam from our own position.

(Chilcot 4.1: 351-355; 79)

Although Blair has subsequently claimed that the memo was about disarming Iraq through *either* peaceful means or military action, his suggestion of justifying war as a humanitarian intervention involving nation building strongly indicates that the objective was to topple Saddam, one way or another, rather than to seek disarmament through peaceful means if possible. Indeed, there is nothing in the wording of the memo that suggests the objective was anything other than regime change.

With a policy of regime change established, the lead up to the Blair-Bush Crawford meeting in April 2002 reveals frequent discussions over using the 'UN route' as a way of getting to war. FCO advice for Blair's 11 March meeting with the US Vice President Dick Cheney stated that:

Military action requires key allies, particularly in the region, to be onboard. That is why we see continuing with the UN route- i.e. ratcheting up pressure on Iraq to comply with UN resolutions and allow weapons inspectors back in as a necessary precursor. We doubt Saddam will co-operate but we must be seen to have tried.

(Chilcot 3.2: 352; 449)

In the context of discussing UK support for regime change in Iraq, Sir David Manning pointed out the importance of taking:

... time and trouble over the UN observers. Demonstrating to international opinion that Saddam was in breach of the UNSCRs ... was

3. Chilcot also confirms that the conditions set by the British government regarding military action, which included going the 'UN route', were not red lines but rather conditions for success. In other words, Blair was not indicating the United States had to go through the 'UN route', only that this was the best way of achieving success (by building a supportive political context for military action and regime change). Chilcot writes: 'Mr Blair's decision on the tactics to be adopted demonstrated he did not intend to set "conditions" for UK support for the US. He was focusing on the conditions for success' (Chilcot 3.3: 110; 23).

a crucial part of coalition building ... It should not be impossible to persuade moderate public opinion that it was Saddam who was at fault if he flouted the conditions and blocked the inspectors.

(Chilcot 3.2: 380; 453)

Chilcot confirms that Blair then offered support to US Vice President Cheney for regime change so long as there was a 'clever strategy' which involved building a case via UN Security Council resolutions. Chilcot quotes Blair:

... it was highly desirable to get rid of Saddam ... the UK would help ... as long as there was a clever strategy ... It was important to take enough time to put Saddam in the wrong place over inspections and compliance with UNSCRs. This would play an important part in convincing international opinion to rally to the idea of regime change.

(Chilcot 3.2: 358; 450)

Finally, as we have previously argued (Herring and Robinson 2014b), Jack Straw spelled out how it was essential for the United Kingdom to follow the 'UN route', emphasizing its necessity for ensuring that any military action was legal and for shoring up political support. He describes the importance of the re-admission of weapons inspectors with respect to both 'public explanation' and 'in terms of legal sanction for any subsequent military action'. Referring to legal 'elephant traps', he states that 'regime change *per se* (original emphasis) is no justification for military action'. He elaborates thus: 'Of course, we may want credibly to assert that regime change is an essential part of the strategy by which to achieve our ends—that of the elimination of Iraq's WMD capacity: but the latter has to be the goal' (Herring and Robinson 2014b: 224).

Following Crawford, the Chilcot report continues to paint a picture of regime change being pursued whilst misleadingly presenting UK strategy as based on the objective of disarmament and maintaining that there was a realistic possibility of a peaceful outcome via Iraqi compliance.<sup>3</sup> Through June, July and August of 2002 pressures on officials increased: As it became obvious the United States were moving swiftly towards war, there was still no obvious legal cover for British involvement and there was the clear risk that the UN might be completely sidelined in favour of unilateral US action (thereby damaging Blair's political conditions needed for a successful regime change). In late July, Powell's advice to Blair was clear and is worth reprinting at length:

I think we need a road map to getting rid of Saddam, drawing parallels as far as possible with his [President Bush's] success in Afghanistan, including the following elements:

We will be there when the US takes the decision to act, but ...

We need to set an ultimatum as we did to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

At a certain point we need to make it clear that unless Saddam agrees to inspectors on our terms – anyone, any time, anywhere – by a certain date we will act.

We need to establish a legal basis. More difficult for us than for them. It needs to be based on WMD rather than terrorism or regime change.

We need at least neutrality in the region before we can act ... If we want to base our troops in the region this will mean a real effort on the MEPP ...

We need to make the case. We need a plan and a timetable for releasing the papers we have prepared on human rights abuses, WMD etc. We need to have the sort of Rolls Royce information campaign we had at the end of Afghanistan before we start in Iraq.

We need a convincing military plan. What we know about so far is not convincing ...

And we need a plan for the day after ... We need to be working on this now.

(Chilcot 3.3: 287; 50)

Following this, Blair communicated his support directly to Bush. On 28 July 2002, he sent a note that started 'I will be with you, whatever' (Blair 2002). The note then discussed that getting rid of Saddam was the 'right thing to do' but that political support was weak. Blair then set out the advantages of developing the UN route and the way in which this could create a *casus belli*. In a section of the note headed 'UN', Blair (2002) writes:

But we need, as with Afghanistan and the ultimatum to the Taleban, to encapsulate our *casus belli* in some defining way. This (the UN) is certainly the simplest. We could, in October as the build up starts, state that he must let the inspectors back in unconditionally and do so now, i.e. set a 7-day deadline. It might be backed by a UNSCR or not ...

I know there will be reluctance to this. But it would neutralize opposition around the UN issue. If he did say yes, we continue the build-up and we send teams over and the moment he obstructs, we say: he's back to his games. That's it. In any event, he probably would screw it up and not meet the deadline, and if he came forward after the deadline, we would just refuse to deal.

Having advocated the use of the UN as a way of creating a *casus belli*, with no indication that there was any hope or expectation that this might lead to a peaceful resolution through Iraqi compliance, Blair finished by stating, 'We would support in any way we can ... On timing, we could start building up after the break. A strike date could be Jan/Feb next year. But the crucial issue is not when, but how' (Blair 2002). In a meeting between Manning and Armitage, dated 31 July 2002, the 'importance of the UN route with an ultimatum for political and "optical" reasons' (Chilcot 3.3: 462; 80, emphasis added) was emphasized by Manning.

### *Resolving Claims and Counter Claims*

However, despite the clear contemporaneous documentary evidence indicating that the UN route was primarily a means to achieving regime change, Blair and some other officials still maintain that it was a genuine attempt at a peaceful resolution. For example, Blair stated that the goal of getting the United States to go through the UN was 'primarily to build a broad coalition against Saddam and to show we were prepared to disarm him peacefully'

(Chilcot 3.3: 450; 78). Also, the Chilcot report makes very clear that, at the time, 'In his public statements, Mr Blair clearly presented the strategy as providing a final opportunity for Saddam to disarm peacefully' (Chilcot 3.4: 588; 194). Some other officials, especially Greenstock and Straw, maintain that the UN route was a genuine attempt at peaceful disarmament and that they had been assured of this.

How can we resolve the apparent contradiction between evidence that the goal was regime change and claims that peaceful disarmament was being allowed for? In fact, an examination of a key period in August/September 2002, when the Bush administration finally agreed to sign up to the UN route, is instructive here. Here the Chilcot report offers only ambiguous and limited evidence that some officials did believe that there was a possibility for a peaceful resolution. For example, evidence from Jack Straw cited in the Inquiry Report indicates that he believed that 'it would be harder to make the case for military action if he (Saddam Hussein) had been disarmed' (Chilcot 3.4: 108; 113, emphasis added). Based upon his interpretation of Bush's statement in a meeting that 'the objective of regime change was getting rid of WMD', Colin Powell stated that the 'logic of the President's position meant that, if WMD were dealt with, regime change would no longer be required'. Powell also noted that he felt that others in the meeting did not appreciate this (Chilcot 3.4: 115; 114). However, Chilcot also notes that Powell summed up his discussion with Straw stating that 'A key question then was whether we could live with a Saddam who had fulfilled the UN mandate' (Chilcot 3.4: 118; 114). Chilcot notes that Bush, in his memoirs claimed the UN route was a genuine attempt at a peaceful resolution (Chilcot 3.4: 376; 159). Other officials, as noted above, claim to have been assured that the UN route was a genuine attempt at a peaceful resolution. In contrast, however, US Vice President Cheney makes clear that leaving the regime in place, even if there had been disarmament, was never accepted: He states that, during the 7 September meeting with Blair and other British officials, no one argued 'that leaving Saddam in power, with all the risks and costs associated with that course, was a viable option' (Chilcot 3.4: 384; 160).

In fact, what appears to have happened during the critical period in late August/September 2002, when the United States agreed to go down the UN route (as opposed to taking immediate unilateral military action against Iraq), is that the UN route was argued for, at least in part, as a mechanism for facilitating the internal collapse of Saddam's regime. From this perspective, it seems that a 'peaceful outcome' actually meant avoiding military action by forcing the collapse of the regime, rather than successful disarmament via the UN route and allowing Saddam to remain in power. For example, at the end of August/beginning of September, conversations between Manning and Condoleezza Rice discussed an intrusive resolution aimed at 'forcing Iraq to be run in a completely different way' and involved US forces being stationed both in and around Iraq (Chilcot 3.4: 169; 124/230; 134). Blair also presents the UN route, during internal discussions, as a way of avoiding war by collapsing the regime. On 6 September he stated that the immediate issue was 'how to maximize the chance of resolving the Saddam dilemma quickly and cleanly'. It was possible that sustained pressure would lead to his quick collapse' (Chilcot 3.4: 407; 163). Blair goes on to state that '[t]he trick would be to make a resolution acceptable to [UN] Security Council members but sufficiently stringent to bring about profound change in Iraq were Saddam to implement it' (Chilcot 3.4: 413; 164). Indeed, the idea of Saddam's regime collapsing as a result of

tough inspections occurs regularly during the months running up to the invasion: For example, on 3 November 2002 Rice and Manning discussed the possibility of securing regime change without military action, noting that ‘a very tough UN resolution accompanied by threatening military preparations, in the hope that Saddam’s system would implode under the strain’, was the best hope of achieving that (Chilcot 3.5: 751; 330); Again, in mid-November, Blair discussed ways of splitting Saddam from his regime and notes that ‘we should be working assiduously on trying to weaken his regime from within’ (Chilcot 3.6: 48; 14).<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, officials also indicate that they had little belief that Saddam would ever comply with a new UN resolution and intrusive inspections. For Blair, again, the strategy was discussed in terms of it providing a *casus belli*:

Mr Blair said that it was ‘unlikely’ that Saddam would comply with the new resolution; even if he let inspectors back in he would probably prevent them from doing their job. He added: ‘we should then be in a very powerful position in demanding action in response to his obstruction and prevarication’.

(Chilcot Report 3.4: 411; 164)

Indeed, in private around 5/6 September, Washington Ambassador Christopher Meyer, discussing US ideas for an ‘Inspection Implementation Force’ and other intrusive policies, and the lack of chance that Iraq might accept them, said that one official had said ‘but that was the whole point’ (Chilcot 3.4: 330; 152). In this respect, one purpose of the UN route strategy, according to Blair, was about shifting responsibility to Saddam whilst making it appear that the United States and United Kingdom were using force only as a last resort: Chilcot cites David Manning’s relaying of Blair’s analysis:

[Blair] ... emphasized the need to play Iraq cleverly. We must look reluctant to use force ... You [Mr Blair] were increasingly convinced that, in the end, people would come round to accepting the need to deal with Saddam, if we had made full and willing use of the UN route. You were confident that we could get the Security Council behind us once we had demonstrated clearly that Saddam remained in violation. But if we appeared to be riding roughshod over the UN ... opinion would be very difficult to shift ... Once we had a new resolution.... We would be putting the onus on Saddam as Bush wanted.

(Chilcot 3.4: 496; 177)

Other evidence from Chilcot indicates that officials were engaging in *deception through distortion* by emphasizing the need to push the public line that peace was desired and that regime change might just be an accidental consequence of disarmament: in a communication between Sir David Manning and Condoleeza Rice, Manning states that they must make their case ‘with conviction and make it absolutely clear that we wanted it to succeed. We should be emphasizing at every turn that war was the last resort’ (Chilcot 3.4: 499–500; 178); Straw communicated to Colin Powell the British line that ‘Blair’s whole focus was on inspectors: regime change might be an *incidental* consequence of our policy but it was not the aim’ (Chilcot 3.4: 515; 180, emphasis added).

4. For other evidence that a hoped for goal was regime change through internal collapse see pp: 3:5: 75; 212/ 3:5: 351; 262/ 3:5: 424; 277/ 3:5:472; 285/ 3:5:786; 334.

### *Drawing conclusions regarding the UN route deception*

In our earlier article (Herring and Robinson 2014b) we *provisionally* concluded, based on evidence available prior to the Chilcot report, that there appeared to have been deception through omission and distortion regarding the UN route. Is it now possible to make a final determination? Ultimately, Blair's public presentation of the UN route as a last chance to disarm disguises the fact that internal deliberations show that it was a strategy thought of primarily as a way of gaining legal cover for the United Kingdom to join military action against Iraq and build international support for military action by creating a clear violation on the part of Saddam that would then be used to justify action. Moreover, the substance of some of the ultimatum discussions in September 2002, when the United States finally agreed to go the UN route rather than unilaterally attack Iraq, suggested that one intention was that, if Iraq complied, it would lead to a situation where the regime would collapse. Accordingly, there is little evidence to suggest that the goal of regime change ever changed. The likely deception here, then, is that the public communications of Blair (and other officials) presented the United States and United Kingdom as offering a fair and genuine approach to disarming Iraq peacefully, which allowed Saddam the opportunity to comply with UN resolutions and then remain in power, when, in fact, their true intentions were always to remove Saddam from power. This would have been an important deception because it would have had the effect of undercutting opposition to war by misleading some people into believing there was a real possibility of peaceful accommodation. Not only would this deception have been important regarding levels of public support, it would also have played into UN Security Council negotiations over Resolution 1441 during which key members such as Russia and France were reassured that the United States and United Kingdom were seriously committed to a peaceful resolution whereby the regime would be allowed to remain in power if it complied with UN resolutions. Without such reassurance, it is unlikely they would have agreed to Resolution 1441. In terms of the conceptual framework, at the very least this would appear to be a case of *deception through omission and distortion*: omission of the main intentions behind the UN route and exaggeration of the possibility of a peaceful outcome. If it was the case that Blair and Bush never had any intention of allowing the regime to stay in place, as Cheney indicated, then the deception here is closer to one involving a lie, whereby officials claimed that they would allow Saddam to remain in power if he disarmed when, in fact, they never had any intention of allowing for this possibility.

Importantly, there was little evidence from the Chilcot report of *self-deception*, whereby officials actually believed that the UN route being devised held out a real possibility for a peaceful resolution: indeed, the deliberations repeatedly show that key officials did not believe it would work. Moreover, the language used in some documents indicates that officials were actively and consciously (i.e. intentionally) engaged in misrepresenting the truth of what was going on: 'We must *look* reluctant to use force' (Chilcot 3.4: 496; 177, emphasis added), use the UN route for '*optical*' reasons (Chilcot 3.3: 462; 80, emphasis added), 'we must be *emphasizing at every turn* that war was the last resort' (Chilcot 3.4: 500; 178; emphasis added), and that regime change could be an '*incidental consequence* of policy' (Chilcot 3.4: 515; 180, emphasis added), are all examples of officials stressing the need to obscure the reality of what was going on.

Finally, to believe that, by the summer/autumn of 2002, either the United States or British governments had actually elected to allow Saddam the chance to remain in power would require believing that the United States had, effectively, abandoned its long-standing policy of regime change and that Blair had also shifted his position of intending to remove Saddam. Moreover, when Saddam actually admitted inspectors and offered close to full cooperation (December through March 2003), this was still not enough for the United States and United Kingdom who, ultimately, invaded Iraq before the UN route had been exhausted: as Chilcot concluded, the war was not one of last resort and the UN route was never exhausted (Chilcot Executive Summary: 20; 6). All of this is powerful evidence that at least some UK officials, including Blair, were engaged in intentional deception at least through exaggeration and omission. It is not possible to determine, based upon the evidence examined to date, that Bush and Blair did not hold some belief in the possibility, however remote, that a peaceful outcome might have occurred. Hence it cannot be concluded that deception through lying occurred. However, we can now say with confidence that officials were involved in actively promoting a public rationale that appeared to provide an opportunity for peaceful disarmament, whilst all the while working as hard as possible to achieve regime change and in full knowledge that to achieve this military force would most likely be necessary.

#### *Chilcot again fails to consider the honesty and probity of officials*

As with the WMD issue, despite all of the evidence that officials were less than forthcoming regarding the main purpose of the UN route, Chilcot does not engage with the question of possible deception. Interestingly, in fact, Chilcot does acknowledge that some officials saw the UN route mainly in terms of securing legal cover for war rather than achieving peaceful disarmament (Chilcot 3.5: 887–89; 358); he also concludes that ‘a new UN resolution was a key element of Mr Blair’s ‘clever strategy’ to obtain US and UK objectives (Chilcot 3.5: 1081; 386). Of course, this ‘clever strategy’ had originally been articulated in the context of assuring UK support for the US objective of *regime change* (see Blair’s assurance to Cheney in March 2002 [Chilcot: 3.2: 353; 449]). However, Chilcot does not resolve the contradiction that is obviously implied here regarding the real purpose of the UN route and, as with the WMD issue, avoids questioning the honesty and good intentions of those involved. Perhaps part of the problem here is that, as recently indicated in the recent Commons committee hearing, Chilcot appears to understand deception only in terms of outright lying: As noted earlier regarding the WMD claims, Chilcot absolved Blair ‘of a personal and demonstrable decision to deceive Parliament or the public ... to say falsehoods knowing them to be false’; but he does state that Blair was not reasonable or fair in his ‘advocacy and persuasion’ and that ‘it was exaggeration’ that Blair was guilty of. Of course, and as set out in our conceptual framework, deception can occur through exaggeration and omission: and this is precisely what appears to have also happened in relation to the UN route/regime change public line. In short, the evidence is not there that lying occurred, but there is ample evidence to support the thesis of deception through exaggeration and omission. Chilcot, however, is clearly reluctant to tackle this issue and this must be considered a shortcoming of the report.

### **SECTION THREE: FRAGMENTS OF A BIGGER PICTURE; WHAT SECTION 3.1 OF THE CHILCOT REPORT TELLS US ABOUT 9/11 AND THE 'WAR ON TERROR'**

Beyond WMD and the UN route, the most revealing information to emerge from the Chilcot report, contained in section 3.1, pertains to the formative stages of the 'War on Terror' during the immediate aftermath of 9/11. In fact, examination of this phase also helps to shed further light on the WMD and UN route deceptions which occurred during the run up to the invasion of Iraq. Section 3.1 provides important indications of both the breadth and depth of the 'War on Terror', and the way in which it appears to have formed part of a broader strategy aimed at pursuing geo-strategic objectives both in the Middle East and more widely, often only tangentially connected with tackling Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. It is to a consideration of this suggestive information, and how it opens up new areas for inquiry, that we now turn.

#### ***Further Support for the WMD and UN route deceptions***

First and foremost, Section 3.1 confirms that the plans for invading Iraq were under way, on both sides of the Atlantic, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. In fact, the Chilcot report cites a British embassy report from prior to 9/11 which noted 'the growing pressure to change course from containment to military action to oust Saddam Hussein' (Chilcot 3.1: 30; 318). Hence the firming-up of Iraq policy was occurring *before* 9/11 and reflected the reality of the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 (which had made the removal of Saddam official US policy) and the emerging constellation of interests based around the neo-conservative movement. Following 9/11 the removal of Saddam Hussein became top priority. The Chilcot report cites Alastair Campbell's diaries with respect to a 20 September 2001 meeting between Bush and Blair in which the focus on Afghanistan was emphasized, but in which Bush 'also talked about how they could go after Saddam's oilfields' (Chilcot 3.1: 89; 328). By mid November 2001, Jonathan Powell was advising Blair that 'only the removal of Saddam Hussein and a new regime would deal with the risks from Iraq' (Chilcot 3.1: 183; 345). In late November, a memo titled 'Iraq: Change of Heart or Change of Regime' specified UK objectives as 'the removal of Saddam and replacement by a new, more moderate regime'. This could be achieved by the 'US, UK and others' setting 'up a UN 'demand for the return of inspectors' followed by:

a military plan, and if Saddam failed to meet the demands, there would be grounds to go ahead with the military plan ... [reference to a possible coup]. Supported by air power and a small number of Special Forces in support roles. Need to be clear with everyone that this time we are going all the way ...'.

(Chilcot 3.1: 265; 357)

In a possible example of deception through omission, Powell advised that officials should not publicly acknowledge that regime change was the goal: 'regime change would be desirable, but not our formal objective for the moment'. He also stated that if 'Saddam did allow the inspectors in, there would be a "need to find a new demand to justify military action"' (Chilcot 3.1: 265; 357).

By December it appears that Powell's advice had been adopted by Blair. In a telephone conversation between Bush and Blair on 3 December 2001, Blair stated 'it would be excellent to get rid of Saddam. But there needed to be a clever strategy for doing this'. Chilcot notes that Blair repeated this again during the telephone call: '... not opposed to action against Saddam. But an extremely clever plan would be required' (Chilcot 3.1: 330; 367–368). The elements of this clever plan were detailed in a memo to Bush dated 4 December 2001: Blair wrote of a 'strategy for regime change that builds overtime' involving 'softening up first' via demanding the return of weapons inspectors and implying that military action would follow if Saddam failed to comply as well as engaging in a raft of strategies aimed at weakening the regime (Blair 2001a). These included enforcing the existing no-fly zones on 'a more intensive basis', supporting opposition groups, mounting 'covert operations with people and groups with the ability to topple Saddam' and backing any emerging rebellions. Blair's advice to Bush, involving a covert, subtle and apparently deceptive approach to removing Saddam, is spelled out clearly in the concluding paragraph:

So: my strategy is to build this over time until we get to the point where military action could be taken if necessary: but meanwhile bring people toward us, undermine Saddam, without so alarming people about the immediacy of action that we frighten the horses, lose Russia and/or half the EU and nervous Arab states and find ourselves facing a choice between massive intervention or nothing.

Ultimately, of course, and as detailed in the preceding section on the UN route, it was broadly this plan, this 'clever strategy', that came to be executed.

Overall, Section 3.1 and its insights regarding the genesis of the Iraq regime change strategy, although covering a period well in advance of the run-up to war, does inevitably add further weight to the arguments developed in the previous sections of this article that claims made during the run up to war regarding pressing WMD threats and UN-based peaceful disarmament were largely propaganda strategies designed to help realize regime change.

### ***Evidence of a much wider deception regarding the 'war on terror' and regime change wars***

But there is also further information in Section 3.1 that is indicative of the emergence of a much wider geo-strategic policy involving a belligerent strategy aimed at coercing 'enemy' states including those uninvolved with Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. First, and remarkably, Section 3.1 reports a British embassy cable that indicates that some in the US administration were seeking to use a 'War on Terror' in order to pursue other objectives: Dated 15 September 2001, four days after 9/11, this report stated: "The "regime-change hawks" in Washington are arguing that a coalition put together for one purpose [against international terrorism] could be used to clear up other problems in the region' (Chilcot 3.1: 65; 324). Evidence that action against multiple countries was being planned is also indicated in a 20 September 2001 note from Blair to Bush in which he advised Bush to 'take our time to see whether we could build up the case against Iraq or other countries' before acting' (Chilcot 3.1: 84; 327). Blair also seems to have been 'thinking

big' in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, seeing events as an opportunity to change the world. The Chilcot report quotes the following line from his 2 October 2001 Labour Party Conference speech: 'This is a moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us' (Chilcot 3.1: 130; 335). Also revealing is the 4 December 2001 memo from Blair to Bush in which Blair discusses the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). Here, he states that '[t]he Middle East is set for catastrophe' before noting that the MEPP needs to be put back on track otherwise it will 'complicate everything in the Middle East for a wider struggle' (Blair 2001a) These brief but important notes suggest an awareness on the part of Blair that a much wider conflict was expected: How else could he have been aware that the Middle East was 'set for catastrophe'?

The remainder of Section 3.1 provides further important indications of the planned scope and nature of the 'War on Terror'. For example, on 17 September 2001 there was already discussion of Phase 2 of the war on terrorism (in which targets would be broadened out from the Phase 1 focus on Afghanistan and Bin Laden). Blair's 4 December 2001 memo, titled 'The War Against Terrorism: the Second Phase' discusses a total of seven countries (Iraq, Philippines, Syria, Iran, Yemen, Somalia and Indonesia) and provides further indications of how the 'War on Terror' was being conceived. Interestingly, this memo provides a clear indication that both Iran and Syria were part of discussions concerning military action: Blair cautions 'If toppling Saddam is a prime objective, it is far easier to do it with Syria and Iran in favour or acquiescing rather than hitting all three at once' (Blair 2001a). How many of these countries were being targeted for regime change is not clear from the documents. However, talk of *hitting* Iran and Syria, countries not associated with the Islamic fundamentalist terrorism understood to have been behind Al Qaeda and 9/11, is clearly suggestive of some kind of military action and is certainly consistent with actions and events witnessed over the fifteen years since 9/11. Moreover, as already noted, the Chilcot report also referenced the British embassy cable that observed how the 'regime-change hawks' in the United States were looking at using the 'War on Terror' coalition to 'clear up other problems' in the region. It seems highly plausible, then, that Syria and Iran were being conceived of as potential targets for regime change in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

Importantly, on questions of deception and propaganda, the more broadly conceived 'War on Terror' was seen as in need of being both covert, i.e. kept out of the public eye, and of requiring a significant propaganda campaign. In a statement made in a memo to Bush dated 11 October 2001, and in a section headed 'Extending War Aims', Blair writes:

we know what you want; you can do it; but not whilst you are bombing Afghanistan. The uncertainty caused by Phase 2 seeming to extend to Iraq, Syria etc is really hurting them because it seems to confirm the UBL propaganda that this is West vs. Arab. I have no doubt we need to deal with Saddam. But if we hit Iraq now, we would lose the Arab world, Russia, probably half the EU and my fear is the impact of all that on Pakistan. However, I am sure we can devise a strategy for Saddam deliverable at a later date. My suggestion is, in order to give ourselves space that we say: Phase 1 is the military action focused on Afghanistan because it's where the perpetrators of 11 September hide. Phase 2 is the

medium and longer-term campaign against terrorism in all its forms. ... We just don't need it debated too freely in public until we know what exactly we want to do, and how we can do it. Incidentally, the leaders all warned about treating Syria like Iraq.

(Blair 2001b)

As Bush and Blair were secretly discussing their plans for phase 1 and 2 of a wide-ranging 'War on Terror', Chilcot indicates that the public line being maintained was to downplay the scope of the 'War on Terror': Chilcot notes MP Ben Bradshaw's statement that 'People should not speculate about expanding the ... campaign beyond Bin Laden and al-Qaeda ... There is no evidence of any other state involvement ... We have always made it clear that the military campaign is limited and specific' (Chilcot 3.1: 215; 349). At the same time, both Blair and Manning identified the need for propaganda campaigns in order to underpin Phases 1 and 2 of the 'War on Terror'. In his 11 October 2001 letter to Bush, Blair stated that '[w]e need a dedicated, tightly knit propaganda unit for the war generally and for the Arab and Moslem world in particular' (Blair 2001b). More fully, in a letter from David Manning to Condoleezza Rice, in a section headed 'Propaganda', the basic strategy was outlined with a daily 'message according to the grid pushed out world-wide. Specific rebuttal capability set up'. The letter also detailed a set of initiatives designed to show how 'from September 11, good can come for the world, led by the US' (Manning 2001).

Finally, these fascinating insights into, and indications of, a broader geo-strategic conflict underpinned by the 'War on Terror', deception over its reach and a propaganda campaign, corroborate two claims made by high-profile officials. First, the indication of a wider than publicly acknowledged 'War on Terror', including the targeting of countries such as Syria and Iran, are consistent with claims made by retired General Wesley Clark (former Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO [1997–2000]). Clark's statement (made in public on two occasions) was that, shortly after 9/11, he was told by a Pentagon official that the United States intended to attack up to seven countries. Clark recalls:

He picked up a piece of paper, he said I just got this down from upstairs, from the Secretary of Defence's office today, and he said this is a memo that describes how we are gonna take out seven countries in five years, starting with Iraq and then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and finishing off Iran.

(Clark 2007a, 2007b)

Second, Blair's apparent awareness that the Middle East was 'set for catastrophe' and talk of a shaken 'kaleidoscope' and 'reordering this world', in addition to all of the evidence regarding a Phase 1 and 2 of the 'War on Terror', are consistent with a recent statement by Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of MI6. He indicated that Saudi officials were aware of a coming conflict, even prior to 9/11. During a speech to the Royal United Services Institute in 2014, Dearlove made the following comments:

The second Saudi incident predates 9/11 and it comes from a conversation with Prince Bandar ... and that was, 'the time is not far off Richard in the ME when it will literally be God help the Shia, more than a

billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them' and that was a chilling comment which I remember very well indeed.

(Goodman 2014)

To the extent that these statements are made by officials of the highest status and rank, and are consistent with the evidence put into the public domain by the Chilcot report, they raise a critical set of questions with regard to both the nature and extent of the 'War on Terror' and, inevitably, the role of both deception and propaganda with respect to the enablement of that war. The questions raised, and the research agendas needed to address them, will now be discussed in the conclusion.

### **CONCLUSION: RETHINKING THE 'WAR ON TERROR'**

On the questions of WMD and the UN route, this paper provides comprehensive and conceptually grounded empirical evidence in support of the thesis that strategies of deception were pursued (Herring and Robinson 2014a and 2014b). With respect to WMD, the conceptual framework indicates a pattern of distortions and omissions that led directly to official claims that went 'beyond the bounds of the available intelligence'. With respect to the UN route, the evidence from the Chilcot report shows that policy-makers actively exaggerated the possibility of a peaceful resolution by misleadingly presenting it as a genuine attempt at securing peaceful disarmament, all the while developing the strategy primarily as a way of mobilizing support for war and gaining legal cover for British military action. There was no evidence of self-deception, group think or misperception either with respect to the threat from Iraqi WMD or the likelihood of the UN route succeeding. Indeed, it was routinely acknowledged that the intelligence on Iraq was weak, that Iraq was not an immediate threat and that the UN route was expected/intended to fail. Moreover, there is evidence indicating awareness amongst officials that they were not engaged in a fair and accurate portrayal of what was going on; comments about '*obscuring* the fact that Iraq was not the most serious WMD threat' (emphasis added), going the UN route for '*optical* reasons' (emphasis added) and the need to '*appear reluctant* to use force' (emphasis added), all indicate an intention to *disguise* the reality of what was going on. Although avoiding deception through lying, officials were engaged in deception through exaggeration and omission. Chilcot, apparently working with a narrow definition of deception, whereby it is defined only in terms of lying (i.e. telling of falsehoods) thereby excluding deception via omission and distortion, absolves Blair of dishonesty. He also avoids assigning responsibility for the use of Report X, the critical piece of intelligence which meant that the dossier went beyond the bounds of the available intelligence (Butler Inquiry 2004; Chilcot Report 2016). However, the evidence he puts into the public domain clearly shows officials working hard to manipulate public perceptions of both Iraqi WMD capability and threat, as well as the real purpose of the UN route. The evidence from Chilcot supports the thesis that these manipulations involved *deception via distortion/exaggeration and omission*, yet on these issues of probity, Chilcot remains silent.

Analysis of Section 3.1 of the Chilcot report throws into relief the deceptions over WMD and the UN route and provides highly significant new evidence regarding the 'War on Terror' itself. These propagandistic OPC strategies would appear to be only the end product of critical decisions and

opportunities seized in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. It was in this period that the initial 'clever' plan was set out to remove Saddam Hussein through a process of 'softening up' and pushing the issue of weapons inspections and WMD. In this period both Blair and his advisor Manning expressly stated the need for a 'propaganda' campaign to cover phase 2 of the 'War on Terror'. Moreover, whilst the public and academic perception of the 'War on Terror' has largely remained focused upon an interpretation of a campaign aimed at tackling Islamic fundamentalism, the evidence from Chilcot indicates that, in addition, there was a broader geo-strategic vision/campaign formulated in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. This involved a regime-change strategy potentially targeting many countries (also indicated by Wesley Clark's claims) which included Syria and Iran, and an awareness of an impending catastrophic conflict in the Middle East (also indicated by Dearlove's claims regarding Prince Bandar). Importantly, US and British officials (including Blair and Bush) appear to have seen all of this as an opportunity to be exploited, not as something to be stopped or contained. Moreover, they make clear that the strategy should not be pursued in full view of the public: As such it appears to have involved *deception through omission*.

At a general level, the depth and consequences of these apparently deceptive and propagandistic OPC campaigns (multiple wars and massive human suffering) demand that scholars devote far more attention to the analysis of OPC, deception and propaganda within liberal democratic states. This should involve development of the conceptual framework used here and application to further cases. It should also include a thorough-going interrogation of the institutions, doctrines and practices that lie behind these kinds of OPC campaigns, the role of deception as a political strategy, and the consequence of all this for our understanding of the state of contemporary democracy. Work in this area is the subject of ongoing research by the author and others (e.g. Bakir et al, 2017; Miller et al. 2017). More work is needed.

The Chilcot report also clearly raises new questions about the 'War on Terror', and ones that have potentially profound implications for our understanding of the global role of the West during the last sixteen years. Indeed, the initial evidence presented in this paper strongly suggests the need for a major expansion of scholarly inquiry into the formative stages of the 'war on terror'. With the materials Chilcot afforded us, this must now include a thorough-going and critical exploration of the extent to which this global conflict was seen as a way of pursuing a geo-strategic agenda aimed at 'clearing up other problems', projecting power and securing access to key resources, including oil. Second, scholarly attention should be paid to the extent to which key Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, might have envisaged a substantial Middle East conflict aimed at pursuing regional objectives, and the way in which this might have dovetailed with the objectives of the 'regime change hawks' in Washington. Third, as part of this analysis, close attention needs to be paid to the 'close knit propaganda campaign' described by Blair in Autumn 2001 and the extent to which this might have involved a strategy of deception aimed at underpinning multiple aspects of the global 'War on Terror' from inception: *put bluntly, to what extent might have western populations been manipulated into support for a war on terrorism that was as much about geo-strategic opportunism and aggressive wars, as it was about tackling Islamic fundamentalist terrorism?* A full and thorough application of the conceptual framework to this period is now an urgent task in order to substantiate the indicative evidence presented in the final section of this article regarding deceptive OPC and the 'War on

Terror'. Fourth, if it is indeed the case that, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, elements within the US government (and perhaps elsewhere) sought to take advantage of circumstances in order to either topple or weaken 'hostile' governments, it is important to assess the extent to which events that we are witnessing today (especially the conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen) are a consequence of the geo-strategic 'visions' indicated in both Section 3.1 of the Chilcot report and in the claims made by Clark and Dearlove. For example, to what extent is the current war in Syria linked directly to United States and Saudi (amongst others) ambitions in the region? Given the extraordinary level of conflict in the Middle East, which is indeed of the 'catastrophic' proportions foretold by Blair back in 2001, it is a matter of great importance and relevance to establish both the extent to which current events are traceable to these geo-strategic 'visions' and the responsibility, indeed culpability, of western governments and their key allies for the current conflagration in the Middle East.

The last fifteen years have borne witness to multiple violent and destructive conflicts initiated by the West with the justification of fighting terrorism. Governments in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya have been overthrown whilst countries such as Syria and Yemen are the sites of protracted and highly destructive wars of such scale that, for example, Europe now faces its largest refugee crisis since World War II. It is perhaps only now that we are beginning to understand the geo-strategic underbelly of this war and the scale of the propaganda exercise needed to mobilize public and political support. It is a matter of urgency that much greater intellectual attention is paid to these issues.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Stefanie Haueis, Chris Ames (Iraq Inquiry Digest <http://www.iraqinquirydigest.org/>), Tareq Ismael and Eric Herring for comment and feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

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### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

- Robinson, P. (2017), 'Learning from the Chilcot report: Propaganda, deception and the "War on Terror"', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 11: 1+2, pp. 47–73, doi: 10.1386/jcis.11.1-2.47\_1

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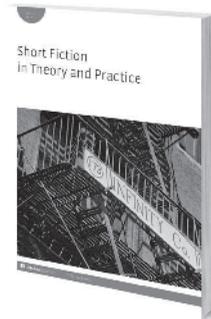
ISSN 2043-0701 | Online ISSN 2043-071X  
2 issues per volume | Volume 3, 2013

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