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ARTICLE

The mother of all post-mortems

Robert Jervis

Department of Political Science and School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, New York, USA

ABSTRACT

The most striking finding of the Chilcot Report is that the record reveals little that was previously unknown. A key point for its authors is that diplomatic alternatives had not been exhausted when the US and UK went to war. But, short of an armed attack by the other side, it is hard to say when they would have been. Here what was crucial was the belief shared by Bush and Blair that Saddam Hussain would not and could not change. For the British the issue of whether alternatives to war remained is particularly important because of its implications for international law, something that did not trouble the Americans. It remains unclear if Blair would have gained or lost leverage over Bush had he made British participation contingent on better American policy, for example on developing a workable plan for the reconstruction of Iraq.

KEYWORDS Chilcot Report; Iraq war; postmortems

The main news about the Iraq Inquiry (the Chilcot Report) is that at least in its coverage of the run-up to the war, it largely confirms what scholars have come to believe. There are no bombshells; we do not have to relearn the history. But this should not be a cause for disappointment because the point of inquiries like these is to lay out the historical record and reach sensible judgments, not to be original. The fact that there are so few revelations is reassuring in showing that in an open society, it did not require an investigation as long and thorough as this one to bring out a good account of what had happened. This reaction is very different from what prevailed in the United Kingdom, I realize, and this discrepancy is worthy of analysis I cannot provide. Perhaps, my lack of surprise reflects my somewhat cynical beliefs about how British policy had been formed.

Unless I missed it (truth in commenting – I did not read every volume, let alone every word), the Report does not disclose whether security considerations prevented the authors from seeing or publishing any documents. But the strong implication is that there is nothing left in the cupboard, and with

CONTACT Robert Jervis  rlj1@columbia.edu

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the exception of some details of intelligence sources, I find this very plausible. We will continue to argue about normative matters, motivations, causes, and counterfactuals, but we are not likely to get much new information. Here is where the Report shines. The rich detail of the story as it unfolds is unsurpassed and will be a resource for years to come. My favorite anecdote is that during the negotiations over a second UN Resolution, the British Ambassador to France advised that 'Nothing the French say at this stage, even privately, should be taken at face value' (Executive Summary p. 28 para. 197). Also not to be missed is that fact that while MI6 found a source's description of spherical glass containers filled with poison gas to be credible, it also noted the 'remarkably similarity to the fictional chemical weapon portrayed in the film *The Rock*' (vol. 4.3, p. 383, para 722).

At several points, the Report notes that its critical judgments were not based on hindsight, but in a fundamental sense, the whole enterprise is and must be built on hindsight, having been triggered by the widespread agreement that the war was unnecessary and a failure. Successes appear self-validating and rarely call for detailed, let alone critical, scrutiny. It is almost impossible to avoid judging processes partly by the outcomes. If it turned out that Saddam had had active Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programs, few people would have cared or even noticed that intelligence had expressed too much certainty, had failed to examine its assumptions, or exaggerated the reliability of its sources. In parallel, the degree to which Prime Minister Blair overstated the intelligence and short-circuited standard procedures would have seemed like the normal ways of handling a crisis. Had the American and British forces been greeted as liberators and the local population been able to manage a peaceful transition, the lack of preparation for the less happy events that actually unfolded would not have been seen as a major failure, although it still would have been one.

"In the Inquiry's view the diplomatic options had not ... been exhausted when [diplomacy was abandoned]. Military action was therefore not a last resort" (Executive Summary p. 6, para. 20). This may be the "headline" conclusion, being the first point cited by most news accounts and providing the basis for some of the subsequent findings. Although well known, this is a point well worth repeating. The decision to go to war was made in Washington and the timing was driven by military and logistical considerations, especially the onset of the hot weather, in addition to the difficulties of maintaining the necessary political support for war over a prolonged period. In back of this were the beliefs, stronger in the White House than at 10 Downing Street but present there as well, that, as Blair said to the House of Commons right before the war, "Saddam is playing the same old games in the same old way [because] there has been no fundamental change of heart or mind" (ES, p. 45 para. 328), and that at some point, he might

provide WMD to terrorists. There is no evidence that Blair or Bush believed that there could be disarmament without regime change, and the drive for the former was at least a bit more than an excuse for the latter. In retrospect, of course, we know that not much disarmament was needed (although retrospect also shows that Saddam had planned to restart his WMD programs when sanctions were lifted) and so at one level, the Inquiry and the previous views it ratifies are obviously correct. But are diplomatic alternatives ever exhausted? Even after one side uses force, a state can always negotiate, as Japan hoped the US would do after Pearl Harbor. When Hitler attacked Poland in September 1939, diplomacy only had to come to an end concerning Germany's eastern borders, which did not directly affect British security. Furthermore, the evidence in the report does not indicate that further diplomacy at the UN would have yielded the Holy Grail of the second Security Council resolution. Additional inspections of course would have come closer to revealing Saddam's bizarre double game but never could have definitively shown that he had in fact disarmed. They would have posed a major challenge for Britain and the US, and it is hard to know what they would have done, but we did not need a report as thorough as this to tell us that these countries chose to start the war rather than let the inspections play out. (Any evidence that the inspections were short circuited because British or American leaders thought they would clear Saddam if they were continued would have been major news.)

Although the American debate was framed in terms of whether this was a war of necessity or a war of choice rather than whether the diplomatic possibilities had been exhausted, the essential question was the same. For the British, however, it was more freighted because it was linked to whether Iraq was in 'material breach' of UN resolutions and therefore whether the war conformed to international law. This was central to the British debate at the time and subsequently, and it is covered in detail in the Report which in the end faults the process without reaching a definitive conclusion about the war's legality or whether, as opponents have charged, the Attorney General's conclusion to the contrary was a product of political pressures. The legal intricacies here are beyond my competence (and, I must admit, my interest), but the difference in trans-Atlantic perspectives is worth noting. In the US, even opponents of the war cared little about whether it was legal; my sense is that in Britain, the claim that it was not was more than a mere additional reason produced by opponents but was a real motivation and that Blair could not have gone to war without a supporting legal certification. How the US and Britain came to so sharply diverge in their orientations and whether this reflects only differences in material power are fascinating and important questions, but beyond the scope of the Report or this review. I would just note that the British were largely untroubled by the questionable legality of the NATO intervention in Kosovo, which was generally

believed to have turned out fairly well, or with the intervention in Libya which moved from a UN-sanctioned effort to protect civilians to an unauthorized case of regime change, perhaps because no British lives were lost and the British policy, however misguided it may have been, was internally generated rather than being an instance of following the American lead.

The American leaders understood that international law was a deep British concern, even if they found it puzzling. They also knew that British support for the war was vital, less because of the material contribution (although it was not insubstantial) than because the British ratification of the wisdom of going to war affected world opinion and, even more, American opinion. This partly explains why Bush sought the UN resolution and is almost the entire reason why he sought the second one.

For Britain, and especially for Blair, they felt that the need to stand with the US ('shoulder to shoulder,' in Blair's words) was even more important than the American need to have the United Kingdom in the coalition, as the report makes clear. It also avers that this was a questionable choice: 'over the past seven decades, the UK and the US have adopted different and sometimes conflicting positions on major issues.... [without] fundamentally call[ing] into question the practice of close co-operation, to mutual advantage, on the overall relationship, including defense and intelligence' (ES, p. 53 para. 376). This statement is correct and leads to important questions beyond the Report's scope: what would have been the likely costs of breaking with the US? Was Blair more enamored of the 'special relationship' than many of his colleagues and, if so, why?

The Report points out that it is possible that Blair might have retained greater leverage over the US had he adopted a different stance (volume 3.4, pp. 192–3, paras. 577–79). As it also explains, this strategy was a conscious one: 'the belief that the best way to influence US policy towards the direction preferred by the UK was to commit full and unqualified support, and seek to persuade from the inside' (ES, para. 365, p. 51). Here, I think it is fair to say that 'the United Kingdom' means Blair. This, like many other questions, was never explicitly discussed in the Cabinet or even the inner circle, and there is no reason to have expected full agreement because the question is a difficult one.

But it would be a mistake to argue that the perceived need to be with the Americans was the only factor pushing Blair toward war. The report confirms previous judgments that he shared many of Bush's views about the threat that Saddam posed and the multiple reasons to seek Saddam's overthrow. Indeed, the roots of Blair's support for humanitarian intervention were deeper than Bush's. In the end, then, we cannot readily determinate how much Blair was pulled into following Bush's lead as opposed to moving on his own parallel track in feeling that invasion was the only route to greater

security. This leads to the question of whether he really did want to buy more time for the inspections, hoping that there might be a peaceful solution, or whether the fairly minor efforts he made along these lines were largely for domestic reasons.

Parallels indeed are striking. To exaggerate only a bit, not only were the views of Bush and Blair quite close but so were those of Jack Straw, the British Foreign Secretary, and Colin Powell, the American Secretary of State, as were the views of American and British security bureaucracies. The differences within each government were greater than those between two the governments at each level. The intelligence bureaucracies made very similar errors and also were roughly parallel in their correct judgments that the ties between Saddam and terrorists were minimal and that a post-Saddam Iraq would be very hard to govern, and in neither country did the disconcerting views affect decision makers. There were some differences, which remain worthy of exploration. For example, the British believed (and appear to still believe) that Saddam was seeking to acquire uranium from Africa while being generally less concerned about his nuclear capabilities, but these were relatively minor. Furthermore, the British and American governments understood each other quite well, including seeing the splits in the other side. Even among allies as close as the US and United Kingdom, this should not be taken for granted, as Richard Neustadt's studies remind us.¹

The convergence or agreement at the top was not complete, however. Blair always wanted to move more slowly than Bush, in part because he had much more severe domestic constraints. His own views may have been a bit more conflicted as well. Although the Report concludes that 'for the UK, regime change was a means to achieve disarmament, not an objective in its own right' (volume 3.1, p. 386, para. 1080), this may be a distinction without a difference because Blair and his senior advisors believed that the latter could not be achieved without the former. Indeed, as far as I can tell, no thought was given to what relations with Iraq might look like if WMD programs were halted but Saddam remained in power. Some of the difficulty in determining Blair's preferences is that they probably changed over time as he came around to believing that force had to be used, and this in turn derived in part from the fact that it became increasingly clear that Bush was committed to this course of action.

The Report documents that in the United Kingdom, as in the US, leaders consistently presented the public with an exaggerated case for going to war and circumvented normal – or at least text book – procedures. On top of the overconfidence of the intelligence assessments they received, leaders

¹Richard E. Neustadt, *Alliance Politics* (New York: Columbia UP 1970); Richard E. Neustadt, *Report to J. F. K. The Skybolt Crisis in Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1999).

dismissed the uncertainties that remained. They also pushed their intelligence agencies into making public reports ('dossiers' in British terminology), which in the end increased friction within the government and discredited intelligence in the eyes of the public. Most strikingly, in neither government was the decision to go to war aired at formal and fully briefed meetings of the highest level institutions. Reading Gill Bennett's perceptive account of important cabinet discussions during the Cold War shows how valuable these can be even when the Prime Minister's preferences clearly are going to prevail.² Although it is not news that the power of the Prime Minister has increased over the past half-century and the power of the Cabinet has correspondingly diminished, the latter is still supposed to be key to the British system of government, and so the Report's demonstration of the extent to which Blair sidelined it is significant. Judging by the response in the United Kingdom, this came as a greater surprise there than it did to me and my colleagues.

Whether surprising or not, these findings raise the fundamental question of how democracies are to conduct the foreign policy. Political leaders face extraordinarily difficult tasks in deciding what to do and assembling a supportive coalition. How much information should we expect them to share with likely opponents? Where are the boundaries between strong political leadership and unacceptable political manipulation? When a decision turns out to have been a bad one, we will highlight the latter elements, but I very much doubt the comforting thought that only bad policies require unacceptable behaviors.

The report documents that the Blair government exaggerated the danger that Saddam might give weapons to terrorists, although it was less egregious in this regard than was the Bush administration. But while internal documents show that neither government expected such an alliance in the immediate future, both were worried about the long-term danger. If the 9/11 attacks did not "change everything" in the United Kingdom as they did in the US, for the former as well as the latter, it reduced the tolerance for risk and made more salient low probability but high-impact events. Contrary to the common generalization that heightened tensions lead people to focus on the immediate future and to the normative claim that we are better off looking to the future, leaders in both countries were moved by fears, not for what was likely to happen soon, but for the longer run. Indeed, it was clear that invading Iraq would increase the immediate risks. Leaders mislead the public not about the danger they saw, but when they believed it might eventuate. Presumably, their underlying assumption is that while they, being stewards of their countries' fates, were mature enough to give proper weight to the future, their publics were not.

²Gill Bennett, *Six Moments of Crises: Inside British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2013).

Let me close with four puzzles I wish the Report had addressed.

One is quite small. Other versions had stressed that British were very worried about Saddam firing chemical-tipped missiles at their base in Cyprus. There is almost nothing about this in the report. Since these fears struck me as bizarre, I was glad to see that apparently they were not significant, but I would have like more discussion.

Second, it is significant but perhaps not surprising that the design of coercive diplomacy did not include measures to try to assure Saddam that if he did get rid of his putative WMD programs, he would not be invaded and overthrown and that some if not all of the sanctions would be lifted. As Schelling stressed at the very start of the academic consideration of coercion, such bargaining requires that promises as well as threats be made credible.³ Part of the explanation is that the US and Blair thought that Saddam would never give up his programs, but this problem should have merited the attention of those in the UK for whom a disarmed Saddam was not only their first choice but also a possible outcome.

Third, the fact that Blair's inner circle and, at least to some extent, the Prime Minister himself worried about the lack of post-hostilities planning raises the question of why Blair did not exert greater pressure on Bush on this point. The reasons for the greater British sensitivity to the question is an interesting one, but beyond the remit of the Report. But it could have probed more deeply why Blair did not make British support conditional on a decent plan. Did he think about this and reject it or was it beyond his ken? Perhaps, he felt that getting Bush to propose a Middle Eastern peace plan and go to the Security Council for not only one but also two authorizing resolutions (items that were crucial to him domestically but that had little effect on the outcome of the war) was all that the traffic would bear. By committing himself to stand with the Americans, Blair reduced his ability to threaten that he would stay out. Nevertheless, this does seem like a lost opportunity.

The fourth puzzle is why neither the British nor American intelligence reevaluated their estimates in the last month before the war when Saddam finally did cooperate with the inspectors, and yet they turned up no WMD programs (ES, p. 76, paras. 569 and 570; more details can be found in volume 4.3, especially pp. 335–36, 350–79, and 416–17). My study of the American side led me to conclude that by the end of 2002, intelligence officers realized that the US was going to war no matter what they said and essentially stopped doing serious and unbiased work.⁴ This conjecture is possible for British side as well, but, as we learned with Iraq WMD, things that are plausible are not always true.

³Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 1960) Ch. 2.

⁴Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 2010), 135–6.

Notes on contributor

Robert Jervis is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University. His most recent book is *How Statesmen Think* (Princeton University Press, 2017). He was President of the American Political Science Association in 2000-01 and has received career achievement awards from the International Society of Political Psychology, ISA's Security Studies Section, and APSA's Foreign Policy Section, and he has received honorary degrees from the University of Venice and Oberlin College. In 2006 he received the National Academy of Science's tri-annual award for behavioral sciences contributions to avoiding nuclear war

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