

The still unanswered question: why did we rush to war?

(published as “Still no answer on rush to war” in *The Greensboro News and Record*, 22 February 2004)

One by one these days, in Washington and London alike, the wheels are coming off the case for the invasion of Iraq. In fact they are now coming off with increasing speed. The President once told us that the Iraqi regime was seeking uranium in Niger; Colin Powell told us that Saddam Hussein had links to al Qaeda; and Tony Blair told us that the Iraqi dictator could mobilize some of his WMD in 45 minutes if pushed. They don't tell us any of that now. And after David Kay's starting announcement that he doubted that Saddam Hussein had any weapons of mass destruction when we invaded, Bush and Blair haven't even been able to use their 'wait and see, we will find them' defense. We have waited. We have seen. WMD are not to be found.

So time and evidence has forced the architects of the invasion to totally reset both what they concede and what they claim. Yet that resetting is making a mockery of what they told us before. More critically still, what we are being told now is also inadvertently deepening Bush and Blair's difficulties on a dimension of the invasion little discussed of late, but one that might yet drive them both from office. For it is not simply that George Bush and Tony Blair keep giving us different explanations of why they went to war. It is also that they have yet to give us a convincing one about when and how they went to war.

The rolling road show of justifications for why Iraq was invaded is currently being driven by the need to counter a claim that is steadily gathering strength: the claim that the invasion was unnecessary, and indeed counter-productive, in the wider war on terrorism. Not so, Tony Blair told Parliament last week. Not to invade would have emboldened the dictator, and given him time to build up his military stockpiles. Not so, George Bush told Tim Russett on Sunday. We went to war on the basis of intelligence that, if faulty now, was widely believed then. And anyway, we have democratized Iraq. This is a war justified by its outcome.

But in arguing that defense, the advocates of the invasion simply create new problems for themselves, not on the reasons for the invasion, but on its timing. If the freeing of Iraq from an evil tyranny is truly what this invasion was about, then why did it come so late? Why was the Hussein regime covertly supported by governments in both Washington and London for so long in the 1980s? Why was it allowed such internal latitude for repression after the first Gulf War? And more crucially still, if the WMD argument for the war is now watered down to the simple proposition that 'Saddam Hussein was dangerous with the ability to make weapons' – as the President put it on Sunday – why then did the US and UK rush to war last March? Why were they so unwilling to allow Hans Blix the short time needed to check the accuracy of the intelligence data that we now know was so inadequate, if all that Hussein had was some long-term ability to be 'dangerous'?

By being so reluctant to set up inquiries into that intelligence failure, the Bush Administration and Blair Government may inadvertently have given an indirect answer to that question. For there is great protection for them, after all, in going down that route: in reframing the issue into one focused on the failings of intelligence, not of politics. Given the David Kay holing of the WMD defense of the invasion, senior government figures in Washington and London might have been expected to seize on these inquiries with enthusiasm, as a guaranteed escape route for

them. But they have not. Why? Could it be that those same senior figures already know that the real problem here was not that the intelligence was inadequate but that it was politicized? After all, what the intelligence community in Washington and London knew about Iraq in the early months of 2003 was known in every major western capital too; and yet only the US and UK rushed to war.

Until we hear an adequate explanation of why that rush was necessary, many of us will continue to suspect that Iraq's supposed possession of WMD was simply a smokescreen used to justify a war that had already been decided upon. So tell us, Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair: why didn't you allow Hans Blix time to complete the inspection process released by UN Resolution 1441? Why was it so necessary to rush into this war? We really need to know.