

Will Blair Walk the Walk? (with Joel Krieger)
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On January 28th Tony Blair will face the most dangerous day of his political life when a much-anticipated report on the death of an obscure scientist will be issued. The report will bring to a climax the miserable saga that began in May 2003 when the BBC reported that the most compelling evidence for the claim that Saddam Hussein posed an imminent threat—that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction on 45 minutes notice—was wrong. For an increasingly beleaguered Tony Blair, facing mounting criticism of the war in Iraq, the story could scarcely have been more damaging. Relying on an unnamed “senior official,” the BBC asserted that Downing Street had ordered the government’s claims against Saddam to be exaggerated or, as the BBC reporter unforgettably put it, “sexed up.” After three weeks of merciless pounding in the media, Blair made a fateful decision: it was time to authorize a back-channel leak of the BBC’s source, David Kelly. If Kelly were discredited, the BBC would be put in its place, and the prime minister might reclaim the offensive. His name revealed, Kelly was promptly placed before the harsh glare of television cameras on July 15th and grilled by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs committee.

For a day or two—no more—Blair got what he was looking for. Kelly, a scientist at the Ministry of Defence with extensive expertise about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, wilted under intense public scrutiny about his unauthorized interview and the BBC was put on the defensive. Then, on July 17th, Kelly died under mysterious circumstances. That day, he left his home in a village near Oxford for his usual afternoon walk, chatted with a neighbor, and never returned.

Some suspect skullduggery, but most likely Kelly committed suicide under pressure. His tragedy put a human face on the doubts many millions of Britons (and Americans, too) felt about the justifications for the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. It unleashed a furious debate about what lengths Blair had gone to steamroll parliament into backing his war aims and what pressure he was willing to exert to intimidate a well-meaning whistle blower. The furor was so great that the government had no choice but to commission an investigation, headed by senior judge Lord Hutton, into the circumstances surrounding Kelly’s death.

Unfortunately, no formal inquiry can reveal what truly begs for an explanation. We will never know why a man with no history of instability, a man seasoned by a five-year tour of duty as a weapons inspector with UNSCOM in Iraq, a man tough enough to help get the Iraqis to admit that they had a biological weapons program, a man by all accounts eager to return to Baghdad as part of the Iraq Survey Group, why a man like that would take his life. Someone else might have raged at friends, or drunk heavily, or worried about his future assignments and security clearance. Kelly reacted with horrible finality. When the report of the Hutton Inquiry is published we will know little more about this very public end to a very private man.

The death of David Kelly was the central focus of the investigation, but the Hutton Inquiry could not escape a wider agenda, for every public debate about the war in Iraq has become a referendum on Tony Blair. In this regard the Report is likely to be very damaging. No doubt our

suspicions will be confirmed that Blair was far more directly involved than he initially admitted in publicly naming Kelly. It is certain to expose the government's willingness to spin a claim about WMD's on a 45-minute trigger that went far beyond any reliable evidence. In short, it is likely to show that the BBC story that provoked the whole tragic chain of events ending in Kelley's death was well founded. In the wake of the Report, Blair will stand accused of stonewalling on the facts about Kelly and, far more importantly, treating as facts unproven assertions about Iraq.

Hutton was required to limit his investigation to Kelly's death, so his report will not directly raise the real issue: for how much longer should a prime minister remain in office when his integrity and leadership have been so compromised? That is the question left in the wake of the Hutton Inquiry, for Blair's position is now impossible.

Here, after all, is a man who persists in presenting the unilateral invasion of Iraq as a success story of high moral tone. He tells the US public as well as Britons that the invasion was necessary and legitimate, and that its benefits are evident. Yet the evidence is now clear that the invasion was mounted on the basis of claims that proved to be false.

In the United States, such revelations have not yet undermined the public standing of President Bush. But in Britain the response has been very different. Blair is under mounting pressure and is taking heat on his domestic policy as well. Tuesday evening Blair faces a parliamentary rebellion of unprecedented proportions. His backbench MPs are up in arms over his proposals to increase student fees in order to stabilize the funding of university education. Blair has made it clear that a defeat on Tuesday will be taken by him as a vote of no confidence in his leadership, and bring with it the possibility of resignation. By Wednesday, even if Hutton's verdict about Blair's role in the Hutton tragedy is relatively mild, his premiership may be crumbling.

Meanwhile in the United States the resignation last week of the head of the US weapons inspection team, David Kay, has underscored Blair's continuing vulnerability on the 45 minute claim. As one senior member of the Bush Administration after another back-pedals on the immediate danger once posed by the Iraqi armaments, they might be saving themselves from temporary embarrassment, but they are digging a deeper and deeper pit for their major European ally. 'It is becoming rather undignified for the prime minister to continue to insist that he was right all along', his major political critic, Robin Cook, told the BBC over the weekend, 'when everyone can now see he was wrong, even the head of the Iraq Survey Group has said he was wrong'; and it is Cook, not Blair, who best represents popular sentiments in the UK on this issue right now.

In a week that may hold many surprises, one thing is certain: Blair doubtless knows there is precedent for departure under circumstances such as these and there will be growing pressure on him to do so.

This is not the first occasion in modern times when Britain has sent troops to the Middle East. Nor is it the first occasion when a prime minister has found himself accused of duplicity when mired in such an exercise. In the wake of the Suez fiasco of 1956, cabinet and parliamentary

colleagues condemned Sir Anthony Eden for misleading them on his degree of collusion with Israel in the planning of the invasion. Eden was forced to resign as a consequence.

Of course, the odds are still against Blair's resignation. But in Britain the removal of a prime minister does not require the constitutional hand-wringing or wrenching national spectacle of impeachment. In this case the responsibility clearly lies with the cabinet and the rank and file members of parliament from Blair's own Labor Party to force his hand.

Tony Blair has often, even eloquently, talked the talk about the demands of morality and responsibility. But will he walk the walk—or literally drive the drive from 10 Downing Street to Buckingham Palace—to take responsibility for a war, built on false declarations of dangers and advanced by the needless harassment of a government scientist, that has destroyed his credibility and compromised the principles of his party?