

After the Butler Report: time to take on the group think in Washington and London

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Key Points

- The Butler report found intelligence evidence stretched to the “outer limits” and (like the US Senate Intelligence Committee) attributed failings to “group think” rather than individuals.
- This paper confirms that many of the symptoms associated with ‘group think’ do appear to be prevalent in the way intelligence was handled by British agencies and Downing Street.
- Such errors may have been avoided by a few simple precautionary steps, such as encouraging analysts to be critical evaluators of the intelligence; setting up ‘devils advocate’ sub-groups to criticise the main intelligence findings; more diversity in the ‘group’ (especially among the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Downing Street inner-circle); and encouragement of the presentation of a minimum of three interpretations and a minimum of three arguments for and against each interpretation.
- US-UK ‘group think’ also appears to be shaping the wider contemporary security threat (the alleged nexus between international terrorism, WMD proliferation and failing states) and the US-led policy response. This could be resulting in errors of judgement, particularly in the ‘war on terror’, that may compound the policy mistakes in Iraq.
- Recommendations:
 - Acknowledge past mistakes
 - Learn the right lessons
 - Review the role of intelligence
 - Bring the spooks out of the shadows
 - Re-examine the doctrine of pre-emption
 - Return UN inspectors to Iraq
 - Create a permanent international cadre of inspectors
 - Support multilateral and international law-based solutions to WMD proliferation
 - Think about WMD closer to home

Introduction

The justification for the US-led military intervention in Iraq has once again been brought into the media spotlight with the publication of the reports of the Butler Inquiry (July 14) and US Senate Intelligence Committee (9 July). This paper mainly focuses on the Butler report, which examines the collection of intelligence on Iraq by British agencies and the subsequent use of that information by the British government. In drawing conclusions and recommendations for future British policy towards combating and preventing the proliferation of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ (WMD), the paper also draws on the lessons, where appropriate, from the three earlier British inquiries on Iraq and the recent US Senate Intelligence Committee report.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins with a brief overview of the rationale and remit of the Butler inquiry, and the findings of the previous inquiries. It then summarises the key findings from the Butler inquiry. Particular attention is given to the problem of ‘group think’ identified by both Butler and the US Senate inquiries, the main symptoms of which are described (drawing on established research on group psychology). The paper then raises the possibility that ‘group think’ may apply more widely than just in relation to intelligence assessments of Iraqi WMD. Specifically, it argues that similar tendencies appear to be at work in the formulation of the current Western threat orthodoxy: the alleged nexus between international terrorism, WMD proliferation and failing states. Finally, the paper makes some policy recommendations, both in the light of the lessons from the Butler Report and in relation to addressing the broader problem of ‘group think’ in analysing security threats.

Why the need for the Butler Inquiry?

The Butler Inquiry is an investigation, conducted in secret by a committee of five people,^[2] into the use of intelligence before the Iraq war. Lord Butler is the Committee Chairman. It is the fourth

British inquiry to look at the lead up to war in Iraq, but is the first to work on the assumption that the intelligence was wrong. Indeed, it has been described as the biggest failure of British intelligence since Argentina's invasion of the Falklands in 1982. However, the main pressure to hold another inquiry came from the United States, where comments from David Kay, the former US chief weapons inspector, that "we were almost all wrong" made it politically impossible for George Bush to resist calls for an inquiry. Tony Blair, pressured by the opposition parties, found it necessary politically to follow suit.

The Butler Inquiry remit states that it is to examine "discrepancies" between the intelligence evaluated by the government and the findings of the weapons inspectors in the US-led Iraq Survey Group.

What did the previous inquiries discover?

The Commons foreign affairs select committee[3] and intelligence and security committee[4] both concluded it was too soon to tell whether or not the intelligence was false as there was still the chance that WMD would be discovered. Lord Hutton also bypassed the failure to find Saddam Hussein's alleged chemical and biological weapons stocks. The focus of his inquiry was to "urgently ... conduct an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr Kelly" and decided that anything other than the government's row with the BBC over claims Downing Street had deliberately put false material in the dossier (the row that drew in Dr Kelly) was beyond his terms of reference. The issue of the reliability or otherwise of the intelligence contained in the dossier was "separate", he wrote. See BASIC Media Briefing, 'The Hutton Inquiry Report: Missing the Bigger Picture', 29 January 2004.

The report by the US Senate Intelligence Committee provides only a partial picture of intelligence failures, since a full assessment of the White House role has been postponed until after the presidential election. In short, the US Senate report attributes blame on the intelligence community, which it says suffered from "group failure". The report also held that:

- The US did not have enough spies on the ground in Iraq, and that intelligence from defectors was faulty (In contrast, Butler concluded in the case of British intelligence, that "we do not believe that over-reliance on dissident and émigré sources was a major cause of subsequent weaknesses in the human intelligence relied on by the UK", para 438);
- The US government used bad information to bolster the case for war;
- The CIA suffered from "a broken corporate culture and poor management"; and
- Ex-CIA director, George Tenet skewed advice to top policy makers.

Most of the section dealing with questionable information from British intelligence on alleged Iraqi attempts to acquire uranium in Africa was deemed classified information and blacked out.

In comparing the US Senate report with the Butler report, US intelligence expert, Anthony Cordesman concluded:

In short, any comparison of the two reports shows that the US report was almost designed to focus all of the blame on the intelligence community in ways that ignored the role of policymakers under both the Clinton and Bush Administrations, and that the senate report is virtually worthless in providing a useful basis for solving the problems in intelligence, and understanding the inherent limits of intelligence. By comparison, [with the Butler report] the Senate report is both incompetent and unprofessional.[5]

What are the key findings of the Butler Inquiry?

At just under 200 pages, the Butler report is a relatively concise attempt to document the intelligence available to the British Government and the use they made of it (in contrast to Hutton's monumental 740-page report on the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr Kelly). In short, the main findings are as follows:

- The judgements in the dossier went "to (although not beyond) the outer limits of the intelligence available" (para 331), but there was "no deliberate attempt on the part of the government to

mislead”.

- No evidence of “culpable negligence” or “deliberate distortion” (para 449), but instead alludes to “group think - the development of a prevailing wisdom” among the intelligence services and the government (a similar conclusion to the US Senate intelligence committee report, which spoke of “collective group think” among the US intelligence community). But, the report goes on to catalogue a large number of failings:

- The intelligence services were placed under such “strain” that their neutrality was compromised (para 327).

- The government dossier setting out the case for war had the “serious weakness” (para 332) of omitting many crucial caveats about the “thin”, “unclear” and “uncertain” nature and limitations of much of the intelligence, and using language that suggested it was “fuller and firmer” than was the case - a point reinforced by a handy appendix to the report that publishes excerpts of the original joint intelligence committee (JIC) papers alongside excerpts of the dossier.

- In particular, the claim that biological or chemical weapons could be deployed within 45 minutes should not have been included in the government dossier, and led to suspicions that it had been inserted “because of its eye-catching character” (para 511).

- In the run up war, the JIC made no new assessment of Iraq’s claims it had disarmed, even though “the generally negative results of [UN weapons inspectors] became increasingly apparent” (paras 362-364).

- Britain had only five “main sources” on Iraq and the quality of much of the information from three of those sources has since been challenged or withdrawn as “unreliable”.

- In future, the uses and limitations of intelligence must be carefully explained, and “clearer and more effective dividing lines between assessment and advocacy” established (para 342).

One of the most alarming omissions in the Butler report is the lack of any consideration of the inter-actions between UK and US intelligence agencies, and more importantly, on the role of the ‘UK-US Special Relationship’ in the decision to go to war in Iraq. Butler simply says that his remit “inevitably has led us to areas of UK/US cooperation” but fails to go further on the grounds that the actions of the US intelligence are “being covered by the Presidential Commission” (para 10; also see para 428).

One of Lord Butler’s less insightful conclusions was that there is no evidence that the September 2002 dossier was produced to make an explicit case for war (paras 319). However, the inquiry fails to address the question as to whether the dossier may have been produced to make an implicit case for war, since Butler refuses completely to take in to account the political and public context at the time. Indeed, Britain and the United States had been preparing for war for several months when the September dossier was published. Some ministers certainly seemed to believe that the dossier was designed to strengthen a case for war. As the Defence Minister says in evidence:

“... if we were going to be able to make out a case for war against Iraq, we were going to have to publish the material ... otherwise we would have just faced day in and day out a constant complaint that we had no basis, that we had no proper reason”. (Butler para. 316)

And it should be beyond doubt that the Prime Minister’s office aspired to make the case against Saddam Hussein as strong as possible. Lord Hutton writes in his earlier report:

“Mr Alastair Campbell made it clear to Mr Scarlett on behalf of the Prime Minister that 10 Downing Street wanted the dossier to be worded to make as strong a case as possible in relation to the threat posed by Saddam Hussein’s WMD, and 10 Downing Street made written suggestions to Mr Scarlett as to changes in the wording of the draft dossier which would strengthen it.” (Hutton para. 467.1.v.)

But a case for what? Iraq had disclosed a large amount of information about its dismantled weapons programme, but this only received a cursory examination by the British intelligence community. What is more plausible: that No. 10 was making a case for renewed inspections or a case for war? In any case, the government’s strategy worked. When the dossier was released to

the public, it did simply reinforce the government's case for war, and the UK government was quick to capitalise on the new bellicose climate. The Prime Minister, for example, while carefully avoiding the word 'war', told the media that "either the regime starts to function in an entirely different way ... or the regime has to change ... that's the choice, very simply".[6]

So, how do you enforce a regime change? By continuing the economic sanctions that Iraq had been subjected to since 1991, by renewed inspections, or by military force? To say, as Butler does, that the dossier did not make a case for anything is to revise history. And to suggest that it was merely a call for renewed inspections is simply naïve. In the Parliamentary debate on 24 September 2002 the Prime Minister reassured:

"Our case is simply this: not that we take military action come what may, but that the case for ensuring Iraqi disarmament, as the UN itself has stipulated, is overwhelming".[7]

During the rest of the evening, the House of Commons discussed the possibility of war. Clearly, most MPs saw the key issue in terms of whether Iraq remained a serious and current threat that had to be dealt with by military means. Sadly, the Butler inquiry (like the Senate Intelligence Committee report) fails to see the importance of this political context, whereby after mid-2002 the JIC and British intelligence were put under immense indirect pressure to provide intelligence to please.

The report does, however, point at very serious weaknesses in the material that underpinned the government's case for war. It turns out that two-thirds of all material that constituted the British intelligence on Iraq came from two sources (para 355). The remaining one-third came from "a handful" of sources. Of these two, one (perhaps one-third of the material) source was after the war deemed unreliable and the information flawed. The other source (perhaps another one-third of the material) reported on hearsay picked up in Saddam Hussein's palaces. Does this mean that two-thirds of all intelligence on Iraq was either flawed or hearsay? The inquiry fails to answer this question directly. Thus, we can only speculate. But this troubling thought reinforces the committee's conclusion that the intelligence community and JIC suffered from 'group think'.

Gathering and processing intelligence & 'group think' syndrome

The 'group think' theory of error defines a form of decision making characterised by uncritical acceptance of a prevailing point of view. Contradictory evidence is often discarded and the group's policies are rationalised collectively. The Butler inquiry "detected a tendency for assessments to be coloured by overreaction to previous errors. Past under-estimates had a more lasting impact on the assessment process than past over-estimates, when both should have been as deserving of attention". This meant, "a risk of over-cautious or worst case estimates, shorn of their caveats, becoming the 'prevailing wisdom'". (Butler, para 458)

The US Senate Intelligence Committee reports similar shortcomings in the US intelligence services: "The Intelligence Community (IC) suffered from a collective presumption that Iraq had an active and growing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program. This "group think" dynamic led Intelligence Community analysts, collectors and managers to both interpret ambiguous evidence as conclusively indicative of a WMD program as well as ignore or minimize evidence that Iraq did not have active and expanding weapons of mass destruction programs. This presumption was so strong that formalized IC mechanisms established to challenge assumptions and group think were not utilized". (US Senate, conclusion 3)

Both US and British intelligence assessments highlighted the vague nature of the intelligence. However, at no point did the intelligence agencies on either side of the Atlantic produce compelling and clear evidence that Iraq was actively pursuing a nuclear, chemical or biological weapons programme. Concerns were voiced that Saddam Hussein would resume his unconventional weapons programmes once UN sanctions were lifted and the fact that the Iraqi state still possessed a considerable amount of 'know how' was highlighted. While these assumptions may

seem reasonable, given the Iraqi regime's previous transgressions, the Butler report highlights how contrary evidence was downplayed or ignored in the September 2002 dossier. For example, Butler notes that some senior Iraqi officials were discussing the possibility of resuming clandestine nuclear research in the early 1990s but also that they refrained from doing so because they feared detection by the IAEA. If nothing else, this is a clear indication of the deterrence value of traditional multilateral verification mechanisms.

Many of the criticisms identified by Butler could probably have been written after the Falklands War or in assessments of Warsaw Pact conventional forces during the Cold War. (Butler, however, suggests that most of the intelligence community's conclusions on the Soviet Bloc's military equipment were vindicated after the dissolution of the Soviet empire (para 53)[8]). Certainly, the failure to deal with uncertainty, to examine alternative approaches and to share information with other agencies are all problems that have a long history in intelligence circles.

One theory about 'group think' suggests that it is based on another psychological phenomenon called 'risk shift': the tendency of a group to come to more radical solutions than the individual member would alone. The main premise is that the members of the group have a tendency to think alike before they join the group. But the most worrying aspect of 'risk shift' is that the position of the individual gradually slides towards the more extreme position of the group. It is when the conditions for 'risk shift' are especially prevailing, that the 'group think' syndrome comes into play.[9] Symptoms of 'risk shift' and 'group think' are as follows:

1 Personal pressure. The group has a low tolerance for dissenting opinions from the individual. A historical example is that counsels acting for accused witches in the Middle Ages were usually accused of witchcraft themselves. Within the contemporary British political system, for example, might this explain why more questions were not asked in Cabinet, why junior ministers did not request meetings to clarify evidence, and why more backbench MPs failed to speak out?

2 Self censorship. When members of the group find that they have little to gain from raising concerns about the groups finding, they tend not to 'rock the boat'. The number of dissenting voices over key intelligence issues in Iraq was certainly small. Lord Butler in his report does mention the dissent of Dr. Jones on key issues but then largely glosses over the failure to forward dissenting views to decision makers. (Butler, paras 566-578). Indeed, a feature of JIC assessments is that they contain single statements of position, with no minority reports or noted dissents (as is the practice in the US). Butler also found that key experts in the Defence Intelligence Staff were excluded from reviewing key evidence that "was of significance" in the drafting of the dossier (para 452).

3 Mind guards. Individuals tend to filter information before they submit it to the group. This happens irrespective of individual personal motives, be those self interest or the safeguarding of the group's morale or teachings. For example, Soviet collective farms often filtered their production results and 'sexed them up' before reporting up the chain of command. In determining British policy towards Iraq, the issue of 'political spin', 'sexing up' dossiers, and the role of political minders such as Alistair Campbell and Peter Mandelson, have been much debated. However, the extent to which it influenced political outcomes is unclear and controversial.

4 Illusion of invulnerability. There is a feeling inside the group that they are superior and never fail. This feeling may come from a string of overwhelming victories (such as prior to the German advance on Moscow in 1941) or a feeling that the group is at an extreme intellectual level ("in this group of geniuses, who can be wrong?"). After two electoral successes and with a divided opposition the invulnerability of the British Prime Minister has been discussed ad infinitum in political and media circles. Again, the extent to which such perceptions influenced government decision-making towards Iraq remains an open question.

5 Illusion of morality. This happens when the decisions of the group have a strong moral bearing and when the group uses terms of a propaganda nature ("we cannot lose, since it is the will of God that we win or we cannot be wrong, since we are fighting for freedom"). A constant highlighting of the group's 'just cause' makes it difficult to come to contradictory conclusions.[10] Again,

this symptom has great resonance in Iraq given that the case against Saddam Hussein was repeatedly dressed up in moral rhetoric on both sides of the Atlantic.

Jannis also identified a number of organisational factors that may cause the syndrome:

1 Cohesion. Groups where the interaction between group members shows signs of unity and corps d' esprit are especially vulnerable to 'group think'. This is also true for groups that penalise dissenting opinions. Examples of this may be found during the IT boom, when certain company directors were penalised for being 'too cautious', or the non-promotion of British officers who advocated a change of doctrinal thinking after high casualties in the beginning of the Boer war. This sense of social order can also be built up if the group holds an unwarranted respect for the other members of the group.

2 Isolation. A group with sporadic and limited contacts with the outside world is vulnerable to 'group think'. For example, the US decision to attack the Bay of Pigs was made by an inner group of policy makers that were unable to discuss their plans outside the group for security reasons. And, in Iraq, the fact that many allies went along with the US and UK threat assessments (mainly because most countries have little or no independent collection capability and limited national technical assets) reinforced a collective but isolated view of the problem.

3 Leadership. An authoritarian leader style, where responsibilities of the group, its subjects of discussion and agenda is severely limited, highly contributes to the development of 'group think'. Butler saves some of his most withering criticism for the style of government adopted by Tony Blair, especially in relation to the conduct of cabinet meetings. He reveals that in the 24 cabinet meetings in the year before military action in Iraq, instead of seeing relevant papers, ministers were usually only given oral summaries (para 609) and that "one inescapable consequence of this was to limit collective discussion and consideration by the Cabinet" (para 610).

A number of additional factors have subsequently been identified:

4 Decisional stress. Groups that need to make decisions within a short period of time are highly susceptible of 'group think'.^[11] The September 2002 dossier was produced in only three weeks, during which time the JIC were under some pressure from Downing Street to strengthen its conclusions.

5 A perceived need for unity. The individual members of a group that feel it is important to 'show a united front' or that 'it is important to stick together', because otherwise 'they' will get to 'us', tend not to bring forward information that leads to 'disagreement' within the group.^[12] In Iraq, many 'independent' analysts and journalists also displayed a united front with the UK and US governments in the run up to war. Given their reliance on government reporting and access to officials, many were inclined to regurgitate official announcements and evidence provided in dossiers with very little analysis and few health warnings.

6 Shared responsibility. The need of the individual to 'share the responsibility with the collective' increases with the importance of the decision. An analysis of US jurors in death penalty cases, for example, shows that the individual juror generally refrains from reporting a dissenting opinion.

According to psychologist Fredric Bohm, a specialist on the 'group think syndrome', there are a few easy methods to avoid it, namely:

- 1 The leadership should encourage all analysts to be critical evaluators of the intelligence;
- 2 The senior analyst or the leadership should not state a preferred result of the analysis up front;
- 3 All analysis teams should be further divided into subgroups, which utilises the 'devils advocate' technique to criticise the group's main findings.
- 4 Individual accountability - all individuals should be held accountable for their respective analysis.

In addition, the organisation should:

- 1 Make sure that key decision makers are recruited from a pool of people with different political views, social backgrounds and, primarily, education paradigms;
- 2 Avoid connecting rewards with social adaptability and social competence;

- 3 Avoid putting the analysis team under severe deadlines;
- 4 Force all teams to present a minimum of three interpretations and then a minimum of three arguments for and against each interpretation.

Butler endorses some of this analysis in recommending that, in future, “challenge should be an accepted and routine part of the [JIC] assessment process as well as an occasional formal exercise, built into the system” (para 605.f.). Another potential fix to the problem of ‘group think’ is to open up the analysis for third party input and/or review. Naturally, given the secret character of intelligence gathering, this is generally not a valid option. However, again, Butler leans towards such a solution: “Consideration should be given from time to time to occasional external peer review, particularly on technical issues (para 605.g.). The JIC and/or British Cabinet could have applied many of the other options listed above in seeking to validate WMD intelligence in Iraq.

Continuing ‘group think’: the nexus between international terrorism, WMD proliferation and failing states?

Current British and American security doctrines are based on the presupposition that there exists a linkage or ‘nexus’ between ‘failed’ or ‘failing’ states, ‘international terrorism’ and ‘weapons of mass destruction’. This paradigm may also be a result of ‘group think’.[13]

The US National Security Strategy released in September 2002 redefined the threat to US security as the nexus between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, and the possibility of access to such weapons through failed states or “rogue” regimes. The greatest danger was identified as the “crossroads of radicalism and technology,” the fear that terrorists aided by tyrants would acquire and use nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. Subsequent policy documents and speeches by the US and British governments have elaborated on this nexus; other parties to the transatlantic alliance have also begun to endorse this emerging world-view, although important transatlantic differences still exist.

While each of these issues - terrorism, WMD proliferation and failing states - are problematic in their own right, by conflating them into a new threat orthodoxy could be a major mistake. In so doing, important differences are ignored: differences between those whose terror is based on historic and possibly negotiable political struggles from those whose terror is consciously directed at the United States, its allies and Western values; differences in the magnitude of risk associated with weapons of mass destruction (only nuclear weapons should be classified as true ‘weapons of mass destruction’); and differences in the root causes and nature of state failure.

Indeed, all the available non-classified evidence suggests that most ‘states of concern’ are actually diminishing their active support for terrorism, perhaps partly in response to the threat of US military force. Only Sudan and Afghanistan’s former Taliban regime are known to have materially aided Al Qaeda. In terms of transferring WMD materials to non-state actors, the biggest risk lies in theft or diversion of the huge stockpiles in the existing nuclear states.

The nexus case is further clouded by the absence of agreed definitions of all three terms. The most obvious examples of ‘failed states’ are those governments that have no effective control over their people or territory, like the Somali and Liberian state. However, the notion could also be applied to states that exercise iron control over their subjects, like North Korea. One of the most informed recent US studies on the issue is from a bipartisan federal ‘Commission on Weak States and US National Security’, which issued a report in May 2004 recommending that the United States do more to “improve societies” that are being badly governed by “failed states”.[14] According to the Commission, “failed states” are “those that generally cannot provide security for their citizens, or their territory, and that are corrupt and illegitimate in the eyes of their citizens”.

As regards ‘terrorism’, the word has been used in so many contexts past 9-11 that it is fast losing all meaningful credence. Many anti-government activities are now brandished as ‘acts of terrorism’, while many repressive or illiberal policy responses are dressed up as counter-terrorism. Arguably one of the most blatant misuses of the term would be the Israeli government labelling

the wilful destruction of Palestinian roads, lands, houses and airports as 'dismantling the terrorist infrastructure'. The repression of the Chechen nation by the Russian Federation is also justified as a 'fight against terrorism'. The term, which has a strong negative meaning, is increasingly being used in order to maximise popular support rather than to describe realities on the ground.

Similar problems abound with the term 'weapons of mass destruction'. The Butler report points out at the outset (paras 13-17) that "there are problems" with the term, and with other shorthand terms, such as 'chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear' (CBRN) weapons. We agree with Butler, and have said so in numerous BASIC briefings in the past, when he says that the term 'WMD' is "used so variously as to confuse rather than enlighten readers" (para 14).

In short, the new nexus is based on loose terminology, which is often meaningless outside of a proper context. Such terms and phrases sound good and play well with the tabloid press, however. And they help maximise public support for measures that otherwise may not have been approved. But the terms do not contribute to understanding of the complexity of the problems, and often serve to hide important differences.

Second, very few, if any, hard cases have been presented in the public domain that support this nexus. The link between Saddam Hussein's regime and Al Qaeda remains tenuous at best. The Butler report agrees with the US Senate report in that it finds no meaningful cooperation between Iraq and Al Qaeda (Butler, paras 481-484). The link between states like Iran and North Korea and the proliferation of 'weapons of mass destruction' to non-state actors is also tenuous. North Korea has been known to export missile technology but to include delivery systems into the term 'WMD' would be to further confuse the debate. And while North Korea could be regarded as a failed state, it is hard to argue the same with regard to Iran.

Moreover, most failed states are to be found on the African continent, and the linkages between such states and 'weapons of mass destruction' is again, rather tenuous.

The linkages between non-state actors and 'weapons of mass destruction' are also unconvincing and limited. Though there have been cases of chemical and biological weapons being used by terrorist groups, the impact of these attacks (cf. the Tokyo subway attack and the US anthrax attacks) have been comparably small compared to large scale conventional attacks (cf. the World Trade Centre and the Madrid bombings). The threat of a terrorist group armed with weapons of mass destruction should neither be over exaggerated nor underestimated. True, a threat exists, but is it so large and imminent that it warrants the current interventionist US and UK policies towards the Middle East? Isn't the greatest threat to be found in the vast nuclear stockpiles of the former Soviet Union (and hence the key policy response should be an acceleration of cooperative threat reduction programmes)?

In summary, there is little agreement on either side of the Atlantic as to what constitutes a failing state, or how to tackle the root causes of terrorism, or the extent to which these issues combine to drive WMD proliferation. Indeed, the evidence suggests that Western threat assessments overestimate the extent of such a nexus, that the terminology ('weapons of mass destruction', 'terrorism' and 'failed states') is misleading, mendaciously conflating weapons, political violence and state weaknesses of profoundly different significance, and that it is setting a framework in which wrong policy choices are being made (as in Iraq). Most pertinent of these misguided approaches is the fixation on military instruments, as reflected in a sharp increase in US military expenditure since 2001, which other countries in the 'war on terror' are being encouraged to match.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite being couched in the diplomatic language of the mandarin, the Butler Report is a critical and damaging analysis of British intelligence and governance failures in Iraq. It clearly shows that the intelligence evidence was weaker than presented by the Prime Minister. It also provides a welcome insight into the broad nature of counter-proliferation activities in the UK, and how intelligence fits into those activities. However, it is far too general, almost deliberately gracious,

about the problems and limits to the British intelligence collection and analysis effort, and the problems in its coverage of given countries. The report also paints a rosy picture of the successes in other areas of British intelligence gathering, despite the sense that the same or similar failings may be affecting our intelligence work in these other areas.

Butler also contains similar failings to the US Senate report in that it fails to address questions over whether British intelligence explicitly looked at UNMOVIC's work or whether giving inspections more time was a feasible option. (It does note a failure in this regard in para 472). Butler also fails to consider the intelligence evidence, and the demand for that intelligence, against the level of preparation for war at any given time. And as stated earlier, he fails to address the serious allegations that Britain may have gone to war primarily to defend the special relationship with the United States.

Military Intervention in Iraq was undertaken under a false premise

The evidence is now overwhelming that Iraq did not have banned weapons at the time of the invasion. The brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime was not an adequate justification for war, and the US and British authorities did not seriously focus on it until long after the war began and the false justifications began to fall apart. Official statements made immediately before the war suggesting a far more advanced and extensive programme were wrong.

It is also clear that the Bush administration and Blair government took ambiguous and weak intelligence reports and transformed them into a clear and strong message to the American and British publics: we need to go to war in order to force a regime change in Iraq before the current regime acquires weapons of mass destruction that it can use against us or transfer to international terrorist groups.

While the Butler report exonerates the British government from "deliberate distortion or culpable negligence" it fails to address the possibility of non-culpable negligence by Downing Street, when it strengthened the language of the JIC assessments and presented it to the public in the form of the September 2002 dossier. Non-culpable negligence cannot be punished through a judicial process, but it is still in the public interest to know whether or not capable and professional public servants and ministers govern the country.

We Were Not All Wrong

President Bush, Prime Minister Blair, David Kay and others claim that everyone - including the United Nations - got it wrong. The UN inspectors never said, however, that Iraq had nuclear, biological or chemical weapons-only that Iraq might have some components or materials for such weapons. As Hans Blix told the Security Council one month before the war, "One must not jump to the conclusion that they exist". The inspections were needed to clarify the situation.

This is a key point. The Bush administration, Blair government and many experts ignored the new intelligence coming in from UNMOVIC during the three months the inspection team was allowed to operate. The Butler report notes the failure of the British government to "re-evaluate" its intelligence estimates in light of the inspectors' findings in 2003. The inspectors reported back that there was no evidence of the large-scale, on-going production programmes the US and UK claimed. The inspectors said they would have needed only a few more months to give definitive answers.

Millions of people around the world, the inspection teams in Iraq, many governments (not least those in France and Germany), and a number of respected think-tanks and politicians were urging caution or offering alternatives to war. In the United States, for example, in August 2002, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published a study proposing an enhanced system of robust weapons inspections to guarantee Iraqi disarmament. In October 2002, another Washington-based think-tank, the Fourth Freedom Forum, outlined a series of specific policy

steps-including more vigorous external border monitoring and tighter controls on Iraqi oil exports-for containing and deterring Iraqi military capabilities. And in February 2003 US and UK religious leaders published *An Alternative to War for Defeating Saddam Hussein* that urged the indictment of Saddam Hussein on war crimes charges and UN enforcement of Iraq's disarmament. BASIC also urged caution and published a range of alternative opinions and discussion papers on Iraq with partner organisations (<http://www.iraqconflict.org/>).

We now know that containment and inspections were effective: that Saddam's grip on power was diminishing and not growing stronger.

President Bush and Tony Blair asserted that failure to act in Iraq was not an option, implying that military action was the only means of countering Saddam Hussein. In fact many alternative means were available in Iraq, and are available generally, for addressing terrorism, weapons proliferation, and other threats to US, UK and international security.

Where do we go from here?

Containment and deterrence as a policy worked to some extent during the Cold War and in Iraq. But we need to move beyond such largely outdated concepts to focus on new approaches based on international cooperation and early intervention to prevent conflicts before they escalate. International cooperation is also needed to improve the intelligence base, strengthen law enforcement capabilities, restrict terrorist access to funds and weapons, and reduce the root causes driving people to radical violence.

BASIC came to many of the same conclusions as the Butler Committee and the US Senate Intelligence Committee months ago without classified access - see our January 2004 report, *Unravelling the Known Unknowns: Why no Weapons of Mass Destruction have been found in Iraq*, <http://www.basicint.org/pubs/Research/2004WMD.htm>. In particular, our main conclusion was "that the failure to find banned weapons in Iraq suggests very strongly that the UN weapons inspectors succeeded in their mandate". Butler agrees:

"We note that much of what was reliably known about Iraq's unconventional weapons programmes in the mid- and late-1990s was obtained through the reports of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) and of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). These international agencies now appear to have been more effective than was realised at the time in dismantling and inhibiting Iraq's prohibited weapons programmes" (para 584)

The Butler report also examines progress now underway to improve analysis and makes a number of useful and concrete recommendations to make further improvements to the intelligence gathering, assessment and validation process (paras 585, 587, 589, 600, 601, 604, 605 and 611). We seek to complement these recommendations in the closing section of this paper. In the January report we presented a number of recommendations that remain as valid as ever. These are reproduced below (slightly abridged) together with some additional recommendations in the light of the Butler and US Senate reports:

- Acknowledge past mistakes

Tony Blair and George Bush must acknowledge that they were wrong about Iraq's WMD and show that they are taking sweeping action to rectify the concerns that led to this miscalculation. There must also be sufficient political space for political leaders to acknowledge their mistakes. In both the US and UK, the continuing search for hidden agendas and the lack of trust afforded to politicians are among the most corrupting aspects of politics.

- Learn the right lessons

Despite continuing instability in Iraq and Afghanistan, both interventions are being lauded by US and British officials as political and military successes. While the hard line stance is said to be improving the security situation in other parts of the world, such claims are wildly overstated and mean that important lessons are lost. For example, Libya return to the international community is welcome but lies in the patient diplomatic initiative set in motion long before the recent pursuit of Saddam. The invasion of Iraq appears to have exacerbated the terrorist threat, reversed peace

and democracy in parts of the Middle East and undermined the transatlantic alliance, the UN and international law.

- Review the role of intelligence

The demands on intelligence gathering and assessment are enormous and the consequences of getting it wrong can be dire. One issue that undoubtedly affected intelligence assessments in Iraq was the prior failure of US and British intelligence to spot Al Qaeda's strategic ambitions, particularly the attack on 9/11. As Butler now confirms, British intelligence agencies tended to "worst case" thinking, especially after political pressure was brought to bear. The failure to find any banned weapons makes it more difficult to trust intelligence reports about North Korean, Iranian or other 'rogue state' threats.

Threats to our security - such as those from NBC proliferation and catastrophic forms of terrorism - are now much more diffuse and debatable. Since most of these threats are developed in secret, the case for maintaining secret specific intelligence is strong. This is not only to provide early warning, but to facilitate diplomatic and other policy responses short of military action. But it is vital to base future non-proliferation and counter-proliferation strategies on carefully collected and analysed open evidence rather than on prejudice or political expediency.

While there will always be a requirement to turn 'raw' intelligence data into a document or information for public consumption, all intelligence assessments are doctored to some extent for public consumption. It is also self-evident that all governments have a tendency to edit and shape raw intelligence data to present the case in the best possible light. In the case of Iraq, it is clear that the requirement to persuade took precedence over the requirement to be objective. In future, therefore, public information that draws on intelligence data should have more health warnings and clearly set out the context for and motives behind publication.

- Bring the spooks out of the shadows

In Britain at least, the intelligence agencies need greater visibility and accountability. If the existing Intelligence and Security Committee is not up to this task, then a new small oversight committee should be established to vet intelligence gathering and assessment procedures and be responsible for publication of unclassified intelligence reports and related materials. New ways of sharing the raw intelligence data with a broader cross-section of MPs should also be explored.

- Re-examine the doctrine of pre-emption

Over reliance on intelligence makes the doctrine of pre-emption a flawed and dangerous instrument of foreign policy. Greater caution has to be exercised in thinking about pre-emptive warfare and its consequences. Moreover, if pre-emption became widely acceptable, it could encourage other countries that fear an assault to attack their rivals first, pre-empting the pre-emptor and escalating a conflict that might have been resolved without force. Or a nation under a sudden attack might choose to deploy CBW or nuclear weapons it otherwise might not use. When much of the world is working toward common understandings about the legal use of force, the very act of one country pre-emptively attacking another carries troubling echoes of vigilante justice.

- Return UN Inspectors to Iraq

International inspections and monitoring actually worked effectively in Iraq. The return of the UN inspectors would confer some much needed legitimacy to the post-conflict search for weapons, and also help to re-engage the wider international community in the reconstruction effort. UNMOVIC should also be given the task of monitoring in Iraq on an ongoing basis once the 'coalition' military forces have left.

- Create a permanent international cadre of inspectors

The British and US governments should also support the establishment of a broader mandate within UNMOVIC, as suggested by Hans Blix. Over the years, UNMOVIC has acquired much experience in the verification and inspection of biological weapons and missiles as well as chemical weapons, but only in Iraq. Its trained scientific cadres could be mobilized to provide the Security Council and other concerned actors with a capability for ad hoc inspections and monitoring elsewhere.

- Support multilateral and international law-based solutions to WMD proliferation

Non-proliferation and arms control remain essential elements in the fight against further WMD proliferation. International arms control regimes must, however, be reinforced and adapted to current developments, both technological and political. We have reached a pivotal moment in inter-state relations with a real opportunity to shape a new world order based on the rule of law. The US and UK should be working to write those rules and get them implemented. Direct action will sometimes be necessary, including military action in extreme circumstances, to stop the rules being broken. But such action should only be undertaken within the rules of international law, and preferably with Security Council authorisation.

- Think about WMD closer to home

WMD threat reduction should begin at home. It is not just a 'rogue' state problem. Existing nuclear-armed states (including the US and UK) should reaffirm their intention to implement the 13 disarmament steps agreed to in 2000 under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The US Senate's decision in May 2003 to at least partially rescind a ten-year ban on funding research and development of new 'low-yield' nuclear weapons was unnecessary and destabilising. Efforts to expand threat reduction programmes, such as the G-8 Global Partnership Against Weapons of Mass Destruction, to new regions and countries, such as North Korea, the Middle East and South Asia, should be actively supported.

Endnotes

[1] The authors are grateful for the advice and comments on 'group think' from Fredric Bohm, an organisational psychologist based in Sweden. Responsibility for the paper's contents, of course, falls only on the shoulders of the authors.

[2] The Butler Committee consists of: Two retired civil servants who worked at the highest levels of the British government (Lord Butler and Sir John Chilcot); two MPs on the Commons intelligence and security committee (Ann Taylor and Michael Mates); and Field Marshal Lord Inge, chief of defence staff between 1994 and 1997. All five are privy counsellors, are treated to confidential briefings and meet in private due to the sensitive nature of their inquiries.

[3] House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, "The Decision to go to war in Iraq" (HC 813).

[4] Intelligence and Security Committee, "Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction-Intelligence and Assessments" (Cm 5972), September 2003.

[5] Personal email communication.

[6] Voice of America, 3 September 2004.

[7] Hansard, 24 September 2002, Column 5.

[8] For a different assessment, see Andrew Cockburn, *The Threat - Inside the Soviet Military Machine* (London: NEL Books 1985).

[9] 9. See Jannis, I.L., *Victims of Group Think* (Boston: Houghton-Misslim 1972); *Group Think* (2nd ed.) (Boston: Houghton-Misslim 1982); *Crucial decisions. Leadership in Policy Making and Crisis Management* (New York: Free Press 1989). Comp Longley J., & Pruitt, D.G., "Group think - a critique of Jannis theory", *Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, Newbury Park, Sage, 1980.

[10] See McGraw K.M. & Bloomfield, J., "Social influence on group moral decisions: the interactive effects of moral reasoning and sex role orientation", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, No.53, 1987.

[11] Calaway et al "Effects of dominance on group decision making toward a stress reduction explanation of group think", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, No.49, 1985.

[12] Bohm, F., *In-group reactions to group pressure* (Stockholm 2000).

[13] The alleged nexus between international terrorism, WMD proliferation and failing states, is the subject of a more detailed study by Ian Davis, which will be published shortly.

[14] Commission on Weak States and US National Security, *On the Brink: Weak States and US National Security*, Center for Global Development, May 2004.