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Marching in time: alliance politics, synchrony and the case for war in Iraq, 2002–2003

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This article considers how three countries—the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia—approached the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by examining how the leaders' decision-making interacted, the commonalities of their policy-making processes, and the approach to policy justification taken in terms of their domestic political environments. In particular, it examines the extent to which their claims as to why invasion was necessary went in synchrony. Having decided on war, all three national leaders sought to persuade their publics of the moral imperative for invasion and the immediacy of the threat that needed to be eradicated, and each made secret intelligence public in so doing. The selective use of intelligence allowed the politial leaders to shift the focus of the blame from policy-makers to intelligence accuracy when the immediate threat from weapons of mass destruction turned out to be illusory.

The period of the 2003 Iraq war was one of political triumph for the leaders of the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia, the three leading advocates of an invasion to depose Saddam Hussein. As US aircraft bombed the Iraqi Republican Guard, President George W. Bush told Australian Prime Minister John Howard: 'I think everybody has a nice little bounce in their step these days' (Woodward 2004: 406–7). A week later, with victory all but assured, the *Washington Post* ran an op-ed column terming the war, in a reference to the 1991 Gulf War, '"Cakewalk" revisited' (Adelman 2003). On 1

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May 2003, Bush was able to declare the end of major combat operations from the flight deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, in front of a banner proclaiming 'Mission Accomplished'. Critics of the war were on the political defensive as public support for a war that had rid the world of Saddam and his threatening weapons of mass destruction (WMD) reached its peak.

However, this period of political triumph proved to be as temporary as the military victory was illusory. Even at the height of the apparent success, the ease of the military triumph raised questions about the validity of the case for invasion. As the three leaders basked in the immediate glow of victory, there was already disquiet over the disjunction between the allegations of active Iraqi WMD programs and the speed of the allied victory. Not only had Saddam's regime not used them in any act of external aggression, it had not even attempted to use any to defend itself while it was being destroyed. Hence, before it was apparent that the military situation in Iraq was souring, there were already simmering controversies in all three countries about the veracity of governmental claims, the quality of the intelligence material on which they were said to be based, political leaders' public use of that material, and the nature of the policy process that wove the material into the fundamental justification for launching a pre-emptive war.

The 14 months before the March 2003 war had seen a stream of dramatic and alarming claims by all three governments about the scope of Iraq's WMD and the threat they constituted. From a series of official inquiries and reports, leaked documents, memoirs, and books it is now possible to relate the public record to the private deliberations and decisions, and to piece together a clearer picture of the subterranean history of policy-making with regard to Iraq during 2002–03. Thus far, however, little analytical attention has been given to the alliance of these three governments in terms of the initial US policy agenda toward Iraq, the coalescing of the British and Australian governments around that agenda, the selective use of intelligence material to support this, and the sources and use of a shared discourse to argue persuasively for the need for an invasion. The purpose of this article is to show how the three national leaders' decision-making interacted, how claims as to why invasion was necessary went in synchrony, and how intelligence-sharing between the three countries constituted an echo chamber in which each misperception of the threat from Saddam reinforced the others' conviction that war was necessary.

Alliance politics

US–UK–Australian cooperation over Iraq did not constitute an alliance of equals. The label most commonly used to describe the Bush administration before 11 September 2001 (9/11) was 'unilateralist', and there were always differences within it over how much attention it should pay to its allies. Indeed, at a Camp David meeting immediately after 9/11, when Secretary of State Colin

Powell said the emerging coalition would dissolve if Iraq were attacked, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's response was straightforward; any 'argument that the coalition wouldn't tolerate Iraq argues for a different coalition' (Woodward 2002: 88). The decision to oust Saddam was an American initiative, not a joint decision. Nevertheless, some form of alliance that translated into a multilateral military operation was important to the US to help counter the perception that this would be a solely American war. Whereas the US could easily forge a coalition to condemn many of Saddam's actions, securing military support for an invasion was much more difficult. Although the US was willing to 'go it alone' in accord with its post-Cold War unilateralism (Dumbrell 2006), the addition of several allies in a 'coalition of the willing' was important to Bush, in terms of both domestic and international opinion. British and Australian support was of fundamental importance to Bush's claims as to the legitimacy of the invasion. These were particularly important allies, both because of their Anglophone commonality and their status in the international community.

Moreover, both saw themselves as having a 'special relationship' with the US, a self-image in part defined by their historic willingness to deploy troops alongside US forces whenever necessary. When the US pressed Clement Attlee's government to commit ground troops to Korea following the North Korean invasion of the South in 1950, ambassador Oliver Franks told the Foreign Office that:

> underneath the thoughts and emotions engendered at times by difficulties and disagreements between us and them there is a steady and unquestioning assumption that we are the only dependable ally and partner. This derives from our position in the world over past decades, our partnership with them in two world wars and their judgment of the British character. The Americans in Korea will be in a tough spot for a long time. They look round for their partner (Yasamee and Hamilton 1991: 77).

Keen to create a favourable image that might persuade the US to enter into a regional defence pact (achieved with the 1951 ANZUS pact), Foreign Minister Percy Spender was quick to pledge Australian troops. While Harold Wilson resisted considerable pressure from Lyndon B. Johnson's administration to commit British troops to Vietnam at the cost of the 'special relationship', Australia's response to the US 'more flags' campaign was exceptional (Logevall 1999), with Prime Minister Harold Holt ('all the way with LBJ') commiting over 5,000 Australian ground forces by 1967, including conscripts—a deployment that divided Australia. In 1991, Australia contributed a naval task group to the war to evict Iraq fom Kuwait, while the UK contributed 43,000 troops, thereafter enforcing 'no fly' zones alongside the US.

Hence, a key feature of the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003 for both Britain and Australia was their predisposition to support the US. Both accepted the necessity of overthrowing Saddam, and simply adapted their public rhetoric to follow the US lead in making the case. The threat posed by Iraq had not

figured prominently in their pre-9/11 public rhetoric, but did so once it became clear, in the wake of Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, that the US was intent on regime change. The key policy decisions in Britain and Australia were over how best to accommodate themselves to the American position, and these decisions were not derailed by doubts within these governments, pronounced public divisions, or evidence that the US policy decision had preceded the intelligence-based case.

While accepting the US view of the terrorist threat and the Iraqi regime, 'Howard supported Bush for a slightly different combination of reasons from those which motivated Bush himself' (Sheridan 2006: 59). As Howard's own statement to parliament made clear, 'Australia's alliance with the United States has been and will remain an important element in the government's decision-making process on Iraq' (Barker 2003: 86). While he regarded being publicly close to the US as an electoral asset, it was international strategy as much as domestic politics that drove his decision. According to one of his main journalistic supporters, Howard sought to earn credit from the Americans for a relatively small but effective military commitment, and to reassure the Americans that they did not have to undertake a difficult task alone, so 'encouraging them to continue to shoulder the burden of security' (Barker 2003: 65). Howard's strategic aims included further building the closeness of the Australian–American intelligence and military relationships, gaining greater leverage in Washington, and increasing US involvement in Australia's region. He also thought that it increased Australia's leverage with other countries to be seen as being close to the US. Beyond all of these, Howard was viscerally committed to the Anglo–American alliance, and throughout his political career had been a conservative in foreign policy. He saw the alliance as having a strong moral basis: 'I do believe that common values that bind countries together are very important . . . Australia, the United States and United Kingdom, are three of a handful of countries that have been continuously democratic for the last 100 years. That is a fact that you can't ignore' (Garran 2004: 105).

In this war Australia enjoyed both the political luxuries and liabilities of being a junior ally. It did not have to take on the central responsibility for the conduct and outcome of the conflict, and nor did it have to make a major military commitment. While there were political benefits in proclaiming conformity with the country's two most traditionally important allies (Barker 2003: 86), the Howard government was also essentially captive to decisions made in Washington and London, which it was powerless to affect. It also relied on its two senior allies for most of its intelligence on the Middle East—97 per cent of Australia's pre-war intelligence on Iraq came from the US or UK (Parliamentary Joint Committee 2003: 46)—making its policy-making heavily dependent on the quality of information with which it was being supplied.

In Britain's case, the stakes were higher. A major North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member and European power, with historic links and more substantial interests throughout the Middle East, it had much more

invested diplomatically than Australia. It also had a tendency to believe that this position and the history of its 'special relationship' with Washington gave it greater scope to influence US policy, although ultimately its influence proved to be minimal. Central to Tony Blair's government's motivations was a wish that the US not be isolated. For all three countries, however, there were a number of issues to be addressed in coalescing around the US intention to invade. These included managing United Nations (UN) initiatives on WMD and preparing a favourable public opinion, in part by selectively making public secret intelligence.

The Bush administration and the Iraq dilemma

For a range of reasons, including the nature of their UN mandate, the politics of keeping a diverse international coalition together, and the fear that Iraq might dissolve into its constituent parts, coalition forces stopped short of marching on Baghdad during the 1991 Gulf War. Saddam's retention of power created a dilemma that divided political opinion in the US, and which was well-reflected in the tension at the heart of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) operation during the 1990s—the inspection regime designed to ensure Iraqi compliance with the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 687 and verify its destruction of its WMD. Once Iraq complied, UN sanctions could be lifted. However, as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright pointed out in 1997, the US and UK agendas involved retaining sanctions until Saddam was somehow removed from power and in this respect UNSCOM served as a means of maintaining and legitimising the sanctions (Phythian 2000: 57). Notwithstanding the human cost, the fact that Saddam remained in power, and periodic pressure from France and Russia to remove sanctions, the US and UK view at the time of the 2000 US presidential election was that containment was working—an assessment shared by Condoleezza Rice (Rice 2000).

However, the administration in which Rice was about to serve would be dominated by a different perspective on Iraq. Bush's one-time terrorism advisor, Richard Clarke, has claimed that the Bush administration entered office 'with Iraq on its agenda' (Clarke 2004: 264). Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill has revealed that Bush's first two National Security Council meetings focused on Iraq. According to O'Neill, in what seemed like a scripted exchange, Rice opened the meeting by saying the first item was how Iraq was de-stabilising the region, and that Iraq might be the key to reshaping the entire region. Bush told Rumsfeld and the military to examine the military options. Already, according to O'Neill, the focus was on the hows of ending Saddam's regime rather than the whys (Suskind 2004: 72–6).

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Clarke expected his government's focus to lie in protecting itself from further attack by pursuing al-Qaeda. Instead, Bush asked Clarke three times to find a link between Saddam and the 9/11

attacks, even though Clarke had explained that the intelligence community believed al-Qaeda to be behind the attacks (Clarke 2004: 32). At the crisis meetings in the days following 9/11 the option of attacking Iraq was canvassed, with Rumsfeld advocating it because of a shortage of targets in Afghanistan and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz arguing that it was 'doable'. Ultimately, the President decided to concentrate on al-Qaeda and its protectors in Afghanistan, but still ordered the Defense Department to examine the possibility of a military confrontation with Iraq (Kessler 2003). By November, with the operation against al-Qaeda and the Taliban well underway, the Bush administration's planning with regard to Iraq became much more concrete. On 21 November, Bush asked Rumsfeld to develop an operational war plan. After a series of meetings, General Tommy Franks presented the results of this planning to Rumsfeld and Bush on 7 February 2002. At that time intelligence, personnel, and planning resources began to be shifted from the war in Afghanistan to focus on Iraq.

Soon after 9/11, Blair visited Washington. As the British ambassador to the US, Sir Christopher Meyer, recalled, Bush made clear that he was determined to topple Saddam:

> rumours were already flying that Bush would use 9/11 as a pretext to attack Iraq. On the one hand, Blair came with a very strong message—don't get distracted; the priorities were al-Qaeda, Afghanistan, the Taliban. Bush said, 'I agree with you, Tony. We must deal with this first. But when we have dealt with Afghanistan, we must come back to Iraq' (Burrough *et al.* 2004: 110).

Immediately after 9/11, after spending three hours talking with Bush, Howard pledged Australian support under the ANZUS pact, the first time it had been invoked so directly.

Beyond the immediate emotion, the 9/11 attacks had an important impact on Australian politics. They heightened the sense of a dangerous and threatening world, with alien forces at work, which fed directly into both Howard's worldview and his electoral strategy. Early in 2001, Howard's electoral position had seemed hopeless, with pundits dismissing his chances of winning another term in the election due later that year. However, in one of the most remarkable turnarounds in Australian history, Howard won the November 2001 election by a substantially increased margin. Howard's dramatic shift of emphasis away from socioeconomic issues towards security concerns, utilising firstly the issue of asylum-seekers landing on Australia's northwest coast and then the threat of terrorism, was central to this political turnaround (Solomon 2002; Marr and Wilkinson 2003).

Even though Iraq was not linked in any way with 9/11, those events made it possible to begin the process of generating the political momentum to wage war against Iraq. On 29 January 2002, Bush placed Iraq at the centre of the global political agenda in his State of the Union address, identifying an 'axis of evil'

involving Iraq, Iran and North Korea. 'What we have found in Afghanistan', he explained:

> confirms that, far from ending there, our war against terror is only beginning ... I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons ... History has called America and our allies to action (Bush 2002a).

Developing the agendas: the axis of evil and the discourse of war

Establishing the common cause

This statement began the prolonged countdown to what was perhaps the most telegraphed war in modern history, with subsequent statements seeking to cement in the public imagination the link between Iraq and terrorism. On 1 June 2002, at West Point Military Academy, Bush asserted that, 'containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies' (Bush 2002b). In effect, this speech asserted the US's right, post-9/11, to launch pre-emptive war, an assertion formally elaborated in the September 2002 National Security Strategy. When Senator Mark Dayton asked Rumsfeld: 'What is compelling us now to make a precipitous decision and take precipitous action?', Rumsfeld replied 'What's different? What's different is 3,000 people were killed' (Scheer *et al.* 2003: 14). This logic was also applied in the UK. When former British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook told a Cabinet meeting that, 'for me the most difficult question was "Why now?" What has happened in the past year to make Saddam more of an imminent danger than he has been any year in the past decade?', Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon told him that the 'key issue' was 9/11. The problem with this, Cook realised, 'is that no one has a shred of evidence that Saddam was involved' (Cook 2003: 212–13).

Nevertheless, the UK and Australian governments publicly accepted the US portrayal of the Iraq problem, privately recognising the Bush administration's determination to remove Saddam. Hence, while the French Foreign Ministry described Bush's 2002 State of the Union speech as simplistic, Howard thought it 'first class' (Garran 2004: 122). In a major foreign policy speech at the George Bush Senior Presidential Library on 7 April, Blair offered a more unequivocal commitment to the US:

> ... we don't shirk our responsibility ... when America is fighting for those values, then, however tough, we fight with her. No grandstanding, no offering implausible but impractical advice from the comfort of the touchline, no wishing away the hard not the easy choices ... but working together, side by side (Blair 2002a).

Public rhetoric, private planning

The proclamation of the Bush approach—a combination of moral absolutism, celebration of American power, and refusal to be bound by international conventions—alarmed many. In public, however, Australian and British ministers played down the significance of the new doctrine, asserting that in an age of terrorism it was merely common sense (Garran 2004: 34–5). Even though the US National Security Strategy's emphasis on pre-emption focused attention on the possibility of war with Iraq, leaders in all three countries denied any commitments had been entered into. Although war planning was under-way, on 7 February 2002, Powell told a Senate Committee that the President, 'has no plan on his desk right now to begin a war with any nation' (Woodward 2004: 103). Bush used the identical formulation in April ('I have no war plans on my desk'), and repeated the same phrase again at two press conferences in May (Woodward 2004: 129). A similar pattern was repeated in Britain and Australia. When Howard met with Blair in London in April, following the Queen Mother's funeral, he said that, 'it's hypothetical at this stage to talk about action against Iraq. There has been no proposal and I know of no proposal for imminent action' (Garran 2004: 125). Similarly, in July Howard maintained that no final decision had been made (Garran 2004: 141).

These public denials were in direct contrast to the increasing behind-the-scenes activity. On 19 March, reporter Bob Woodward encountered an ebullient Rumsfeld bragging about 'the war you don't see' (Prados 2004: 10). General Franks told a meeting of military commanders on 23 March, 'this is fucking serious. You know, if you guys think this is not going to happen, you're wrong' (Woodward 2004: 115). The same month, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet assured Kurdish leaders that the US was going to attack Saddam (Woodward 2004: 116), while the President reportedly told Rice, during a meeting with several senators: 'Fuck Saddam. We're taking him out' (Elliott and Carney 2003: 18). When State Department official Richard Haas broached the issue with Rice in the first week of July, she told him to save his breath, the decision had already been made (Lemann 2003: 36).

For the Blair government, effective confirmation (were it still needed) of the Bush administration's determination came in late July, and was recorded in a minute, subsequently leaked, of a Downing Street meeting of senior foreign policy, military and intelligence figures. Head of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, gave a report on recent talks in Washington, where there 'was a perceptible shift in attitude. Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy' (www.downingstreetmemo.com). Thus, by spring 2002 there existed a clear disjuncture between the public presentation of the issue and the intentions of the top leadership of the three countries.

Concerted attempts on the part of the three national leaders to build up a public consensus in support of the coming war began in the northern summer of 2002. With opposition to war growing in elite circles, the Bush administration decided to make the public case for war strongly and explicitly. On 26 August, Vice President Dick Cheney, in a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, declared: 'Many of us are convinced that Saddam will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon . . . There is no doubt he is amassing them [WMD] to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us' (Cheney 2002). Cheney's rhetoric was aimed not only at mobilising public sentiment against Saddam, but also against those in the administration who wanted to work via the UN rather than unilaterally. The administration also forced a vote in Congress on authorising war in advance of the November 2002 congressional elections. Democrats were put in the difficult position of voting for the administration or risking being labelled 'soft on terrorism' during their re-election campaigns. This tactic proved successful in securing enough Democratic votes to pass the resolution.

Blair's presentation of the Iraqi threat also shifted to follow this lead, for the first time implying a direct threat to the UK. At a 3 September press conference, Blair explained that: 'Iraq poses a real and unique threat to the security of the region and the rest of the world'. On 10 September, after meeting Bush at Camp David, Blair told the Trade Union Conference:

> So let me tell you why I say Saddam Hussein is a threat that has to be dealt with. He has twice before started wars of aggression. Over one million people died in them. When the weapons inspectors [UNSCOM] were evicted from Iraq in 1998 there were still enough chemical and biological weapons remaining to devastate the entire Gulf region (Blair 2002b).

The high-water mark of Blair's attempts to convince the British public of the case for war in this phase came with the publication that month of a dossier based on secret intelligence that outlined the threat posed by Saddam along the lines recommended by the Cabinet Office earlier in the summer. Entitled *Iraq's weapons of mass destruction,* the UK dossier made a number of claims, including: 1) Iraq's ability to assemble nuclear weapons within months if fissile material was obtained from abroad (the dossier also mentioned that Iraq had tried to get material from Africa); 2) its capability to manufacture WMD and to deliver them by various means and over various distances (including UK bases in Cyprus, Israel, and NATO members Greece and Turkey); and 3) to do so quickly (within 45 minutes of the order being given).

In Australia, government leaders continuously denounced Iraq's WMD program, sometimes talking of the inevitability of a coming war. Typically, in June 2002 Foreign Minister Alexander Downer stated that:

> the world cannot and must not stand idly by while Iraq develops and manufactures weapons of mass destruction . . . Time is running out. The real danger is that Hussein is progressing his comprehensive program to develop

and deploy weapons of mass destruction. It is incumbent on the interna-
tional community to do all within its powers to bring him to heel (Garran
2004: 130).

The following month, when Downer returned from a visit to Washington, he
raised the political temperature by accusing the Labor opposition of appease-
ment (Garran 2004: 138–9). The Australian Liberal government also used
Blair's support for the US as a stick with which to beat the Australian Labor
opposition. The publication of Blair's September 2002 dossier also helped the
Howard government, bringing a rash of favourable publicity.

The Blair government's dossier was quickly followed by its US equivalent,
based on a classified National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). The NIE—unusually,
requested by Congress rather than the executive—asserted that Saddam had
chemical and biological weapons and could manufacture a nuclear bomb within
one year of acquiring fissile material. It also contained dissents by the
Departments of State and Energy, and the Air Force that undercut the major
findings of the document. Shortly after this NIE was given to members of
Congress, a declassified version was made public. This retained the most
disturbing assertions concerning Iraq's WMD, but was shorn of the dissenting
opinions contained in the original, thereby conveying a greater certainty about
Saddam's threat than the original justified. The intelligence reported in the NIE
was used by Bush in his 7 October speech in Cincinnati designed to convince
members of Congress to vote for a resolution allowing him to initiate war with
Iraq.

Australian concern about terrorism gained greater urgency following the Bali
nightclub bombing on 12 October. Two hundred and two people were killed in
this attack on Australians' most popular tourist destination, 88 of them
Australian, generating criticisms that Australia should not involve itself in a
conflict half way round the world, but also heightening fears of terrorism and
the threat from radical Islamic groups. Even though Iraq had no role, the
incident led to the government strengthening its emphasis on the need for pre-
emptive action to meet terrorist threats. The government had already endorsed
the new US doctrine, but Bali gave it new meaning. As Howard put it: 'If I were
given evidence that this country were likely to suffer an attack, and I had a
capacity as prime minister to do something to prevent that attack occurring, I
would be negligent to the people of Australia if I didn't take that action' (Barker
2003: 28).

Like their US and UK counterparts, Australian intelligence agencies were
affected by the political needs of their leaders. According to a 2004 Australian
parliamentary report, this marked a new period in the relationship between the
Australian government and the leading intelligence advice agency, the Office of
National Assessments (ONA). As the report noted: 'From the beginning of
September 2002, the number of intelligence reports received on Iraq's WMD
increased exponentially' (Parliamentary Joint Committee 2003: 31). Compared

with the eight months from 1 January to 31 August 31 2002, the following seven and a half months to March 2003 produced a tenfold increase in reporting (Parliamentary Joint Committee 2003: 45–6). In addition, from September, the language of ONA assessments tended to be 'much more definitive'. Moving from its earlier, more measured views of Iraqi capabilities, ONA assessments 'became more assertive and less qualified' (Parliamentary Joint Committee 2003: 32, 56). This paralleled the greater certainty in US and UK intelligence reporting, as intelligence agencies responded to political imperatives and pressures. Given Australia's reliance on the US and UK for its raw intelligence, it is no surprise that ONA assessments were affected. By January 2003, it was reporting that:

> there is a wealth of intelligence on Saddam's WMD activities, but it paints a circumstantial picture that is conclusive overall rather than resting on a single piece of irrefutable evidence. [However] so far no intelligence has accurately pointed to the location of WMD. . . . Such intelligence leaves little room for doubt that Saddam must have something to hide . . . and confirms his deception efforts are so systematic that inspectors could not find all his WMD even if given years to do so (Parliamentary Joint Committee 2003: 35).

Focusing on WMD: embellishing the detail

The argument that Saddam was close to obtaining nuclear weapons was the most compelling argument for war, and political leaders knew this. Hence, when Foreign Minister Jack Straw released a dossier on Iraqi human rights abuses in December 2002, he went so far as to claim Saddam 'probably' possessed nuclear weapons (MacAskill and Watt 2002). Similarly, Howard claimed that there was 'no doubt' that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons, that it had not abandoned its 'nuclear aspirations. And the questions of how far she is from achieving that aspiration, I can't tell you and perhaps nobody can, but nothing can alter the fact that she is seeking it' (ABC 2002).

Intelligence-sharing led to the multiplication of dubious claims at a time when all three governments were cherry-picking from that intelligence to make the strongest possible public case for war. Almost a year after former ambassador Joseph Wilson's debunking of the claim that Iraq was attempting to acquire uranium from Niger, it was included in President Bush's 2003 State of the Union address ('The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa'), despite previous Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) warnings that there was no evidence for this (Prados 2004: 164–74; Wilson 2004: 331–2). Shortly thereafter Howard also included it in a speech to Parliament making the case for war. According to former intelligence officer Andrew Wilkie, the ONA, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Defence Department have all acknowledged

that they knew before January 2003 that the Niger story was simply wrong. No satisfactory explanation of how the Prime Minister could have failed to know has been given (Wilkie 2004: 98).

At the same time the key decisions had already been made. The only question was whether the allies would invade Iraq with explicit UN authorisation or operate outside the UN. According to Wilkie, 'by late 2002 nothing could stop the countdown to war. Blair and Howard understood this clearly because their intelligence agencies were telling them so' (Wilkie 2004: 72). Bush's reaction to Hans Blix's appeal for more time for the newly-returned weapons inspectors to complete their search for WMD was dismissive: '"This business about, you know, more time—you know, how much time do we need to see clearly that he's not disarming? . . . This looks like a rerun of a bad movie and I'm not interested in watching it"' (DeYoung 2003). Instead, in his January 2003 State of the Union address, Bush announced that the UN had given Saddam his 'final chance to disarm', but 'he has shown instead utter contempt for the United Nations and for the opinion of the world'. Bush declared that the course of the US 'does not depend on the decisions of others' (Bush 2003). As it became clear that the US and UK could not secure a further Security Council resolution, or even a majority vote, for military action against Iraq, they moved unilaterally to commit themselves to war, whilst blaming French intransigence for their decision to abandon the UN route.

The allies were able to act rapidly because throughout the preceding period, despite their leaders' constant denials that any decision had been taken, the preparation for military action had been continuing in earnest. US military planning had been intense since mid-2002. Australia had joined in 'preliminary operational planning' at that stage, and had even begun planning for the ultimate operation six months before that (Garran 2004: 141). As early as 22 January, the Australian government had pre-deployed troops to the region, arguing that this would give the Australian Defence Forces sufficient time to prepare 'in-theatre' and increase the pressure on Saddam. In fact, allied troop deployments generated a political momentum of their own. As Henry Kissinger put it in early February 2003, 'if the United States marches 200,000 troops into the region and then marches them back out, the credibility of American power . . . will be gravely, perhaps irreparably, impaired' (Scheer *et al.* 2003: 80).

Accountability and deniability

After the war, and in particular as the initial military success was superseded by an increasingly active and violent resistance/insurgent movement, clear evidence that their earlier claims about WMD were false required the three leaders to further justify their decisions to go to war. All three leaders portrayed themselves as acting in the best possible interests of the

international community (and, less emphasised, in the interests of the Iraqi people). In the aftermath of war and as the machinery of legislative and official accountability undertook the *post mortem* examinations of the causes and justifications, all portrayed themselves as faithfully responding to the intelligence which their own professional agencies were providing, claiming that their decisions were based on the imperatives of intelligence findings and not due to any problems in policy-making by them. As Blair told the postwar Hutton inquiry:

> What changed was really two things which came together. First of all, there was a tremendous amount of information and evidence coming across my desk as to the weapons of mass destruction and the programmes associated with it that Saddam had ... Why did we say it was a big problem? Because of the intelligence. And the people were naturally saying: produce that intelligence then ... So, in a sense, the 24 September dossier was an unusual—the whole business was unusual, but it was in response to an unusual set of circumstances. We were saying this issue had to be returned to by the international community and dealt with. Why were we saying this? Because of the intelligence (Phythian 2005: 128–9).

In the US, the accountability framework was provided by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) and Robb-Silberman inquiries. Both concluded that it was the intelligence rather than politicians who were to blame, and that professional intelligence judgements were not affected by administration pressure. According to the SSCI, 'most of the major key judgments in the Intelligence Community's October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate ... either overstated, or were not supported by, the underlying intelligence reporting.' It found 'no evidence that the IC's [intelligence community's] mischaracterization or exaggeration of the intelligence on Iraq's WMD capabilities was the result of political pressure' (Whitney 2005: 203–4). The Robb-Silberman report concluded that 'the Intelligence Community was dead wrong in almost all of its pre-war judgments' about Iraq's WMD. It too concluded that the IC did not change any judgements in response to political pressure (Whitney 2005: 335, 346). Thus the two official reports on the use of intelligence exonerated the political leadership and blamed the failures on faulty intelligence.

In the UK case, the Butler inquiry suggested that, in turning intelligence material into material that could be put into the public domain:

> warnings were lost about the limited intelligence base on which some aspects of these assessments were being made. Language in the dossier may have left with readers the impression that there was fuller and firmer intelligence behind the judgements than was the case: our view, having reviewed all of the material, is that judgements in the dossier went to (although not beyond) the outer limits of the intelligence available (Butler 2004: 154, para 33).

Further, the British intelligence system allowed weak information, shorn of caveats, to be labelled as intelligence-approved, and used as such for advocacy by government.

In the Australian case, a parliamentary inquiry took the view that the presentations by the government were 'more moderate and more measured than that of either of its alliance partners' and that 'the government's emphatic claim about the existence of Iraqi WMD reflected the views of the Office of National Assessments after 13 September 2002' (Parliamentary Joint Committee 2003: 97, 98). While the ONA believed it 'highly likely' that Iraq had WMD, the Australian agencies did not think the amounts involved to be large, and the Defence Intelligence Organisation always expressed doubts about any production of biological or chemical weapons beyond 1991. The government's presentations, however, implied large arsenals and stockpiles, endorsing the idea that Iraq was producing more weapons and that its programs were larger and more active than before the 1991 Gulf War. In addition, there appears to have been a gap on the matter of immediacy of the threat. Assessments by Australian agencies about possible degradation of agents and restricted delivery capability cast doubt on the suggestion that the Iraqi 'arsenal' represented a 'grave and immediate' and a 'real and unacceptable' threat.

Although the inquiries implied that political leaders might have been more prudent, none was accused, as Dearlove had reported of the Bush administration, of 'fixing intelligence around the policy'. Indeed, while all the inquiries looked at allegations of pressure and undue influence—in other words, politicisation—none blamed the politicians. In the Australian case, the inquiry accepted the claims of the intelligence agencies that there was no overt political pressure to change assessments. The closest the Committee came to indicating the tailoring of intelligence reports to suit political purposes was when it stated that it was aware that a 'fine distinction might often be made between "being relevant to the policy issues of concern to the Government" and catering to the policy concerns of the Government' (Parliamentary Joint Committee 2003: 54). In the UK case the Hutton inquiry noted, but ignored, clear evidence of political advisors actively interfering in the preparation and presentation of intelligence material for the September 2002 dossier, while the later Butler inquiry considered that the problems lay less in the relations between the government and the intelligence agencies than within government itself, 'the informality and circumscribed character of the Government's procedures which we saw in the context of policy-making towards Iraq risks reducing the scope for informed collective political judgement' (Butler 2004: 160, para 67).

The politics of marching in time

These inquiries, although explicitly absolving the political levels of any blame for misuse of intelligence, opened windows onto alternative perspectives as to

what really happened. In the case of the UK, the Butler report noted that the Blair government, aware that there was no legal justification for the overthrow of the Iraq regime other than failure to comply with UN disarmament obligations, used:

> intelligence on Iraqi nuclear, biological, chemical and ballistic missile programmes . . . in support of the execution of this policy to inform planning for a military campaign; to inform domestic and international opinion, in support of the Government's advocacy of its changing policy towards Iraq (Butler 2004: 151, para 11).

In other words, and certainly from the UK perspective, the 2003 Iraq war—the first in the new era of pre-emptive warfare—was based on a false premise. Iraq had no WMD. Horrible as the regime was, it posed no substantial threat to anyone beyond its own borders. Before the Iraq war, governments displayed certainty about Saddam's possession of WMD, and denigrated the character and patriotism of anyone who dared to doubt them (although, retrospectively, government leaders tried to suggest that the views of Iraq that they promoted were all but universally held). The head of the Iraq Survey Group, himself a pre-war believer in Iraq's WMD and critic of the UN inspectors, had to admit defeat in their post-invasion effort to find WMD—'We were almost all wrong, and I certainly include myself' (Woodward 2004: 434)—but this misses the point.

If the intelligence had been accurate and robust, it would have been used as it stood; if it was less compelling, then it had to be made to look stronger, because the policy direction that the intelligence might have informed had already been chosen. The policy process was not coherent and there was no serious explicit evaluation of the options for dealing with Iraq. Rather, the three leaders were committed to a particular policy outcome—deposing Saddam Hussein—and used intelligence to support their preordained commitment. Thus the question of how the intelligence agencies got it so wrong was not the main point. At key points, politicians applied misleading spin to findings, amounting to clear efforts at deception. At other points, the careless attitude to evidence showed a culpable recklessness.

In Australia, Howard and his key national security ministers were in agreement, and there seems to have been a high degree of conformity inside the Cabinet, in marked contrast to Britain. Here decision-making was marked by closely-held consultations among Blair and his closest aides without the traditional degree of consultation or deliberation with Cabinet ministers. Meetings of the Cabinet featured expressions of doubt as to the wisdom of a military course, but Cabinet government during this period was dysfunctional, with ministers unable or unwilling to challenge Blair's insistence on the need to remain close to the US by supporting its case for war.

The US decision-making process was marked by high-level and tightly-held discussions rather than deliberations by a war cabinet. Within this framework, the Bush administration politicised the intelligence process in several ways in order to bolster its case for war: by creating a separate bureaucratic unit to second guess the CIA; by 'stovepiping' questionable intelligence directly to the White House, thereby bypassing the CIA; and by bringing pressure to bear on the CIA to provide evidence for Saddam's alleged cooperation with al-Qaeda. Perhaps the most authoritative evidence that policy-makers sought to politicise intelligence prior to the Iraq War is the testimony of Paul R. Pillar, the national intelligence officer responsible for Middle East intelligence from 2002–05 who directed the coordination of intelligence assessments on Iraq. Pillar charged that: first, 'official intelligence analysis was not relied on in making even the most significant national security decisions'; second, 'intelligence was misused publicly to justify decisions already made'; and third, 'the intelligence community's own work was politicized' (Pillar 2006: 15). According to Pillar, 'intelligence on Iraqi weapons programs did not drive [the Administration's] decision to go to war', because sanctions were working; rather, the Bush administration wanted to 'shake up the sclerotic power structures of the Middle East and hasten the spread of more liberal politics and economics in the region' (Pillar 2006: 16).

Conclusion

This article has argued that official and unofficial sources that have come to light since the military phases of the Iraq war have allowed for more complete analysis of the decision-making processes leading up to the invasion of 2003. Specifically, it has argued that an invasion was a policy objective for the Bush administration from the outset. The US did not need to persuade British and Australian leaders that Saddam needed to be confronted. Both followed the lead of the US and adapted their rhetoric of threat accordingly. By mid-2002 a military agenda had been established with all three countries presenting the case for war to their publics, while insisting that no decisions on war had been taken.

While intelligence information was flawed, the three governments presented it in ways that supported their policy goals. In all three cases the intelligence agencies hedged their analyses to reflect some uncertainty about the conclusions that it would justify. The political leadership, however, hyped the intelligence and used it to make a stronger case for war than the intelligence justified.

At issue here is a matter of democratic leadership in three leading governments. Citizens must trust their elected leaders because they do not have access to all of the information that their leaders have. Where the head of government misrepresents or misuses crucial information, this undermines the democratic bonds between citizens and government upon which the three countries profess to be based. To the extent which the three leaders misled their

legislatures and their citizens, either from deliberate mis-statements or through creating an atmosphere in which they were not well-informed by their advisors, they undermined the crucial trust upon which these countries depend and severely threatened the support they may require when they call upon their citizens to support international action that *does* pose a genuine threat to international security.

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