

## **Lest We Forget Britain's Iraq Inquiry, and Why it Matters**

**Patrick Porter**

### **Abstract**

Britain's 'Chilcot' Iraq Inquiry matters, for all its delays and incompleteness, because it reaffirms the danger of dogma and the deadliness of good intentions, the force of powerful ideas honestly held by decision-makers. Beyond rumours of the conspiratorial, and the covert, it is about the quality of decisions. The Inquiry's hearings demonstrate the perils of wishful thinking, of doctrinaire ideological beliefs that go unchecked. It shows what can happen when the architects of policy operate without testing their own assumptions, move on the basis of an unquestioned 'common sense', making choices that are less calculated than axiomatic. As the Chilcot hearings revealed, those who conducted policy were in the grip of fatal assumptions. These assumptions were about Western insecurity, Western power, the Anglo-American relationship, and the very evolution of modern states. None of these assumptions have gone away. In that sense, the past is not even the past.

**Key Words:** Chilcot, Iraq, British Foreign Policy, Defence Policy, Grand Strategy, Causes of War, Anglo-American Relationship

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**Acknowledgement:** This article is based on an earlier version published online at The National Interest. The author is grateful to the editors for permission to reproduce that material here.

Britain's vote to leave the European Union threatens to overshadow the inquest into another far-reaching diplomatic choice, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Britain's part in it. 'Brexit' has unleashed a [new season](#) of rancour over the future of Britain and Europe. It may distract the public from what had been the gravest foreign policy crisis since Suez. Iraq is likely to feature in the British Labour Party's bitter leadership contest. Used as a weapon for leftists to wield against 'Blairites', it may appear as little more than self-interested recrimination about the past. Events, time and narrow partisanship may eclipse the true value of Britain's [Iraq 'Chilcot' Inquiry](#) findings, soon to be published.

As a transforming event, the Iraq war is not over. We are still coping with its aftermath. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime helped trigger a longer-term process of violent sectarian breakdown in the Middle East, the shattering of the state system, with its sulphuric interaction of revolution and war. It left behind many thousands of maimed and wounded survivors. We should consider not only whether the Inquiry matters, but why it matters.

As I will argue here, the most valuable insight of the Inquiry is not about deception, illegality, or ‘smoking guns.’ Rather, Chilcot matters as a reminder of the dangers of dogma, the deadliness of good intentions, the force of sincere assumptions that went unexamined. The makers of British strategy were not practising cynical geopolitics. They were doing something more dangerous: acting out of faith that history was on their side. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair’s speech of self-vindication after Chilcot was unveiled, that he acted out of a belief that he was moving with the tide of historical forces, in itself demonstrates the dangerous miscalculations that drove the decision in the first place.

‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ overthrew an adversary regime and brought about a constitutional government largely friendly to America and its allies. It did so at a heavy price, however. It [killed and maimed](#) thousands more people and [drained more resources](#) than those who conducted the policy estimated. It gave Iraqis not secure democratic freedom, but anarchy followed by a [corrupt sectarian order](#), an abusive Shiite ascendancy and illiberal tyranny of the majority that helped spawn the growth of the Islamic State. Rather than defeat international terrorism and disorder, it created [fresh opportunities](#) for it, as criminals and militants poured into the vacuum. [Torture and the abuse](#) that tends to accompany long counterinsurgency wars offered propaganda opportunities for terrorist networks. The successes of the surge suppressed violence for a time, but could not induce reconciliation in the long-term. Upsetting the regional balance of power empowered Iran and propelled a power struggle that continues today. The war’s central premise, that Saddam Hussein had an active WMD programme, [proved false](#). Indeed, destroying a regime that had disarmed struck a blow against the cause of disarmament, demonstrating to other hostile states the value of nuclear deterrence. Even some proponents [concede in retrospect](#) that [their project wasn’t worth it](#). A reckoning is surely overdue – especially as the United States has not undertaken an equivalent inquest.

Despite these high stakes, those who didn’t suffer directly from the war are susceptible to ‘Chilcot fatigue.’ The Inquiry, seven years long in gestation and costing £10 million, addresses choices made almost fifteen years ago which now seem prehistoric. Critics have [already dismissed it](#). Long delays and obstruction make it unlikely to shift already entrenched opinions. Accused parties have long left the scene. The Inquiry suffers from an unfortunate gap, as transcripts of communications between Prime Minister Blair and President Bush remain undisclosed. It lacks judicial authority. It cannot impeach or convict, and therefore is futile. This assumes that Chilcot’s only value lies in addressing the issue of bad faith: the Blair government’s alleged fabrication or distortion of evidence, misleading of parliament, and violation of international law. In the legalist lexicon of the war’s critics, ‘illegal’ is interchangeable with ‘immoral.’

Before reading the Inquiry’s findings, we should consider why it most matters. It matters not primarily as an indictment of dishonesty or illegality, as [other critics emphasise](#). These issues matter. They are not the main reasons the Iraq war became infamous, nor why it destroyed the premiership of Prime Minister Blair. Wars can be honestly waged, and in compliance with international documents, and still be disasters. As we speak, post-Gaddafi Libya struggles to pull back from the brink of collapse. Conversely, wars can be *prima facie* illegal, like Vietnam’s overthrow of a genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in 1978, or NATO’s bombing of Milosevic’s Serbia in 1999, and still be morally and strategically defensible. Iraq attracted furore, and multiple inquiries,

because it had calamitous results. If the invading coalition had discovered and shut down an advanced weapons programme in Iraq, and if ‘regime change’ had been peaceful and stable, the experiment would not draw so much condemnation.

Chilcot matters, for all its delays and incompleteness, because it reaffirms the danger of dogma and the deadliness of good intentions, the force of powerful ideas honestly held by decision-makers. Beyond rumours of the conspiratorial, and the covert, it is about the quality of decisions. The Inquiry’s hearings demonstrate the perils of wishful thinking, of doctrinaire ideological beliefs that go unchecked. It shows what can happen when the architects of policy operate without testing their own assumptions, move on the basis of an unquestioned ‘common sense’, making choices that are less calculated than axiomatic. As the Chilcot hearings revealed, those who conducted policy were in the grip of fatal assumptions. These assumptions were about Western insecurity, Western power, the Anglo-American relationship, and the very evolution of modern states. None of these assumptions have gone away. In that sense, the past is not even the past.

Let us begin with the first two assumptions, as they worked together. The calculation that Britain could and should take part in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime was driven by both a sense of vulnerability and a sense of power. Iraq did not happen in isolation. It was part of a new calculus about the nature of the world as it was supposedly revealed by the 9/11 terrorist attack. It was that event that haunted the public discussion and private deliberation of governments on both sides of the Atlantic. Testifying before the Inquiry, Blair clearly articulated a rationale that is also to be found in declassified documents, namely that in a post-9/11 world, the American-led West had to act more decisively, and with anticipatory military action, to transform the global security environment. Containing, limiting or disrupting threats, and certainly deterring them, was no longer adequate. The issue, the choice between ‘tough containment’ and threat elimination had been canvassed in government, in the Cabinet Office’ [Iraq Options Paper](#) of March 2002, and earlier in the Foreign Office’s [agenda](#) for ‘draining the swamp’ of threatening regimes. In Blair’s [words](#), it ‘really depended on whether you thought post-September 11th we had to be change makers or whether we could still be managers. Up to September 11th we had been managing this issue. After September 11th we decided we had to confront and change.’ Threats – and potential threats- had to be eliminated promptly. Enemies had to be struck first, and at the time of ‘our’ choosing. The 9/11 mass-casualty attacks, they assumed, were harbingers of things to come, part of a serial wave of catastrophic, first-order threat events that directly threatened the homeland, rather than aberrations, in a world where most violent threats can be kept at bay. The threat matrix included the possibility of a linkage between rogue regimes, the most destructive weapons technology, and terrorist networks. This helps explain a revelation of the inquiry, about the [notorious claim](#) that Saddam Hussein had the capacity to deploy chemical and biological weapons at ‘forty five minutes’ notice. The hearings suggest that policymakers had genuinely not appreciated the distinction between tactical ‘battlefield’ and strategic range weapons, and that there was a striking incuriosity about the actual geographical extent of the threat. The [exchange](#) between Sir Lawrence Freedman of the Inquiry and Tim Dowse, the Foreign Office head of counter-proliferation, is revealing on this point:

**Sir Lawrence Freedman:** What we are trying to work out is what it meant. Now, you have indicated what seemed to you to be a pretty nondescript observation, but it got an iconic status because, in a sense, it got lost in translation. It became not a chemical

weapon for use on the battlefield, but a weapon of mass destruction for use in an interstate war; otherwise, why mention the 45 minutes?

**Mr Tim Dowse:** I don't think we ever said that it was for use in a ballistic missile, but

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**Sir Lawrence Freedman:** But you didn't say it wasn't.

The point here is not the issue of duplicity, but a proneness to belief that threats were globalised, a theme underscored [in public media](#) at the time. Through a prism of fears about globalised insecurity, tactical and localised military capabilities could easily be conflated with long-range ones.

Also evident is the closed quality of decision-making in the Blair government, [observed during the hearings](#). Incuriosity and confusion of this type could thrive at high levels of government because of the way that government operated. It side-lined cabinet and cabinet committees, lacked a 'devil's advocate' for its thinking, as major decisions fell to a small inner circle. In such a cabalistic decision-making style, it is harder to probe assumptions or evaluate choices with rigour. Hence the susceptibility to threat inflation, treating limited or remote risks as imminent, and the strong presumption that threats anywhere were threats everywhere. [Another source](#) confirms that by November 2002, the commitment to remove Saddam had become theological beyond calculations of cost and risk, to one of moral absolutes. The threat had become personified, as liberation largely meant removing an atrocious ruler. In November 2002, when six academic experts assembled at Downing Street to brief Blair on the potential problems that invading Iraq would encounter: 'Professor Joffe emphasised the rigid power structures in Iraq that defined Saddam Hussein as much as he defined them, but became frustrated when the Prime Minister responded by personalising the problem again, saying: "But the man is evil, isn't he?"

The perception that 9/11 created a new threat environment, which required a more robust response, also implied that the West had the capacity to act decisively and at acceptable cost to eliminate threats, in this case by removing a government from office and managing the aftermath. What Blair called a fresh '[calculus of risk](#)' was also a calculus about power. The US and its allies originally presented the Iraq war as primarily a counter-proliferation war, to neutralise a dangerous arsenal and its owner. WMD claims were indeed a point of agreement for a range of rationales for invasion. Blair has [since indicated](#) that he would have supported the invasion anyway, given his belief that the regime's pathological quality posed a wider threat to the region. We cannot get inside the exact evolution of Blair's inner convictions. We can, though, detect that the decision to invade flowed from a more ambitious, visionary 'world-making.' In that calculus, the West's capacity to inflict self-harm hardly featured.

As several witnesses affirmed, there was insufficient planning for the post-war aftermath, and the project was incompetently executed, leaving British forces [wildly under-resourced](#). Incompetence, though, flowed not just from bureaucratic process or intra-alliance dysfunction. It came from a deeper and visceral assumption: that with an autocratic ruler removed, Iraq would naturally evolve as a market democracy. This assumption was partly due to the influential expatriate Iraqi lobby in Washington, who assured policymakers the whole task was possible. It also came from an entrenched 'common sense' about the trajectory of modern states. All the liberators had to do, the main decision-makers seemed to assume, was remove the impediment, the Baathist regime, and this would birth Iraq's freedom. To put it bluntly: Britain joined the war

partly because Blair presumed it would be easy. The end of the shooting war would mark the end of political conflict. Against the background of what looked like stunning success in the more forbidding territory of Afghanistan, policymakers identified free elections and free markets, both competitive processes, with security and peace. The assumption persisted that Iraq had become a democracy, ‘largely at peace with itself’ and ‘certainly no longer a threat to its neighbours’ and was therefore neutralised as a threat. Then Secretary of Defence John Hutton [testified as much](#) in January 2010. Iraq had also become captured by an illiberal and sectarian regime, that helped stoke the rise of the Sunni militant group the Islamic State that now threatens neighbours from a base in Iraq.

An important part of the calculus, according to [high-level](#) military and [diplomatic](#) participants, was also the expectation that the United States had decided upon forcible regime change; that the issue was not ‘whether’ but when and how, that military preparations overrode diplomatic process; and that Britain could act as a brake on Washington’s unilateralism, and influence American decision-making towards Iraq and beyond by taking part. Britain’s preference in the confrontation with Saddam was for peaceful disarmament, extracted through the pressure of military coercion, but this pressure created momentum and alliance pressure towards actual war that was hard to reverse. The expectation that the ‘blood price’ would purchase Britain significant influence is a powerful tradition, and fell short. Not only did involvement not tilt Washington towards a concerted resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It even failed to shape the conduct of the invasion itself. As Sir Jeremy Greentock [indicated](#), in line with [Army reports](#) about prewar planning, US officials hardly listened to UK advice or kept them informed of major developments.

At the core of the Iraq calamity is that Blair and the main architects of the policy believed in what they were doing. Whether the government misrepresented the strength of intelligence, to guard the truth with a bodyguard of lies, is disputed. Their belief in the cause, however, is clear. Within government, opponents of war like former ministers Clare Short and Robin Cook agree Blair not only genuinely believed Saddam possessed an active WMD programme, but that the war was the right step to protect Britain’s security and influence. As Cook [told MPs](#), he had ‘no doubt about the good faith of the prime minister.’ The ‘burning sincerity and conviction of those involved in exercise’ was itself a ‘problem.’ Sensing a world of clear and present dangers, over-impressed by Western capabilities, and determined to steer a superpower, the believers left little space for dissent or scrutiny. Hopefully, Whitehall can build in ways of governing that subject strategic choices to more rigorous evaluation. As the Inquiry recommends, a revival of Cabinet committee scrutiny is one measure that could help fortify government against cloistered groupthink. No mechanism can guarantee against failure of judgement. Government can be nudged towards ensuring that the weightiest decision – whether, not how, to use violence – is made soberly, carefully and in cold blood. Iraq was worse than cynical geopolitics committed with falsehood. It was a blunder, undertaken from the best of intentions. Lest we forget.