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Licensed to lie: the aftermath of the Iraqi WMD fiasco

Over the coming months, British and American intelligence agencies are going to come under intense and unwelcome scrutiny. The jobs of George Tenet, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and of Sir Richard Dearlove, the head of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) are in danger. It is now obvious that the intelligence that led to war with Iraq was catastrophically wrong.

No weapons of mass destruction (WMD) - nuclear, chemical or biological - have been found in Iraq, although the alleged existence and "imminent threat" from these weapons were the prime arguments for going to war. And no link has been found between ousted dictator Saddam Hussein and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, even though such a link was trumpeted, especially in the US as the reason why "regime change" in Iraq was essential for American security. These intelligence failures are a scandal of massive proportions that will reverberate for years in the British and American government. There are bound to be political casualties, but also casualties in the intelligence community, although most of the latter will be unpublicized. It may be years before the full picture emerges. So, who was to blame - the spies or the politicians?

The battle to apportion responsibility for the fiasco is being waged not only between the agencies and their political masters, but also within them, particularly in the US, where the intelligence community costs taxpayers the tidy sum of \$40 billion a year. Many lucrative careers and many handsome budgets are at stake.

There are 15 agencies in the US concerned with gathering and analyzing intelligence, of which six are the most important. They are the CIA; the Defense Intelligence Agency; the National Security Agency, responsible for world-wide electronic eavesdropping; the State Department's intelligence department; the Department of Energy's intelligence department; and the National Imagery and Mapping Agency, which operates many spy satellites.

The National Intelligence Council assembles and boils down the vast output of these agencies into so-called National Intelligence

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Estimates, which go to the president and other political leaders. In much the same way, Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee collects and collates material from the various British intelligence agencies for the prime minister and the Cabinet. In theory, the director of the CIA presides over the entire American intelligence community. In practice, however, each agency enjoys considerable autonomy and jealously guards its turf.

There is a further complication on the American scene. The Washington hawks who pressed most insistently for war against Iraq - men such as Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, numbers two and three in the Pentagon hierarchy, and Richard Perle, then chairman of the Defense Policy Board, together with their political master, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld - were not satisfied with the intelligence they were receiving from US intelligence agencies. Desperate to make the case that Saddam Hussein was linked to Al-Qaeda and that he was on the verge of acquiring nuclear capability, they created their own intelligence unit at the Pentagon, which produced intelligence more to their liking about Saddam Hussein's WMDs.

Known as the Office of Special Plans (OSP), this unit was in close touch with Ahmed Chalabi and other Iraqi dissenters of doubtful reliability, as well as with Israel's Mossad. The American press has reported that Israeli agents would be allowed into the Pentagon without formality, simply waved in by Feith.

The OSP did not play the consensus game of the more established US agencies. Instead, bypassing the usual bureaucratic channels in charge of analysis and collation, it fed raw intelligence - often from a single source - directly to the president and other political leaders. The CIA thus appears to have lost control of the flow of intelligence underpinning political decisions. America's giant intelligence community was neutralized, while the decision to go to war was taken on the basis of highly "politicized" intelligence, much of it evidently bogus. No doubt the CIA will want to settle accounts with the men who set up the OSP and who, by so doing, tarnished the reputation of America's entire intelligence community.

A crucial outcome of the US presidential campaign will indeed be the fate of the Washington hawks, many of them close to Israel's Likud, who took America into war. To the eternal regret of much of the British electorate, Prime Minister Tony Blair joined in the war, no doubt worried that if he stayed out, like France and Germany, he risked endangering Britain's "special relationship" with the United States.

John Kerry is now the Democratic front-runner in this year's US

presidential election. "I have spent my whole life fighting against powerful interests," he said recently, "and I've only just begun to fight. I have a message for the influence peddlers, for the polluters, the drug companies, big oil and all the special interests who now call the White House home: We're coming. You're going. And don't let the door hit you on the way out." The warning to the Washington hawks is very clear.

In the months before the US elections, political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic will seek to push onto the intelligence services responsibility for the mess in Iraq. It will be interesting to see whether the intelligence agencies - or defectors from them - decide to fight back. The spies will not want to be the only scapegoats for a costly failure. They know better than anyone the extent to which intelligence was manipulated or politicized to make the case for war. Under intense pressure from public opinion, US President George W. Bush and Blair have now reluctantly agreed to set up two commissions, one American and one British, to inquire into the intelligence that led to war. But both leaders have tailored the commissions to suit their own political needs.

The American commission, which is expected to be headed by Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser of former President George Bush, has been given 18 months to conclude its work. This means its report will not be published before next November's presidential election. This will allow the president to evade awkward questions about the war during the presidential campaign by saying that he must wait until the commission uncovers the truth. In any event, he has given the commission so wide a brief that investigations into the Iraq war are likely to be swamped by an examination of a range of American intelligence failures having to do with terrorism, as well as with the nuclear programs, not just of Iraq, but of India, Pakistan, Iran, North Korea, Libya, and much else besides.

In contrast, Blair's commission has been given exceedingly narrow terms of reference. It is to enquire into the quality of the intelligence that led to the war in Iraq but not into the politicians' use of this intelligence. In other words, it will not investigate the reasons Blair decided to join Bush's war. This refusal to tackle the central political issue has been widely criticized and has caused Britain's Liberal Democrats to refuse to take part in the commission.

Blair's choice of Lord Butler, a Cabinet secretary when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister, to head the new commission resembles his earlier choice of Lord Hutton to head the enquiry into the death of the weapons scientist David Kelly. Both men are staunch establishment figures, who can be counted on not to rock the boat.

Patrick Seale, a veteran Middle East analyst, wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR

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