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## Britain and US will back down over WMDs

By **Andy McSmith, Raymond Whitaker and Geoffrey Lean**

07 September 2003

Britain and the US have combined to come up with entirely new explanations of why they went to war in Iraq as inspectors on the ground prepare to report that there are no weapons of mass destruction there.

The "current and serious" threat of Iraq's WMD was the reason Tony Blair gave for going to war, but last week the Prime Minister delivered a justification which did not mention the weapons at all. On the same day John Bolton, US Under-Secretary of State for arms control, said that whether Saddam Hussein's regime actually possessed WMD "isn't really the issue".

The 1,400-strong Iraq Survey Group, sent out in May to begin an intensive hunt for the elusive weapons, is expected to report this week that it has found no WMD hardware, nor even any sign of active programmes. The inspectors, headed by David Kay, a close associate of President George Bush, are likely to say the only evidence it has found is that the Iraqi government had retained a group of scientists who had the expertise to restart the weapons programme at any time.

Foreshadowing the report, Mr Bolton said the issue was not weapons, or actual programmes, but "the capability that Iraq sought to have ... WMD programmes". Saddam, he claimed, kept "a coterie" of scientists he was preserving for the day when he could build nuclear weapons unhindered by international constraints. "Whether he possessed them today or four years ago isn't really the issue," he said. "As long as that regime was in power, it was determined to get nuclear, chemical and biological weapons one way or another. Until that regime was removed from power, that threat remained - that was the purpose of the military action."

Last week Mr Blair declared at his Downing Street press conference: "Let me say why I still believe Iraq was the right thing to do and why it is essential that we see it through. If we succeed in

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putting Iraq on its feet as a stable, prosperous and democratic country, then what a huge advertisement that is for the values of democracy and human rights, and what a huge defeat it is for these terrorists who want to establish extremist states."

He added that if anyone were to ask the average Iraqi whether they would prefer to be still living under the old regime, "they would look at you as if you were completely crazy".

This contrasts starkly with what the Prime Minister said in his speech to the Commons on 18 March, the day when MPs voted to endorse the decision to go to war. Then Mr Blair asserted, "I have never put the justification for action as regime change."

Just as Britain and the US send more troops to Iraq and seek international help to restore stability, it has emerged that Mr Blair, almost alone among leaders of major nations, is to stay away from the opening of the UN General Assembly later this month. The development is bound to increase the Prime Minister's isolation following his decision to join the US in going to war without a UN resolution, and has led to speculation that he is reluctant to leave the country at a time when his conduct is under examination in the Hutton inquiry.

Downing Street yesterday refused to comment on the grounds that it does not disclose the Prime Minister's movements in advance. But this has not applied to other international summits, where his attendance has been announced well in advance.

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