

How the NYT covered (up) the leaked British memos on Iraq

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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On May 1 the London *Sunday Times* published leaked minutes — the Downing Street Memo — of a high-level British cabinet meeting held on 23 July 2002 that discussed contingencies, political and military, for invading Iraq.

In the Cabinet meeting, C [the head of MI6, Richard Dearlove] 'reported on his recent talks in Washington', where 'military action was now seen as inevitable' and 'the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.' In other words, the books were being cooked to give Bush his war.

The planners assumed 'that the UK would take part in any military action.' So they had to consider the illegality of the war. Unfortunately, 'the Attorney-General said that the desire for regime change was not a legal base for military action.' The Attorney-General dismissed the three possible excuses: 'self-defence, humanitarian intervention, or UNSC authorisation'. Self-defence couldn't work partly because, the British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said: 'the case was thin. Saddam was not threatening his neighbours, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran.' How could the government overcome the illegality? The memo, and the *Sunday Times*, quotes this puzzle-solving contribution from Jack Straw:

We should work up a plan for an ultimatum to Saddam to allow back in the UN weapons inspectors. This would also help with the legal justification for the use of force.

Going to the UN, therefore, was about growing a legal fig leaf. The foliage was merely for the British government, since the planners believe that the Americans do not care about legality: The US National Security Council 'had no patience with the UN route' and 'many in the US did not think it worth going down the ultimatum route'.

The UK Defence Secretary thought that the 'timeline' for military action would begin '30 days before the US Congressional elections' [in November 2002]. So the US government's closest ally expects it to murder Iraqis in order to win elections, what many antiwar critics said years ago.

1. COVERAGE IN THE UK

Here are the *Sunday Times* headlines:

20 March : MI6 chief told PM: Americans 'fixed' case for war
01 May : Blair planned Iraq war from start [with full text of the memo]
22 May : Blair faces US probe over secret Iraq invasion plan

The articles are thorough. The May 1st article discusses the memo in great detail. Along with that article, the Sunday Times published the full memo, so readers can find out for themselves what it says.

2. WAITING FOR GODOT

Beginning two months after the first Sunday Times article, the New York Times published several articles (other than opinion pieces) on the Downing Street Memo and on its cousin, a briefing paper prepared for the cabinet meeting.

A thought experiment helps explain the delay (seven weeks since the publication of the full memo). Imagine a symmetrical situation: An Iraq government memo, detailing plans to hide chemical weapons from UN inspectors, is leaked to and reported in the Sunday Times. How long before the NYT reports the story? We can answer with data from a real experiment. On 22 April 2003 the London Daily Telegraph reported 'Galloway Was in Saddam's Pay, Say Secret Iraqi Documents'. The (forged) documents were found by the Telegraph reporter David Blair — what an unfortunate name — in a 'burned-out building' in Baghdad. The NYT headline 'A Briton Who Hailed Hussein Is Said to Have Been in His Pay' showed up on 23 April, as quick as a daily newspaper could be. The memo and briefing paper, however, being critical of the war, were unfit for American consumption for many weeks.

3. COMPARING THE HEADLINES

Compare the London headlines with these NYT headlines, all the non-opinion pieces that mention the memo:

1. 20 May : British Memo On U.S. Plans For Iraq War Fuels Critics 2. 07 June : Blair, Due to Meet Bush, Will Push 2 Issues 3. 08 June : Bush and Blair Deny 'Fixed' Iraq Reports 4. 13 June : Prewar British Memo Says War Decision Wasn't Made 5. 14 June : A Peephole to the War Room: British Documents Shed Light on Bush Team's State of Mind 6. 16 June : 'Exit Strategy' Is More Than a Whisper in Washington, With Lawmakers Speaking Out 7. 17 June : Memo Shows Bush Mised Public, Antiwar Group Says

I discuss each headline in turn.

* 1. 20 May : British Memo On U.S. Plans For Iraq War Fuels Critics

The headline reports the effect of the memo rather than the important news, the content of the memo. By interposing war critics, who are otherwise rarely quoted in the NYT, the headline distances the reader from what the memo says and from what happened in the meeting. The reader will think, 'Those critics, like a machine needing fuel, are always hungry and trawling for evidence. So what?' If a mysterious journalistic credo forbids discussing the memo's contents and headlines must only discuss effects, it could have read: 'British Memo On U.S. Plans For Iraq War Multiplies Critics.' An undecided reader would wonder, 'Undecided people are changing their mind. Maybe I should read the memo and see what happens to my opinion.'

* 2. 07 June : Blair, Due to Meet Bush, Will Push 2 Issues

This headline does not mention the memo.

* 3. 08 June : Bush and Blair Deny 'Fixed' Iraq Reports

This headline reports that Bush and Blair deny an important point of the memo, that Bush first decided to go to war and then made up lies to get public support. No president accused of lying has admitted it, and I do not expect Blair or Bush to tamper with precedent. If, how quaint, one expects news to mean _unexpected_ information — man bites dog rather than dog bites man — then the headline contains no news.

* 4. 13 June : Prewar British Memo Says War Decision Wasn't Made

This headline, which contradicts the point of the memo, is anti-news. The article itself talks about a different document, the briefing paper, but the headline leads readers to think that the memo says the opposite of what everyone else says it means. The briefing paper, as I discuss later, belies what the article says about it.

* 5. 14 June : A Peephole to the War Room: British Documents Shed Light on Bush Team's State of Mind

Here the memo becomes a dispassionate historical tool shedding light into great mysteries. The headline offers readers vicarious power via access to the mind of the 'team', a word evoking the home team that we are trained to support in American high school (the only learning that happens there). When the light glinted on the documents, what did it reveal? The reader does not learn.

* 6. 16 June : 'Exit Strategy' Is More Than a Whisper in Washington, With Lawmakers Speaking Out

This headline does not mention the memo.

* 7. 17 June : Memo Shows Bush Misled Public, Antiwar Group Says

This headline begins promisingly by stating the memo's contents, and then undermines the statement as merely the opinion of an antiwar group. As in headline 1 ('British Memo On U.S. Plans For Iraq War Fuels Critics'), the _NYT_ has found a role for war critics: to downplay news that undermines trust in our wars. Readers will think, 'Antiwar groups have been saying Bush misled us since long before the war started. What is new here?' The headline's message is, 'Nothing to see here, keep moving.'

4. SUMMARY OF THE HEADLINES

The _NYT_ headlines either ignore the memo [2,6]; deny its main point [4], quote others denying it [3], quote war critics or describe the memo's effect on them [1,7], or report the memo as being of mere clinical interest [5]. No headline states what was said in the meeting, a feat the _Sunday Times_ managed back on March 20: 'MI6 chief told PM: Americans 'fixed' case for war'. One _Sunday Times_ headline (22 May), like the _NYT_, mentions the effect of the memo, but it also reveals important information from the memo, the 'secret Iraq invasion plan'.

5. THE _NYT_ ARTICLES

I discuss each articles in turn.

* 1. 20 May : British Memo On U.S. Plans For Iraq War Fuels Critics

The _NYT_ downplays the significance of the memo with 'It has long been known that American military planning for the Iraq war began as early as Nov. 21, 2001' [1]. By using the impersonal passive 'It has long been known', the article omits who knew, who told them, or when they found out. It also leads to unanswered questions, such as why, while invading Afghanistan, the alleged source of the World Trade Center attackers, the US government planned to invade Iraq.

Military planning differs from deciding to invade. As mathematicians say, the first is necessary but not sufficient for the second. The United States has detailed military plans, developed over decades, to launch nuclear weapons at Russian cities, but it has not decided to use them (or so we hope). In obscuring this difference, the article constructs a _fake rebuttal_. The 'long-known' information, while accurate, seems to discredit the memo, only slow, careful thought exposes its irrelevance. Without that pause, the reader picks up a vague feeling that the memo is indeed old news.

On the subject of Bush deciding to invade in 2002, the memo 'provide[s] some contemporaneous validation...though only through secondhand observations.' It provides merely 'some' validation and that validation is at best secondhand. Yet one cannot find more authoritative sources of intelligence information: the head of MI6 talking probably to his counterpart in Washington, the head of the CIA. Did the _NYT_ treat so gingerly the prewar reports of Iraq's (invisible) WMD's?

* 3. 08 June : Bush and Blair Deny 'Fixed' Iraq Reports

Article [3] quotes the White House denials:

The White House has always insisted that Mr. Bush did not make the decision to invade Iraq until after Secretary of State Colin L. Powell presented the administration's case to the United Nations Security Council on Feb. 5, 2003...

The only useful information in this denial is the date, 5 Feb 2003, around which the White House is building its story. Then the article repeats the fake rebuttal:

But as early as Nov. 21, 2001, Mr. Bush directed Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld to begin a review of what could be done to oust Mr. Hussein.

When the article reveals the crucial information, that the 'intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy', it downplays their import by appending a 'Sir Richard was reported in the memo to have told his colleagues.' The reader may think that we have the word of the memo, of unknown authenticity. But as the earlier article [1] admits, 'The British government has not disputed the authenticity of the British memorandum.' Nor has any participant denied any quote in the memo.

The headline — 'Bush and Blair Deny 'Fixed' Iraq Reports' — reveals the theme. Their denials fill the article:

'There's nothing farther from the truth,' Mr. Bush said...

'Look, both of us [him and Blair] didn't want to use our military,' Mr. Bush added. 'Nobody

wants to commit military into combat. It's the last option.'

Mr. Blair...said, 'No, the facts were not being fixed in any shape or form at all.'

The article allows that 'The statements contradicted assertions in the memorandum...', but it spends most of its remaining space discussing merely the effect of the memo. Its contents have 'dogged Mr. Blair...', and he was 'generally unsmiling through the 25-minute news conference'. The first paragraph, again focusing on the effect over the content, says that the memo upset critics who 'see it as evidence that the president was intent to go to war with Iraq earlier than the White House has said.' Like the statement in [1] that military planning began in November 2001, the statement is true but irrelevant: irrelevant because it is not intrinsically terrible to go to war earlier than said. If it were only a week earlier, for example, who cares? The reporting obscures how Bush first decided to invade, then, to grow legal fig leaves for Blair, cooked up a UN ultimatum designed to fail. As reported on the front page of the London _Guardian_:

A US state department official said he thought it very unlikely that the Iraqi regime would be prepared to accept the stringent programme of inspections the US will demand.

As the American intelligence source put it, the White House "will not take yes for an answer", suggesting that Washington would provoke a crisis. ['US targets Saddam: Pentagon and CIA making plans for war against Iraq this year', 14 Feb 2002, p. 1, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,649867,00.html>>]:

The _NYT_ article, continues with more information about the effect of the memo, '89 Democrats in the House of Representatives have written to the White House', and the White House sees 'no need' to respond to the letter. Then comes another fake rebuttal:

Mr. Bush noted of the memorandum that 'they dropped it out in the middle of his race,' indicating that he thought it had been made public last month to hurt Mr. Blair's chances for re-election.

The memo had been leaked to hurt Blair, which is irrelevant: The circumstance does not invalidate the memo, especially when, as reported in the _NYT_ [1], its authors and subjects do not dispute its authenticity.

Then come more Bush/Blair fake rebuttals:

'Now, no one knows more intimately the discussions that we were conducting as two countries at the time than me,' Mr. Blair said.

That statement, true almost by definition, is as newsworthy as $2+2=4$ or dog bites man. The newsworthy question is whether Blair is lying about the memo. This article was written by Elisabeth Bumiller. In a panel discussion she protested:

You can say Mr. Bush's statement was not factually accurate. You can't say the president is lying... [_Extra!_, January/February 2005, <www.fair.org/index.php?page=2481>]

The reader should not expect Bumiller to conduct a searching investigation of Blair or Bush's veracity. Empirically Bumiller is right: A mainstream article saying that the president lied so rarely appears that one suspects a taboo on the subject. Where from and why, Bumiller does not say and may not know herself.

* 4. 13 June : Prewar British Memo Says War Decision Wasn't Made

In the memo, Dearlove (head of MI6) says that the decision had been made and the facts 'were being fixed' around the decision. The headline [4] claims the opposite. Who are you going to believe: your eyes or the _NYT_? The article's first paragraph restates its theme:

A memorandum written by Prime Minister Tony Blair's cabinet office in late July 2002 explicitly states that the Bush administration had made 'no political decisions' to invade Iraq,

Careful reading reveals that the article is discussing another document: not the memo but rather the briefing paper prepared for the Cabinet meeting. The briefing paper does explicitly say: 'no political decisions have been taken'. However, the complete sentence is:

Although no political decisions have been taken, US military planners have drafted options for the US Government to undertake an invasion of Iraq. ['Cabinet Office paper: Conditions for military action', 21 July 2002, para. 6, published in the _Sunday Times_ (London), 12 July 2005, and at<<http://www.afterdowningstreet.org/?q=node/189>>]

So, contrary to the _NYT_ fake rebuttal enabled by selective quoting, invasion planning is underway. The briefing paper says that 'military planning for action against Iraq is proceeding apace', however 'it lacks a political framework' [para. 1]. Translated from Foreign Office speak, the US planners had not sold the war to the US public, i.e. had not developed the political framework. That sale would come later because, 'From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August' [White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card in September 2003].

The _NYT_ article emphasizes that the briefing paper 'appeared to take as a given the presence of illicit weapons in Iraq', and criticizes its foolishness ('an assumption that later proved almost entirely wrong'). This imperial disdain, cruder than a fake rebuttal, also obscures the truth. Readers must drag out the full document and pore over it. Who except a fanatic has time for that? After doing so, you find that briefing paper might not accept the presence of 'illicit weapons'. WMD are key to the 'information campaign...that will need to give full coverage to the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, including his WMD, and the legal justification for action.' In other words, talk of WMD is for selling the war, not necessarily because they exist.

Then the article produces a fake rebuttal: 'the central fact reported — that the American military was in the midst of advanced planning for an invasion of Iraq — was no secret.' Advanced planning is not the same as deciding to go to war. The British minutes and briefing paper reveal the additional news that the war decision had been made, news that the _NYT_ avoids by juxtaposing an irrelevant fact.

Just to make sure we understand that everyone accepted that Iraq had WMD's, the article continues: 'On unconventional weapons, the memorandum also discloses doubts — but not that they existed.'

* 5. 14 June : A Peephole to the War Room: British Documents Shed Light on Bush Team's State of Mind

Article [5] leads with the 'political stir' from the disclosures, putting it down to the 'opponents' of Bush and Blair — not opponents of invading and killing (pro-life people, in a

more honest era) — but as Blair and Bush's personal antagonists. The article shifts the debate from policies to personalities. The article then states its theme early: 'But the documents are not quite so shocking' [as the political opponents claim]. The article has already stated a banal thesis to refute, that Bush and Blair misled their countries into war; and even that claim shall be downplayed.

The article contains this rich paragraph:

What no one knew then for certain (though some lonely voices did predict it) is that American forces would find none of the lethal chemical or biological weapons that Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair said made Iraq so dangerous, or that the anti-American insurgency would be so durable and deadly.

It does name the lonely voices. They include George Galloway MP, whose May 2005 drubbing of the US Senate made huge headlines in Britain (but not in America where they happened); they include Scott Ritter, former chief UN weapons inspector in Iraq. They felt lonely only in the _NYT_ and the rest of the mainstream media, which hardly reported their views except to dismiss them.

What makes the insurgency anti-American? The 'insurgents' could be called Iraqi 'freedom fighters'. An insurgent is 'a person who revolts against civil authority or an established government' (Merriam-Webster); by postulating an insurgency rather than a freedom struggle, the _NYT_ covertly asserts the legitimacy of the American occupation.

Then we learn that 'the memos are not the Dead Sea Scrolls', a highbrow expression of disdain, because 'There has been ample evidence for many months, and even years, that top Bush administration figures saw war as inevitable by the summer of 2002.' War, in this view, is like a hurricane, and the Bush administration passively awaited its approach. Accepting that misleading metaphor for the moment, the evidence adduced for it, a quote from the _New Yorker_, is weak. Richard Haass supposedly asked Condoleezza Rice 'whether it made sense to put Iraq at the center of the agenda, with a global campaign against terrorism already under way.' She said 'that that decision's been made...' Putting Iraq at the center of the agenda is almost certainly necessary to invading Iraq, but it is not sufficient: a difference that the article obscures.

Then the article downplays the memo for not 'put[ting] forward specific proof that Mr. Bush had taken any particular action'. Instead it merely gave, in the _NYT_ words, 'a general sense' from 'the impressions of Britain's chief of the Secret Intelligence Service'. The article does not explain for American readers that this chief is the counterpart of the CIA director, a post not usually given to people who comment on their vague impressions. The memo is further deficient because it 'does not elaborate' on the statement that 'the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy': another fake rebuttal. The lack of elaboration is true and irrelevant. As Michael Smith, the reporter who broke the stories, said in an online Q&A:

...as for the reports that said this was one British official. Pleeaaaassee! This was the head of MI6. How much authority do you want the man to have? He has just been to Washington, he has just talked to George Tenet. [16 June 2005, _Washington Post_ online]

After the fake rebuttal, the article then whitewashes the abuse of the United Nations:

Rather, what the memo seems to emphasize is that the United States could build greater support for any military action — especially from Britain — by first confronting Iraq through the United Nations,

Jack Straw's puzzle solution, quoted in the memo, explains what the UN route was about: creating an ultimatum that Iraq couldn't accept and using their refusal as the legal fig leaf.

The article finishes with a quote from oil itself, Senator John D. Rockefeller, who said we need '...a full and complete accounting of the mistakes leading up to the war in Iraq and what changes are necessary to fix them.' The base metal of aggressive war has transmuted into the silver of a mistake. Like the Vietnam war, soon it will become the gold of an American tragedy.

* 6. 16 June : 'Exit Strategy' Is More Than a Whisper in Washington, With Lawmakers Speaking Out

Article [6] first mentions the memo deep in the text:

On Thursday, Representative John Conyers Jr., a Michigan Democrat, will convene a forum on the so-called Downing Street Memo, a leaked document that appeared to suggest the White House had made a decision to go to war in the summer of 2002.

The convener is a Democrat, so he is probably already antiwar; his forum — not the more official sounding 'hearing' — is just antiwar organizing. Furthermore, the reader learns mostly the effect of the memo with its contents bashfully peeking out from the veils. The memo merely 'appeared to suggest' that the White House 'had made a decision' to go to war. The 'appeared' is one indirection, and the memo only 'suggests', a second indirection separating the reader from the content of the memo. Even minor sentence constructions contribute distance: The White House 'had made a decision', a noun phrase rather than the more active and direct verb 'decided'. The article spends many words creating space between the reader and the memo, and no words explaining the the memo's significance: that after the summer of 2002, Bush and Blair's talk of peace and working with the UN was just marketing (i.e. lies) to build public support and legal cover.

* 7. 17 June : Memo Shows Bush Misled Public, Antiwar Group Says

The most recent _NYT_ coverage [7] leads with:

Opponents of the war in Iraq held an unofficial hearing on Capitol Hill...to draw attention to a leaked British government document that they say proves that President Bush misled the public about his war plans in 2002...

Its hearing is downplayed as 'unofficial', and besides it is held by opponents of the war, so it is another antiwar event: No news here, keep moving. The article does not explain that the hearing was unofficial because Republicans refused to allow it to take place in the Congressional chambers.

Here is the well-designed second paragraph:

In a jammed room in the basement of the Capitol, Representative John Conyers Jr. of Michigan...presided as witnesses asserted that the 'Downing Street memo'...vindicated their view that Mr. Bush made the decision to topple Saddam Hussein long before he has

admitted.

It distances the reader with ‘witnesses asserted’ that the memo ‘vindicated their view’, rather than the direct ‘the memo says...’ The article eventually explains one of the memo’s revelations: that Dearlove says Bush has decided on war. But the article omits the evidence for Dearlove’s statement: a high-level trip to Washington, probably talking to George Tenet, head of the CIA. As far as the reader knows, Dearlove could just be sounding off.

The fourth paragraph quotes a mother who damns the war as an ‘illegal invasion of another sovereign country on prefabricated and cherry-picked intelligence’. The reader learns that her son had been killed in Iraq, and is invited to think that she is hysterical and too involved to be objective.

The article then reprints Bush’s denials without comment:

‘Nobody wants to commit military into combat. It’s the last option.’ He added, ‘We worked hard to see if we could figure out how to do this peacefully.’

Without pausing to comment, let alone to refute, the report continues with Mr. Conyers and colleagues delivering ‘bundles they said contained the names of more than 560,000 Americans gathered on the Internet who had endorsed his letter to the president demanding answers to questions raised by the memo.’ The ‘they said’ casts doubt on the list, but the reporter gives no evidence that Conyers fabricated the names or did not gather them on the Internet. If the count is doubted, he could have inspected the bundles himself, counted the names on one page, estimated the number of pages, and then multiplied the figures to arrive at his own estimate. The White House’s fake rebuttal, that Conyers voted against the war, is quoted verbatim. Conyers probably voted against the war, but — making the rebuttal fake — his vote is irrelevant to what the memo says or whether Bush lied. Even granting the fake rebuttal a comment, the reporter could have refuted it by stating how many of the 122 Congressional co-signers voted for the war.

The article explains nothing more of the memo’s contents. The last paragraph mentions that another document — the briefing paper — warned of a long ‘nation-building exercise’. Careful, America, do not let your helping impulse (building nations) put you into the soup!

6. SUMMARY

The _NYT_ articles — masterpieces of delay, indirection, distraction, fake rebuttals, and elegant omission — keep readers ignorant of the lies and the lying liars who tell them. No wonder so many Americans still support this gangster war.

No _NYT_ article comments on perhaps the most revolting revelation of the memo. The UK Defence Secretary thought that the US military ‘timeline [would begin] 30 days before the US Congressional elections.’ Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi die so that Americans elect a crowd of pirates perched on the rotting platform of the war of terror.

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