

Tony Blair Should be Prosecuted over Iraq

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President Barack Obama was not [?] a war criminal despite US involvement in wars in Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan and against Daesh. His predecessor George W. Bush was. Apart from anything else, his administration tortured captives. Was the former British minister, Tony Blair, the closest ally of Bush also a war criminal? And should he now be prosecuted and tried for war crimes?

Did Blair lie over the reason for going to war with Iraq, the supposed stockpile of weapons of mass destruction that he alleged Iraq possessed? It depends on how you define lie. If you define lie as saying this cat is white, when in fact it is black, he did not lie on the big issues. But what he did do was give the impression the cat was assuredly white when it was, in fact, a sort of dark greyish white. As far as the public could tell from what he told them, the intelligence services did seem to have the goods on Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.

But as a later independent report made by a distinguished judge appointed by the government made clear, the caveats presented to Blair by the intelligence services were left out and the presentation was polished by Blair's office. Parliament and the public were never given the pre-polished version.

That he was not prepared to persuade Bush to wait a few more weeks until the evidence of Hans Blix, the chief UN arms inspector, was in the midst of collecting on the ground inside Iraq, was gravely irresponsible. Moreover, sanctions had Saddam boxed in. He was, as was obvious to many outside the White House and Downing Street, able to harm no one outside his country. The UN policing and inspecting, imposed after the first Gulf War, had led to ridding Iraq of all its weapons of mass destruction. The war itself had effectively wiped out Saddam's air force, navy and broken the back of his army. Evidence has come to light that Bush, with Blair's knowledge, had given the green light for going to war long before Blix got to work. Blair denied this and covered it up.

Blair also lied about the suicide of the government's weapons expert, David Kelly, who shortly after he was ousted in the press as the source claiming the government's public dossier on Iraq's weapons had been "sexed up", killed himself. Although an inquiry exonerated Blair for any blame for precipitating the suicide, a BBC interview much later caught Blair lying in a way we could all understand. He told the interviewer:

"I do not believe we had any option, however, to disclose his name [to the press]."

Until that day, Blair had always maintained that it was “completely untrue” that his government had done this.

In an article in The Financial Times, Rodric Braithwaite, former UK ambassador to Moscow and later chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee that prepares intelligence for the prime minister, wrote, “Stiff in his opinions, but often in the wrong, Blair has manipulated public opinion, sent our soldiers into distant lands for ill-conceived purposes, misused the intelligence agencies to serve his ends and reduced the Foreign Office to a demoralised cipher because it keeps reminding him of inconvenient facts”.

Can Blair be prosecuted for war crimes? Iryna Marchuk, an associate professor of law at the University of Copenhagen, who has studied in detail this question, told me that the government-appointed Chilcot inquiry that lasted from 2009 to 2015 did blame the government for the war. However, it did not point a finger at individuals responsible.

She, however, adds to the Chilcot conclusion:

“It was an unnecessary war, thousands were killed and a country almost destroyed and fingers can be pointed.”

There is enough information, she argues, available for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to start an investigation to see if the court could build a case sufficient to send Blair to trial because of his responsibility for war crimes. “It is not going to happen overnight. The ICC is still looking at the evidence. The ICC prosecutor examined the Blair case before, but his successor, Ms Fatou Bensouda, in 2014 re-opened the case.”

Tony Blair must worry day and night that he might be prosecuted. After all, it took the Serbian war criminal, Radovan Karadzic, 20 years before he was brought to trial and convicted. He is now serving a 40-year sentence.

There are human rights organisations, like the European Centre of Human Rights, working to collect evidence and to push the ICC prosecutor forward in a case that has great ramifications.

It is time overdue and the evidence is compelling that Blair be sent for trial. It was not necessary to launch a war that killed tens of thousands of children, either directly or for want of the previously available medicines and hospitals. The ICC must get on with it.

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