http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/27/bush-administration-sold-iraq-war

How the Bush administration sold the war – and we bought it

We knew WMD intelligence was flawed, but there was a larger failure of officials, media and public to halt the neocon juggernaut

Valerie Plame Wilson

2/27/2013

It has been 10 long years since "Shock and Awe" – the opening bombardment of Baghdad – lit up the skies above the Tigris. A decade later, we know far more about the case the Bush administration made to the world to justify its war of choice to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Books like Hubris by David Corn and Michael Isikoff, and British commission and US Senate reports have catalogued the extent to which intelligence was misused to mislead the public.

Yet, even as the intervening period has brought profound change for the United States and its role in the world, have we learned the lessons of that disastrous period? And what were those lessons?

For nearly a year prior to the invasion, President Bush and his administration peppered the airwaves with serious accusations against Saddam Hussein, including claims of aluminum tubes that could be used in centrifuges to enrich uranium, and of Iraqi efforts to purchase uranium yellowcake from Africa. The intelligence supporting the claims was either not believed or was highly disputed by the experts. But that did not stop senior government officials from repeating them incessantly; nor did it prevent the powerful neoconservative ideologues who were the war's most fervent supporters from parroting them with menacingly jingoistic passion.

Who can forget the trademark line, delivered by Condoleezza Rice:

We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.

As a covert CIA operations officer working frantically in the months before the war to find and verify hard intelligence about Iraq's presumed WMD program, Valerie was keenly interested in watching Secretary of State Colin Powell address the United Nations on 6 February 2003. His reputation and service to the United States was stellar, and he was viewed as the lone moderate inside what many others considered to be a hawkish cabinet.

As Valerie watched the speech unfold on TV from CIA headquarters that morning, she experienced what can only be described as "cognitive dissonance". It became clear, as Powell laid out the case for war (with CIA Director George Tenet sitting conspicuously just behind the secretary's right shoulder), that his robust claims about the state of Iraqi WMD simply did not match the intelligence which she had worked on daily for months.

Powell's claim from a discredited defector code-named "Curveball" on Iraq's biological weapons capability was particularly alarming. Valerie knew that "Curveball" had been deemed a "fabricator" by the agency, meaning that none of his intelligence could be believed.

The implications suddenly become obvious: we were watching a kabuki play and the outcome was predetermined. The Bush administration was determined to go to war, however bad the intelligence, and not even Secretary of State Powell was going to stand in the way.

Joe, too, watched Powell's speech, wondering whether the secretary would repeat the statement, first made by President Bush in his state of the union address several days earlier , that "the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." At the request of the CIA, Joe had investigated that claim in February 2002, as it pertained to Niger and had reported back to the agency that there was *no* evidence to support the charge. Tellingly, Colin Powell made no mention at the UN of any Iraqi effort to seek uranium, either from Niger or anywhere else in Africa.

Rumors of a Niger-Iraq uranium deal had first surfaced in Rome in 2001, as documents purporting to be related to the sale of 500 metric tonnes of yellowcake (a lightly refined uranium ore) circulated in intelligence circles and among journalists. Those documents were later found to be forgeries, but by the time the charge made its way into the president's speech, it had already been largely discounted by both the State Department and the CIA. The agency's director told the White House three times not to use the claim because the CIA believed it to be false.

The now infamous 16 words made it into the state of the union speech only by agreement between the White House and the CIA to attribute the charge to the British government, which had published such a claim in its "White Paper" on Iraq, in September 2002. Unfortunately, as then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw testified to the House of Commons foreign affairs select committee in June 2003, the British claim had been based on separate intelligence from the forged documents, and that the British had *not* shared their intelligence with the US government.

In sum, we are left to believe that a significant part of President Bush's case for war was based on intelligence that neither he nor his intelligence officials had even seen. The declassification of several documents in recent years, and a US Senate investigation report published in 2008 conclude that there was far closer collusion between the Bush and Blair administrations than the Straw testimony suggests. Yet, the British government to this day continues to stand behind its "separate intelligence" – which it has yet to make public.

The Powell address to the UN and the Niger-Iraq saga are but two examples of the efforts of the Bush administration to manipulate intelligence to support its political objectives and the lengths to which it went to secure support for its war. As former White House press secretary Scott McClellan put it:

"Bush and his White House were engaging in a carefully orchestrated campaign to shape and manipulate sources of public approval to our advantage."

That it was so successful is an indictment of a corrupt administration. But it is also emblematic of the failure of the checks and balances that are the hallmark of our democracy. As Obama appointees John Kerry and Chuck Hagel can attest, the US Congress was ineffective, to say the least, in the exercise of its oversight responsibilities. (The same applies to the UK Parliament.) The Washington press corps was dilatory in its investigative reporting – valuing access and cozy relationships with senior officials above the search for truth; ultimately, the media served as lapdogs rather than watchdogs.

And the public, still reeling from 911 and whipped up by the fear-mongering since, instinctively trusted its leaders. Given the full force and power of the administration's efforts to sell the war, it is no wonder that nearly 60% of Americans were in favor of the invasion in the early part of 2003.

Not surprisingly, that figure has flipped, with nearly 60% of Americans now saying that the Iraq war was a mistake; more than 70% of the British public agree. We owe it to ourselves and to our partners in the "coalition of the willing" to confront the fact that, when it mattered a decade ago, our Congress, our press, and we as citizens were not vigilant enough in holding our government to account for its statements and actions.

We did not do nearly enough to prevent this tragedy perpetrated on Iraq, on the world, and on ourselves.