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Blair's continuing thirst for war

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Looking sun-tanned and relaxed, the former prime minister had strode into the hearing room that morning, taking his seat before the five-person panel led by an avuncular Lord Chilcot.



Former prime minister and current Middle East peace envoy Tony Blair was summoned to another session of the Iraq Inquiry, where he was met with derision by families who lost loved ones in the war on Iraq

The inquiry, officially launched in July 2009, is intended to identify lessons that can be learned from the Iraq conflict and has so far heard testimony from scores of key government and military officials from the time.

The former prime minister - the current EU Middle East envoy - who testified last January, was recalled in order to clarify some discrepancies between his earlier evidence and that of later witnesses. Indeed, before today's hearing there was speculation that the inquiry might demonstrate that he deliberately misled his cabinet, parliament and the British people.

Einstein once defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and waiting for different results, so perhaps it was madness to hope Tony Blair, appearing for the second time at the Iraq Inquiry, would tell us anything new.

But whilst there were no big revelations over the decisions he made in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq, Blair's statement that he "deeply and profoundly regrets the loss of life" before a number of grieving parents who had lost family members in the war caused something of a stir.

As he came to the end of a four-and-a-half hour bravura during which Blair robustly defended all his decisions over Iraq and even used the platform to urge possible military action against Iran, he decided to take the opportunity to express sorrow for deaths resulting from the war.

But his statement was met by jeers of derision from members of military families attending the hearing.

"Too late!" cried woman a woman in the public gallery. Two others stood up and left the room. Rose Gentle, whose son Gordon was killed in Basra in 2004, looked Blair in the eye and told him, "Your lies killed my son."

During questioning, Blair dismissed suggestions that he had committed British troops for the American-led invasion long before the issue was properly discussed in cabinet or debated in parliament.

Earlier this month Lord Goldsmith, the government's chief law officer at the time, had told the Inquiry that in October 2002 he learned that "the prime minister had indicated to president Bush that he would join the US in acting without a second security council decision if Iraq failed to take the action that was required by the draft resolution [1441]."

But he explained this away saying that he had not wanted to "start raising legal issues" with Bush until he was absolutely sure of the British legal position.

Blair did not deny that in January 2003 he had assured George W. Bush that he was "solidly" with him despite the fact that it was only two months later, on the eve of the invasion, that Lord Goldsmith had given Blair the formal legal advice that a "reasonable case" could be made for launching an attack without further UN backing.

Challenged as to why, in direct contradiction to advice provided by Lord Goldsmith, Blair told parliament on January 15, 2003 that in certain circumstances a second UN resolution would not be necessary, Blair said that he had been "making a political point" rather than "a legal one".

Anyone hoping for this to be judgement day for Blair was in for a sore disappointment.

Instead, 'Teflon Tony' rose to the occasion, defiantly repeating his 'I did what I thought was right' mantra and once again using the platform to warn of the "destabilising" and "negative" influence of Iran.

At his first appearance before Lord Chilcot, Blair managed to mention Iran no less than 58 times.

Last Friday, although his first reference to Iran came within the first three minutes of his testimony, it was only at the end of his session that he went into detail about the "looming, coming challenge" posed by Iran.

When asked what lessons he took from the Iraq war, Blair responded: "the link between AQ [Al Qaeda] and Iran". He went on to say that "we must get our heads out the sand" and meet the Iranian threat with "the requisite determination and, if necessary, force".

The Middle East peace envoy has clearly lost none of his thirst for war.

Outside, as the former prime minister prepared to leave, the demonstrators' chant of "Tony Blair, to the Hague" was clearly audible.

Whilst Blair will never have to face the International Criminal Court, his religious views mean that one day he will have to face a higher form of judgement.

"In Catholic terms there are three clear steps for forgiveness: confession, firm purpose of amendment and penance" veteran peace campaigner and former Roman Catholic priest Bruce Kent tells me outside the Inquiry. "Mr Blair has done none of these."

Though Tony Blair has made it clear that he feels no guilt, he clearly feels a sense of responsibility; responsibility for the decisions made in office and responsibility for the blood price paid by British soldiers as well as Iraqis.

In those heady days in 1997 a newly elected Blair said in a speech: "Mine is the first generation able to contemplate the possibility that we may live our entire lives without going to war or sending our children to war."

Two wars and countless deaths later, he must sometimes ask himself where it all went so horribly, horribly wrong.

He may have done what he "thought was right", but as news comes in this week alone of a further 130 deaths in Iraq, that decision must surely weigh heavily on his sun-kissed shoulders.