Unpeople
Mark Curtis

Chapter 1

PART 1

IRAQ

OCCUPYING IRAQ: THE ATTACK ON DEMOCRACY

Current British policy towards Iraq is in many ways nothing new. Many aspects of the invasion and occupation are normal, permanent features of British foreign policy, in particular: the violation of international law, the government's abuse of the UN, its deception of the public and its support for US aggression.

Yet what the Iraq episode has revealed to large numbers of people is the nature of British foreign policy-making: a cabal of unelected advisers around its chief, the Prime Minister, taking decisions in an unaccountable and increasingly centralised way and contemptuous of restrictions on its authority from public opinion and international law.

Indeed, the British and Iraqi public have something in common: they are both seen as a threat to policy-makers, to be overcome with violence in the case of Iraq and propaganda in the case of Britain. There is a symmetry between the attack on democracy in Britain (evident in the invasion, opposed by the majority of the public) and the attack on democracy in Iraq (evident in the occupation, which is attempting to impose Anglo-American priorities on an increasingly popular resistance movement).

British democracy in action

The three key actors at the centre of the Iraq episode – Downing Street, parliament and the media – illustrate the current nature of 'democracy' in Britain.

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Blair's cabal – consisting of his closest foreign policy advisers in Downing Street – has been heading an unprecedented propaganda campaign to deceive the public, and has appropriated the power of the state to an unprecedented degree, even to the point of capturing its legal functions. Britain's 'democratic' political system has been revealed as more a kind of personalised autocracy. There are, moreover, no formal mechanisms within the British political system to restrain it. The Hutton and Butler inquiries were set up by the Prime Minister and predictably cleared the government of acting in bad faith or for 'sexing up' intelligence on Iraq, in defiance of all the evidence. They suggest a stage-managed lack of accountability which would be hard to match outside the former Soviet bloc.

Consider also the failure of the various all-party parliamentary committees to hold the government to account. For example, the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on the decision to go to war found that 'ministers did not mislead parliament' and agreed with the government that Iraq was 'a real and present danger'. It also concluded that the claims made in the government's September 2002 dossier, alleging all manner of threats from Iraq which have since been shown to be nonsense, were 'well-founded on the basis of the intelligence then available'. These select committees are the primary means by which policy-making is scrutinised on behalf of the public.

On the eve of the invasion the majority of the British public, 58 per cent, were shown to be opposed to the war. Air Marshal Brian Burridge, Commander of British forces in the invasion, later noted that 'we went into this campaign with 33 per cent public support'.2 Yet parliament still backed war; indeed, more MPs voted to oppose the government over the proposed ban on fox-hunting than did over the invasion of Iraq – perhaps evidence that to those who supposedly represent the British people, animals are more important than (un)people. Following the parliamentary debate on the Butler report in July 2004, only 41 MPs voted against the government. At the same time, an opinion poll showed that 55 per cent of the public believed that Tony Blair lied over the war. The 'democratic deficit' in British political culture is now gaping.

The invasion of Iraq highlights the need for a transformation in the way Britain is governed – something which now seems obvious even to some supporters of the war. Keeping discussion of this largely off the mainstream media agenda must count as one of the great elite propaganda successes, another sign of the extreme lack of democracy in mainstream British culture. While many in the media praise themselves for not letting Blair 'draw a line' under the Iraq affair, they have indeed done so on its most important aspect.

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In this light, the media's increasing criticism of Blair personally is a sideshow: it is the system, not the individuals that preside over it, which is the problem. Protecting the system is a basic function of the mainstream media – we can expect that once Blair falls and different faces are in power (no doubt promoting essentially the same policies), the real issue will become even more deeply buried. Indeed, many in the media are now openly calling for Blair to resign precisely because he has become a liability to the system: ever larger numbers of the public no longer trust it, and know that 'democracy' is a facade, thus posing a threat to the wider elite. Yet the problem for that elite is that it is hard even for them to remove the Blair cabal since the beast they have created is indeed so centralised.

It is true that, since the occupation began, there has been considerable criticism of government policy in the mainstream media, and some thorough reporting of the revelations from the Hutton inquiry in the Guardian and Independent. This stance is partly explicable by the media's need to defend itself against Alastair Campbell, Blair's former Director of 'Communications', and from the Hutton report's attack on the BBC. It is also worth remembering that the parameters of acceptable debate have been widened from within the establishment, much of which was opposed to invading Iraq, for self-interested reasons: the April 2004 letter, speaking out against British policy in Iraq and Israel and signed by 52 former senior diplomats, shows how Blair's cabal has succeeded in alienating even members of its own elite.

Yet the government was able to invade and occupy Iraq because of much of the media's failure to expose obvious propaganda and to be regularly willing simply to parrot it. By the time the September 2002 dossier was published, it was clear that Blair's cabal was bent on invading Iraq and would find any justification for doing so. Yet the mainstream media failed systematically to ridicule the document as obvious state propaganda. Much of it has been taken at face value, not only by the tabloid press, with only mild criticisms and analysis. From then until the invasion period, the litany of British and US government claims of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and links to al Qaeda was consistently reported uncritically.

Just as unquestioning has been the portrayal of the 'intelligence' agencies and the 'security services' as independent, neutral actors providing objective material for a government to act upon. Yet much of the 'intelligence' agencies' work is to promote disinformation, a role discussed in chapter 3.

Also absurd has been the media's compliance in a portrayal of Britain as a force bent on reducing WMD. Not only is Britain a leading nuclear power with no intention of abolishing its own arsenal (in defiance of its international obligations), it is also

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developing a new generation of such weapons. While the debate over Iraqi WMD was taking place, the British delegation at the UN was opposing several General Assembly resolutions calling on the nuclear states to reduce and abolish their arsenals. In the 57th session of the UN General Assembly, which began in September 2002, Britain voted against three such resolutions and abstained on two others. In all of these votes, more than a hundred states voted in favour, while Britain could count less than five allies (one of which was invariably the US). None of this has been reported in the mainstream media, which preferred to take seriously New Labour's moral commitment to abolishing WMD.

The ideological role of the mainstream media over Iraq has been well-documented in various academic studies and also by the organisation Medialens, which currently provides the most incisive analysis of media reporting. It has noted, for example:

The important lies – that past experience proved war was necessary to enforce Iraq's disarmament, that its alleged weapons of mass destruction represented a serious threat, that there was a 'moral case for war', and that the US/UK governments were making 'desperate efforts to find a diplomatic alternative' to war – went almost completely unchallenged by the BBC and the media generally.

The portrayal of the BBC as either neutral or even opposed to the war is another staggering public relations achievement. In reality, the institution's 'news' output has been shown by independent analysis to consistently support the priorities of the state. Blair's 'moral' commitments in Iraq are rarely questioned; the done thing is to question only the tactics for achieving his assumed 'humanitarian' objectives. It is almost never mentioned that hundreds of thousands of Iraqis lie dead thanks partly to sanctions previously maintained by Britain and the US. The mainstream media also continues to broadcast the British and American assertion that they are seeking 'democracy' in Iraq while the insurgents are never described as the resistance movement which they represent.

In May 2004, a huge amount of media attention was paid to abuses of Iraqis in custody by US soldiers. But these gruesome acts were a sideshow to the hundreds of Iraqis being massacred in Falluja and elsewhere at the same time. The Abu Ghraib diversion ensured that these uprisings barely made the news, and their suppression was rarely described as the slaughter it was.

Invasion, occupation

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The Blair government ordered British forces into a brutal invasion and occupation not in response to a threat from Iraq but to promote traditional foreign policy goals and to demonstrate the special relationship with the US. This is at a time when the US has clearly announced its intention to rule the world by force, outside of international law and free from restrictions imposed by many multilateral institutions or agreements. Blair has acted as the world's major apologist for US foreign policy under the Bush administration. 'There has never been a time when the power of America was so necessary, or so misunderstood', he told the US Congress in July 2003.

Washington's decision to invade Iraq appears to date to two days after September 11th 2001, when Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz argued to strike Baghdad but decided on Afghanistan first. One week later, at a private dinner in Washington, George Bush asked Tony Blair for his backing in removing Saddam, according to Christopher Meyer, the former British ambassador to the US. Bush agreed with Blair on the need to strike Afghanistan first but said that 'we must come back to Iraq', to which, according to Meyer, Blair 'said nothing to demur'. Within weeks of September 11th Sir Richard Dearlove, head of MI6, reportedly flew to Washington for policy discussions with US National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice on regime change in Iraq and on al Qaeda.

Tony Blair's decision to join the US in invading Iraq appears to have been taken in September 2002 at the latest and possibly as early as April 2002 – at meetings with President Bush. The Butler report is interesting in this respect, and refers to British 'changes in policy towards Iraq in early 2002'. In March, the government considered two options 'for achieving the goal of Iraqi disarmament' – 'a toughening of the existing containment policy; and regime change by military means'. The Butler report states that:

The government's conclusion in the spring of 2002 that stronger action (although not necessarily military action) needed to be taken to enforce Iraqi disarmament was not based on any new development in the current intelligence picture on Iraq. In his evidence to us, the Prime Minister endorsed the view expressed at the time that what had changed was not the pace of Iraq's prohibited weapons programmes, which had not been dramatically stepped up, but tolerance of them following the attacks of 11 September 2001.

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Butler also notes that at this time 'there was no recent intelligence that would itself have given rise to a conclusion that Iraq was of more immediate concern than the activities of some other countries'.

Britain apparently joined US military planning for an invasion of Iraq in June 2002, at which point, according to British military chiefs, a target date of 'spring of 2003 or autumn of 2003' was considered. More specific military planning, including 'media operations', began in September 2002.

This date coincides with Blair's ordering the production of a dossier, intended to make the case for war, while claiming that it was simply outlining the intelligence that Britain had on the threat posed by Iraq. For months, and possibly up to a year, the pretence was maintained to the public that the decision to go to war had not been taken.

By early 2003, the real threat posed to Whitehall by Iraq was not possession of WMD but the fact that Iraq was beginning to cooperate with the weapons inspectors. On 7 March, two weeks before the invasion, chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix told the Security Council that Iraq, although by no means fully cooperating, was taking 'numerous initiatives . . . with a view to resolving longstanding open disarmament issues' and that 'this can be seen as "active", or even "proactive" cooperation'. After the invasion, Blix reported to the Security Council that his weapons inspections commission, UNMOVIC, 'has not at any time during the inspections in Iraq found evidence of the continuation or resumption of programmes of weapons of mass destruction or significant quantities of proscribed items – whether from pre-1991 or later'.

The invaders' actual aims were essentially to ensure that Iraq has a pro-Western government, that it provides the US with the military bases necessary for a redesign of the Middle East, and that oil flows in accordance with US and UK interests; attainment of the latter two objectives will provide an alternative to US reliance on Saudi Arabia. The British interest in securing new foreign energy supplies is outlined in chapter 4.

That the Iraqi WMD threat was largely a pretext for securing fundamental US interests was conceded by Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who told Vanity Fair magazine that the issue of WMD was chosen for political expediency: 'The truth is that for reasons that have a lot to do with the US government bureaucracy, we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on – which was

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weapons of mass destruction – as the core reason'. A 'huge' outcome of the war, he noted, was the opportunity for the US to pull troops out of Saudi Arabia.

Jay Garner, the retired US General who initially ran the occupation authority in Iraq, recently noted that:

One of the most important things we can do right now is start getting basing rights . . . Look back on the Philippines around the turn of the 20th century: they were a coaling station for the navy, and that allowed us to keep a great presence in the Pacific. That's what Iraq is for the next few decades: our coaling station that gives us great presence in the Middle East.

Indeed, by early 2004 the US press was reporting that 'US military engineers are overseeing the building of an enhanced system of American bases designed to last for years'. Fourteen 'enduring bases' were being constructed with plans to operate from former Iraqi bases in Baghdad, Mosul, Taji, Balad, Kirkuk and in areas near Nasiriyah, near Tikrit, near Falluja and between Irbil and Kirkuk. The number of US troops currently in Iraq – around 110,000 – was expected to remain the same through to 2006.

There was a further reason given for war, by Blair, repeated on many occasions in speeches and press conferences. This goal was the same as that given for the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and Afghanistan in 2001, which again went largely unreported. Blair said a month before the invasion that if 'we fail to act' then 'when we turn to deal with other threats, where will our authority be? And when we make a demand next time, what will our credibility be?' In a press conference at Camp David in February he similarly said that if 'we back down' and if 'the world walks away' then 'think of the signal that would have sent right across the world to every brutal dictator'.

What Blair is saying is that the rulers of the world must show the underlings who's boss, otherwise their 'credibility' may be challenged. The demonstration of brute power has value. After the invasion Blair said:

You can see in relation to countries like Syria and Iran, where we have still got big issues we need to discuss with them and we need to resolve with them, and yet we

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can do that now in a completely different atmosphere than was possible a few months ago.

Translated: now that we've whacked Iraq, our other enemies are more easily brought into line. Such is the viciousness that lies behind the facade of British foreign policy.

The invasion was extremely brutal. Figures vary from 10,000 civilian deaths alone, with at least 20,000 injured, to another estimate of 22,000–55,000, a figure which includes military and civilian deaths from diseases caused by the war's destruction of health infrastructure.

US and British officials are not counting the number of civilian deaths, during either the war or the occupation. 'We have no viable means of ascertaining the numbers of Iraqis killed or injured during the conflict', the government has stated on several occasions. It has also refused calls in parliament to make a survey of the number of deaths during the invasion period.

British and US forces used around 13,000 cluster bombs containing 2 million bomblets, which killed or wounded more than 1,000 civilians. Around 90,000 bomblets remain unexploded, according to US-based organisation Human Rights Watch, littering the country with what are effectively landmines.

Britain used 2,170 cluster bombs containing 113,190 submunitions. The government, however, had the audacity to claim in June 2003 that 'we are aware of no proven civilian casualties caused by UK cluster weapons'. By contrast, Human Rights Watch reports:

UK forces caused dozens of civilian casualties when they used ground-launched cluster munitions in and around Basra. A trio of neighbourhoods in the southern part of the city was particularly hard hit. At noon on 23 March, a cluster strike hit Hay al-Muhandissin al-Kubra (the engineers district) while Abbas Kadhim, thirteen, was throwing out the garbage. He had acute injuries to his bowel and liver, and a fragment that could not be removed lodged near his heart . . . Three hours later, submunitions blanketed the neighbourhood of al- Mishraq al-Jadid about two and a half kilometers northeast. Iyad Jassim Ibrhaim, a twenty-six-year-old carpenter, was sleeping in the front room of his home when shrapnel injuries caused him to lose consciousness. He later died in surgery. Ten relatives who were sleeping elsewhere

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in the house suffered shrapnel injuries. Across the street, the cluster strikes injured three children.

The US and Britain also conducted air strikes against media, electrical and civilian power distribution facilities. 'Some of the attacks on electrical power distribution facilities in Iraq are likely to have a serious and long-term detrimental impact on the civilian population', due to the effects on water and sewage treatment plants and medical care, Human Rights Watch comments. The US destruction of three separate Iraqi media facilities 'was of questionable legality' since there was no evidence that the media was used to support Iraq's military effort, it notes further.

Between 1,000 and 2,000 tonnes of depleted uranium were also used. According to the Uranium Medical Research Council, the main cities of Iraq are poisoned with radiation from these shells and missiles.

Immediately after the fall of the Saddam regime, the occupation took a predictably violent course. From the outset, US troops opened fire on unarmed civilians, killed peaceful demonstrators and even shot at ambulances, killing or wounding their occupants. Hundreds of people were killed in the first year of the occupation, mainly by US forces, who often resorted to brutish methods of population control. Homes were being demolished as a form of collective punishment, which are illegal acts. The press also reported the existence of a secret police force operating with British approval in southern Iraq that had been accused of kidnapping suspects who were subsequently mistreated in detention and, in some cases, 'disappeared'. Israeli advisers were also reported to be training US special forces in 'aggressive counter-insurgency operations', including the use of assassination squads.

Faced with increasing opposition to the occupation, as well as horrific bombings against US and Iraqi targets, the US stepped up the war in November 2003. It was then that new 'offensive operations' began, directed at Iraq's 'growing guerrilla movement', and which involved heavy equipment such as gunships and the use of aircraft for the first time since Bush declared the war over. A further, even more dangerously violent phase began in April 2004, when, in response to the killing of four US private security guards, the US decided to clamp down on Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. It launched horrific attacks on Falluja and other cities that killed hundreds of people, half of whom were civilians and children. British forces killed up to 40 people in a massacre near the town of Amara in May 2004.

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The attack on Falluja started with eliminating the power supply and involved days of intense bombardment, including pounding the city with 500lb bombs. Reports suggested that US troops shot randomly at people and targeted ambulances, while US marines closed the main hospital for the city's 300,000 people for more than two weeks in order to use it as a military position, a violation of the Geneva convention. According to aid workers, many wounded died as a result. After the attack, aid workers described the city as a ghost town after inhabitants poured out in their tens of thousands.

As a result of these operations, one member of the USappointed Iraqi Governing Council suspended his membership and another called them 'mass punishment for the people of Falluja', which was 'unacceptable and illegal'. The attack on Falluja was, however, completely backed by Tony Blair, who told MPs that 'it is perfectly right and proper that they take action against those insurgents', adding that 'I deeply regret any civilian death in Falluja, but it's necessary that order is restored'. Blair justified the attack under the general pretext of fighting 'former regime elements' and 'outside terrorists'. Yet, as the Guardian reported, 'those from Falluja could not understand the claim. The insurgents were not terrorists but Iraqis, they did not support the old regime and were merely fighting a patriotic war against American occupation'. The Falluja massacre was quickly passed over in the media, whereas the terrorist killing of 200 people in Madrid received intense coverage for over two weeks.

By May 2004, it had become clear that the US and Britain were confronting an increasingly popular resistance movement. The occupation resembled previous colonial attempts at subjugating nationalist uprisings, and a war of national liberation, uniting various groups, was emerging. Contrary to the public proclamations of British ministers, a leaked Foreign Office memo of May 2004 noted that the insurgency had 'a reservoir of popular support, at least among the Sunnis'.

The response was plain. 'We are going to fight them and impose our will on them and we will capture or, if necessary, kill them until we have imposed law and order upon this country', the US administrator, Paul Bremer, sounding tellingly like a viceroy, said before he left the country after the fictional 'transfer of power' in mid-2004.

A report by the US-based Centre for Economic and Social Rights in June 2004 noted that 'the Bush administration is committing war crimes and other serious violations of international law in Iraq as a matter of routine policy'. It documented ten categories of violations. These included: 'unlawful attacks' involving 'widespread and unnecessary civilian casualties'; 'unlawful detention and torture' involving

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indiscriminate arrests with around 90 per cent of those detained being innocent bystanders swept up in illegal mass arrests; and 'collective punishment', involving 'taking a cue from Israeli tactics in the occupied territories' by demolishing civilian homes, sealing off entire towns and villages and 'using indiscriminate, overwhelming force in crowded urban areas'.

US and British occupation forces have consistently acted with impunity. Human Rights Watch reported in October 2003 that there were 94 civilian deaths in Baghdad alone 'involving questionable legal circumstances that warrant investigation'. But the US military was 'failing to conduct proper investigations into civilian deaths resulting from the excessive and indiscriminate use of force'. One year into the occupation not a single US soldier had been prosecuted for illegally killing an Iraqi civilian.

As of mid 2004, the deaths of 75 Iraqi civilians at the hands of British forces were being investigated by the British military. 'British troops, and those who command them, can kill with impunity because there is no effective mechanism for accountability within domestic or international law', commented Phil Shiner, a lawyer acting for those killed by British forces. The British military maintains a discreet unit within US-run Camp Bucca prison near the port city of Umm Qasr, in which US soldiers have been known to abuse Iraqis.

A Red Cross report of May 2004 noted 'a number of serious violations of international humanitarian law' by US forces, including 'brutality' in custody, 'physical or psychological coercion during interrogation', prolonged solitary confinement in cells without daylight and 'excessive and disproportionate use of force, resulting in death or injury'. Methods used included hooding, handcuffing, 'pressing the face into the ground with boots', threats, being stripped naked for several days, acts of humiliation and exposure to loud noise. These methods, which involve war crimes, have become standard US practice, employed both at Guantanamo Bay and in Afghanistan, and perhaps also at other US detention centres in Pakistan, Jordan and Diego Garcia. Indeed, they have been taught to US and British military intelligence soldiers at bases in Britain and elsewhere and are known as 'resistance to interrogation' techniques. They also perhaps best signal the Bush administration's view of international law, exemplified in Bush's own response to September 11th: 'I don't care what the international lawyers say, we are going to kick some ass'.

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