



The war of the willing

THE FAILURE BY THE United States to find any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq raises disturbing questions for Australians. Our intelligence agencies should be reeling from the massive failure in US and British intelligence. Why was their advice so wrong? Was it simply incompetence, or was it the result of political interference?

One hopes our agencies are also deeply concerned about the cavalier attitude of our government which seems so blasé about such a catastrophic intelligence failure. Whatever happened to political accountability? And our military personnel must be wondering why their lives should be so incompetently placed at risk.

Ignoring the UN teams that had for years been looking for any weapons of mass destruction, the US sent the 1400-member Iraq Survey Group to scour the country for these weapons. After five months, its CIA representative, David Kay, reported in October 2003 that they had found none. Kay wanted another \$US600 million to continue the search, bringing the total cost to about \$US1 billion. Few observers now think any significant WMDs will be found, but it is a measure of the desperation of the Bush administration that it is prepared to consider squandering such sums when they could be much better spent in reconstructing Iraq.

President Bush has changed the rhetoric and is now making much of the fact that Iraq had retained a *capability* to make such weapons, claiming that this justified the war. But the existence of such capability is news to no-one, since the US and other Western countries helped supply many of these weapons programs in the first place. As the quip goes, the Western countries still have many of the receipts for such weapons and programs. It seems that Saddam had destroyed his chemical and biological weapons by the mid-1990s, and that he had no active nuclear program.

Even after Saddam in the 1980s had used chemical weapons against the Kurds and Iranians, the US continued to supply Iraq with weapons and support, especially critical battlefield intelligence. It is during this period that Saddam perpetrated most of his mass killings. The US did not then call for

humanitarian intervention to overthrow him. Moreover, the US did nothing to protect members of the Muslim Shii sect from Saddam, when it provoked a revolt in southern Iraq after the Kuwait war. Thousands of Shii died while the US forces watched. No wonder that new US attempts to justify the invasion on humanitarian grounds are seen as deeply hypocritical.

The lack of justification for the war should be of immense concern to the churches, as the just war tradition provides the key moral framework for judging the legitimacy of war, and has been one of the churches' most significant contributions to Western culture and political theory.

Yet the 'coalition of the willing' rushed into war against the widespread opposition of the mainstream Western churches, even in the 'coalition' countries. This has never happened in the Western democracies before. The Pope himself, buttressed by leading Vatican officials and a spontaneous chorus from Catholic bishops' conferences around the world, repeatedly opposed the intervention in Iraq.

THE CHURCHES WOULD have been even stronger in their opposition but for the fact that the US, British and Australian governments repeatedly claimed that they had incontrovertible evidence that Iraq posed an urgent and immediate risk with its weapons of mass destruction, and/or was linked with the al Qaeda terrorists. But whenever these governments offered any so-called evidence, it was almost immediately challenged by UN or other weapons experts. Only when war was imminent and still no firm evidence had been produced were the churches and other groups able to declare more definitively that war was not justified. By then, of course, the political decision to invade had long been made.

The US Bush administration is now sinking under the weight of its misrepresentation of the intelligence and the justification for war, as well as the quagmire of occupation in Iraq. Prime Minister Blair has also been fighting for survival in Britain. Yet the Howard government, walking away from its responsibilities as an occupying power in Iraq, tells us it is all past history.

As Brian Toohey wrote in the *Australian Financial Review* (4–5 October)—a paper that has maintained the highest standards of critical commentary on the war—this was ‘one of the worst intelligence failures in modern history’. ‘The staggering level of incompetence makes it extremely difficult to see why Australia should take any notice of anything emanating from British intelligence agencies.’

But the Australian government seems remarkably unconcerned about this.

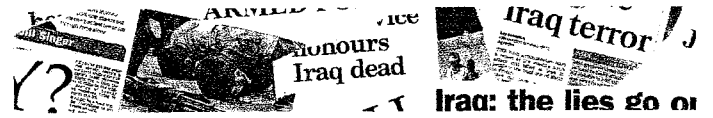
MOREOVER, AS ONE OF only three countries with significant forces invading Iraq, Australia had added responsibility, and could have used its influence to insist on incontrovertible evidence and UN backing before joining the invasion.

All three ‘coalition of the willing’ leaders are now seeking to cover themselves. Politicians will be politicians after all. But recall how eager our Australian government was for war, and how even in mid-2002 Mr Downer accused those who questioned the evidence about WMDs of anti-Americanism, adding ‘only a fool could support appeasement’. It was Mr Howard who declared on 14 March 2003 that were Saddam to rid himself of WMDs, there would be no war.

The Howard government has a long track record of not knowing or telling the truth—over East Timor, *Tampa* and the asylum seekers, as well as Iraq. No-one is expecting that Mr Howard will confess all to the Australian people, that his government misjudged the situation badly, and will now

make some compensation to the people of Iraq.

But what has happened to the social conscience of other members of our political parties? Was there a single public word of dissent about our intervention in Iraq from members



of the Coalition parties, or did I miss it? At least in Britain, members of the Labour Party are able to debate the issue. In Australia, do members of the Liberal Party still have a right of free speech?

The whole Iraq adventure is fast becoming a fiasco. I believe that Mr Howard will go down in the history books as having committed Australia to an unnecessary war, gullibly or otherwise, at the cost of hundreds of millions of dollars, making Australians a larger target for terrorists, damaging the United Nations, and possibly further polarising much of the Muslim world against the West. ■

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