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From shadow boxing to *Ghost Plane*: English journalism and the War on Terror

*In my career as a journalist, there has never been a war on terror but a war of terror.* John Pilger.<sup>1</sup>

*"In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible....This political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombed from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck...this is called elimination of unreliable elements. Such phraselogy is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them."* George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language'. (1946).

## **Rendition**

Arguably the finest example of investigative journalism during the 'war on terror' has been the exposure of the Central Intelligence Agency's 'extraordinary rendition' programme. Probing journalists, whose researches were encapsulated by British journalist Stephen Grey's book *Ghost Plane* in 2006, have painstakingly identified over 1000 CIA 'ghost flights' criss-crossing the globe since 2001.<sup>2</sup> Many of these flights were for 'extraordinary rendition' where terror suspects were secretly, without the suspect's agreement, taken by force from one country to another and in some cases kidnapped.

Rendition is exactly the kind of practice that journalists exist to expose as it is extrajudicial and involves nation states abusing fundamental human rights. These states seek to avoid the trial process. Rendition flights have not been used to move suspects from a war zones like Afghanistan or Iraq to the United States where these 'terrorists' could be charged and tried. The receiving nation was not the U.S. but a third

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1 On 14 April 2006, the Heyman Center for the Humanities at Columbia University in New York brought together John Pilger, Seymour Hersh, Robert Fisk and Charles Glass for a discussion entitled 'Breaking the Silence: War, Lies and Empire'.

2 Grey, Stephen (2006) *Ghost Plane: The Inside Story of the CIA's Secret Rendition Programme*. pg vii, London: Hurst & Company,

country where the security services sympathetic to the U.S. and cooperative with the CIA. These third-party states are alleged to include Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Morocco, and Uzbekistan. Suspects were then incarcerated, interrogated, and in many cases tortured to extract their alleged knowledge of al Qaeda. Some of the suspects have died in custody. It is estimated that at least one hundred 'suspects' have been 'rendered'.

As Bob Baer a former CIA operative in the Middle East has commented: "If you want a serious interrogation you send a prisoner to Jordan. If you want them to be tortured you send them to Syria. If you want someone to disappear.....you send them to Egypt."<sup>3</sup>

The best documented and widely publicised case of extraordinary rendition is that of an Egyptian refugee in Italy named Osama Nasr, known more widely as Abu Omar.<sup>4</sup> Council of Europe investigator, Dick Marty, later described the abduction of Abu Omar as a "perfect example of extraordinary rendition".<sup>5</sup>

In 2003 Abu Omar was an Iman who had been granted asylum and was living in Italy. (The Egyptians believed he belonged to al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya an organisation they had designated as illegal as its aims are said to include the overthrow of the democratically elected Egyptian government. It is considered a terrorist organization by the United States and European Union.) Abu Omar was suspected by the U.S. of plotting terrorist acts.

On 17 February 2003 Abu Omar was walking along the street in Milan on his way to noon prayers at the local mosque. As he strolled along the Via Guerzoni, he was kidnapped by a CIA snatch team and bundled into a car. Abu Omar was taken to the air base at Aviano. Later that day he was flown in a U.S. Air Force jet to Ramstein airbase in Germany and there put on a CIA hired aircraft and flown on to Egypt.

The CIA plane landed at Cairo and Abu Omar was put into the hands of Egyptian intelligence (the Mukhabarat). Abu Omar claimed he was tortured both by them and by State Security, Egypt's feared secret police. He was kept locked up for many months and, he says, torture ranged from hanging him upside down and applying electric

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3 Grey, Stephen (2004) U.S. accused of 'torture flights', London: Sunday Times. 14/11/2004.

4 Full given name: Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr, born 18/03/1963.

5 Willey, David (2007) Italy secrets Threaten CIA trial, BBC News. 8/06/2007

shocks to genitals to putting him in a room where loud noise was played, damaging his hearing. He was interrogated as whether he was an al Qaeda militant. Then after thirteen months he was suddenly released and told to keep his mouth shut. An Egyptian court had ruled his imprisonment was "unfounded".<sup>6</sup>

What his CIA abductors had not reckoned with was that independent Italian prosecutors would not ignore these events. Prompted and assisted by journalists from a range of countries they began an inquiry. As a result we now know that a group of Italian secret service officials colluded with the CIA in the kidnap of Abu Omar.<sup>7</sup> 22 European arrest warrants issued in December 2005 and Italian security service (SISM) officers were among those arrested. The Italian judge also issued arrest warrants for four Americans, three CIA agents and a U.S. Lieutenant Colonel who had been based at Aviano airport.

The start of the trial was set for June 8, 2007, although it was adjourned until October 2007, pending an upcoming ruling by Italy's Constitutional Court regarding the possible violation of state secrecy laws by Milan prosecutors who used phone taps on Italian agents during their investigation.<sup>8</sup>

Two others Italian suspects reached plea bargains.<sup>9</sup>

The Italian legal authorities have asked the United States for the extradition of CIA operatives involved with the kidnapping. While it is almost inconceivable that the United States will concede these extraditions, the request has caused the White House no little embarrassment. His lawyer says he is now living in Egypt and has agreed to return to Italy to give evidence in the abduction trial.

Abu Omar's is only one of many cases of rendition, the details of which have been revealed as a result of painstaking forensic work by journalists.<sup>10</sup>

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6 Nasrawi, Salah (2007) Egyptian kidnap victim 'was tortured'. Independent News. 13/02/2007.

7 Ghost Plane, pps 170-190

8 The Middle East Times. (2007). CIA trial in Italy delayed to October, 24/06/2007.

9 International Herald Tribune (2007) (AP Story) , Italy indicts 31 linked to CIA rendition case, 16/02/2007

10 Ghost Plane, pps 170-190

The United States continues to deny that it was engaged in rendition. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated in an April 2006 radio interview that the United States does not transfer people to places where they know they will be tortured.<sup>11</sup>

The exposure of the CIA's extraordinary rendition programme and the collusion of other Governments around the world in this illegal and immoral practice has been one of the most successful episodes of investigative journalism in covering the 'war on terror' and its excesses.<sup>12</sup>

As *Ghost Plane* author Stephen Grey, whose work on rendition has been pre-eminent, says:

The outlines of the CIA's rendition programme have emerged not from any single piece of reporting by a journalist or any single disclosure by a public official. Instead, details have come to light in a piecemeal fashion. Beat reporters like me who have followed this story have worked co-operatively – not in concert but by picking up pieces of the jigsaw puzzle disclosed by others, and then adding new pieces to the picture of what we know so far. Much more remains to be discovered."<sup>13</sup>

Indeed the question remains as whether the CIA had a secret network of 'black' prisons in European and other countries, where suspects were held and tortured.

What is significant about the rendition story is that investigative journalists from around the world have cooperated in a way that has no precedent.

The reporting of the war on terror has shown that reports of the death of investigative journalism are premature. Good investigative journalism has been at the forefront of revealing both the iniquities of terrorism and also the parallel illegalities of the war on terror. But separating investigative journalism from other reporting given the intense scrutiny of the war on terror can be difficult. And as we shall

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11 Naughtie, James (2006) Interview of Secretary Rice With British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. BBC Radio 4's Today Programme 01/04/2006.

12 European government including the British have been suspected of discretely assisting the CIA by allowing the flights to use their airports.

13 *Ghost Plane* (2006) pg vii.

see not all reporting of this dark and depressing period has been inspired.

There has been much discussion about an exact definition of investigative journalism. Elsewhere in this book Gavin McFadyean identifies research as the one key essence that distinguishes investigative journalism from other reporting. Another vital ingredient is that this research should result in a highly accurate piece of journalism, which usually contains information that someone, typically in a position of power, does not want public. It should stand the test of time and be in the public interest.

What we can already say is that the landmark journalism on the rendition story was based on impressive research. The journalists involved went to great lengths to find and contact eyewitnesses, sources, participants, victims and experts. They obtained documents that were classified.

Stephen Grey made great use of thousands of flight records and was astonished that he could eventually obtain on the exact movements of CIA planes.<sup>14</sup> He obtained these both from his own confidential source with access to European air traffic records but also a worldwide network of planespotter and information released to subscription aviation databases by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration. He also made sophisticated use of the relatively new art of computer aided journalism. He used a specialist computer programme to analyse the raw data and separate from the millions of routine flights the flights flown by CIA front companies to transport 'suspects' illegally. While rendition is a clear example of good investigative reporting, it is much harder to pick other examples in the complex and crowded media coverage of the war on terror in all its forms.

Defining and separating investigative journalism from other reporting may appear on the surface to have the value of the arcane theological exercise of deciding how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. But the war on terror has produced so much poor and hasty reporting, and worse, disguised propaganda, that there is now a need for reflection on practices of contemporary journalism. In too many cases media organisations and journalists need to account for their past failings before the media can regain public trust in their reporting.

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<sup>14</sup> Grey, Stephen email to Lashmar, Paul (2007) 19/09/2007

Covering the war on terror has been among the most difficult and demanding jobs in journalism in recent history. Domestically, the probing journalist is up against the wilderness of mirrors created by the intelligence agencies and politicians. Terrorists are by their very nature secretive and their hinterlands, whether at home or abroad, are potentially dangerous places to operate. Covering Afghanistan, Iraq and the battlefields of this war has been more dangerous for journalists than any war before.

### **War on Terror.**

The terror attacks of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 were a watershed, not least for the media. Before the attacks new organisations had limited curiosity about the Muslim world. That changed instantly after 9/11 and the interest became instant and intense, with any subsequent lack of concentration refocused by another terror attack or political or military excess.

With hindsight the warning signs were there but few in the media wanted to see them, confirming again the conformity of many contemporary media organisations in the West. Prior to 9/11 there had been an escalation of terror attacks aimed at Western targets, emanating from fundamentalist terror groups coalescing around the leadership of former Saudi citizen and former mujahedeen Osama bin Laden. These included the attacks on United States embassies in East Africa and the sea-borne attack on the U.S.S Cole off Yemen. There had been some reporting and some investigative journalism of these developments but certainly it was generally perceived in the UK media as far from centre stage news.

With the hijacked airliners caught on video as they ploughed into the World Trade Center, the drama and impact of the attacks and 2950 deaths on 11 September 2001 really justify use of the term; creating a new paradigm. The world was suddenly a very different place. Global attention fixed on a few acres of smouldering earth and rubble in the centre of Manhattan. The search, by governments and media alike, for the perpetrators of this unparalleled act of terror began instantly. All knew that the America would respond with force the only question was how that revenge would be framed. Within weeks in his address to a joint session of Congress following the attacks on September 11, U.S. President George W. Bush defined a 'war on terror':

Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.<sup>15</sup>

In retrospect we can see the tone of reporting after 9/11 was set in reaction to the horror of the event which muted objective critical reporting. There was some critical reporting on whether the United States should have been better prepared and whether early warning of the attacks had been ignored by the U.S. authorities.

Sir Harold Evans, the former *Sunday Times* Editor and New York resident, would later point to a string of failures by the American press, most especially in the months prior to 9/11. He was scathing about the fact that 'not a single major newspaper' took seriously enough the February 2001 report by Senators Rudman and Hart which gave warnings about the likelihood of a terrorist attack.

He conceded that following 9/11 a wave of patriotism in the U.S. made criticism and dissent much harder. He said: "I felt rage myself. I was in New York". But it required the press to stand back and take stock rather than be caught up in the emotion.<sup>16</sup>

There can be few events in history that have attracted as much media coverage as the 9/11 and the events stemming from it. How much of that coverage was objective could be described as investigative is more complicated. Investigative journalism usually thrives in places where there is little or no serious reporting. After 9/11 every decent journalist wanted to be engaged in what was clearly to be the most important story of the decade.

U.S. journalists became preoccupied with a domestic story, the discovery of anthrax in various government buildings. For months reports suggested a range of suspects from Iraqis to al Qaeda.<sup>17</sup>

In the wake of 9/11 various conspiracy theories emerged, mostly suggesting that the U.S. government covertly organised the attacks. Some conspiracy theorists have claimed that the collapse of the World Trade Center was the result of a controlled demolition. Some also

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15 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/print/20010920-8.html>, "President Declares Freedom at War with Fear"

16 Evans, Sir Harold (2006) Journalism under pressure – reporting terrorism speech by Sir Harold Evans, IPI world congress, Edinburgh. 2006.

17 Six years on the culprit has never been conclusively identified.

contend that a commercial airliner did not crash into the Pentagon, and that United Airlines Flight 93 was shot down. Few of these claims, however, were taken seriously by mainstream journalists and were largely confined to the alternative media. Over time none of these theories have yet been shown to be compelling.<sup>18</sup> As one respected journalist observed: "If you can't trust your own media to tell you the truth you are more likely to believe in conspiracies." **WHO/WHERE**

In the UK investigative activity concentrated on the links between the 9/11 plotters and their relationship with Britain. When a British national and convert to Islam, Richard Reid, was arrested in December 2001 off a transatlantic flight having attempted to set off a bomb in his shoe, the focus for the UK media began to shift to the threat within the UK.<sup>19</sup>

Many western journalists looked to the Muslim world, trying to establish the extent of the al Qaeda network and threat. In the atmosphere of shock and revenge the media were often uncritical if not outright supportive of the American led invasion of Afghanistan in the same month and the removal of al Qaeda's mentors, the Taliban, from government.

The world was taking on a new, more sinister shape, not least for inquiring journalists. "In the year since the September 11 attacks on the United States, the world has become a more uncertain place," said Aidan White of the International Federation of Journalists at the end of 2002. "The declaration of 'a war on terrorism' by the United States and its international coalition has created a dangerous situation in

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18 Some of the wilder conspiracy theories grew out of legitimate reporting. For instance just after 9/11 Greg Palast and Meirion Jones of BBC2's Newsnight programme were handed a secret FBI report showing that they'd been investigating the Bin Laden family but had been taken off the case both under Clinton and Bush. The agents were furious. What particularly annoyed the agents was that the Bin Laden's had been flown out of the U.S. without proper questioning as soon as the "no-fly" ban had been lifted. The story got coverage in the UK but didn't suit the legend that was being created in the U.S. at the time. Later the conspiracy theorists got hold of it and their version is that the Bin Ladens were flown out during the "no-fly" ban which of course is unlikely.

19 According to al-Qaeda operative Mohammed Mansour Jabarah (who was captured and interrogated in Oman in 2003), Reid was a member of al-Qaeda and had been sent on the bombing mission by Khaled Shaikh Mohammed, a senior member of the organization.

which journalists have become victims as well as key actors in reporting events.”<sup>20</sup>

Following what then appeared to be the efficient and effective regime change in Afghanistan, the U.S. and UK governments brought the repressive dictatorship of Saddam Hussein under intense scrutiny and criticism. There was a feeling that the West had failed to tackle Saddam Hussein effectively at the end of the first Gulf War. But more pressing were the links to be made between Saddam and bin Laden that would justify an invasion.<sup>21</sup>

From late 2001 we see the campaign by those governments to persuade their public and world opinion that Saddam Hussein had links with al Qaeda and that he was developing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) that threaten U.S., UK and Western interests. These government claims were largely supported by media. While no one doubted the barbarity of Saddam’s regime, many journalists including took the extra step and accepted the neo-conservative perspective of Iraq as the dominant global threat.

Observers worried about the media’s coverage after 9/11. Aidan White’s report for the International Federation of Journalists observed that media reporting in the UK tended to follow the political direction of the Government and was very pro American: “After September 11 this tendency overrode everything else. Reporting the war aims of the coalition was uncritical and for a month or two dissenting voices were bitterly attacked.

However, it must be stated that there has been some excellent coverage, and not just in the obvious paper, *The Guardian*, the leading liberal paper. In particular the *Daily Mirror*, the second highest circulating national paper, which had been totally ‘Blairite’,

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20 White, Aidan (2002) ‘Journalism and the War on Terrorism: Final Report of the Aftermath of September 11 and the implications for Journalism and Civil Liberties’, pg 2. International Federation of Journalists. 03/09/2002

21 When did the “War against terror” become a campaign against Saddam Hussein rather than Osama bin Laden? Less than a month after the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, some hawkish members of the U.S. administration were stressing a connection with Iraq, but the shift did not become clear until George Bush’s State of the Union address in January 2002, when the “axis of evil” was unveiled. Suddenly Baghdad was in the frame, and al-Qaeda took a temporary back seat. For some months the name of Bin Laden was hardly referred to by President Bush. He name-checked al Qaeda in the 2003 State of the Union speech but its leader was not mentioned. Instead Washington has acted as though the link between Iraq and terrorism were self-evident.

converted itself to a critical position in March 2002 and has run some critical coverage, which has been widely welcomed among journalists.<sup>22</sup>

White made a prescient comment:

But the media need to resist the pressure of politicians who are willing to sacrifice civil liberties and press freedom to win their propaganda battles. The priority must always be the right to publish words and images – however unpalatable – that help people better understand the roots of the conflict. (ibid: pg2 )

Columnist, George Monbiot, later commented that the government position found support in surprising places. *The Observer*, he pointed out, published five articles claiming that there were “direct Iraqi links with the U.S. hijackers” who carried out the 9/11 attacks.<sup>23</sup> One of them suggested that “Iraqi training, intelligence and logistics were hidden behind an Islamist facade”. Iraq, it claimed “ran a terrorist camp for foreign Islamists, where it taught them how to hijack planes with boxcutters”.<sup>24</sup>

The worst offender, Monbiot claimed, was the *Sunday Telegraph* with a range of articles. For example, in September 2001, it opined that “the Iraqi leader had been providing al-Qaeda ... with funding, logistical back-up and advanced weapons training. His operations reached a ‘frantic pace’ in the past few months”.<sup>25</sup>

### **Brutality - warning bells unheeded**

As in all wars, at the sharp end the military often did not behave in keeping with the high moral tone struck by their political leaders.

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22 White, Aidan (2002) ‘Journalism and the War on Terrorism: Final Report of the Aftermath of September 11 and the implications for Journalism and Civil Liberties, International Federation of Journalists. Published on September 3, 2002.

23 Rose, David and Vulliamy, Ed (2001) U.S. hawks accuse Iraq over anthrax, *The Observer*, 14/10/2001.; Rose, David, The Iraqi connection, *The Observer*, 11/11/2001; Rose, David, The case for tough action against Iraq, *The Observer* 2/12/ 2001; Rose, David, A blind spot called Iraq, *The Observer*, 13/01/2002; Rose, David (2003) Spain links suspect in 9/11 plot to Baghdad, *The Observer*, 16/03/2003

24 Monbiot, George (2004) The Lies of the Press on Monboit.com. 20 July 2004

25 Berry, Jessica, Sherwell, Philip and Wastell, David. (2001) Army alert by Saddam points to Iraqi role, *The Sunday Telegraph*. 23/09/2001

In December 2002 came the first of what would become a long stream of allegations of brutality by allied forces towards prisoners in the war on terror. A *Washington Post* article by Dana Priest and Barton Gellman exposed the abuse of Al Qaeda and Taliban prisoners, detailing a 'brass-knuckled quest for information' that includes 'stress and duress techniques.'

Americans with direct knowledge and others who have witnessed the treatment,' the Post reported, said that 'captives are often 'softened up' by MPs and U.S. Army Special forces troops who beat them up and then confine them in tiny rooms.' The paper also made an early mention of the practice of 'extraordinary renditions'— shipping prisoners to countries where they can be tortured more freely. One official who was 'directly involved' explained: 'We don't kick the [expletive] out of them. We send them to other countries so they can kick the [expletive] out of them.'<sup>26</sup>

Little attention was paid to this story of brutality with its hint of the shape of things to come. In late 2002 the media's reporting focussed on the increasing tension between the international team of weapons inspectors and the U.S. Government.

Leading campaigning journalist John Pilger was already alarmed:

The attempts by journalists in the U.S. and Britain, acting as channels for American intelligence, to connect Iraq to 11 September have also failed. The 'Iraq connection' with anthrax has been shown to be rubbish; the culprit is almost certainly American. The rumour that an Iraqi intelligence official met Mohammed Atta, the 11 September hijacker, in Prague was exposed by Czech police as false. Yet press 'investigations' that hint, beckon, erect a straw man or two, then draw back, while giving the reader the overall impression that Iraq requires a pasting, have become a kind of currency. One reporter added his 'personal view' that 'the use of force is both right and sensible'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Priest, Dana and Gellman, Barton, (2002) U.S. Decries Abuse but Defends Interrogations *Washington Post*, Thursday, 26/12/2002; Page A01

<sup>27</sup> Pilger, John (2002) The Media and Iraq: A compliant press is preparing the ground for an all-out attack on Iraq', 21/03/2002 [www.johnpilger.com/page.asp?partid=395](http://www.johnpilger.com/page.asp?partid=395)

In September the UK the government published a dossier, based on material from British intelligence, making the case that Saddam and Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. It had a foreword by then British Prime Minister Tony Blair which said:

"The document discloses that his military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them."<sup>28</sup>

On 24 September 2002 Prime Minister Tony Blair told MPs the intelligence revealed that Saddam Hussein 'has existing and active military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons, which could be activated within 45 minutes, including against his own Shia population.'<sup>29</sup> The *Evening Standard* carried the headline '45 minutes from attack.' The *Sun* carries the headline 'Brits 45 mins from doom' about the threat to troops in Cyprus.

In early February televised briefings by U.S. Secretary for State Colin Powell at the UN detailed 'evidence' of weapons of mass destruction within Iraq is largely accepted by the media. Powell pointed to blown-up aerial spy pictures purporting to show Saddam's mobile biological warfare production facilities.

Powell drew on the British Government's second dossier on Iraq published in February 2003.<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that a week later the Government's dossier was exposed by Glen Rangwala, a Cambridge academic and writer who has excellent investigative skills, to have been an extensive piece of plagiarism, mostly of old material. The Cabinet Office authors had lazily lifted material from three different sources on the internet most extensively from a postgraduate at the Monterey Institute. This 'cut and paste' document was given the lasting sobriquet the 'dodgy dossier'.<sup>31</sup>

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28 Iraq – Its infrastructure of Concealment, Deception and Intimidation(or Iraq Dossier for short) was a 2003 briefing document for the Labour government use. It was issued to journalists on 3 February by Alastair Campbell, then Tony Blair's Director of Communications and Strategy, and concerned Iraq and weapons of mass destruction. published 30 January 2003

<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page1470.asp>

29 BBC News (2004) TimeLine: The 45-minute claim, 13/10/2004

30 Iraq: Its Infrastructure of Concealment, Deception and Intimidation (s and Strategy, and concerned Iraq and weapons of mass destruction.

31 Channel 4 News (2003) 6 Feb 2003.

As part of their case both the British and American governments made much of the earlier arrest of an alleged terrorist cell claimed to be planning a lethal ricin poison<sup>32</sup> attack in Britain. After the arrest of six men in 2002 in what was known as the 'ricin plot', the Sun claimed: "The men are thought to be linked to fanatical Algerian Islamic groups which are part of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network."<sup>33</sup>

Prime Minister Blair, David Blunkett, then minister responsible for internal security, and British senior police officers, emphasized that the plot was a threat from what they called a new and highly dangerous kind of terrorist. To back up their case for war, politicians suggested there was a clear link between Saddam Hussein, al Qaeda, and terrorists planning chemical or biological attacks on targets in the west, including London.

The ricin claims were used most strikingly by Colin Powell, the U.S. secretary of state, in his UN speech. Insisting "every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources", Powell spoke of a "sinister nexus between Iraq and the al-Qaeda terrorist network". (These British and American claims were to look very different after the court case in 2005.<sup>34</sup>)

So it was these government presentations that set the tone for the launch of the second Gulf War.

On 7 March 2003 Hans Blix, who had been recalled by Kofi Annan to head the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission, told the Security Council that a series of searches had found no evidence of mobile biological production facilities in Iraq. This received little media coverage.

On 20 March American missiles bombed Baghdad, marking the start of a U.S.-led war to topple Saddam Hussein. In the following days U.S. and British ground troops entered Iraq from the south.

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32 Ricin is a very toxic poison extracted from the castor bean, if inhaled, injected, or ingested, acting as a toxin by the inhibition of protein synthesis. There is no known antidote.

33 Sullivan, Michael (2003) Factory of Death The Sun . 8/01/2003.

34 The 'ricin plot' proved to be an embarrassment for the security services. As tests later showed there was no ricin. Only one person was found guilty, an Algerian who fatally stabbed a police officer during his arrest. Several other Algerians were acquitted. Supposed al Qaeda terror manuals had been lifted in large part from survivalist manuals openly published in the U.S.. The best account of the fiasco was written by investigative journalist Duncan Campbell who gave evidence for the defence see Campbell, Duncan (2005) The ricin ring that never was, The Guardian. 14/04/2005.

By 9 April U.S. forces had advanced into central Baghdad. Saddam Hussein's hold on the city was broken.

On 1 May 2003 George W Bush landed on the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln. A huge poster hung from the ship's bridge proclaiming 'Mission accomplished'. In the subsequent press conference to the world the U.S. President declared that 'major combat operations in Iraq have ended.' 'The Battle for Iraq' he added, 'is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 and still goes on.'<sup>35</sup>

## **The Hutton Inquiry**

Reporting in the Britain in the immediate post invasion period was greatly influenced by a confrontation between the BBC and the government. On 29 May 2003 BBC Radio4's Today programme defence correspondent Andrew Gilligan said in a early morning two way interview that he had a senior source, who had said the 45-minute claim was the 'classic example' of how the dossier was 'sexed up'.<sup>36</sup>

Regarded as a talented investigator with the ability to conduct deep research, Gilligan had been probing the government's case for war. The Prime Minister's office especially objected when the BBC reporter said that the Prime Minister's office 'probably knew' the claim was wrong when it was put in the dossier.

It was the Prime Minister's Head of Communications (and right hand man), Alistair Campbell, who took Gilligan's allegations most personally. Campbell was, to use that colourful cliché, 'incandescent with rage'. On the 6 June he sent a four-page denunciation of Gilligan's reporting to BBC Director of News Richard Sambrook.

Campbell's letter ends with:

On the word of a single, uncorroborated source, you have allowed one reporter to drive the BBC's coverage. We are left wondering why you have the guidelines at all, given they are so persistently breached without any comeback whatsoever."<sup>37</sup>

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35 BBC News (2003) Bush declares victory in Iraq, BBC News online 02/05/2003

36 We now know the source to have been David Kelly a leading British WMD expert and former arms inspector. A transcript of the Gilligan broadcast can be found at:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/03/hutton\\_inquiry/hutton\\_report/html/chapter02.stm#a9](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/03/hutton_inquiry/hutton_report/html/chapter02.stm#a9)

Over the next few weeks a battle of wills raged. The Prime Minister's office demanded an apology and the BBC refused to give it. The strength of reaction from the Prime Minister's office against the BBC over this broadcast was compelling. It influenced not only BBC correspondents but other journalists' views on the claims for the existence of WMD. The Foreign Office and other government departments continued to brief that there were WMD in Iraq and this remained the overriding priority for war.

But then the drama cranked up when, on 17 July, the apparent source of Gilligan's claim, government scientist David Kelly, was found dead. By most accounts he had committed suicide, following his treatment by Parliamentary investigators and by his civil service colleagues. Prime Minister Blair quickly proposed an independent judicial inquiry 'urgently to conduct an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr Kelly'.

To conduct the inquiry Blair chose Lord Hutton, a senior judge. A key witness was John Scarlett, the head of the leading branch of British intelligence services, MI6, who defended the controversial 45-minute claim at the inquiry, calling it 'well-sourced intelligence' but said it concerned munitions, mortar shells or similar weapons, not missile warheads.

When he reported in January 2004 Lord Hutton was very critical of the BBC's journalism and management of news.<sup>38</sup> Among the inquiry's conclusions were:

- BBC claims that Downing Street 'sexed-up' the dossier on Iraqi weapons was 'unfounded'.
- Reporter Andrew Gilligan was wrong to claim Number 10 inserted intelligence knowing it was suspect.

Lord Hutton went further, calling BBC editorial procedures that allowed the report to be broadcast 'defective'. Worse for the Corporation, he criticised both managers and governors for not investigating the Government's complaints quickly and fully. After Lord Hutton reported, Alistair Campbell, made his feelings clear:

"If the Government faced the level of criticism.... which today Lord Hutton has directed to [*sic*] the BBC, there would clearly have been resignations by now. Several resignations at several levels. Today the stain on the integrity of the prime minister and the

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<sup>38</sup> The report can be found at the Hutton Inquiry website: <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/>

government has been removed”<sup>39</sup>

Despite initial resistance within days both the Chairman of the BBC Governors Gavin Davies and the BBC Director General Greg Dyke resigned. Andrew Gilligan departed too. What did surprise many observers was not Lord Hutton’s criticism of the BBC but his reticence to criticise the way the government had operated, especially over the writing of the Iraq dossier.<sup>40</sup> The Hutton inquiry served, at the very least, to distract the media from events in the Middle East and Iraq in particular. There was for time a dampening of the media’s spirit of inquiry into the circumstances around the invasion of Iraq.

The Hutton Affair left the BBC vulnerable. Many felt the humbled organization was avoiding any further confrontation with the Government. It was open season for attacks on the BBC for lacking patriotism. It is notable that the rest of the media were harshly critical of the BBC’s failing, yet in most cases their own reporting standards, especially in newspapers, would not have withstood the same intense scrutiny.

Over the next few months the BBC came under attack by politicians and some of the media for its alleged anti-war coverage. The perfidy of these attacks was demonstrated by a later Cardiff University report that showed that the BBC “displayed the most ‘pro-war’ agenda of any broadcaster.”<sup>41</sup>

The BBC has also been criticized for being too pro Government. One target was the BBC’s flagship current affairs programme, *Panorama*, whose investigation had provided support for the Government’s position prior to the Iraq invasion. In the *Australian Financial Review*, Brian Toohey, his country’s most distinguished investigative journalist, reminded readers that *Panorama* on 23 September 2002 claimed to have ‘hard evidence’ about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. “It did

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39 Wells, Matt; White, Michael and Wintour, Patrick (2004) Crisis cuts through the BBC, *The Guardian* 29/01/2004

40 Hutton’s absolution of the British Government was a genuine surprise even to ministers who could not believe their good luck. Whitehall experts said they had expected a ‘massively destructive week for the establishment’. Most were convinced the judge to spread the blame across the field, though criticising Gilligan more than most.

Ministers and officials were exonerated from any wrongdoing, or as Hutton put it from anything ‘dishonourable or underhand or duplicitous’.

41 ‘Study deals a blow to claims of anti war bias in BBC news’, by Matt Wells, *The Guardian*, 4 July 2003.

no such thing," wrote Toohey. "Instead, it presented a load of nonsense which bolstered the case for subsequent invasion. One of the programme's prime sources was an Iraqi, Adnan Seead al-Haideri whom it described as 'credible'. He claimed that a secret biological weapons laboratory existed under a major hospital in Baghdad.<sup>42</sup>

The programme's reporter Jane Corbin summed up: "So the new weapons and technology have been hidden away in heavily populated areas, even under a hospital in Baghdad according to Haideri. Beneath Saddam's many presidential palaces too, and weapons are constantly on the move to outwit the vigilant spy planes."

"Haideri's most harrowing account comes from people forced to work inside the secret weapons programme. They've told him Saddam's ordered the testing of chemical weapons on prisoners."<sup>43</sup>

John Pilger commented, "That edition of *Panorama* was not untypical of the BBC's coverage of the build-up to the invasion, and the 'war on terror', or indeed any war fought or supported by the British establishment in living memory."<sup>44</sup> Pilger also cites Cardiff University report showed that 90 per cent of the BBC's references to weapons of mass destruction suggested that Saddam Hussein actually possessed them.<sup>45</sup>

In the New Year of 2004 *Panorama* transmitted a programme on the Hutton Inquiry that was critical of their former colleague Andrew Gilligan. Reporter John Ware concluded: "The BBC still insists it got its story largely right – despite some flawed reporting."<sup>46</sup>

The same team some weeks later went on to analyze the intelligence failure that had led to the Iraq war. At the end of the programme, reporter John Ware said:

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42 Toohey, Brain (2004) Australian Financial Review. 31 January 2004

43 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/audio\\_video/programmes/panorama/transcripts/23\\_09\\_02.txt](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/panorama/transcripts/23_09_02.txt)

44 Pilger, John (2004) John Pilger argues that Gilligan was an exception. 09/02/2004. News Statesman

45 Lewis, J., Brookes, R., Mosedell, N. and Threadgold, T (2006) Shoot first and ask questions later: media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War, New York: Peter Lang. One of the report's authors, Justin Lewis says; "Pilger's quote gets the spirit but loses the detail. The actual figure is 89%, and refers to all British broadcasters, not just the BBC (whose record here is better than the others, the worst offenders being Sky).

46 BBC1 (2004) "A fight to the death" Panorama Special. 21/01/2004

"The war has been over for 15 months. Iraqis have been liberated from a tyrant. But the military objective was to disarm him of his weapons of mass destruction. No weapons have yet been found. The cost has been countless injured and perhaps 11,000 dead. But already a key bit of the case for war has officially been withdrawn by MI6. We've been told by a reliable intelligence source whose identity we have to protect, that MI6 no longer trusts its report that underpinned the dossier's claim that 'Iraq has continued to produce chemical and biological agents.'<sup>47</sup>

To this day seasoned reporters from across the media consider that the BBC and C4 current affairs departments lost their nerve in the wake of the Hutton inquiry. Some say the BBC would not tackle controversial subjects. Some insiders say this lasted a year after Hutton, others say longer.

There is broad view that both organisations failed to deliver as broad a range of challenging programmes on the war on terror that you might have expected. Executives of both organizations I have spoken to deny such claims. BBC Journalists are categorical that the BBC avoided controversial items on Iraq in the months after Hutton. BBC journalists now deny lack of post Hutton journalistic vigour. One BBC journalist remarked: ".....they genuinely seem to have convinced themselves like a bunch of UFO alien abductees."

### **The truth will out**

The tide was turning; the government and intelligence service's credibility further plummeted after the failure to find any WMD in Iraq. By September 2004 Foreign Secretary Jack Straw was also forced to admit to Parliament that MI6 had withdrawn the 45 minute claim.

Meanwhile in the United States the justifications for the invasion were also being unpicked.<sup>48</sup> The United States also had its own scandal, a

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47 BBC1 (2004) "A failure of intelligence?" Panorama. 11/07/04.

48 The task of challenging the Saddam/al Qaeda link first fell to the leading U.S. investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, whose track record goes back to the revealing the My Lai massacre in 1969. Hersh reported in The New Yorker, in October 2003, (as early as????) "it was understood by many in the White House that the President had decided, in his own mind, to go to war." Hersh added, "The undeclared decision had a devastating impact on the continuing struggle against terrorism. The Bush Administration took many intelligence operations that had been aimed at Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups around the world and redirected them to the Persian Gulf. Linguists and special operatives were abruptly reassigned, and several ongoing anti-terrorism intelligence programs were curtailed." Then he focussed on the role of

complicated affair centring around the New York Times reporter Judith Miller, who had been at the forefront of reporting the existence of WMD in Iraq. It later turned out that her sources consisted of officials close to the neo-conservatives at the heart of the Bush administration and also the Chalabi camp of exiled Iraqis, now discredited for providing unreliable intelligence from within Iraq.<sup>49</sup>

## Home Grown

Meanwhile British public attention was dramatically drawn to more domestic aspects of terrorism. After 9/11 there was little doubt that the UK was a target for al Qaeda inspired terrorism. There was clear and increasing danger from bin Laden's supporters looking to attack high profile targets in the UK.

Initially the concern was that such attacks would be conducted by non indigenous Muslims. MI5 sought potential terror plots among those who were citizens of the Middle East and North Africa, while not discounting the odd indigenous maverick in the shoe bomber mould.

Following the raid on the Finsbury Park mosque in January 2001, The *Evening Standard* reported: "Scotland Yard is now liaising with French and American intelligence agencies in connection with recent arrests. Other north African countries are also believed to be involved in the terror conspiracy. Members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group as

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Iraqi leader in exile, Ahmed Chalabi, who was subsequently revealed as an arch manipulator and purveyor of skewed intelligence. "Chalabi's defector reports [are] now flowing from the Pentagon directly to the Vice-President's office, and then on to the President, with little prior evaluation by intelligence professionals." The piece quoted Greg Thielmann, top intelligence official for the State Department, as saying, "There was considerable scepticism throughout the intelligence community about the reliability of Chalabi's sources, but the defector reports were coming all the time. Knock one down and another comes along. Meanwhile

<sup>49</sup> Judith Miller was based in Washington D.C and close to leading Government officials. She became well known through her involvement in two stories. Firstly about Iraq's alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Program. Secondly for her involvement in the Plame Affair.. Miller announced her retirement from The New York Times on November 9, 2005. In July of 2005, Miller was jailed for contempt of court for refusing to testify before a federal grand jury investigating a leak naming Valerie Plame as a covert CIA agent. Miller did not write about Plame, but was said to be in possession of evidence relevant to the leak investigation. After her release on September 29, 2005, Miller agreed to testify to the grand jury the identity of her source, Lewis Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff. Miller and Bill Keller, executive editor of The New York Times, have not disclosed to the New York Times Miller's role in covering the Plame story. Miller now works at the Los Angeles Times.

well as Tunisians with links to extremist groups are believed to be under investigation.”<sup>50</sup>

But as plot after plot was detected attention moved to British born terror suspects. Britain’s involvement with the Iraq invasion and its perceived anti-Islamic stance clearly provoked many young indigenous Muslims to align themselves with al Qaeda.

The result was the 7/7<sup>51</sup> and 21/7<sup>52</sup> attacks of 2005 which appeared to be organized entirely by ‘home grown’ Muslims.<sup>53</sup> The Prime Minister and his cabinet maintained that his alliance with the U.S. and the invasion of Iraq had played no part in the radicalization of British born Muslims. To their credit the majority of media have never accepted this perverse political logic.

### **Meanwhile back in Iraq....**

Reports from Iraq after the invasion were producing a string of stories alleging brutality by British troops during and after the invasion period. Many troops were later to face court martial. But attention was beginning to focus on U.S. internment camps. The key camp was Abu Ghraib, also known as the Baghdad Correctional Facility, which housed prisoners suspected of Baathist and al Qaeda connections and staffed by U.S. military intelligence units notably the 372<sup>nd</sup> Military Police Company.

In the one of the first reports the *Associated Press* said that detainees in Iraq were being subjected to torture and inhumane living conditions and told of an instance where a prisoner was shot and killed. The article reported the story of one prisoner, Saaed Naif, who said he saw

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50 Davenport, Jason and Dovkants, Keith (2003) Mosque Linked to Key Terror Network, Evening Standard. 21-01-2003.

51 The 7 July 2005 London bombings were a series of coordinated terrorist bomb blasts that hit London's public transport system during the morning rush hour. At 8:50 a.m., three bombs exploded within fifty seconds of each other on three London Underground trains. A fourth bomb exploded on a bus nearly an hour later at 9:47 a.m. in Tavistock Square. The bombings killed 52 commuters and the four suicide bombers, injured 700

52 On 21 July 2005, a second series of four explosions took place on the London Underground and a London bus. The detonators of all four bombs exploded, but none of the main explosive charges detonated, and there were no casualties. All suspected bombers from this failed attack escaped from the scenes but were later arrested. A number of men have been tried

53 The suicide bombers are not around to tell their side of 7/7. At the time of writing a number of men were standing trial for the 21/7 and are innocent unless proven guilty by the jury.

another prisoner 'shot dead at Abu Ghraib when he approached the razor wire.' Many former prisoners of the detainment centers agreed that some of the worst atrocities at the prisons were the guards' treatment of the women, sick, and disabled.<sup>54</sup>

The full horror of Abu Ghraib was to be told by Seymour Hersh in the New Yorker magazine.<sup>55</sup> As journalist Nick Davies points out that Seymour Hersh's investigative reporting on the war on terror has been exemplary not least on Abu Ghraib: "Generally, Seymour Hersh has been there way out in front of just everybody and although CBS ran the Abu Ghraib pictures before him, its clear they were dithering and eventually put them out only because they heard that he was about to run them in the New Yorker."<sup>56</sup>

The photographs of Lynndie England, Charles Graner and other American military personnel degrading Iraqi detainees are so casual yet so debased as to have caused immeasurable worldwide damage to the United States' claims to morality of purpose in Iraq. In its pursuit of a war on terror the Bush Administration has been accused of acting in violation of international law, human rights, and the U.S. Constitution in its execution of the campaign, particularly with regard to the internment of prisoners of war (or 'illegal combatants') in its military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

In Iraq the situation after the invasion gradually deteriorated. Investigations by the media show that neither the U.S. or UK had thought through their post invasion strategy. The only people to benefit were corrupt Iraqis in positions of power and the Western private security companies who were paid hundreds of millions of dollars to protect key installations and personnel.<sup>57</sup>

The insurgency grew in strength and increasingly Iraq was referred to as suffering a Civil War. The media received no special treatment or quarter. Most news organizations were forced to remain in a specially protected 'Green Zone' in Baghdad for fear of kidnapping, torture and murder.

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54 Associated Press, 11/3/2003

55 Hersh, Seymour (2004) New Yorker magazine, May 2004.

56 Davies, Nick to Paul Lashmar Email. 28 January 2007

57 Secrets of the Iraq War, (2004) TV documentary by Films of Record for ITV. Producer Ed Harriman. 1 hour Jan 2004

Reporting in Iraq has on the occasion shown again the difficulties of separating out investigative reporting from other good reporting. There has been some exceptional revealing and courageous reporting from foreign correspondents on the ground.

As Noam Chomsky commented:

The scale of the catastrophe in Iraq is so extreme that it can barely be reported. Journalists are largely confined to the heavily fortified Green Zone in Baghdad, or else travel under heavy guard. There are a few regular exceptions in the mainstream press, such as Robert Fisk and Patrick Cockburn, who face extreme hazards, and there are occasional indications of Iraqi opinion.”<sup>58</sup>

Reporters have taken tremendous personal risk to deliver detailed and disturbing reports on the failure of the U.S. led alliance to transform Iraq into a peaceful democratic society. These reporters are seen as foreign correspondents but their work is heavily researched and accurate.

Head of current affairs at C4, Dorothy Byrne, says:

“Our key pieces on Iraq have tended not to be investigations (although we have made good films like *Iraq’s Missing Billions*) but reportage and analysis. It has been so difficult to show what is really happening in Iraq that this form of current affairs – working with Iraqis to show the truth on the ground – has been important and influential. Politicians have tried to claim that there was not civil war and finding ways to get out there and show people just how normal civil society was falling apart has been key.”<sup>59</sup>

## **Investigations**

For this chapter I conducted a straw poll of some of the UK’s investigative reporters and editors. The question I asked was: ‘What do you think is the most important contribution investigative journalism has brought to the Iraq War and the war on terror coverage in the last couple of years? I asked them to look from a primarily a UK perspective.

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58 Chomsky, Noam (2006) *Failed States*, Noam Chomsky, Penguin, pg 52

59 Byrne, Dorothy email to Lashmar, Paul Feb 2007

A number of stories were repeatedly cited. Top of that list by far was the coverage of 'extraordinary rendition'. There was also general agreement that former Sunday Times journalist Stephen Grey has undertaken outstanding work on rendition. The approach to the rendition story has moved the practice of investigative journalism a step forward, in a variety of ways including innovative use of computer aided journalism and cooperation by journalists in many different countries. Stephen Grey has shown how an effective freelance investigative journalist can work across the media and national boundaries. It shows that journalists can improvise a global response to stories that transcend any one country.

Another important story that was acclaimed in the straw poll was former *Daily Telegraph* defence correspondent Michael Smith's 'Downing Street memo' story.<sup>60</sup> This was the leak of a document clearly from a highly placed source revealing that Tony Blair was intent on an invasion of Iraq much earlier than he had admitted. But this story raises an interesting point. Using Gavin McFadyean's criteria of research, this story is a leak and is difficult to see it as investigative reporting. An excellent example of leak based journalism and a great piece of journalism but not an investigation.

The importance of this and other documents leaked from Whitehall was summed up later by *The Guardian's* security editor, Richard Norton-Taylor:

The full extent of Tony Blair's mendacity over the invasion of Iraq has been emphatically revealed in classified Downing Street documents leaked since the invasion. They make up a devastating indictment of the way we were led into an adventure with the U.S. whose bloody consequences show no sign of relenting.<sup>61</sup>

Other UK stories suggested include:

- The exposure as false of the claim that Saddam Hussein had sought 'yellowcake' unrefined uranium ore from Niger as part of

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60 Smith, Michael (2005) Blair hit by new leak of secret war plan, pg1, Sunday Times. 1/05/2005

61 Norton-Taylor, Richard (2007) Memo to Mendacity: Blair subverted the truth to take us to war, Comment section. The Guardian. Thursday 17/04/2007.

- a nuclear weapon development programme. *The Independent on Sunday's* coverage has been influential.<sup>62</sup>
- Revealing the Attorney General's advice on the Iraqi invasion a story which Channel 4 News excelled. C4 News obtained a leak of the vital advice to then Prime Minister Tony Blair on which the nation had gone to war. The leak revealed the Attorney General's original advice was full of caveats that were stripped out of the summary he gave to Parliament.
  - BBC2's nightly current affairs programme *Newsnight* has produced some illuminated reports not least that suicide bomber Mohammed Siddique Khan was under surveillance by the security services a year before the 7/7 suicide attacks.<sup>63</sup>
  - Reporting of troop shortages, kit shortages and failure to provide 'hard skinned' transport for military operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>64</sup>
  - The exposure of the rescue of female U.S. soldier Private Jessica Lynch during the Iraq invasion as false and U.S. military PR exercise.<sup>65</sup>

Alex Thomson of C4 News believes that media coverage of military operations have highlighted political failures: "In Afghanistan the persistent inquiry into general overstretch and under-supply of critical equipment in both Afghanistan firstly and Iraq too has been very effective in calling the government to account and I suspect – created the climate of unsackability which allows people like Dannant to say what they said."<sup>66 67</sup>

Much coverage of the U.S. government's Guantanamo Bay detention camp on Cuba has been driven by British journalists, including David

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62 Whitaker, Raymond and Buncombe, Andrew (2007) How an article in the 'IoS' led to the conviction of Lewis 'Scooter' Libby *The Independent on Sunday* 11/02/2007

63 BBC2 (2005) 7 July bomber 'filmed in 2004', *Newsnight* - reporter Richard Watson 25/10/2005  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/uk\\_terror\\_threat/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/uk_terror_threat/default.stm)

64 Shipman, Tim (2002) Fighting forces hit by shortfalls in Equipment and medical care; Scandal of our khaki heroes in tattered trousers. *Sunday Express* pg 4 05/04/2002; Hickley, Matthew (2003) They've got the courage, Mr Blair, but have given them the equipment? *Daily Mail* Pg 1&5 22/01/2003

65 BBC2 (2003) War Spin, presented by John Kampfner and produced by Sandy Smith, Sunday 18 May 2003.

66 Lt Gen Sir Richard Dannant, the Commander of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corp from 2003

67 Thomson, Alex email to Lashmar, Paul (29 Jan 2007)

Rose at *The Observer* although some U.S. colleagues have undertaken fine investigations.<sup>68</sup>

U.S. stories to consider:

\* The exposure of the Bush administration exaggeration and misuse of intelligence provided by the informant 'Curveball', an Iraqi defector was written by Bog Drogin and John Goetz in the Los Angeles Times.<sup>69</sup> The investigation revealed that the source claiming to have seen mobile bioweapons labs was the brother of one of the senior aides to Ahmed Chalabi, the leader of the Iraqi National Congress, who boasted how the erroneous information provided by his group achieved his long-cherished goal of toppling Saddam.

Curveball, was an asset of German intelligence and was never directly interviewed by U.S. officials. The Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency did not even know exactly who he was, the LA Times reported.<sup>70</sup> This first-hand intelligence source on Saddam Hussein's alleged mobile bioweapons labs was a politically motivated Iraqi defector now dismissed as an "out-and-out fabricator". The mobile labs, since exposed by weapons inspectors as hydrogen production facilities at best and phantoms at worst, were one of the centrepieces of the U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's prewar address to the United Nations.

## Discussion

There are many questions about the reporting of the 'war on terror'. Could the British media have warned the public before the Iraq invasion that there were no WMD? In the face of such relentless government claims that WMD existed it was hard to challenge. Perhaps the best response on WMD comes from Hans Blix the UN Weapons Inspector who was later vilified by the U.S. for not finding WMD. "In the autumn of 2002 I still thought there were Weapons of Mass

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68 Guantanamo Bay detainment camp is a joint military prison and interrogation camp under the leadership of Joint Task Force Guantanamo since 2002.[1] The prison, established at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, holds people suspected by the executive branch of the U.S. government of being al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives, as well as those no longer considered suspects who are being held pending relocation elsewhere. The detainment areas consist of three camps in the base: Camp Delta (which includes Camp Echo), Camp Iguana, and the now-closed Camp X-Ray. The facility is often referred to as Guantanamo, Gitmo (derived from the abbreviation "GTMO"), or Camp X-Ray.

69 Drogin, Bob and Goetz, John (2005) The Curveball Saga, Los Angeles Times 20-21/11/2005,

70 The Curveball Saga (2005)

Destruction'. As he pointed out it is hard to prove a negative. But he went on to say: "It is extraordinary that the intelligence services of the World's most advanced nations made such a major error."<sup>71</sup>

It is clear that reporting of the war on terror has not always been of the highest standard, sometimes it was plain wrong and sometimes it hid behind the coattails of unidentified sources.

Perhaps the most controversial piece of investigative reporting in the UK was Andrew Gilligan's famous report. Many reporters believe that Gilligan's methods were not always proper or professional and he put the source in danger of exposure. Hutton came down hard on the fact that Gilligan had relied heavily on one source. But many experienced investigative reporters feel that while the two source rule should apply generally, when it comes to covering intelligence an exception can be made by experienced reporters. To have one high level intelligence source is no small achievement. Other reporters were also getting worried source reports from within the intelligence service on the same grounds.<sup>72</sup> If the hurdle was set at two sources it would dramatically restrict coverage of this important subject of the intelligence services. If we have learnt any thing from war on terror it is that intelligence services are politically influenced and capable of making major errors. They, almost more than any other organization, need the scrutiny of the investigative reporter to make sure they do not abuse their exclusive powers.

No better can this be demonstrated than by the difficulty journalists have in establishing whether MI5 knew of links between the terror cell that were caught making a fertilizer bomb and the 7/7 suicide bombers. MI5's briefings in late 2005 that Mohammed Siddique Khan, the leader of the 7/7 bombers had been identified months before the suicide bombings only on the 'periphery' of the fertilizer bomb cell.<sup>73</sup> It now looks like the Police and MI5 had many more leads on Khan than they admitted. This leaves the question – are they hiding other key facts. Should MI5 have prevented 7/7?

As Gilligan pointed out there are many stories that we simply have not been able to investigate. "What has happened on Diego Garcia?" he

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71 'On the Ropes', BBC Radio4, 24 April 2007

72 On the brink of war: The spies' revolt MI6 and CIA: the new enemy within" by Paul Lashmar and Raymond Whitaker, Independent on Sunday 09/02/2003

73 The author of this chapter experienced misleading information from official sources on the knowledge of Khan.

asks.<sup>74</sup> The British protectorate of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean is a secret base and journalists have no access. It also has an air base and military facilities. It has been associated with the rendition operations. But no one has been able to establish what the base has been used for and whether terror suspects have been held there.

Four years on, how does Gilligan's story, perhaps the best remembered piece of journalism so far in the war on terror, stand the test of time? Now, few would seriously contest his central point that the Government's dossier claiming Iraq had WMD was 'sexed up'. As Gilligan pointed out in an interview for this chapter, the Government in their initial counterattack claimed to be angry because he accused it of lying. This he points out he never did. The obvious implication is that the attack on Gilligan was a device to frighten the BBC and curtail criticism. It may have worked.

And that bring us onto a key point. One overarching observation has to be made about the media reporting of the war on terror. Even if you have high quality and consistent reporting, investigative or otherwise, that shows that a government has misled the public and made errors of judgement on a truly epic scale, if the executive has an overwhelming electoral majority it can withstand such criticism.

In the UK, if the quality of reporting has been varied over the last six years, good journalists including investigative journalists made a compelling case that Prime Minister Blair and his successors in government have committed the most serious foreign policy disaster certainly since Suez. Reporters have shown conclusively that Blair and his cabinet were either fools or knaves in the way we were enrolled into the war on terror. Even now it is hard to discern whether Blair did or did not believe that there was WMD in Iraq. Yet the Labour Government remains in power, Tony Blair has chosen his own time to retire. You could equally say the same for President Bush in the United States. Here we have sobering examples of the limitations on the power of the media at a point when it was most crucial.

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<sup>74</sup> Gilligan, Andrew telephone interview by Lashmar, Paul (2007).