

This is the cost of Blair's 'moral' war

The Blair Government has known, almost from the day it came to office in 1997, that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction were almost certainly destroyed following the Gulf War. Of all the pro-war propaganda of Blair and Bush, and their current threats giving Saddam Hussein yet another deadline to disarm, what may be their biggest lie is exposed by this revelation.

Two weeks ago, a transcript of a United Nations debriefing of Iraqi general Hussein Kamel was obtained by the American magazine, Newsweek, and by Cambridge University analyst, Glen Rangwala (who last month revealed that Blair's "intelligence dossier" on Iraq was lifted, word for word, from an American student's thesis).

General Kamel was the West's "star witness" in its case against Saddam Hussein. He was no ordinary defector. A son-in-law of the Iraqi dictator, he had immense power in Iraq; and when he defected, he took with him crates of secret documents on Iraq's weapons programme.

These secrets have been repeatedly cited by George W Bush and his officials as "evidence" that Iraq still has large quantities of deadly weapons of mass destruction, and that only war can disarm it. Bush, his officials and leading American commentators, have frequently lauded General Kamel as the most reliable source of information on Iraq's weapons. The Blair government has echoed this.

In 1995, General Kamel was debriefed by senior officials of the United Nations inspections team, then known as UNSCOM, and by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The complete transcript, now disclosed for the first time, contradicts almost everything Bush and Blair have said about the threat of Iraqi weapons.

For example, General Kamel says categorically: "I ordered destruction of all chemical weapons. All weapons - biological, chemical, missile, nuclear - were

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destroyed.” All that remains, he says, are the blueprints, computer disks and microfiches.

Newsweek says that the CIA and Britain's MI6 were told this; and Blair and Bush must have been told the truth. In other words, it is likely that Iraq has been substantially disarmed for at least eight years.

With General Kamel now out of the way (he was killed when he returned to Iraq in 1996), his “evidence” was selectively made public by Washington and London. In his dramatic presentation to the UN Security Council on February 5, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said that the truth about Iraq's nerve gas weapons “only came out after inspectors collected documentation as a result of the defection of Hussein Kamel, Saddam Hussein's late son in law”.

What Powell neglected to mention was that his star witness had told them all the weapons had been destroyed.

General Kamel's sensational admission has been corroborated by the former chief UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter who says that when he left Iraq in 1998, disarmament was “90 to 95 per cent”.

A United Nations verifying panel set up by the Security Council, confirmed that “the bulk of Iraq's proscribed weapons programmes has been eliminated”. This has seldom been reported.

Of course, none of these facts will deter the American and British security agencies from inventing and planting “evidence” of “Saddam's secret weapons” once Anglo-American forces take over Baghdad.

When America and Britain crush Iraq, a new phase of their black propaganda will emerge - for which the British public ought to be prepared. This new range of deceptions will be designed to justify attacking a sovereign state and killing innocent people: a crime under international law, with or without a second UN resolution.

Black propaganda of this kind has a long history. My own experience of it was the American invasion of Vietnam. In 1964, the US State Department published a White Paper with pages of “conclusive proof” of North Vietnam's preparations to invade the south. This “proof” stemmed from the “discovery” of a stockpile of weapons found floating in a junk off the coast of South Vietnam. The White Paper, which provided a quasi-legal justification for the American invasion, was known as a “master illusion”. The whole episode was fake, a set-up.

Master illusion was the CIA's term for master lie. In 1982, I interviewed Ralph McGehee, a senior CIA officer who documented the planting of the fake

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evidence. He told me: “The CIA loaded up a junk, a North Vietnamese junk, with communist weapons ... They floated this junk off the coast of Central Vietnam. Then they shot it up and made it look like a fire fight had taken place. They then brought in the American press and the international press and said, ‘Here’s the evidence that the North Vietnamese are invading South Vietnam.’ Based on this ‘evidence’, the US Marines went in, and the American air force began regular bombing of North Vietnam.”

As a result of this fakery, which included the elaborate fiction that an American destroyer had been attacked by a North Vietnamese gunboat, the United States dispatched its greatest ever land army to Vietnam, and dropped the greatest tonnage of bombs in the history of warfare, and forced millions of people to abandon their homes, and used chemical weapons that profoundly damaged the environment and human genes, leaving a once beautiful land petrified.

At least two million people were killed, and many more were maimed and otherwise ruined. Now replace “Vietnam” with “Iraq” in this story of lies; and you have the essentials of the same justification for another great criminal act.

Watch how the propaganda unfolds once the bombing is over and the Americans are running Baghdad and their spin machine. There will be the “discovery of Saddam’s secret arsenal,” probably in the basement of one his palaces. This will be accompanied by the “discovery” of gruesome evidence of Saddam’s oppression. This will not come as news to the many dedicated anti-war campaigners, who for years tried to stop the American and British governments from supplying Saddam with the tools of his oppression.

They include many Iraqis exiled in Britain, such as Khalid Sahi, who was tortured by the regime and opposes an attack “will bring nothing but more bloodshed, more misery”; and the anti-war Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn, who has protested about the Iraqi dictator for more than twenty years and demanded that the British government prosecute British companies that sustained the Iraqi torturers.

Two years ago, Peter Hain, then a Foreign Office minister, blocked a parliamentary request to publish the full list of British companies that had illegally traded with Saddam Hussein.

The reason why became clear last week when the Guardian newspaper disclosed that the Blair government had secretly paid out more than £33 million in taxpayers’ money to British companies claiming non-payment on the weapons they sold Saddam Hussein in the 1980s. The total loss to the taxpayer on sales to

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Iraq now exceeds £1billion. Add this to the £3.5billion that Gordon Brown has “put aside” for an attack on Iraq. Add this to the £1billion that the bombing of Iraq has already cost - the rarely reported bombing by British and American aircraft in the so-called “no fly zones”, which now cover most of Iraqi airspace and were set up, according to Blair, to “protect Iraq’s minorities”. Who believes this now?

This week, the Ministry of Defence said: “We never target civilians [in the no-fly zones] ... there’s no evidence of civilian casualties.”

The lie of this statement would be breathtaking were it not routine.

In northern Kurdish Iraq, I interviewed members of one family who had lost their grandfather, their father and four brothers and sisters when a “coalition” aircraft (British or American) dive-bombed them and the sheep they were tending. It was open desert, a moonscape with not a sign of other life, let alone a military installation. Amid the carcasses of blasted sheep were pieces of clothing and a single shoe.

The attack was investigated and verified by the chief United Nations representative in Iraq at the time, Hans Von Sponeck, who drove there especially from Baghdad. His findings are listed among dozens of similar attacks – on shepherds, farmers, fishermen – in a document prepared by the United Nations Security Section. At a windswept cemetery near the town of Mosul, I caught sight of the shepherd’s widow as she grieved for her husband and four children. “I want to see the pilot who did this,” she shouted.

Last week, “coalition” aircraft killed another six people in the southern city of Basra. Nothing unusual there. When I was last in Basra, an American missile killed six children when it “mistakenly” hit Al Jumohria, a very poor section of Basra’s residential area.

I walked down the street where the missile had struck in the early hours; it had followed the line of houses, destroying one after the other. I met the father of two sisters, aged eight and 10, who were photographed by a local weddings photographer, Nabil al-Jerani, shortly after the attack. Their bodies were unlike the other four children, who were blown to bits, their limbs and flesh in the overhead wires.

These two little girls were left intact. In Nabil’s photographs, they are in their nightdresses, one with a bow in her hair; their bodies perfectly engraved in the rubble of their homes, where they had been bombed to death, murdered, in their beds.

Look closely at their images on these pages; they are the faces of a stricken

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nation of whom 42 per cent are children. When Blair speaks about the “moral case” for sending hundreds of missiles against this nation of so many children, as well as new types of cluster bombs and bunker bombs and microwave bombs, and shells tipped with pure uranium, a form of nuclear weapon, the images of the two sisters provide an eloquent commentary on the Prime Minister’s Christian “morality”.

And when pictures of exhausted Iraqis greeting their “liberation” are flashed around the world, remember the faces that will be missing in the crowds - not only those of the children bombed and disposed of as “collateral damage”, but more than a million faces declared expendable by the American-driven and British-backed economic embargo.

Remember the vaccines, cancer-treatment equipment, pain-killers, plasma bags, food treatment equipment and much else denied over fourteen years: \$5.4 billion worth as of last July, to be precise, blocked by the US government, backed by the Blair government.

Remember the words of President Clinton’s then representative at the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, when she was asked if the price of 500,000 Iraqi children was a price worth paying for the embargo. “We think the price is worth it,” she said.

And when you next hear Bush or Blair or Straw or Hoon talk about “the tyrant who gassed his own people”, remember those American officials and British ministers who competed with each other to excuse and effectively reward Saddam Hussein for gassing 5,000 Kurds in the town of Halabja.

Barely one month after the atrocity in 1988, Tony Newton, Margaret Thatcher’s Trade Secretary, flew to Baghdad to offer Saddam £340million of taxpayers’ money in export credits. Three months later, the smiling Newton was back, this time to celebrate with Saddam the joyous news that Iraq was now Britain’s third-largest market for machine tools, from which a range of Iraqi weapons was forged - some of them used against British troops in the Gulf War.

Newton was followed by Assistant US Secretary of State John Kelly who flew to Baghdad to tell Saddam that “you are a source for moderation in the region, and the United States wants to broaden her relationship with Iraq”.

When the “liberation” of Baghdad is on the front page, remember the warmongering newspapers whose editorials defended Saddam Hussein throughout the 1980s by promoting the lie that his use of chemical weapons against Iran was purely defensive.

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Remember, too, Blair's long silence. There is no record of Blair saying anything worthwhile about Saddam's "excesses" (as his crimes used to be known by British ministers when he was "one of us") until after September 11, 2001 when the Americans, frustrated at having failed to catch Osama bin Laden, declared the Iraqi dictator their number one enemy.

Like a discredited East European autocrat, attended only by his court of supplicants and propagandists, Blair has few left to deceive. He even claimed the other day that "no Iraqis marched" in the great demonstration of February 15. In fact, as many as 7,000 Iraqis and Kurds marched. Iraqi families stood on the roadside holding up home-made placards: "Thank you for supporting my people."

None, it can be assumed, has any time for Saddam Hussein; but none want their country strangled, attacked, poisoned and occupied by another variety of dictator. **JP**