

Needed: An enquiry into a slaughter

The 1994 inquiry by Lord Justice Scott into the scandal of Britain's illegal supply of weapons to Saddam Hussein produced memorable moments. There was Mark Higson's detailed description of "a culture of lying" at the Foreign Office, where he was the Iraq Desk Officer. And there was the anxious moment when it seemed that Margaret Thatcher might walk out. "Lady Thatcher," said His Lordship, "we'll try and trouble you with as few papers as possible".

The Scott inquiry produced a mountainous report and opaque conclusions. No politician was prosecuted; a few reputations were ruffled. The English establishment is expert at this. Tim Laxton, an auditor who examined the books of two British arms companies, believes that if there had been a full and open inquiry, "hundreds" would have faced criminal prosecution. "They would include," he said, "top political figures, very senior civil servants throughout Whitehall: the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Trade and Industry... the top echelon of government."

The Hutton inquiry into the circumstances of Dr David Kelly's death has its memorable moments, too. The warning of Jonathan Powell, the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, not to "claim that we have evidence that [Saddam] is a threat", points directly to Blair's lying. However, that was exceptional. What is emerging is a pattern of protecting Blair, who is being subtly spun as a restraining influence, a peacemaker, even a guardian of Dr Kelly. A criminal abuse of power is not on any charge sheet: it is not within Hutton's brief, yet the British people and the memory of the thousands of innocent lives cut short in Iraq deserve nothing less.

Credible research shows that up to 10,000 civilians were killed in the attack on Iraq, together with perhaps 30,000 Iraqi soldiers, many of them teenage conscripts. A slaughter. These people were killed by weapons designed to reduce

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human beings to charcoal or to shred them. The British Army littered urban areas with cluster bombs, while the Americans did the same and in greater quantity, adding uranium-coated munitions, whose radiation poison is ingested with the desert dust.

In my experience, the unseen deaths are far more numerous. Today, malnourished children are dying from thirst and gastroenteritis because the world's biggest military machine, including the British, fails to restore power and clean running water as its most basic obligations require.

This carnage, wrought in an unprovoked illegal assault on a sovereign country, is a crime by any measure of international law: be it the United Nations Charter or the Geneva conventions. The "supreme international crime", the Nuremberg judges decided, was that of unprovoked aggression, because it contains "the accumulated evil" of all war crimes.

Blair has committed this crime. He shares responsibility for causing violent death and suffering on a vast scale, which the web of deceit spun by his courtiers has failed to justify. His co-conspirators in Washington care nothing about this; only their ascendant power matters. In their concentration camps, at Guantanamo Bay, Bagram in Afghanistan and Baghdad airport, there are no human rights, no recognisable rule of law, no justice. In this Kafkaesque world, people "disappear" while others, charged with nothing, plead for their lives. In the meantime, on the streets of conquered Baghdad, an elite US unit acts as a death squad, shooting people as they drive by.

In Washington the other day, I asked John Bolton, Under-Secretary for International Security at the State Department, the most outspoken of the "neo-conservatives" around President Bush, about civilian deaths in Iraq. I referred to the study that estimated up to 10,000 casualties. He replied: "Well, I think it's quite low if you look at the size of the military operation that was undertaken."

Quite low at 10,000. Puzzled that he should be subjected to such a line of questioning, he said with a laugh: "You must be a member of the Communist Party."

Norman Mailer recently broke the great silence about the true direction of Bush's America when he wondered if his country had entered a "pre-fascist atmosphere". In Washington, I put this to Ray McGovern, a former senior CIA officer, distinguished as a Soviet specialist and cold warrior, a man who counts himself a personal friend of George Bush, the president's father, who said: "I hope [Mailer] is right, because there are others who are saying we are already in a fascist mode... when you see how this war [on terror] is being conducted."

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Blair has made himself part of this. He is the fig leaf for what Vice-President Cheney has speculated might be a war lasting “50 years or more”, including an attack on North Korea, which has nuclear weapons. The Koreans, Blair told Parliament, might be “next”. Watching him accept 18 choreographed standing ovations in Congress, flushed and eager and grateful, was like watching a Stalinist puppet summoned to Moscow. Britain is not yet Bush’s America. Fear and loyalty oaths are not the currency here. Two million people filled the streets of London in February, the greatest show of dissent in this country, the British at their best. A critical public intelligence, long denied in much of the media, understands what Blair and his court have done and where the trail of blood leads: that he has handed al-Qa’ida and other jihadi groups a gift in a devastated and humiliated Iraq and, in so doing, has endangered us all.

Why, then, should we accept merely a Hutton inquiry? David Kelly’s tragedy deserved public investigation; but so does the epic, unnecessary, tragedy of the thousands of Iraqis whose lives Blair helped to end or scar.

This is not just rhetoric. Robert Jackson, the US prosecutor at Nuremberg in 1946, said: “If certain acts of violation of treaties are crimes, they are crimes whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct against others which we would not be willing to have invoked against us...”

It is time the issue of “our” criminality entered the public arena - before a media-endowed respectability is allowed to settle over the occupation in Iraq. “There never was a time,” said Blair in his obsequious speech to Congress, “when the power of America was so necessary or so misunderstood or when, except in the most general sense, a study of history provides so little instruction for our present day.”

Greater demagogues than Blair have said the same about history; Richard Nixon was one of them. In Washington during the Watergate scandal, the unsayable about Nixon was that he was a criminal. Then, as each lie was revealed, as each courtier was exposed and each fall guy fell, the unsayable was finally said, and he went. That took almost two years. Can we, and a peace-loving world, afford to wait that long? **JP**