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The Sunday Times - Britain

June 19, 2005

The leaked Iraq war documents

MICHAEL SMITH

The level of interest in the now famous Downing Street Memo, published in the May 1 edition of The Sunday Times, and in the leaked documents published over subsequent weeks, has been extraordinary

This new web page is designed to give our readers access to all the stories we have written about three highly classified documents on the Iraq war that were leaked to *The Sunday Times* ahead of the British General Election on May 5, 2005.

These three documents include the now famous "Downing Street Memo", which contains the minutes of a meeting of what was effectively Tony Blair's war cabinet held in Downing Street on July 23, 2002.

The meeting was a crucial one. President George W Bush was due to make a decision on which military plan should be used for the invasion of Iraq. The British had a number of deep concerns over the US plans which Blair would have to raise with the US president.

The Foreign Office was particularly concerned over US lack of interest in planning for the aftermath of the war and the lack of a legal justification for ousting Saddam. Regime change for its own sake is illegal under international law. It was therefore seen as essential that the allies went first to the UN to obtain a Security Council resolution backing the use of force to oust Saddam.

It was in this context that the main players on the British side met. Blair chaired the meeting, which was also attended by the Foreign Secretary Jack Straw; the then Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon; the Attorney General Lord Goldsmith; Sir Richard Dearlove, the Chief of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (better known as MI6); the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee John Scarlett; and Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, who as Chief of Defence Staff was head of Britain's armed forces.

The key quotes in this particular document came from:

Dearlove, who had just returned from Washington where he had talks with George Tenet, and was quoted as saying that there was "a perceptible shift in attitude" in the US capital. "Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, though military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy. The NSC had no patience with the UN route... There was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action."

Straw, who said: "It seemed clear that Bush had made up his mind to take military action, even if the timing was not yet decided. But the case was thin. Saddam was not threatening his neighbours, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran." Britain should "work up a plan for an ultimatum to Saddam to allow back in the UN weapons inspectors. This would also help with the legal justification for the use of force."

And **Geoff Hoon**, who in what may yet turn out to be

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the most damaging quote of all, said that "the US had already begun "spikes of activity" to put pressure on the regime". (See [British Bombing Raids were Illegal, says Foreign Office](#), June 19, 2005)

An inside-page article set out the context for the publication of the leaked document (see [Blair planned Iraq war from the start](#), May 1, 2005), and it was in fact the second of the documents, the Cabinet Office briefing paper, [Iraq: Conditions for Military Action](#), on which we based our first front-page story ([Blair hit by new leak of secret war plan](#), May 1, 2005).

This document distributed on July 21, 2002 two days before the Downing Street meeting was designed to brief the participants on the latest situation with regard to the US war planning. It gives an astonishing feel of the official concern felt within Whitehall over the way in which things were going, the lack of legal justification, the failure to prepare for the post-war situation in Iraq and most particularly the fact that there was no way that Britain could get out of going to war (See [Ministers were told of need for Gulf War excuse](#), June 12, 2005).

For as the briefing paper made clear very early on "When the Prime Minister discussed Iraq with President Bush at Crawford in April he said that the UK would support military action to bring about regime change."

At the time, this was the most damaging part of any of the documents. Despite Blair's repeated insistence throughout 2002 that no decision had been taken to go to war with Iraq, political analysts had long believed that the decision was in fact made at the Bush-Blair summit at the president's range at Crawford, Texas, in early April 2002. Not only did this confirm it, but it did so in terms that were highly damaging to the prime minister.

Despite having been warned by his officials that "regime change per se is illegal" he had agreed to back military action to achieve it. There were three conditions attached to his agreement. But the most crucial of these, that "options for action to eliminate Iraq's WMD through the UN weapons inspectors had been exhausted" would never be achieved.

The third leaked document was [Foreign Office legal advice](#), which was appended to the briefing paper. This is a useful background document on the British view of international law the text of which is now also published on this website.

The recent circulation on the internet of the text of five other similar memos, which were leaked to me last September, has raised some interesting issues, largely because I destroyed the original copies I was given to protect my source. A number of supporters of President Bush have even suggested that this somehow "proved" that the documents were not genuine.

Firstly, all of the documents have been authenticated not just by me, but by the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the Associated Press. Secondly, the various documents included quotes from a dozen senior officials, including Blair, Straw and Hoon, none of whom have come forward to dismiss them as fakes. Thirdly it is a matter of record that a police Special Branch leak investigation took place into how I came to get hold of the documents, something that would not have occurred were they forgeries.

The leak investigation should come as no surprise to anyone who has read the Downing Street Memo, which carries the stern warning, "This record is extremely sensitive. No further copies should be made. It should be shown only to those with a genuine need to know its contents." The irony is of course that the attention given to the document by the internet bloggers once it appeared on this website has almost certainly made it the most widely read secret British document in history.

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