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STRAW: IRAQ MAY NOT HAVE WMDs

Apr 29 2003

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By Paul Gilfeather, Whitehall Editor

THERE may be NO weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw admitted yesterday.

He told the Commons that war was declared because the regime had ONCE been in possession of them.

And he insisted they did not have to be found to justify the invasion.

His astonishing U-turn stunned MPs on all sides of the Commons - and came hours after Tony Blair again insisted that weapons were there and would be found.

Mr Straw said: "I'm absolutely certain that Iraq HAD illegal possession of weapons of mass destruction and had these RECENTLY and there is every reason why these ought to be found."

Earlier Mr Blair told his monthly Downing Street press briefing: "I remain confident that they will be found."

He added defiantly: "Before people crow about the absence of weapons of mass destruction, I suggest they wait a little bit."

Mr Straw's remarks are a clear watering down of the Government's position. Critics of the war said the move was a blatant attempt to prepare the public for the failure to find weapons.

His spokesman said: "He used his words very carefully.

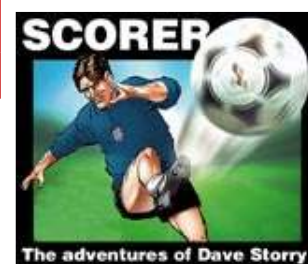
"The point he is avoiding making is that the war is justified only if we find weapons of mass destruction."

And he admitted that any chemical or biological weapons finds would be a "bonus".

MPs said they were staggered by the U-turn.

Senior Labour backbencher Ian Gibson said: "The justification for war was that Iraq had weapons and could use them. Apparently that wasn't the case after all.

"Now they are backtracking because they suspect that there are no weapons to be found.



"The public should beware the point where spin and lying by politicians comes together."

Labour MP Tam Dalyell, the Father of the House, accused the Government of hoodwinking the nation.

He said: "We were told again and again the reason for going to war was that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and that they could be used within 45 minutes.

"Now it's clear that the Iraqis have had no weapons for some time and that Parliament was given a completely false impression."

The White House also showed signs of a climbdown last week, claiming that Saddam may have destroyed his arsenal before the war started.

President George Bush said then: "We know he had them and whether he destroyed them, moved them or hid them, we're going to find out the truth."

TONY Blair ordered British commanders in Iraq to find out why US soldiers paraded three captured looters naked through the streets of Baghdad.

Downing Street revealed that US commanders were being asked for further details.

Mr Blair's official spokesman said: "We don't know why they were photographed with their kit off. Let's find out the facts, then we will see if we need to comment."

Amnesty International said the gunpoint parade was an "appalling" violation of international conventions on the treatment of prisoners.

THE PRIME MINISTER

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THE FOREIGN SECRETARY

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