

IRAQ: ANOTHER BLOODY COVERUP



“[Bush and Blair] may well, with the passage of time and the opening of archives, join the ranks of Roosevelt and Churchill.”

These were the words of historian Martin Gilbert in 2004. Today, he emerges as one of the panel leading the government inquiry into Iraq. Can't you just see him reversing this eulogy and denouncing them as a pair of bloody war-mongers? No, neither can I.

The Chair of the Inquiry, Sir John Chilcot, may not be any more helpful. Chilcot was part of the original whitewash on Iraq, delivered by the Butler Inquiry five years ago. It is hard to believe that What The Butler Never Saw then is suddenly going to be revealed now.

Around the same time, in 2004, I wrote to Kofi Annan asking whether the UN could look at the legality of the Iraq war and consider whether these two leaders of 'the free world' could be tried as war criminals. Today, there can be little doubt that they lied their way into a war of choice; with terrible consequences for Iraq, for the families who lost sons and daughters fighting in the war and for the fear of terrorism that has stalked us ever since.

What then is the point of an Inquiry stacked with neo-cons and Establishment figures that meets behind closed doors and works out how to exonerate everyone? Families of the bereaved will be as offended by this as the whole of the anti-war movement. Political opponents will score free hits at Labour's duplicity in structuring the Inquiry in this way.

Arguments that it just mirrors the Franks Inquiry into the Falklands War, miss the point. With the Falklands, Britain was at least confronted with the de facto occupation of the islands by General Galtieiri's troops. With Iraq, we faced no such occupation. Instead, the USA and Britain had to manufacture the case for a war, on the basis of 'weapons of mass destruction' claims we know to be manifestly untrue.

We know too that Weapons Inspectors were asking for more time and that other UN members were demanding a second Security Council Resolution to justify a war. Instead, we ended up with a Coalition of the Willing and Britain's biggest foreign policy disaster since Suez.

Paradoxically, Gordon Brown's courage in setting up the Inquiry will turn out to be a stick that beats him for his duplicity. No Cabinet member can come out well from a genuinely independent and open Iraq Inquiry. Brown must know that. If he had been cunning he could have allowed everything to come into the open and for Blair to be seen as the arch villain and messianic warmonger. As it is, Brown is now the most likely person to cop the blame for the cover-up that will surely follow.

Another fine mess to chase us into the general election.