

While England Sleeps

The Iraq inquiry that is certain to uncover nothing

By Rod Liddle

THERE IS A GRAVE anxiety that gnaws away at Sir John Chilcot as he daily conducts his inquiry into the war in Iraq. By 11 o'clock each morning, as some former Foreign Office mandarin is dissembling about weapons of mass destruction or the legality of the invasion, you can see Sir John beginning to look troubled. A little after midday, this has developed into a rumbling and a mild panic. Soon enough, he will interrupt the evidence and inquire politely, but with some urgency, if perhaps now might be the right time to break for lunch? Or, he will add, in a spirit of democracy but with a slightly crestfallen expression, should we wait until 1 o'clock?

Lunch is an important part of the Chilcot Inquiry, Britain's third sort-of inquest into the events that led up to the invasion of Iraq. This one has been convened because the present Labour administration, under Gordon Brown, wishes to decouple itself from the gravest failure of the previous Labour administration, under Tony Blair. Or at least I assume that's the idea. Anyway, over the course of several interminable months all of the British people who had anything to do with the war will be paraded before the inquiry and asked stuff.

I don't think you Americans would quite believe the Chilcot Inquiry unless you saw it. Even then you might be fooled into thinking it is a production of a hitherto unknown early Terrence Rattigan play, one of those anti-dramas where titled, well-mannered people who

attended Eton behave with exquisite politeness toward titled, well-mannered people who attended Harrow. It is a snapshot of Britain that could have been taken with a pinhole camera in 1896. If nothing else, it is at least a salutary reminder that no matter how modern Britain pretends to be, it is not really so. Not at the top.

The counterargument is that at least we are prepared to investigate this far-ago, to ask the salient questions. Well, indeed—although that depends upon what you mean by “investigate” and “salient.” We have already had two inquiries into the Iraq War—the Butler Inquiry and the Hutton Inquiry—both of which largely exonerated the government, at least partly as a consequence of the extremely narrow remits that were set down at the start of each process. Now we have a third that,

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according to Chilcot, is “not a trial,” is not designed to establish guilt or innocence or to apportion blame, but is instead an amiable ramble around the houses before a spot of lunch at the Garrick Club. Thus there has been an almost total absence of forensic inquiry and follow-up questions. Witnesses say things that clearly conflict with things they were saying during the run-up to war, but they are never asked to reconcile these contradictions.

Please forgive the skepticism, or even cynicism, but public inquiries chaired by amenable establishment judges and consisting of amenable establishment figures have been a mainstay of the British system for a century or so, and they have never poked a finger of blame at the government. This may, of course, be because over the last 100 years the British government has at all times behaved with the utmost probity, honesty, and decency. Certainly this is the line taken by government ministers over Hutton and Butler: You see, we told you so. It's just that you people are determined to vilify the government and are not prepared to accept the official decision.

Inquiries of this kind only ever work when they are held 30 or 40 years later, and everybody who might be implicated by them is dead. If we held an inquiry into Suez right now it is entirely possible

that the chairman would find that Britain may just have overstepped the mark a little with regard to Egypt, but benefit of hindsight, past is a different country, not much we can do about it now, etc.

Let's take a look at the people doing the inquiring. There's Sir John Chilcot in the chair, a former civil servant attached to the security services who has been accused of “spoon-feeding” easy questions to the witnesses and has told them

that they need not answer questions they consider inappropriate. Then there's the eminent historian Sir Martin Gilbert, who was four-square behind the invasion of Iraq from day one and has already served on the Butler Inquiry, which cleared the government of misleading the public and the House of Commons. Then we have Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, who wrote some of Tony Blair's foreign-policy speeches, including the one our former prime minister made in Chicago where he outlined the criteria by which civilized countries like Britain and the U.S. might wage war against Third World Islamic hellholes. Are you beginning to get a flavor of this thing? There's the former diplomat Sir Roderic Lyne, who, in his genteel way, has asked the most penetrating questions so far. And Baroness Usha Prashar, who is presumably on the panel because she is a nice middle-class Asian lady who has done many nice things in her life but has so far not asked a single question of pertinence or point. These are the people charged with the task of discovering the truth.

From the witnesses—mainly civil servants but with a sprinkling of charismatic guests such as Blair, his spin doctor Alastair Campbell, and former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw—we have heard the same stuff we heard in the Butler Inquiry.

We know that even in the autumn of 2002, Iraq was considered less of a threat to the West than Libya and Iran. We have heard again how Blair pledged to stand beside the U.S. in its dealings with Iraq as early as spring 2002, and from that moment on we were headed to war, with or without the United Nations' approval. It has been reiterated that the September dossier, which detailed Iraq's threat to the West, was not merely based upon flawed intelligence, but was "sexed up" in order to provide a compelling case for the

public—and the House of Commons and the cabinet—to take military action. We have heard once again that in the last month or two before the invasion, the British government received persuasive intelligence reports that Iraq had no program for weapons of mass destruction, posed no threat, had no official links with any Islamic terrorist organizations, and was beginning to comply with the UN weapons inspectors.

WE HAVE HAD CONFIRMED WHAT WE KNEW ALL ALONG: **BRITAIN, VIA A SHORT CONVERSATION BETWEEN OUR PRIME MINISTER AND PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH, COMMITTED ITSELF TO DOING PRETTY MUCH WHATEVER THE U.S. WANTED.**

In short, we have had confirmed what we knew all along: Britain, via a short conversation between our prime minister and President George W. Bush, committed itself to doing pretty much whatever the U.S. wanted to do about Iraq. As this criterion for an invasion might not prove sufficiently alluring to the public or to Parliament, Blair and his close lieutenants flammed up Iraq's military threat in a manner that deceived all of our major institutions. A nuclear program? Nope. A program of WMD that was "beyond all reasonable doubt"? Nope. An ability to strike at British targets within 45 minutes? Don't be so bloody stupid. This much we knew already, but the cavalier approach to those nonexistent weapons of mass destruction continues to thrill the layman. We discovered, early on in the inquiry, that Iraq's possession of chemical weapons was not predicated upon it having, uh, chemical weapons. As one sage put it, as a country with a vibrant petro-chemical industry, Iraq had the ability to create chemical weapons pretty quickly and had no need to stockpile them. As it also possessed ballistic missiles—a means of delivery of those hypothetical chemical

weapons—then de facto, it had chemical weapons. Even if it didn't.

Only Brits get a chance to take part in this production. There will be no Bush or Rumsfeld or Cheney. More pertinently, no Hans Blix.

The spin from the major players—the cabinet, Blair, Campbell—continues unabated. They say, in the most reasonable of terms: listen, we made a decision to invade Iraq. That may have been the

wrong decision, and we can have a valuable and rewarding debate about that. But come on, do not suggest that we lied or acted under anything other than good faith.

The complete reverse of the argument is the truth. It may well be that invading Iraq was, in the long term, the right thing to do—although I would disagree, and so would many others over here. But it is beyond dispute that the government dissembled, it exaggerated, it distorted. It misled the British Parliament and the British people. Its reasons for invading Iraq were simply not those that it stated at the time. Instead of commissioning intelligence reports to ascertain the nature of Iraq's threat to either the West or to neighboring Arab countries, it made up its mind and twisted the intelligence to suit that conclusion. This was pretty clear shortly after the invasion, and it is even clearer now. But don't expect our Chilcot Inquiry to conclude such a thing. It is not there to apportion blame. ■

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Hoosier Hopeful

Antiwar Republican John Hostettler aims for the Senate.

By W. James Antle III

IN DECEMBER, John Hostettler decided to take on a job few members of his party wanted: Republican challenger to popular Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.). The national GOP did not place Bayh's seat very high on its list of 2010 pickup opportunities. In 2008, Indiana defied its Republican roots when it went narrowly for Barack Obama. Bayh vs. Hostettler looked like a long shot, but it would at least carry the distinction of pitting a Democrat who had supported the Iraq War against a Republican who opposed it from the beginning.

Then came Scott Brown's special election to the U.S. Senate in January. Suddenly, the sky seemed the limit. If a Republican could be elected to Ted Kennedy's seat, party recruiters asked, why couldn't they take Evan Bayh's? After all, it had once belonged to Dan Quayle. By February, Bayh himself had apparently decided the seat was no longer safe and dramatically announced his retirement.

Hostettler, a soft-spoken, cerebral mechanical engineer first decided to run for Congress in Indiana's Eighth District in 1994, challenging incumbent Democratic Rep. Frank McCloskey. Despite the district's volatile nature—its competitiveness led handicappers to call it the "Bloody Eighth"—the national party was slow to sense an opportunity to take out McCloskey.

But Hostettler was not. He ran a vigorous campaign, tying the incumbent to the national Democratic Party and blasting him as "Frank McClinton." Hostettler mobilized grassroots conservative

activists, particularly gun owners and pro-life evangelical Christians, who were ready to rid Washington of Bill Clinton's minions. He upset McCloskey and was re-elected five times.

Republicans in Washington are eagerly anticipating another 1994, but they don't seem interested in history repeating itself with Hostettler. Even before Bayh dropped out, the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) was desperate to come up with a different challenger. Their first choice was Rep. Mike Pence, a genial Hoosier who is popular with movement conservatives and already chairman of the House Republican Conference.

William Kristol tried to start a "draft Pence" riot last year, when Scott Brown was still a gleam in Republicans' eyes. Praising a Pence statement opposing the Democratic healthcare bill, Kristol made the case that the country needed an "articulate, conservative first-term Senator who had knocked off a 'safe' Democrat in a state Obama carried in 2008." Foreign policy went unmentioned in Kristol's plea—and so did Hostettler.

Yet a Rasmussen poll released as Pence was in talks with the NRSC did mention Hostettler. The results: Pence led Bayh by three points, 47 percent to 44 percent. Hostettler trailed Bayh by three, 44 percent to 41 percent. A third candidate, state Sen. Marlin Stutzman, was 12 points behind Bayh. Not a sure bet for anyone—and given the margin of error, no clear evidence that Pence was a stronger Republican nominee than Hostettler.

Pence decided to take a pass on the race. "After much prayer and deliberation," he said in a statement, "I have decided to remain in the House and to seek re-election to the 6th Congressional District in 2010." This ran counter to Kristol's advice. "If [Pence] won, he'd be a leading possibility for national office as soon as 2012," the *Weekly Standard* editor wrote. "If he loses, but runs a respectable race—which surely he'll do—he'd have a good shot to succeed Mitch Daniels as governor in 2012."

But Pence is already talked about as a serious candidate for governor, and even for president, in 2012. He will also be in line to become at least the majority whip if Republicans retake control of the House in 2010, a development that no longer seems remote. Given those facts, challenging Bayh seemed to be a risky move for Pence, while Hostettler has nothing to lose. Hostettler himself would have been a problem for Pence. As a blogger for the Swing State Project put it, "Pence could find himself stepping into an unenviable situation that replicates a lot of other Republican Senate primaries: he'd be running as the 'establishment' candidate against a movement conservative outsider even further to his right."

The party establishment's next choice was former Sen. Dan Coats, who previously held the seat and has won statewide office before—most recently in 1992, six years before he decided to retire rather than face Evan Bayh in a general election. While he had a generally conservative voting record in Con-