Report X Marks the Spot: The British Government's Deceptive Dossier on Iraq and WMD


Abstract

The British government published a dossier on 24 September 2002 setting out its claims regarding Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Parliament was recalled for an emergency session on the same day to hear Prime Minister Tony Blair's presentation of it. The dossier stated that Iraq had WMD and was producing more. After the invasion in March 2003, no WMD were found. Ever since, there has been controversy as to whether the dossier reported accurately intelligence which turned out to be wrong, as Blair has claimed consistently, or whether the dossier deliberately deceived by intentionally giving the impression of greater Iraqi WMD capability and threat than the intelligence suggested. Despite a great deal of attention to the September dossier, there has not been any analysis conceptually well developed enough, or sufficiently grounded in the empirical evidence, to make much headway in resolving this disagreement. This article assesses the extent to which the dossier was part of a campaign of organized political persuasion and whether that campaign involved demonstrable deception. It shows that the dossier did not accurately represent the content and strength of intelligence that turned out to be wrong. Instead, the dossier portrayed a misleading picture of greater capability and greater certainty than the intelligence warranted. The misleading nature of the dossier was not an accident. There was a concerted effort by many of those involved in producing the dossier to push the claims about the intelligence as far as possible. The phrase “dodgy dossier” was originally used to describe this September dossier. The British government published another dossier on 3 February 2003 which was exposed as being mostly plagiarized. Subsequently, the term “dodgy dossier” has tended to be applied mainly to this second dossier. In view of the arguments in this article, the September dossier ought to be known as the deceptive dossier. The argument in this article is structured in four sections. The first section surveys official claims regarding the dossier, the results of four successive inquiries (the fifth has not yet reported), and the scholarly literature to date. Here the article shows that, despite some discussion of the dossier in numerous publications, there has still not been an in-depth analysis of its contents and production which is conceptually well developed and which draws on vital information that has become available in the last few years. The second section sets out the conceptual framework, while the third applies it to the empirical record. The article shows that the dossier was fundamentally misleading about the intelligence and that deliberate deception through omission and distortion was involved. The conclusion considers the significance of the deceptive dossier.

Metadata

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The 2016 Iraq Inquiry Report (the Chilcot report) was highly critical of the British government and its involvement in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent occupation. Drawing upon the authoritative material in the report, this article provides the most comprehensive and conceptually grounded post-Chilcot assessment of the empirical evidence now available regarding whether deception and propaganda were used to mobilize support for the invasion of Iraq. Employing a conceptual framework designed to identify deceptive organized persuasive communication (OPC), it is argued that the Chilcot rep...