

Searching for Weapons of Mass Destruction: US Intelligence Failure in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq

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Abstract

In 2003 the United States of America invaded Iraq without prior approval from the United Nations. The political leadership deemed that the intelligence was sufficient to prove that Saddam Hussein was in possession of weapons of mass destruction. The invasion led to what has later been named ‘the perfect intelligence failure’, as it became clear that the intelligence conclusions were wrongful. This essay offers an analysis of the failures that occurred on all stages of the intelligence cycle, and the basis on which the decision to invade was made. The essay concludes that the intelligence was politicised from the point of directions on collection, throughout the cycle, until the point of dissemination and policy implementation.

Keywords: Weapons of Mass Destruction, US Intelligence, Iraq Invasion, Iraq

Introduction

In this essay I will look at the different factors that determine intelligence failure in general to see which of these were present in the US intelligence’s failure to find large-scale weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq. To do this, intelligence in general will be described and the intelligence cycle will be explained and utilised to analyse the different stages of where intelligence can fail. However, using the intelligence cycle to aid the understanding of intelligence

failures is solely a method of simplification. It does not imply that failures cannot be continuous over several steps of the intelligence cycle. I will explore below, especially when looking at failures in the Iraq invasion, how the practical distinction between failures at separate the stages is rather blurry. Failures were made in collection, analysis, dissemination and communication, to name a few. Despite the findings of the prominent investigative reports after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, I believe that politicization of the intelligence community (IC) on this matter was a prominent factor in obscuring the intelligence findings and ultimately led to the intelligence failure of the Iraq War 2003. I will explain why in the following paragraphs.

Intelligence and Intelligence Failure

Intelligence is data and knowledge collected from a range of different sources. In a modern political context, it is “the official, secret collection and processing of information on foreign countries to aid in formulating and implementing foreign policy, and the conduct of covert activities abroad to facilitate the implementation of foreign policy” (Random, 1958). Intelligence is often collected to acquire knowledge of other countries’ military strength, economic power, internal political situation and levels of domestic unrest. The primary job of intelligence is to reduce uncertainty by identifying issues of policy relevance with policy makers, collecting and analysing information (Gentry, 2008:267), and issuing policy makers with timely advance warning of potential threats (Pythian, 2006:401). The intelligence is used to estimate threats, capabilities and intentions of adversaries (Betts, 1978:68). Political leaders analyse these warnings in the relevant strategic and domestic political context, make decisions under conflicting pressures and manage policy-implementing agencies (Gentry, 2008:267). In this way, intelligence is used to guide policy makers and other senior decision makers in the national security and defence arenas (CIA, 2007).

Intelligence failure can be at blame if events “of strategic significance” occur without forewarning (Pythian, 2006:401). Intelligence failure can occur when a state fails in collecting or analysing information, national leaders fail to make sound policy on the disseminated intelligence or fails to act effectively on the information received (Gentry, 2008:249). Gentry (2008:248) argues that reasons for intelligence failure can include organizational, cultural, cognitive or psychological

factors. The intelligence cycle includes the direction from policy makers, the “requirement” of what should be investigated, the collection and analysis of intelligence, the finished product of intelligence analysis that is delivered to the policymakers, and again the directions from policymakers on implementation and further targets of analysis. According to Betts (1978:63) crucial mistakes are sometimes made by the professionals that produce the finished analysis, but most often by the decision makers who consume the products of intelligence services. It is impossible to account for all the possible mistakes that can be made in attempting to take advantage of intelligence, but the following paragraphs will give examples of how possible failures can erupt on all stages of the intelligence cycle and how it is all linked.

Failure Determinants at Different Stages

The directions given by the policymakers in relation to the target of the intelligence-gathering are relevant because different targets require different forms of intelligence. For example, human intelligence (HUMINT) can be a beneficial way of collecting information if the collecting country has an official presence in the country. Additionally, targets of intelligence, usually states or non-state actors, often know that they are targets of intelligence and may act to hinder foreign intelligence efforts through active defences like counter-intelligence activities, deception and concealing sensitive installations (Gentry, 2008:255), which can lead to misleading information and wrongful analysis. One writer who focuses on the act of deception by intelligence targets is Barton Whaley (1973:2). He claims that it was Hitler’s deceptions, rather than mistakes made by the Soviets, that made the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 so surprising. Additionally, collection of intelligence is always incomplete (Dahl, 2005:37), and different targets require different forms of collection. Analysts have concluded that the rising global threat of terrorism, for example, poses new and difficult challenges for the IC, which can best be overcome by more HUMINT (Dahl, 2005:33).

Failures in the intelligence cycle can also happen at the stage of analysis, and when information is processed by the intelligence agencies. Analysts try to identify significant information, distinguish noise from relevant signals, and make accurate forecasts (Gentry, 2008:252). Errors at this level can occur in misunderstanding of information and recognition of “noise” instead of relevant

signals. Additionally, errors can happen through cognitive or institutional bias by the analyst. There might also be a problem of compartmentalization of information, because of restrictions on information sharing, security concerns and fears of compromising sources that creates mistrust between intelligence agencies (Hulnick, 2006:962). By sharing intelligence, gaps in information can be filled, and conflicting analysis can be found. The 2004 Madrid bombings underlined how compartmentalisation of intelligence can impede security operations. Some of the suspects in the Madrid bombing had been known to the French and Spanish police in 2001, and had, since 2003, been on a list of suspects issued by the Moroccan police for a series of café bombings in Casablanca, but were still living openly in Madrid. Several countries seemed to have a few pieces of intelligence each (Finn and Richburg, 2004), which, if shared, could have led to a prevention of the attack.

Other major sources of intelligence failure can be the method of dissemination; the communication to the policy-makers, and possibly also the access to raw material outside the intelligence agencies. For communication to be effective, analysts must present clear, accurate and persuasive warnings. A former Defence Intelligence Officer claimed that analysts cannot only give reports stating that a bombing might happen, they must tell the policy-makers what this means and what is really likely to happen (Dahl, 2005:47). Both insufficient information and an overload of information can lead to unclear messages being communicated. Where there is ambiguous information and limited time for thorough assessment of sources, intelligence analysis can be driven by intuition and conclusions can be led by instinct. As stated by Betts (1978:71): the greater the ambiguity, the greater the impact of preconceptions. Another source of challenge in the intersection between analysts and policy-makers in the US, is that raw reporting from the collection process usually reaches both at the same time (Hulnick, 2006:961). Some of this raw intelligence may be incomplete, contradictory or wrong, and policy officials sometimes take the reporting as having been judged or evaluated (Hulnick, 2006:962). This can create serious problems on both sides.

In the final stage of the intelligence cycle, intelligence is communicated to policymakers, who must then react appropriately and implement policies accordingly. The task of the policy-maker is to place the intelligence warnings in political contexts and make decisions based on their political circumstances and limited tools for implementation. Factors such as psychology,

experience and interests can increase cognitive bias of a policy-maker in interpreting warnings and may lead decisions to become defective policies (Gentry, 2008:254). It was noted in relation to the Beirut bombings in 1983 that failures in collection and processing of information were much less significant than the attitudes and lack of action by the consumers of intelligence (Dahl, 2005:46). Directors of intelligence agencies can tend to dismiss critical intelligence, and cling to data that supports continued commitment to established policies (Betts, 1978:65). Additionally, policy-makers might not have trust in the intelligence personnel, and may therefore refrain from acting on certain warnings. According to Gentry (2008:256) presidents Truman, Johnson, Nixon and Bill Clinton sometimes displayed suspicion of the CIA and at times ignored intelligence. One Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) reportedly quashed a CIA report warning of the dangers of invading Cambodia in 1971, because President Nixon had already decided to invade (Ibid, 2008:252).

Additionally, policy-makers' bias can occur as a source of intelligence failure if politicians create an environment of presumed facts, and indirectly force intelligence agencies to operate in concert with those presumed facts. Or failure can arise if intelligence professionals attempt to increase personal or institutional favour by providing specific intelligence messages that they imagine are wanted or necessary for the leaders (Gentry, 2008:252). It is also said that "the principal cause of surprise is not the failure of intelligence, but the unwillingness of political leaders to believe intelligence or to react to it with sufficient dispatch" (Wohlsetter, 1962:227). Desires to prevent recrimination may drive intelligence agencies to withhold warnings until uncertainties recede, and therefore keep raw information to themselves (Gentry, 2008:253). The allocation of time and resources for intelligence professionals provide additional constraints (Betts, 1978:68). Additionally, agencies responsible for the implementation of policies are subject to certain limitations that impact their ability to respond to intelligence warnings. This way, failures that appear on the implementation stage may superficially look like intelligence failures, but actually reflect structural issues created through previous policy decisions (Gentry, 2008:256).

The Intelligence Failures of the 2003 Iraq Invasion

In 2003 the US invaded Iraq to eliminate the perceived threat posed by Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) (Pythian, 2006:400). The invasion has later been named 'the perfect intelligence failure', as failure occurred on all stages of the intelligence cycle, and no WMDs were found (Hulnick, 2006:967). Some see it as the worst intelligence failure since the founding of the modern intelligence community (IC). The *National Intelligence Estimate* (NIE) that 'justified' the intervention in Iraq was based on reporting from unreliable sources and biased preconceptions grounded in the previous experiences of WMD programs in Iraq (Hulnick, 2006:967). Subsequent investigations into the failed intervention claimed that the failure was in collection and analysis, poor management and organizational weaknesses (Pythian, 2006:401).

Since the US did not have an official presence in Iraq, collection of intelligence relied on a few HUMINT sources that were dependent on "defectors and foreign government services" (US Congress, 2004:24). One of these was 'Curveball', a chemical engineer from Baghdad (Betts, 2007:602), who provided the bases of around 112 separate reports (US Congress, 2004:149), and subsequently was deemed to be a fabricator (Ibid, 2004:462). Analysts further failed to investigate dual-use equipment bought through illicit channels (Ibid, 2004:14), and assumed that these were for the development of a WMD program, and not actually for the legal tactical rockets (Pythian, 2006:408). The Silberman-Robb commission (2005:52) claimed that this constituted "errors in technical and factual analysis". A compartmentalization of information made the DCI unaware of dissenting opinions within the IC (US Congress, 2005:28). Additionally, the CIA tended to deny information to more specialist agencies that could have provided input that challenged existing assumptions (Ibid, 2004:28). These, along with similar findings, led the Silberman-Robb Commission (2005:5) to describe the IC as "fragmented, loosely managed and poorly coordinated".

Politicization on All Levels

Even though the subsequent investigations rejected politicization, and absolved the Bush administration of all charges (Pythian, 2006:401), some reports gave hints of an environment that was not conducive to questioning the dominant assumption on Iraq, which strengthens Betts'

hypothesis that intelligence failure usually lies with the consumers of intelligence (Pythian, 2006:418). Senator Ron Widen stated that the Bush administration had “repeatedly and independently made the case for war not by relying on US intelligence but by ignoring and directly contradicting the same” (US Congress, 2004:489-490). Senior Bush administration officials had made forceful public statements for war (Silberman-Robb, 2005:189) and prevalence of repetitive tasking of intelligence personnel was found, including questions of judgments on a particular issue over and over again by “senior customers” (US Congress, 2004:456). According to Hulnick (2006:967) some also speculate that that the NIE was drawn up in order to meet the political needs of the White House. Richard Clarke (2004:264) claimed that the Bush administration entered office “with Iraq on its agenda”, and a leaked minute from a meeting record shows the head of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, reporting to the prime minister that “military action was now seen as inevitable” and that “intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy” (Danner, 2005).

Deception practices employed by Iraq in the past, and the failure to account satisfactorily for WMDs during the 1991 war, gave US policymakers and intelligence professionals logical reasons for why there was evidence denying the existence of WMDs (Pythian, 2006:408). In a context of seemingly obvious guilt, an environment of pressure to find WMDs and a political desire to intervene in Iraq, analysts shifted the burden of proof from requiring evidence of WMDs, to require evidence showing that Iraq did not possess WMDs, a theory that could not be disproved (Silberman-Robb, 2005:168). The NIE was written with the assumption that the US was going to war (US Congress, 2004:505), and intervention could only take place if the IC concluded that Iraq still had illegal WMD programs. This justification was the only way to secure public support for the Bush administration to initiate a war (Betts, 2007:598). This sentiment caused findings of evidence that denied WMDs to be downplayed and ignored. Even when Saddam Hussein’s son-in-law, Hussein Kamel, told his debriefers that old stocks of WMD had been destroyed, this was not believed (Jervis, 2006:40). Thin amounts of evidence gave room for preconceptions and the ability to shape verifications according to these. Influenced by decisive policymakers, judgments on all levels were driven by circumstantial evidence (Betts, 2007:602) and the necessity of finding WMDs to justify invasion of Iraq.

Cirincione et al (2004:50) confirm my opinion, and found it unlikely that the behaviour at policymaker level did not create an environment of pressure to reach a conclusion confirming WMDs in Iraq. Along with the increased publicity of the immediate threat of Iraq's WMD, the intelligence judgments became more absolute and supportive of the administration's case (Pythian, 2006:417). IC managers failed to utilize mechanisms in order to challenge the prevailing conclusions (US Congress, 2004:23), and concerns regarding credibility of sources were not conveyed to policy makers. The Senate Select Committee explained this behaviour as "groupthink" (US Congress, 2004:18), referring to a desire for unanimity overriding a realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action (Janis, 1983:9), recognized in the selective use of information and collective rationalization of WMD intelligence in Iraq (US Congress, 2004:18). The conclusion reached by the analysts went beyond anything that could safely be reached on the basis of available intelligence (US Congress, 2004:14), and the Senate Select Committee found that the *NIE* "did not accurately portray the uncertainty of the information", but formulated assumptions and theories as if they were facts (US Congress, 2004:17). According to Betts (2007:605) the Key Judgments of the summary conveyed a message that the conclusions "derived from observed activities as much as preconceptions" and assumed intentions. This shows how politicisation possibly influenced the IC to such an extent as to form the intelligence according to preconceptions and desires of the Bush administration.

Conclusion

In many ways, the failure to find WMDs in Iraq could be described as the perfect intelligence failure, as failures can be found to have occurred at all stages of the intelligence cycle. It ranged from collection of intelligence, analysis, dissemination, within management, in the structure of the IC, and at the level of policymakers (Pythian, 2006:419). However, as has been shown in the previous paragraphs, I believe that politicisation ultimately led to obscure intelligence findings, which consequently led to the intelligence failure of the Iraq War. As the collection of intelligence is carried out by humans, ensuring neutrality is of wide importance, and therefore strategies of ensuring this should be employed. In the case of the 2003 Iraq invasion, neutrality was far from ensured. Policymakers and senior officials created a bias towards the existence of WMDs in Iraq, and successfully implemented this bias at all stages of the intelligence cycle, in order to enable a

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conclusion justifying an intervention in Iraq. Given the secretive nature of intelligence, and the minimal political constituency of intelligence agencies, presidents can blame intelligence for their own errors in policy and its execution, and I believe this is in fact what happened in the 2003 Iraq invasion. Intelligence was twisted by politicisation and pressure from government officials, which ultimately culminated in a failed invasion and the onset of war.

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Searching for Weapons of Mass Destruction: US Intelligence Failure in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq

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