
Intelligence and Public Diplomacy: The Changing Tide

Jonathan Pinkus

Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, jpink076@uottawa.ca

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Intelligence and Public Diplomacy: The Changing Tide

Abstract

This article argues that the executive branches of governments will need to change the way that they employ intelligence for public diplomacy in the context of military action. Intelligence assessments that have been “politicized” through distortion and/or omission have led to poor decision-making and a decline in public trust. These propositions are demonstrated using the American and British public diplomacy that preceded the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a case study. This case is then compared to a second case study, the American and British public appeals for a strike on Syria following the 2013 Ghouta chemical attack. The article concludes by reflecting on what changes are still needed and how the strategy of using intelligence for public diplomacy is likely to evolve in the future.

Introduction

Intelligence can be a powerful tool for public diplomacy. It adds an element of objectivity to a government's public appeals, legitimizing its decisions by evidence rather than by ideology or instinct. Loch Johnson proposes that intelligence can become "politicized" in this process, but that in democratic regimes it will be most often countered by the influence of professional integrity.¹ Standing against this proposition is the United States' and the United Kingdom's misuse of intelligence to justify the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq. This example has been used more than any other to highlight the problematic relationship between intelligence and public diplomacy.

This article argues that the way the executive branch uses intelligence for public diplomacy will need to change if it is to remain effective. Rather than simply presenting the executive branch's own interpretation of intelligence assessments, governments will need to share more of the unaltered assessments written by the intelligence communities themselves. The use of the term "intelligence" refers to the assessments produced by intelligence organizations to inform executive branch decision-making. When these assessments regarding national security issues have been used by the executive branch to support diplomatic aims and domestic political purposes, they have been assumed to have a degree of legitimacy, authority and seriousness that would not be implied of documents released by non-intelligence organizations.

This perceived legitimacy has been damaged by both the Bush and Blair administration's public presentation of intelligence to support the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It demonstrated to British and American citizens that when the executive branch presents its own version of intelligence assessments it can lead to incomplete and/or misleading messages. Since then, the United States' and United Kingdom's presentation of intelligence advocating an attack on Syria has suggested that these governments may be changing the way that they present intelligence. This will be increasingly necessary in order to change the views of domestic audiences now skeptical of intelligence justifications for major foreign policy decisions.

This article proceeds in five sections. The first section reviews the concept of public diplomacy as it applies to intelligence and the problem of the "politicization of intelligence." Next, the article briefly examines the current literature that has criticized the use of intelligence for public diplomacy. The third section explores the pretext for the Iraq War as a case study, examining how American and British intelligence were referenced in public to make the case against Saddam Hussein and how this process led to problems. Drawing principally from the British public inquiry into the Iraq War ("the Iraq Inquiry"), the article also examines what lessons the British government learned from that experience. The fourth section compares the use of intelligence leading up to the Iraq War to the recent employment of intelligence assessments advocating for military action against the Syrian regime for the 2013 sarin gas attack (a proposal which was ultimately abandoned). The final section argues that social and technological changes will accelerate pressure on governments to present intelligence in a more transparent manner in the future.

¹ Loch Johnson, "Sketches for a Theory of Strategic Intelligence," in Peter Gill, Stephen Marrin, and Mark Phythian (eds.), *Intelligence Theory: Key Questions and Debates* (London: Routledge, 2009): 46.

Three limitations should be acknowledged at the outset. First, the case studies assume clear communication between the executive branches of government and their audiences. In many cases, however, the “real” audience is the media, who reinterpret government messages for their own audiences. Rather than exploring this second stage of communication, this article focuses on the reaction of the media to government messages. Second, the article acknowledges that every recipient of government information has his/her own biases and assumptions. For simplicity, this article treats them equally and relies on public polls to measure the success of the government’s advocacy. Differences between members of the public in their reception of government messages would serve as an interesting follow-up study. Lastly, it should not be assumed that the conclusions from this study would be equally applicable to countries other than the United States and the United Kingdom. Audiences in other countries may have different standards of transparency and perceive government messages in a different way.

Intelligence in Public Diplomacy versus the “Politicization of Intelligence”

Before examining the role of intelligence in public diplomacy, it is important to understand how intelligence is used for public diplomacy and how it can become politicized. While some definitions of public diplomacy focus on foreign audiences, this article focuses exclusively on domestic ones.² In this context, intelligence is used for public diplomacy when it is publicly presented to support a policy decision. Public diplomacy is combined with intelligence when the government seeks to harness the political power of an intelligence assessment to justify some policy or action to the public. Thus, the use of intelligence in public diplomacy can be conceptualized as falling after the “dissemination” stage of the intelligence cycle.³ The central objective of this strategy is to change public opinion.⁴

Glenn Hastedt has labeled the manipulation of intelligence by the executive branch for policy objectives as “the politicization of intelligence.”⁵ Of course, he acknowledges that it would be wrong to imply that any political use of intelligence is bad. When the executive branch relies on unaltered intelligence assessments to support a particular point of view, it does not subvert the purpose of intelligence, it fulfills it. This treatment of intelligence could be classified as a responsible use of intelligence for public diplomacy. However, when the executive branch alters the assumptions behind an intelligence assessment, or worse, uses its power to remove unfavourable information, its actions enter the realm of “the politicization of intelligence.”⁶

Although intelligence is used for public diplomacy in many contexts, this article focuses on justifications of military action. When justifying a prospective or ongoing military action, these decisions have been the main source of controversy for intelligence in public diplomacy in recent

² Philip Seib, “Public Diplomacy and Journalism: Parallels, Ethical Issues and Practical Concerns,” *American Behavioural Scientist* 52:1 (2009): 773.

³ “Security Intelligence Cycle,” *Canadian Security Intelligence Service*, August 29, 2013, available at: <https://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/bts/ccl-eng.asp>.

⁴ Abiodun Williams, “Public Diplomacy in an Age of Faith,” in Philip Seib (ed), *Toward a New Public Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan: 2009), 233.

⁵ Glenn Hastedt, “The Politics of Intelligence and the Politicization of Intelligence: the American Experience,” *Intelligence and National Security* 5 (2013): 6.

⁶ *Ibid*: 10.

years. Public diplomacy in this context has been labeled the “presentational aspects” of war.⁷ Aside from the recognition that intelligence plays a role in public diplomacy, it has been observed that the relationship between intelligence and public diplomacy is seldom discussed in intelligence studies.⁸ Robert Mandel’s article is an exception, which warned that America’s use of intelligence for public diplomacy is “spinning out of public control.”⁹

The Dangers of Intelligence in Public Diplomacy

Intelligence can be an effective tool to inform the public of the pros and cons of a particular course of action, but it comes with risks. The main risk of using intelligence for public diplomacy is that even when intelligence does not directly contradict what policymakers want it to reveal, it will likely introduce nuances that create political difficulties.¹⁰ These nuances can tempt policymakers to distort information when they present it to the public. As Mandel explains, policymakers often seek “dire numbers” to justify their policy changes, which can force analysts to deliberately distort their analysis.¹¹ Even if distortions are not made at the analysis stage, these numbers can still be altered before they are presented to the public.

When policymakers misrepresent intelligence it can lead to dangerous situations. Perhaps the most extreme example is President Johnson’s instructions to the Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms, to write a paper containing the points that he wanted emphasized about the Vietnam War.¹² Even when it is not deliberate, the public presentation of intelligence can lead to the omission of important caveats and qualifications.¹³ It is perhaps for this reason that “there is a natural uneasiness on the part of anyone who has worked in the intelligence business at putting anything into the public domain.”¹⁴ Despite this discomfort, Professor Bruce Gregory pointed out that even by 2005 there had been no calls for public diplomacy reform in the same way that there have been calls for intelligence reform.¹⁵

One could counter here that there are many legitimate reasons to employ intelligence for public diplomacy as well. After all, the modern conception of the “intelligence cycle” acknowledges that intelligence priorities should be set by the executive branch based on policy concerns.¹⁶

⁷ “Sir Gus O’Donnell transcript,” *The Iraq Inquiry*, January 28, 2011, available at: <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51849/20110202-odonnell-final.pdf>.

⁸ James J Wirtz, “The Sources and Methods of Intelligence Studies,” in Loch K. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23; Hastedt, “The Politics of Intelligence and the Politicization of Intelligence,” 6.

⁹ Robert Mandel, “On Estimating Post-Cold War Enemy Intention,” *Intelligence and National Security* 24:2 (2009): 207.

¹⁰ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 162.

¹¹ Robert Mandel, “On Estimating Post-Cold War Enemy Intention,” *Intelligence and National Security* 24:2 (2009): 207.

¹² Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 172.

¹³ “Rt. Hon. Jack Straw MP transcript,” *The Iraq Inquiry*, January 28, 2011, available at: <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51849/20110202-odonnell-final.pdf>; Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 172.

¹⁴ “Sir David Omand transcript,” *The Iraq Inquiry*, January 20, 2010, available at: <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/44187/20100120pm-omand-final.pdf>.

¹⁵ Bruce Gregory, “Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication: Cultures, Firewalls, and Imported Norms,” (paper presented at the American Political Science Association Conference on International Communication and Conflict, Washington, D.C., August 31, 2005), 31.

¹⁶ “Security Intelligence Cycle,” *Canadian Security Intelligence Service*.

Sometimes intelligence is used as a legitimate call to rally the international community against a violation of international law. For example, in the 1980s the United States incorporated SPOT satellite images into a Department of Defense publication to support charges that the Soviet Union had violated the nuclear test-ban and had biological warfare capability.¹⁷ In addition, President Kennedy's reliance on American intelligence gave him the confidence to both act on the Cuban Missile Crisis and accurately communicate the threat to audiences in the United States and abroad.¹⁸ In these cases, intelligence and public diplomacy operated harmoniously because the policymakers were fortunate enough for the intelligence to convey what the government wanted it to. The problem is that sometimes intelligence assessments contain nuances that the executive branch would prefer the public did not know. This issue is explored in the case studies below.

Case Study #1: Using the Intelligence Community to Justify the 2003 Invasion of Iraq

This section examines the British and American uses of intelligence to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The aim of these efforts in public diplomacy was to influence American and British public opinion.¹⁹ In addition to being one of the most contemporary examples of intelligence in public diplomacy, the government messages that preceded the invasion perhaps best exemplify the consequences of when the executive branch misrepresents intelligence to support its own objectives. The governments of the United States and the United Kingdom may have accomplished this objective prior to the invasion, but it was greatly overshadowed by the revelations that emerged afterwards. This case, like the second case study, has also been chosen because of each government's heavy reliance on intelligence assessments to support their claims.

American Public Diplomacy Leading up to the Invasion

American attitudes leading up to the war in Iraq must be understood in the context of the country's unprecedented sense of vulnerability in the wake of 9/11, and the growing demands for threat detection.²⁰ Though the intelligence community was criticized afterwards, Len Scott contends that 9/11 actually strengthened the legitimacy of secret intelligence.²¹ Since then, "war on terrorism" has given intelligence a new level of importance in the execution of controversial foreign policy decisions—particularly military action.²² It is for this reason that "[c]entral to the George W. Bush administration's strategy for building public support for the Iraq War was the public use of intelligence" (i.e. using intelligence for public diplomacy).²³

¹⁷ Peter D. Zimmerman, "Remote sensing satellites, superpower relations and public diplomacy," *Space Policy* 6:1 (1990): 23.

¹⁸ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 166.

¹⁹ John Prados and Christopher Ames (eds.), "THE IRAQ WAR - - PART III: Shaping the Debate," *The National Security Archive at The George Washington University*, October 4, 2010, available at: <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB330/>.

²⁰ Len Scott and Peter Jackson, "The Study of Intelligence in Theory and Practice," *Intelligence and National Security* 19 (2004), 139.

²¹ Len Scott, "Secret Intelligence, Covert Action and Clandestine Policy," in Len V. Scott and Peter Jackson, *Understanding Intelligence in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2004), 175.

²² Scott and Jackson, "The Study of Intelligence in Theory and Practice," 163.

²³ Hastedt, "The Politics of Intelligence and the Politicization of Intelligence," 26.

This strategy is best illustrated by Secretary of State Colin Powell's address to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on February 5, 2003. Were it a speech in a closed door meeting, it would be nothing more than a private appeal to international governments. However, this speech was televised and broadcast throughout the United States, preceded and followed by media analysis.²⁴ In that speech, Powell argued, among other things, that it had a "thick intelligence file...on Iraq's biological weapons...[and] mobile production facilities used to make biological agents."²⁵

In addition to relying on intelligence assessments, Powell used the intelligence community itself as a tool of legitimacy. It is no coincidence that the Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet, sat alongside Powell as he argued before the UNSC that Iraq posed an existential threat to the world.²⁶ Prefacing his allegations of Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program and its ties to al-Qaeda, Powell underscored that "every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources...These are not assertions...What we are giving you are facts and conclusions."²⁷ Recognizing the potential impact of the speech, polls were soon taken to estimate the impact on American public opinion. A Gallup poll revealed that 79 percent of Americans felt that Powell made either a "fairly strong" or "very strong" case for the invasion of Iraq.²⁸ In the short-term, the strategy appeared to have worked.

The same rhetoric was used by President Bush, who frequently referenced American intelligence while warning domestic audiences that Saddam Hussein was poised to use chemical weapons.²⁹ For example, in an address he gave in Cincinnati in October 2002, President Bush claimed that "[w]e've also discovered through intelligence that Iraq has a growing fleet of manned and unmanned aerial vehicles [UAVs] that could be used to disperse chemical and biological weapons across broad areas."³⁰ Like Powell's statements, this argument relies on assessments from the intelligence community (or at least claims to).

As we now know, many of these assertions were categorically false. What is most problematic is that much of this rhetoric appeared to go against intelligence that the Bush administration had in its possession. With the exception of a German-Iraqi source who later admitted that he lied, the Bush administration's evidence claims were mostly rooted in the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE).³¹ It was not publicly released until July 18, 2003, four months after the invasion began. It began with the key judgment "that Iraq has continued its weapons of mass

²⁴ Douglas M. McLeod, "Derelict of Duty: The American News Media, Terrorism, and the War in Iraq," *Marquette Law Review* 93:1 (2009): 119.

²⁵ "Full Text of Colin Powell's Speech," *The Guardian*, February 5, 2003, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/05/iraq.usa>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁷ *Guardian*, "Full Text of Colin Powell's Speech" (February 5, 2003).

²⁸ Gallup, George Horace and Jr Gallup Frank Newport, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 2003*, in George Jr. Galup (ed.) *The Gallups Poll Annual* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 51.

²⁹ Hastedt, "The Politics of Intelligence and the Politicization of Intelligence," 28.

³⁰ "Transcript: George Bush's speech on Iraq," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2002, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/oct/07/usa.iraq>.

³¹ Martin Chulov and Helen Pidd, "Defector admits to WMD lies that triggered Iraq War," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2011, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/05/iraq.usa>.

destruction (WMD) programs in defiance of UN resolutions and restrictions.”³² On the contrary, the CIA later confirmed that Saddam Hussein had no active WMD program and no plans to revive it (though this may have changed if sanctions had been lifted).³³ Worse yet, a report by the Senate’s Select Committee on Intelligence revealed in 2006 that, contrary to Powell’s announcement to the UNSC, the Iraqi regime “had no link to al-Qaeda.”³⁴

So catastrophic was the invalidation of the Bush administration’s justification for the war that in 2008, the outgoing President Bush called the “intelligence failure” his “biggest regret of all the presidency.” At the same time, however, he seemed to absolve his administration of all responsibility, stating that he “wish[ed] the intelligence had been different.”³⁵ There is formidable evidence that, contrary to this claim, the intelligence itself was not the main problem. Rather, the problem was the politicization of intelligence by his administration to make its arguments more persuasive to both the UNSC and the public at large.

By having the ostensibly full support of intelligence officials like George Tenet, American politicians “conveniently blamed” the intelligence community after no WMD were found and shifted the burden from the executive branch to the public service.³⁶ However, it has since been revealed that there was an abundance of caveats and nuances that the Bush administration kept hidden until after the invasion began (and even then they were not highlighted to the public). While the October 2002 NIE did open with the inaccurate statement about Iraq’s WMD program, it also admitted that it “lack[ed] specific information on many key aspects of Iraq’s WMD programs.” It added that there was no “compelling case” that Iraq was pursuing nuclear weapons. As if that were not enough, it included a “low confidence” assessment of when Saddam Hussein would use WMD, whether he would attack the United States Homeland, and whether he would cooperate with al-Qaeda.³⁷ Professors Stephen Hartnett and Laura Stengrim would label these qualifying statements as “intelligence conditional.”³⁸ The problem, as Hastedt explains, is that the Bush administration cherry picked the intelligence that it presented to the public.³⁹

Hastedt’s comment is only one example of the accusations mounted against the Bush administration for the wilful ignorance of the information available, as well as the occasional complete fabrication of intelligence. Hartnett and Stengrim point out that when Bush’s rhetoric surrounding Iraq’s WMD program began to become scrutinized by the media, White House Press Secretary, Scott McLellan, simply replied that the President was “not a fact checker.” The President, his Secretary of State, and various military officials all supported their assertions with

³² “Key Judgements [from October 2002 NIE: Iraq’s Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction],” *Federation of American Scientists*, July 18, 2003, available at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/cia/product/iraq-wmd.html>.

³³ Central Intelligence Agency, “Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq’s WMD,” *CIA.gov*, September 30, 2004, available at: https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004/Comp_Report_Key_Findings.pdf.

³⁴ “Saddam ‘had no link to al-Qaeda,’” *BBC*, September 9, 2006, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5328592.stm>.

³⁵ Suzanne Goldenberg, “Iraq war my biggest regret, Bush admits,” *The Guardian*, December 2, 2008, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/dec/02/george-bush-iraq-interview>.

³⁶ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 125.

³⁷ “Key Judgements,” *Federation of American Scientists*.

³⁸ Stephen Hartnett and Laura Stengrim, “The Whole Operation of Deception: Reconstructing President Bush’s Rhetoric of Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 4:2 (2004): 157.

³⁹ Hastedt, “The Politics of Intelligence and the Politicization of Intelligence,” 26.

intelligence assessments that turned out not to exist. Nevertheless, guilt was still offloaded to the intelligence agencies when the falsities of their rhetoric came to light.⁴⁰

In fairness, the intelligence community had its own problems as well. The 2004 report by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence revealed that many of the doubts within the intelligence community about Iraq's connections with al-Qaeda (an important counter-argument to the Bush administration's justification for the war) were removed from the analysis *within* the intelligence community before it was disseminated to decision-makers.⁴¹ Even after this report, Director of Central Intelligence, Porter Goss, continued to encourage members of the CIA to tailor their assessments to support United States policymakers. In his criticism of this action, Jervis concedes that if Goss had only been encouraging the CIA to "inform policymakers" and "support better policy" it would have been sound practice. However, as Jervis notes, given the previous accusations that the CIA had "undercut" President Bush, it is more likely that it was an instruction to "reinforc[e] policies and rall[y] others to the cause."⁴²

In any case, one should not consider intelligence officers as completely apolitical and independent decision-makers, since they have political biases and ideological assumptions.⁴³ Thomas Fingar observes that analysts are not completely isolated from federal politics in the United States.⁴⁴ Even if analysts were unbiased, Fingar believes that the intelligence community was "too timid when assessing possibilities...and insufficiently aggressive when presenting worst-case scenarios." He suggests that this may not have been an overt distortion to pander to politicians, but an inadvertent tendency to frame things in such a way that may have made it easier for politicians to misuse their assessments for political purposes.⁴⁵

This tendency does not mean, however, that politicians have no choice in the matter. It should not be discounted that American politicians' created a "war fervor" that changed the atmosphere in the intelligence community in the first place.⁴⁶ Jervis argues that even had the intelligence analysis been better, policymakers would have "still been able to exaggerate the intelligence to justify the war."⁴⁷ As an example, most senior figures in the administration suggested that there was a connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda, and characterized the threat of WMD as "imminent." All of these claims were contrary to the consensus of the intelligence community.⁴⁸ These misrepresentations were made possible by the government's decision to withhold the original intelligence assessments from the public before the war began.

⁴⁰ Hartnett and Stengrim, "The Whole Operation of Deception," 164-169.

⁴¹ "Report on the US Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq," Senate Committee on Intelligence, *United States Senate*, 108th Cong., 2d sess., July 7, 2004, available at: <http://web.mit.edu/simsong/www/iraqreport2-textunder.pdf>.

⁴² Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 159.

⁴³ Scott and Jackson, "The Study of Intelligence in Theory and Practice," 152.

⁴⁴ Thomas Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security* (Stanford: Stanford Security Studies, 2011), 97.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 94-95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 93.

⁴⁷ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 154.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 132.

The distortion of intelligence from the analysis stage to the public diplomacy stage is best illustrated by the Bush administration's public allegation that Iraq was seeking uranium from Niger, which was later proven to be false. Although this allegation was reported by British intelligence officials, it was well known by the Bush administration that American intelligence analysts disagreed with this.⁴⁹ Most tellingly, it was later revealed that the decision to include this intelligence came from none other than a speech writer. Without changing the content, the White House modified the language just enough that if the allegations were proven to be false, it could blame the CIA (which it did).⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the reputations of both the executive branch and the intelligence community suffered from the revelations that followed the Iraq invasion. According to Gallup polls, about half of the American public blamed the Bush administration (despite its attempts to offload blame to the intelligence community) and a little more than half expressed low or zero confidence in the American intelligence community afterwards.⁵¹ Evidently, the image of both the executive branch and the intelligence community had been tarnished in the United States. Public trust would now be more difficult to obtain.

British Public Diplomacy Leading up to the Invasion

The United Kingdom's use of intelligence leading up to the Iraq War suffered from similar problems. With the exception of the Bush administration's allegation of an Iraq-al-Qaeda connection, the United Kingdom's public allegations against Iraq were roughly a mirror image of those made by their American counterparts. By April 2002, British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, publicly announced that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction and was a threat to the region and to the West. In September, he claimed that the intelligence service "conclude[d] that Iraq has chemical and biological weapons" and that Saddam Hussein had "active military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons."⁵² This claim was repeated several months later, and Prime Minister Blair held steadfast to his assertions until over a year into the invasion.⁵³ In addition, the United Kingdom's now infamous "September Dossier" publicly asserted that Iraq was on a trajectory to developing nuclear weapons "within months," and had active plans to make use of weapons of mass destruction.⁵⁴ The dossier has since been accused of being sloppily assembled and plagiarizing from essays dating back to 1997.⁵⁵ Significantly, all of it claimed to be supported by intelligence compiled by the joint intelligence community (JIC).⁵⁶ Like in the United States, "[British] intelligence [was] the fundamental basis for the case [the British government] made" for the invasion of Iraq.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Hartnett and Stengrim, "The Whole Operation of Deception," 174-177.

⁵¹ Gallup, Alec and Frank Newport, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 2005* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 149.

⁵² "Timeline: Tony Blair's statements on weapons in Iraq," *BBC*, December 12, 2009, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/8409526.stm.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government," *BBC*, September 24, 2002, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/02/uk_dossier_on_iraq/html/full_dossier.stm.

⁵⁵ Hartnett and Stengrim, "The Whole Operation of Deception," 158.

⁵⁶ "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government."

⁵⁷ "Sir David Omand transcript," *The Iraq Inquiry*.

Years later, testimony from the Iraq Inquiry suggested that the Blair administration had intentionally departed from the information given to them by the intelligence community for its public diplomacy. Carne Ross, a former civil servant for the British Foreign Office, told the inquiry that ministers intentionally exaggerated intelligence assessments of WMD in their efforts at public diplomacy.⁵⁸ Further, briefing papers had been “more definitive” than the intelligence had suggested.⁵⁹ Therefore, like the Bush administration’s rhetoric, the British allegations were not necessarily fabricated, but modified to fit the policymakers’ public diplomacy strategy. David Omand, another former British civil servant, testified that intelligence officials were satisfied about the generalized statements that were made—it was the details that concerned them.⁶⁰

Like its American counterpart, the British intelligence community was also at fault. The now declassified JIC assessment of September 2002 began with three key judgments that could have easily been used to make the exaggerated claims made by the British government. The JIC regularly presented these assessments to the Prime Minister, the senior ministers, and other officials who dealt with policymaking.⁶¹ Unlike previous assessments, the conclusions in this document offered few caveats. It began with the assertion that Iraq “has a chemical and biological weapons capability and Saddam is prepared to use it.”⁶² It was from statements like these that Prime Minister Blair later excused his administration by “mak[ing] the point that the assumptions in all of [the JIC assessments] was [*sic*] that Saddam was committed in both the intent and the action in developing WMD.”⁶³ However, like President Bush’s attempt at self-exculpation, it failed. An empirical study published in 2012 suggested that there was “strong *prima facie* evidence” that the war and the government’s use of intelligence had a significant negative impact on public confidence in both the intelligence community and the government’s presentation of intelligence.⁶⁴ The authors of the study concluded that this confidence level may negatively affect the public’s willingness to support any preventive military action in the future.⁶⁵

In recognition of this danger, the Iraq Inquiry noted that future intelligence assessments will need to be carefully worded with as many caveats as possible.⁶⁶ However, these efforts may not be enough. As Jervis observed, even had the intelligence been better, politicians could have still ignored caveats and exaggerated claims to increase public support for the war.⁶⁷ One way of avoiding this would be to submit the full intelligence assessment to government ministers, rather

⁵⁸ “Carne Ross: Testimony to the Chilcot Inquiry,” *The Iraq Inquiry*, July 12, 2012, available at: <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/47534/carne-ross-statement.pdf>.

⁵⁹ “Rt Hon. The Lord Prescott Transcript,” *The Iraq Inquiry*, July 30, 2010, available at: <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/49704/20100730-prescott-final.pdf>.

⁶⁰ “Sir David Omand transcript,” *The Iraq Inquiry*.

⁶¹ “Transcript of Sir John Scarlett Hearing,” *The Iraq Inquiry*, December 8, 2009, available at: <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40665/20091208pmscarlett-final.pdf>.

⁶² “Rt. Hon. Jack Straw MP transcript,” *The Iraq Inquiry*.

⁶³ “Tony Blair’s Statement to the Iraq Inquiry,” *The Iraq Inquiry*, January 14, 2011, available at: <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/50743/Blair-statement.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Graeme A.M. Davies and Robert Johns, “British Public Confidence in MI6 and Government Use of Intelligence: The Effect on Support for Preventive Military Action,” *Intelligence and National Security* 27:5 (2012): 687-688.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ “Sir David Omand transcript,” *The Iraq Inquiry*.

⁶⁷ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 154.

than submitting something that was for a “marketing purpose.” This could reduce the danger of losing caveats when the information is presented to the public.⁶⁸ Failing that, the obvious alternative would be to disclose the intelligence assessments directly to the public, as was done after the 2013 chemical attack in Syria.

Case Study #2: Public Diplomacy after the 2013 Syrian Chemical Attack

The British and American intelligence communities’ willingness to reform was tested after the 2013 Syrian chemical attack, when Western countries once again publicly presented intelligence in an attempt to persuade the public that a military strike on Syria was in order. This section examines the United States’ and the United Kingdom’s response, comparing their use of intelligence for public diplomacy to what was used prior to the invasion of Iraq. It appears that while the United Kingdom has become more willing to share original intelligence assessments, the United States continues to limit its disclosure to the executive branch’s own interpretation of the intelligence.

The Attack

On August 21, 2013, the rebel-held Eastern Ghouta neighbourhood just outside of Damascus was shelled by surface-to-surface rockets, which the UN later concluded contained sarin gas. The casualties included civilians, with children among them.⁶⁹ A debate immediately began as to what the international response should be.

The United States’ Response

Having previously marked the use of chemical weapons as a “red line”, President Obama’s administration reacted to the event with a sense of obligation.⁷⁰ Initial intelligence assessments appeared to stress that there was no conclusive proof of what exactly happened, but within a week of the attack, the Obama administration felt comfortable establishing a timeline.⁷¹ The government’s public assessment expressed a “high degree of confidence” that the Syrian government had carried out the attack. It claimed that the information had been corroborated by satellites, discussed the symptoms of the victims, and gave a casualty estimate. It also mentioned, however, that additional intelligence would need to remain classified.⁷² At no point did the Obama administration address the fact that the German BND had publicly asserted that Assad

⁶⁸ “Sir David Omand transcript,” *The Iraq Inquiry*.

⁶⁹ Glenn Kessler, “President Obama and the ‘red line’ on Syria’s chemical weapons,” *The Washington Post*, September 6, 2013, available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons>.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Mark Hosenball and Matt Spetalnick, “Initial Western intelligence finds Syrian forces used chemical weapons,” *Reuters*, August 23, 2013, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/23/us-syria-crisis-obama-idUSBRE97M0E420130823>; Karen DeYoung and Anne Gearan, “US intelligence has established timeline of Syrian chemical attack, officials say,” *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2013, available at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-08-27/world/41484081_1_chemical-attack-chemical-weapons-allegations-u-s-intelligence.

⁷² “Government Assessment of the Syrian Government’s Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013,” *The White House: Office of the Press Secretary*, August 21, 2013, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>.

did not personally order the attack (based on its own signals intelligence).⁷³ “Intelligence conditional” appeared to be absent once again.

Public statements made on the attack also have parallels to the Iraq case. In a similar fashion to Powell’s 2003 speech to the UNSC, the intelligence summary was cited by Secretary of State John Kerry in a televised briefing the same month, who argued that a military response was justified.⁷⁴ As well, United States Senator Bob Casey emerged from an intelligence briefing announcing that he now had evidence “of the national security imperative in Syria and the need to authorize the limited use of force.”⁷⁵

At the same time, there were marked differences between the Obama administration’s approach to Syria and the Bush administration’s approach leading up to the Iraq invasion. For one thing, it should be noted that earlier reports on the use of chlorine gas in Syria were actually played down by the Obama administration, rather than using it as evidence to support an attack.⁷⁶ Clearly recognizing the parallel with Iraq, President Obama made it clear to the public that only “rock solid” intelligence would justify American intervention in the conflict.⁷⁷

Paradoxically, United States officials made numerous claims about the 2013 gas attack without invoking the support of the intelligence community at all. For instance, Jay Carney concluded that the details of the event were simply “abundantly obvious.”⁷⁸ Susan Rice, a key figure in the United States’ public diplomacy strategy, seemed uninterested in what the intelligence had to say. She assumed that it could not tell her anything that she did not already know.⁷⁹ This may explain why rather than releasing an NIE, a document that would have been drafted by the intelligence community, the White House chose to release a statement themselves. This was done despite the fact that members of Congress have requested a record number of NIEs in the last few years.⁸⁰

In the end, the Obama administration’s strategy was poorly received. Polls taken after the government’s assessment was released reflected strong opposition to the proposed strike.

⁷³ Simon Tisdall and Josie Le Blond, “Assad did not order Syria chemical weapons attack, says German press,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2013, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/08/syria-chemical-weapons-not-assad-bild>.

⁷⁴ Scott Sayare, “French Release Intelligence Tying Assad Government to Chemical Weapons,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2013, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/03/world/middleeast/french-release-intelligence-tying-assad-government-to-chemical-weapons.html?_r=0.

⁷⁵ Robert P. Casey, Jr., “Casey Statement following Intelligence Briefing from the Administration on Syria,” *Robert P. Casey, Jr.: United States Senator for Pennsylvania*, September 3, 2013, available at <http://www.casey.senate.gov/newsroom/releases/casey-statement-following-intelligence-briefing-from-the-administration-on-syria>.

⁷⁶ “Officials: Preliminary results show chemical weapons not used in Syria,” *CNN Wire*, March 21, 2013, available at: http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/21/world/meast/syria-civil-war/?hpt=hp_11.

⁷⁷ James Bliz and Geoff Dyer, “Strategy towards Syria haunted by flawed intelligence on Iraq’s weapons,” *The Financial Times*, April 27, 2013, p. 3.

⁷⁸ “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney,” *The White House*, August 27, 2013, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/27/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-8272013>.

⁷⁹ Adam Entous, Sam Dagher, and Siobhan Gorman, “US, Allies Prepare to Act as Syria Intelligence Mounts,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 27, 2013, available at: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324906304579039342815115978>.

⁸⁰ Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty*, 90.

Political analysts found the assessment disingenuous and unconvincing.⁸¹ One could argue that there is hypocrisy in insisting on “rock solid” intelligence for action and then demanding action without proving any of the intelligence itself. The public’s reaction to the government’s interpretation of the intelligence should be unsurprising, given that the problems from the Iraq War emerged from the suppression and distortion of important caveats in the intelligence.

The United Kingdom’s Response

In contrast, the United Kingdom decided to change its approach and share more intelligence directly with the public. The British administration did not rely on a government dossier as it did before the Iraq War. Despite having renounced the practice of publicly releasing intelligence papers several years earlier, the British executive branch made the rare move of releasing the full JIC assessment of the attack. This was done in the aim of influencing both politicians and the broader public to support military action.⁸² While its reliance on intelligence differed from the Americans, the JIC’s statement came to roughly the same conclusions. It stressed that the decision was made “with the highest possible level of certainty.” Reminding the public that it had access to highly sensitive intelligence, it claimed that it had high confidence in everything—a except for the regime’s motivation.⁸³ Perhaps recalling the dire consequences of underplaying important caveats leading up to the Iraq War, the JIC placed its hesitations front and center.

In spite of this decision, it is clear that the public was unimpressed by the JIC’s statement. The Guardian criticized the report almost immediately, accusing it of having a “striking lack of scientific evidence” that “adds nothing to informed speculation.” It quoted chemical weapons experts who cited the lack of “hard facts”, and even cast doubts on whether chemical weapons were used at all. Ironically, however, the newspaper most criticized the JIC for its inclusion of caveats regarding the Syrian government’s motivation, suggesting that this invalidated the rest of the intelligence that was given.⁸⁴ In the end, the government’s proposal to pursue action in Syria was rejected by British Parliament.⁸⁵

The public’s reaction and the political result may have left the British government disappointed, but it arguably left them with much more credibility. It is less likely than it was in the case of

⁸¹ “Syria Chemical weapons case remains in doubt as US refuses to release concrete evidence,” *Associated Press*, September 8, 2013, available at: <http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/09/08/syria-chemical-weapons-case-remains-in-doubt-as-u-s-refuses-to-release-concrete-evidence>; Paul Steinhauer and John Helton, “CNN poll: Public against Syria strike resolution,” *CNN*, September 9, 2013, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/09/politics/syria-poll-main/>.

⁸² Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 160; James Blitz, “UK report on attack fails to produce ‘smoking gun’ evidence,” *Financial Times*, August 29, 2013, available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5d845eba-10d3-11e3-b5e4-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2n1WLwoHE>.

⁸³ “Syria: Reported Chemical Weapons Use,” *United Kingdom Joint Intelligence Organisation*, August 29, 2013, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/235094/Jp_115_JD_PM_Syria_Reported_Chemical_Weapon_Use_with_annex.pdf.

⁸⁴ Ian Black and Ian Sample, “UK Report on chemical attack in Syria adds nothing to informed speculation,” *The Guardian*, August 29, 2013, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/29/uk-report-chemical-attack-syria>.

⁸⁵ Paul Lewis and Spencer Ackerman, “Obama’s Syria plans in disarray after Britain rejects use of force,” *The Guardian*, August 30, 2013, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/30/obama-strike-syria-britain-vote>.

Iraq that the government would be accused of misrepresenting intelligence to mislead the public. It allowed members of the public to form an informed opinion based on all the facts that were available and avoid taking military action for faulty reasons. This could lay groundwork for a more trusting British public the next time it is faced with the prospect of preventive military action.

Possibilities for the Future

Regardless of the reforms implemented to the use of intelligence for public diplomacy, this strategy will inevitably continue in the future. Though illustrative of some of the changes in practice since Iraq, it would be imprudent to assume that the Syrian example categorically reflects how governments will present intelligence in the future. In response to the contentious Iranian nuclear issue, the White House has declassified as much intelligence as possible. Fingar believes that the United States government now releases this information ahead of time to make sure that it has the power to contextualize the intelligence before someone else does it first.⁸⁶ This danger is reflected in the recent WikiLeaks scandal. In that case, a third party obtained sensitive American intelligence and released it to the public against the government's wishes. One of these leaks revealed North Korea's sale of nineteen missiles to Iran. Since the raw intelligence was released by WikiLeaks, the media speculated on the implications of this intelligence and contextualized it themselves, rather than waiting for the government to explain it.⁸⁷

The concern about who gets to interpret intelligence may also reflect a broader change in the dissemination of intelligence to the public. Richard Aldrich and John Kasuku predict that "intelligence in the Twitter age will not be owned by government."⁸⁸ Because the form of communicating intelligence to the public is so important, this may change the way that intelligence is used for public diplomacy. In the past, Americans could be swayed by government communications conveyed through mainstream media, where they were almost assured front page coverage.⁸⁹ Now, however, thanks to the ubiquity of online news, blogs, and social media, it may help spread doubt even when the government expresses a high degree of confidence, as was the case in Syria. This may accelerate the British executive branch's attempts to use intelligence more transparently and force its American counterpart to follow suit. While a certain amount of information may always need to be withheld for security reasons, the Syrian case study above demonstrates that greater transparency is possible.

Conclusion

In the past, governments may have believed that it was in their interest to present only the intelligence that supported their policy objectives and pay less attention to the caveats contained

⁸⁶ Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty*, 121.

⁸⁷ Mark Mazetti and William J. Broad, "Wider Window Into Iran's Missile Capabilities Offers a Murkier View," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2010, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/03/world/middleeast/03wikileaks-missile.html?_r=0.

⁸⁸ Richard J. Alrich and John Kasuku, "Escaping from American intelligence: culture, ethnocentrism and the Anglosphere," *International Affairs* 88 (2012): 1026.

⁸⁹ Robert M. Entman, Steven Livingston and Jennie Kim, "Doomed to Repeat: Iraq News, 2002-2007," in Philip Seib, *War and Conflict Communication: Critical Concepts in Media Cultural Studies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 408.

in intelligence assessments. However, the United Kingdom's implementation of some of the lessons learned from the Iraq Inquiry suggests that governments may be willing to change. In order to regain the public's trust, both the United States and the United Kingdom will need to present intelligence in a more transparent fashion when it is used for public diplomacy.

Reports and polls by the media suggest that the strategy of using intelligence in public diplomacy has been tarnished. Ultimately, it seems unavoidable that the intelligence will be politicized to a certain degree in order to support policy objectives. However, governments may be able to increase public confidence in the use of intelligence for public diplomacy if its executive branches are willing to share intelligence assessments more transparently, including those aspects which shed the course of action they are advocating for in an unfavourable light.

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