

Shock, Horror! Government Puts Spin on Policy!

Why have we not yet seen such a headline in the media? For although it may be ludicrous, this is now the principal argument for retrospective opposition to the liberation of Iraq.

This opposition centres on trying to uncover a high-level conspiracy to **alter intelligence reports** to make them seem more significant. In other words they think that somebody may have got their secretary to do a find-and-replace of "may have weapons" to "does have weapons".

Yet it is not in dispute that Saddam Hussein was/is a big fan of weapons of mass destruction: he has not only *owned* them in the past but has used them on his enemies both domestic and foreign. The evidence provided by the mobile bio-weapons laboratories found scrubbed clean is that he was still committed to retaining this capability until just before the end (unless you wish to believe that caustic cleaning fluid was only used to cover up the embarrassing smell of Iraqi conscripts' underwear).

These mobile laboratories were mentioned by Colin Powell in his **UN Presentation**. Iraq denied their existence, and at the time, we could not be *sure* that that was a lie. Nor could we be sure that any other weapons of mass destruction existed there either, but we had good reasons to believe that they did. And the main reason why we couldn't be sure was that Saddam insisted on obfuscating the investigation of the UN inspectors. Not the actions of an innocent government.

But why did we think it so urgent and important to invade Iraq on the basis that they *probably* had WMD and that they *might* use them to harm or threaten us? After all, North Korea had already started telling anyone who would listen about their intentions to use WMD on everybody in sight, so they definitely have them. (Or do they? Isn't it perfectly conceivable that they are lying too? Should we act on the assumption that they are?)

The fact of the matter is, the Middle East is a large and unstable area which is important to us for various reasons but keeps telling us in words and deeds that it hates us and wishes we were all dead. It would be a great thing for the world, and for the region itself, if it were to become peaceful and start putting its impressive resources into manufacturing cheap cars and electronic goods instead of various types of nasty weapon that serve no purpose other than

slaughtering their civilian populations and ours. Yet history tells us that it is very rare for entrenched psychotic societies suddenly to become friendly and start manufacturing cheap and/or high quality consumer goods without the saultory intervention of *us*, reforming their system of government by force or the credible threat of force.

Here's where the spin part comes in. In the light of the above, our government(s) decide to liberate Iraq. And they decide that given the nature of the opposition to this proposed liberation, they will emphasise the perfectly real and imminent threat of horrific death on our part, which everyone can understand and be afraid of, and de-emphasise the closely related and equally real 'making the world a better, safer place' aspect that sadly doesn't wash with significant sections of the modern trendy-lefty isolationist cheese-eating population. It must be the greatest deception in modern history, we don't think.

What if we never prove that there were/are WMD in Iraq? Well, while we are on the subject of 'what-ifs': what if we never prove that there was a high-level conspiracy to change intelligence reports? Will people stop believing there was one?

Don't forget that today's trendy theory (that the Government over-emphasised WMD in order to enable them to make the world a better, safer place) is *not* what the opponents said was happening at the time. What they said was that Bush, an infamous American oil baron (and President, but that was neither here nor there) had got his buddy/lapdog Tony to help him steal Iraq's oil. Surely nobody who was even slightly informed and/or sane could have believed that, so why haven't any opponents of the war stood up and given the real reason why they thought the war was happening – until now? Maybe because the truth – that the Government was trying to make the world a better, safer place – is not a terribly compelling anti-war argument, any more than it is a compelling pro-war one. Especially now that the war has been overwhelmingly successful by any reasonable criterion. So why haven't we seen the aforementioned headline? Perhaps a better question would be: why haven't we seen the headline "Shock, Horror! Opponents Put Spin on Government Policy" instead?

Fri, 06/06/2003 - 17:41 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

Weapons of Mass Distraction from the real point?

I can't understand the obsession with this issue at all. So what if we didn't find any WMDs? Were the antiwar people swayed by that argument in the first place? No. Were the pro-war people motivated by finding WMDs, as opposed to *making damned sure no Iraqi WMDs were ever used on NYC*? I don't think so.

We know Saddam had the capability, and, at various times, the WMDs. He used some of them.

There are a million and one reasons why no actual user-friendly nuclear missiles have been stumbled across in a Baghdad cellar.

Imagine: you're an evil dictator, threatened with being deposed by

the US. Do you:

- a) hand over your WMDs like a good boy,
- b) dismantle and/or hide the fuckers, maintaining as much capability of reproducing them as you can, or
- c) dirty-bomb London as fast as you can?

I'm for b). Let's not get so distracted by "hard" evidence (ie trophies we can hold in our hands) that we forget the soft stuff... like, mass graves with thousands of bodies in them, for example.

Alice

http://libertarian_parent_in_the_countryside.blogspot.com/

by a reader on Fri, 06/06/2003 - 18:19 | [reply](#)

Lies of over-emphasis

You have said here before I think that the Iraqi invasion was a sort of projection of the real war of competing moral traditions in the West.

You have said elsewhere that it is sometimes right to lie to one's enemies, as the Allies did during WW2.

Is it acceptable for politicians in the West to tell lies of over-emphasis to other politicians and to the public for the sake of making the right things happen? Where do we draw the line?

by [Tom Robinson](#) on Fri, 06/06/2003 - 20:23 | [reply](#)

Spin is Not Good

However *predictable* spin is, though, that doesn't make it right. Better to sell your good ideas honestly on the open market, with free handy integrity added on.

Arguing that the war was for the finding of WMDs and then not finding any WMDs is arguably very bad for the Forces of Rightness. They could have been open about their morals instead of emphasising an excuse to "please" their enemies. Seems they may have shot themselves in the foot with that one.

Alice

by a reader on Sat, 06/07/2003 - 11:54 | [reply](#)

Spin is good

Alice

You seem to be pro-war. So I suspect that you would condemn a government policy that would prevent the war from happening. One such government policy would be complete honesty on politicians' part about their reasons for war. This is just a result of the logic of the situation: that large sections of American and British society do not accept any kind of "making the world a better place" argument

when it involves war.

by **Daniel Strimpel** on Sat, 06/07/2003 - 15:08 | [reply](#)

Helping freedoms take root

The risk we have taken in invading Iraq and setting up a democracy is that Iraq will degenerate into religious civil war once our forces have withdrawn. After many deaths, democracy may crumble and a new Islamofacist government emerge.

Making an assessment of this risk must have been hard. If our leaders were over-emphasising the immediate risk from WMDs in order to push through the invasion then the risk assessment was probably not done properly. OTOH, could it ever have been done properly?

The answer is to stay in Iraq for decades until capitalism and democracy have taken firm root. I guess this was probably the intention.

Ok, so I answered my own question. It probably is ok to lie within a democracy - sometimes. Doh!

by **Tom Robinson** on Sat, 06/07/2003 - 15:42 | [reply](#)

Spin and Lying

I think that spin (choosing which valid arguments to present according to how effective you think they would be) is a good thing. It isn't lying, and at present I don't see any credible evidence that Bush and Blair lied about WMD.

Lying to deceive the enemy is fine. But I find it hard to think of a situation where lying to change the outcome of a public debate, in the most advanced countries, is defensible. Certainly this wasn't one. Fallibilists do not want to participate in a political decision-making process that cannot decide against them even if they are wrong.

by **David Deutsch** on Sun, 06/08/2003 - 03:23 | [reply](#)

Theories of the state

I am not sure who are "they" in "What they said was that...", and who are these opponents of the war in "so why haven't any opponents of the war stood up and given the real reason why they thought the war was happening until now".

One thing I am sure of is that "they" do not include me, nor many antiwar libertarians I know. I have argued the libertarian case against the war in my Laissez Faire Economic Times piece "Political Economy of the 'War on Terror'", reproduced at <http://www.pierrelemieux.org/arteconwar.html>. Although I did not distinguish well enough the so-called "war on terror" and the war in Iraq (mea culpa),

I certainly argued nothing like what the convenient anti-war straw man is purported to have believed.

Another thing we can be (relatively) sure of is that a naive theory of the state cannot be relied upon to explain what states do or predict what they will do. "The Government was trying to make the world a better, safer place"? (Flectamus genua.) Perhaps this is what some people would like states to do, but more serious theories of the state and historical evidence show that this is not what states do in fact.

Pierre Lemieux
<http://www.pierrelemieux.org>

by **Pierre Lemieux** on Sun, 06/08/2003 - 10:12 | [reply](#)

The wrong emphasis?

Hmmm. Spin isn't necessarily done with good motives. It's necessary- one can't present any kind of political policy without *some* spin on it- and can be very good of course, but it can also be nothing more than evil propaganda. I can't see that Bush and Blair did anything wrong, but I don't know the details of what they said. If, for example, they promised people that WMDs in workable form *would* be found, they may have done something wrong.

Any mistakes they made in terms of presenting ideas to the public should be measured by the damage to their good cause that bad presentation results in, IMO. Over-emphasis on WMDs might be a misjudgement, IMO. More explicit statements about tackling Islamofascist terrorism, would, IMO, be a better emphasis, and not alienate anyone who isn't already antiwar.

It's quite possible that good governments will be mistakenly appeasing towards the forces of evil, and very difficult to judge whether this has happened without the kind of long-term perspectives that hindsight eventually offers. I just wonder if the Liberal antiwar left in the West has been appeased too much, and if this whole emphasis on WMDs as "proof" to shut them up isn't part of that: how do we know that a change of emphasis by the governments onto deeper issues would not have inspired more positive support from the undecideds, rather than more dangerous hostility from the peaceniks?

Alice

http://libertarian_parent_in_the_countryside.blogspot.com/

by a reader on Sun, 06/08/2003 - 11:51 | [reply](#)

Conspiracy theories suck

Pierre Lemieux wrote:

"Another thing we can be (relatively) sure of is that a naive theory

of the state cannot be relied upon to explain what states do or predict what they will do. "The Government was trying to make the world a better, safer place"? (Flectamus genua.) Perhaps this is what some people would like states to do, but more serious theories of the state and historical evidence show that this is not what states do in fact."

Western states do stupid and destructive things when the overwhelming majority of people want them to follow policies that lead to stupid and destructive things and not otherwise. The war on drugs is a result of the scientific bullshit about drugs that is so widespread in our society. Where the economy has come under state control in the West this is a result of people wanting that control in place and voting for it. The suffering many children undergo in school is the result of most people believing a false theory about education.

Your entire viewpoint is a bad conspiracy theory based on the idea that when something bad happens as a result of state action it is because the state *intended* something bad to happen, when in fact most of the bad stuff is an unintended result of their poor understanding of the world. I find it ironic that a classical liberal who should surely hold that the state is as thick as two short planks should instead see it as an all-powerful evil force.

Both in the case of the war on terror and the war on Iraq I see no reason to think that it is anything other than well-intentioned although some of the specific legislation may be stupid. The terrorists genuinely do hate our guts and want to kill as many people as humanly possible, as such getting rid of states that sponsor terrorism, as Iraq undoubtedly did, is good. Similarly, getting rid of evil aggressive tyrants who have WMD is good. The war on terror is good.

by a reader on Sun, 06/08/2003 - 17:53 | [reply](#)

States States States *runs away screaming*

Pierre,

The fact that the US government is a State, does not imply that everything it does is Wrong, nor that it can never have good motivations. The notion that the US government wanted to make the world a better place in 2003, does not mean we think all governments want to do that at all points in time.

Also, a State is just a kind of organisation, with a difference that is irrelevant to many discussions.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Sun, 06/08/2003 - 21:55 | [reply](#)

Theories of the state (bis)

Dear Elliot,

"The fact that the US government is a State, does not imply that everything it does is Wrong..."

It depends on what you mean by "Wrong," or its opposite, "Right." Some theories of the state, like the Hegelian theory, claim that the state is the incarnation of right and that, therefore, it cannot do wrong. At the very opposite, the most realistic theories of the state hold that everything (or nearly everything) that a state does is wrong because it arbitrarily and coercively violates the preferences of some individuals. This has been quite conclusively demonstrated by the Public Choice school of economics which has developed over the past 50 years. (Or just remember Arrow's theorem: the state cannot be both democratic and rational.) Perhaps the best extension of Public Choice is to be found in Anthony de Jasay's *The State*, a book which, in my opinion, is a must for anybody talking about the state (even if the book is a bit technical, requiring some background in economic theory, including welfare economics).

"The notion that the US government wanted to make the world a better place in 2003, does not mean we think all governments want to do that at all points in time."

Did the US state want to make the world a better world by attacking a third-world, third-rate tyrant, thousands of kilometers from the American shores? There are good reasons to believe that the American state (and the British state) more naturally wanted to increase its legitimacy and its power. Otherwise, our (taxpayer supported) knights in shining armor would have attacked North Korea or perhaps China (although, it is true that there is the risk that the Chinese tyrant would have fought back more seriously).

Now, it is not impossible that one of the motivations of the American tyrant (let's call a cat a cat, even if Western states may still be "good tyrants", to borrow Lockean terminology from Randy Simmons). Of course, this would require quite a "conspiracy", but we can safely dismiss the simplistic view that the conspiracy buzzword is an argument. In fact, any theory of the state must explain why, since the 19th century (and, with a vengeance, the 20th), states claim to pursue the welfare of the whole population. We know that they can't do this, because one individual's welfare is another's burden. But what is most important to realize here is that the Nice State is often more dangerous than the Egoistic State. "What has always made the state a hell on earth," wrote German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, "has been precisely that man has tried to make it his heaven. (On the Nice State, see my LFET piece, reproduced at <http://www.pierrelemieux.org/artnice.html>.)

"Also, a State is just a kind of organisation, with a difference that is irrelevant to many discussions."

It is true that the state is only a kind of organization, but the difference is very material here: the state is based on coercion and violence.

P.

Pierre Lemieux
www.pierrelemieux.org

by a reader on Tue, 06/10/2003 - 11:49 | [reply](#)

P., you wrote: "It is true..."

P., you wrote:

"It is true that the state is only a kind of organization, but the difference is very material here: the state is based on coercion and violence."

Are you saying that violence and coercion are always wrong?

by a reader on Tue, 06/10/2003 - 13:30 | [reply](#)

Answer to "A reader"

"Are you saying that violence and coercion are always wrong?"

No.

There are unassailable (I think) moral arguments for the right of self-defense. Of course, they don't imply the right of an organization ("a secret band of robbers and murderers," as Lysander Spooner said of a state that was much less powerful than today) to control me more under the excuse of "self-defending" me!

Moreover, a moral argument against violence would not change the fact that violence exists, and will certainly exist as long as all men have not been transformed into angels. Indeed, counterviolence and the threat of violence are the ONLY way to protect individual liberty against violence. Of course, this does not mean allowing tyrants who disarm the populace to become more powerful and more powerfully armed all the time.

(I have written two books, and innumerable articles, on the right to keep and bear arms.)

Pierre Lemieux
www.pierrelemieux.org

by a reader on Tue, 06/10/2003 - 14:34 | [reply](#)

Duncan Smith Lays Into Blair

I just caught this in the FT:

The Tories claimed Mr Blair failed to meet his pledge last week that the government would be open with both parliamentary inquiries. "It would be quite incredible if any inquiry into Downing Street's use of intelligence material did not take evidence from Mr Campbell . . .

who is associated with every allegation," said Iain

Duncan Smith, the Tory leader.

What the hell is Duncan Smith doing? It seems like the height of cynical political BS. Wasn't he in favour of the war? It's this kind of thing that leaves me with a sour taste in my mouth when it comes to politicians.

by a reader on Tue, 06/10/2003 - 15:36 | [reply](#)

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