

# Memos Show British Concern Over Iraq Plans



By THOMAS WAGNER, Associated Press Writer

4 minutes ago

LONDON - When Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#) 's chief foreign policy adviser dined with [Condoleezza Rice](#) six months after Sept. 11, the then-U.S. national security adviser didn't want to discuss [Osama bin Laden](#) or al-Qaida. She wanted to talk about "regime change" in [Iraq](#), setting the stage for the U.S.-led invasion more than a year later.

[President Bush](#) wanted Blair's support, but British officials worried the White House was rushing to war, according to a series of leaked secret Downing Street memos that have renewed questions and debate about Washington's motives for ousting [Saddam Hussein](#).

In one of the memos, British Foreign Office political director Peter Ricketts openly asks whether the Bush administration had a clear and compelling military reason for war.

"U.S. scrambling to establish a link between Iraq and al-Qaida is so far frankly unconvincing," Ricketts says in the memo. "For Iraq, 'regime change' does not stack up. It sounds like a grudge between Bush and Saddam."

The documents confirm Blair was genuinely concerned about Saddam's alleged weapons of mass destruction, but also indicate he was determined to go to war as America's top ally, even though his government thought a pre-emptive attack may be illegal under international law.

"The truth is that what has changed is not the pace of Saddam Hussein's WMD programs, but our tolerance of them post-11 September," said a typed copy of a March 22, 2002 memo obtained Thursday by The Associated Press and written to Foreign Secretary Jack Straw.

"But even the best survey of Iraq's WMD programs will not show much advance in recent years on the nuclear, missile or CW/BW (chemical or biological weapons)

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fronts: the programs are extremely worrying but have not, as far as we know, been stepped up."

Details from Rice's dinner conversation also are included in one of the secret memos from 2002, which reveal British concerns about both the invasion and poor postwar planning by the Bush administration, which critics say has allowed the Iraqi insurgency to rage.

The eight memos — all labeled "secret" or "confidential" — were first obtained by British reporter Michael Smith, who has written about them in The Daily Telegraph and The Sunday Times.

Smith told AP he protected the identity of the source he had obtained the documents from by typing copies of them on plain paper and destroying the originals.

The AP obtained copies of six of the memos (the other two have circulated widely). A senior British official who reviewed the copies said their content appeared authentic. He spoke on condition of anonymity because of the secret nature of the material.

The eight documents total 36 pages and range from 10-page and eight-page studies on military and legal options in Iraq, to brief memorandums from British officials and the minutes of a private meeting held by Blair and his top advisers.

Toby Dodge, an Iraq expert who teaches at Queen Mary College, University of London, said the documents confirmed what post-invasion investigations have found.

"The documents show what official inquiries in Britain already have, that the case of weapons of mass destruction was based on thin intelligence and was used to inflate the evidence to the level of mendacity," Dodge said. "In going to war with Bush, Blair defended the special relationship between the two countries, like other British leaders have. But he knew he was taking a huge political risk at home. He knew the war's legality was questionable and its unpopularity was never in doubt."

Dodge said the memos also show Blair was aware of the postwar instability that was likely among Iraq's complex mix of Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds once Saddam was defeated.

The British documents confirm, as well, that "soon after 9/11 happened, the starting gun was fired for the invasion of Iraq," Dodge said.

Speculation about if and when that would happen ran throughout 2002.

On Jan. 29, Bush called Iraq, [Iran](#) and [North Korea](#) "an axis of evil." U.S. newspapers began reporting soon afterward that a U.S.-led war with Iraq was possible.

On Oct. 16, the U.S. Congress voted to authorize Bush to go to war against Iraq. On Feb. 5, 2003, then-Secretary of State Colin L. Powell presented the Bush administration's case about Iraq's weapons to the U.N. Security Council. On March 19-20, the U.S.-led invasion began.

Bush and Blair both have been criticized at home since their WMD claims about

Iraq proved false. But both have been re-elected, defending the conflict for removing a brutal dictator and promoting democracy in Iraq. Both administrations have dismissed the memos as old news.

Details of the memos appeared in papers early last month but the news in Britain quickly turned to the election that returned Blair to power. In the United States, however, details of the memos' contents reignited a firestorm, especially among Democratic critics of Bush.

It was in a March 14, 2002, memo that Blair's chief foreign policy adviser, David Manning, told the prime minister about the dinner he had just had with Rice in Washington.

"We spent a long time at dinner on Iraq," wrote Manning, who's now British ambassador to the United States. Rice is now Bush's secretary of state.

"It is clear that Bush is grateful for your (Blair's) support and has registered that you are getting flak. I said that you would not budge in your support for regime change but you had to manage a press, a Parliament and a public opinion that was very different than anything in the States. And you would not budge either in your insistence that, if we pursued regime change, it must be very carefully done and produce the right result. Failure was not an option."

Manning said, "Condi's enthusiasm for regime change is undimmed." But he also said there were signs of greater awareness of the practical difficulties and political risks.

Blair was to meet with Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, on April 8, and Manning told his boss: "No doubt we need to keep a sense of perspective. But my talks with Condi convinced me that Bush wants to hear your views on Iraq before taking decisions. He also wants your support. He is still smarting from the comments by other European leaders on his Iraq policy."

A July 21 briefing paper given to officials preparing for a July 23 meeting with Blair says officials must "ensure that the benefits of action outweigh the risks."

"In particular we need to be sure that the outcome of the military action would match our objective... A postwar occupation of Iraq could lead to a protracted and costly nation-building exercise. As already made clear, the U.S. military plans are virtually silent on this point."

The British worried that, "Washington could look to us to share a disproportionate share of the burden. Further work is required to define more precisely the means by which the desired end state would be created, in particular what form of government might replace Saddam Hussein's regime and the time scale within which it would be possible to identify a successor."

In the March 22 memo from Foreign Office political director Ricketts to Foreign Secretary Straw, Ricketts outlined how to win public and parliamentary support for a war in Britain: "We have to be convincing that: the threat is so serious/imminent that it is worth sending our troops to die for; it is qualitatively different from the threat posed by other proliferators who are closer to achieving nuclear capability (including Iran)."

Blair's government has been criticized for releasing an intelligence dossier on Iraq

before the war that warned Saddam could launch chemical or biological weapons on 45 minutes' notice.

On March 25 Straw wrote a memo to Blair, saying he would have a tough time convincing the governing Labour Party that a pre-emptive strike against Iraq was legal under international law.

"If 11 September had not happened, it is doubtful that the U.S. would now be considering military action against Iraq," Straw wrote. "In addition, there has been no credible evidence to link Iraq with OBL (Osama bin Laden) and al-Qaida."

He also questioned stability in a post-Saddam Iraq: "We have also to answer the big question — what will this action achieve? There seems to be a larger hole in this than on anything."

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