

Europe

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# Having duped Britons into war, Blair must be held to account

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Truth is the foundation of democracy. Without truth, there can be no trust, and without trust, politics loses its very legitimacy. And that is the tragedy of what has befallen Britain in the last three years of Tony Blair's premiership - alongside the personal tragedies of the 64 British service personnel and 13,000 Iraqis who have paid the highest price for what has become the cruellest of deceptions.

Faced with this charge of having duped us into war, the prime minister responds with a certain injured innocence: "Are people questioning my integrity? Are they saying I lied?" Of course, professional communicators such as the prime minister almost never tell lies. For the most part it's perfectly easy to mislead the public without resorting to that. Rather than allege there was a real link between Saddam and Bin Laden "he deliberately crafted a suggestive phrase designed to create the impression that British troops were going to Iraq to fight a threat from Al-Qaeda".

There is more than one way not to tell the truth: Half-truths, omissions and deliberate ambiguities can be just as effective as crude lies if the mission is to mislead. All this would still be in the realm of conjecture, of course, if it had not been for the death of David Kelly and Bush's decision to have his own inquiry.

We now know what Blair knew, and when he knew it, and the contrast with his public statements at the time, which are set out in the report, *A Case To Answer*, by Dan Plesch and Glen Rangwala, published yesterday. It's on the basis of that report that I am prepared to state - unprotected by parliamentary privilege, unfettered by the rules of parliamentary language and without equivocation - that the prime minister did not tell the truth. Instead he exaggerated, distorted, suppressed and manipulated the information for political ends.

This was an organized deception to win over a skeptical Parliament and public to the military action he had long ago promised his ally Bush.

The evidence for Blair's duplicity is overwhelming. He claimed in early 2002 that Iraq had "stockpiles of major amounts of chemical and biological weapons" while the assessment of the joint intelligence committee at the time was that Iraq "may have hidden small quantities of agents and weapons". He told the TUC in September 2002 that Saddam "had enough chemical and biological weapons remaining to devastate the entire Gulf region", while the intelligence assessment was that "Saddam has not succeeded in seriously threatening his neighbours".

Blair displayed the most despicable cynicism of all

when he warned that "it is a matter of time, unless we act and take a stand before terrorism and weapons of mass destruction come together", even though the government was later forced to admit to the Butler inquiry that "the JIC assessed that any collapse of the Iraqi regime would

ter was aware of this". He knew the nightmare scenario he painted would be more, not less, likely if we invaded Iraq, yet he gave the opposite impression to translate anxiety into support for the war.

If he was guilty of mismanagement, miscalculation or mere mistakes then the proper

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increase the risk of chemical and biological warfare technology or agents finding their way into the hands of terrorists, and that the prime minis-

place to hold him to account would be the ballot box. Deliberate misrepresentation, however, is what marks this prime minister out.

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Accountability is the lifeblood of democracy. Why should the public bother getting involved in politics if ministers can lead us into war on a false prospectus and not even utter a single word of apology? So what remedy do Parliament and people have in these desperate circumstances? Historically, impeachment has been used by Parliament against individuals to punish "high crimes and misdemeanors".

One MP is all it takes to make the accusation of high crimes and misdemeanors against a public official for an impeachment process to begin. Once an MP has presented his or her evidence of misconduct to the Commons in a debate, and if a majority

of elected members agree there is a case to answer, a committee of MPs is established to draw up articles of impeachment, which will list each charge individually. The case goes before the Lords.

Three centuries ago the Commons called impeachment "the chief institution for the preservation of the government". It has been a key weapon in the long struggle of Parliament against the abuse of executive power. It has been revived before, after long periods of disuse, when the executive's hold on power without-responsibility seemed every bit as total as today.

Today a number of MPs, including myself, are declaring our intention to bring a Commons' motion of impeachment against the prime minister in relation to the invasion of Iraq. This is the first time in more than 150 years that such a motion has been brought against a minister of the crown, and it is clearly not an undertaking we enter into lightly. We do it with regret, but also with resolve.

For our first duty is to the people we represent, who feel they were misled, whose trust was betrayed, who have been placed in harm's way by the irresponsible actions of this prime minister. It is in their name that we impeach him. It is in their name, and with all the authority vested in us, that we demand him now to go.