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COMMENTARY

The Real News in the Downing Street Memos

By Michael Smith

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It is now nine months since I obtained the first of the "Downing Street memos," thrust into my hand by someone who asked me to meet him in a quiet watering hole in London for what I imagined would just be a friendly drink.

At the time, I was defense correspondent of the London Daily Telegraph, and a staunch supporter of the decision to oust Saddam Hussein. The source was a friend. He'd given me a few stories before but nothing nearly as interesting as this.

The six leaked documents I took away with me that night were to change completely my opinion of the decision to go to war and the honesty of Prime Minister Tony Blair and President Bush.

They focused on the period leading up to the Crawford, Texas, summit between Blair and Bush in early April 2002, and were most striking for the way in which British officials warned the prime minister, with remarkable prescience, what a mess post-war Iraq would become. Even by the cynical standards of realpolitik, the decision to overrule this expert advice seemed to be criminal.

The second batch of leaks arrived in the middle of this year's British general election, by which time I was writing for a different newspaper, the Sunday Times. These documents, which came from a different source, related to a crucial meeting of Blair's war Cabinet on July 23, 2002. The timing of the leak was significant, with Blair clearly in electoral difficulties because of an unpopular war.

I did not then regard the now-infamous memo — the one that includes the minutes of the July 23 meeting — as the most important. My main article focused on the separate briefing paper for those taking part, prepared beforehand by Cabinet Office experts.

It said that Blair agreed at Crawford that "the UK would support military action to bring about regime change." Because this was illegal, the officials noted, it was "necessary to create the conditions in which we could legally support military action."

But Downing Street had a "clever" plan that it hoped would trap Hussein into giving the allies the excuse they needed to go to war. It would persuade the U.N. Security Council to give the Iraqi leader an ultimatum to let in the weapons inspectors.

Although Blair and Bush still insist the decision to go to the U.N. was about averting war, one memo states that it was, in fact, about "wrong-footing" Hussein into giving them a legal justification for war.

British officials hoped the ultimatum could be framed in words that would be so unacceptable to Hussein that he would reject it outright. But they were far from certain this would work, so there was also a Plan B.

American media coverage of the Downing Street memo has largely focused on the assertion by Sir Richard Dearlove, head of British foreign intelligence, that war was seen as inevitable in Washington, where "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."

But another part of the memo is arguably more important. It quotes British Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon as saying that "the U.S. had already begun 'spikes of activity' to put pressure on the regime." This we now realize was Plan B.

Put simply, U.S. aircraft patrolling the southern no-fly zone were dropping a lot more bombs in the hope of provoking a reaction that would give the allies an excuse to carry out a full-scale bombing campaign, an air war, the first stage of the conflict.

British government figures for the number of bombs dropped on southern Iraq in 2002 show that although virtually none were used in March and April, an average of 10 tons a month were dropped between May and August.

But these initial "spikes of activity" didn't have the desired effect. The Iraqis didn't retaliate. They didn't provide the excuse Bush and Blair needed. So at the end of August, the allies dramatically intensified the bombing into what was effectively the initial air war.

The number of bombs dropped on southern Iraq by allied aircraft shot up to 54.6 tons in September alone, with the increased rates continuing into 2003.

In other words, Bush and Blair began their war not in March 2003, as everyone believed, but at the end of August 2002, six weeks before Congress approved military action against Iraq.

The way in which the intelligence was "fixed" to justify war is old news.

The real news is the shady April 2002 deal to go to war, the cynical use of the U.N. to provide an excuse, and the secret, illegal air war without the backing of Congress.

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