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The very secret service

David Kelly referred obliquely to Operation Rockingham. What role did this mysterious cell play in justifying the Iraq war?

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[Charm before the storm](#)

[Blair admits WMD may never be found](#)

[Press review: Blair's future](#)

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[Andrew Rawnsley: Waiting for Hutton](#)

[The storm breaks](#)

[Hutton: spy chiefs face reform over Iraq fiasco](#)

Michael Meacher
Friday November 21, 2003
[The Guardian](#)

David Kelly, giving evidence to the prime minister's intelligence and security committee in closed session on July 16 - the day before his suicide - made a comment the significance of which has so far been missed. He said: "Within the defence intelligence services I liaise with the Rockingham cell." Unfortunately nobody on the committee followed up this lead, which is a pity because the Rockingham reference may turn out to be very important indeed.

What is the role of the Rockingham cell? The evidence comes from a former chief weapons inspector in Iraq, Scott Ritter, who had been a US military intelligence officer for eight years and served on the staff of General Schwarzkopf, the US commander of allied forces in the first Gulf war. He has described himself as a card-carrying Republican who voted for Bush, but he distinguished himself in insisting before the Iraq war, and was almost alone in doing so, that almost all of Iraq's WMD had been destroyed as a result of inspections, and the rest either used or destroyed in the first Gulf war. In terms, therefore, of proven accuracy of judgment and weight of experience of the workings of western military intelligence, he is a highly reliable source.

In an interview in the Scottish Sunday Herald in June, Ritter said: "Operation Rockingham [a unit set up by defence intelligence staff within the MoD in 1991] cherry-picked intelligence. It received hard data, but had a preordained outcome in mind. It only put forward a small percentage of the facts when most were ambiguous or noted no WMD... It became part of an effort to maintain a public mindset that Iraq was not in compliance with the inspections. They had to sustain the allegation that Iraq had WMD [when] Unscm was showing the opposite."

Rockingham was, in fact, a clearing house for intelligence, but one with a predetermined political purpose. According to Ritter,

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"Britain and America were involved [in the 1990s and up to 2003] in a programme of joint exploitation of intelligence from Iraqi defectors. There were mountains of information coming from these defectors, and Rockingham staff were receiving it and then selectively culling [picking out] reports that sustained the [WMD] claims. They ignored the vast majority of the data which mitigated against such claims."

Only one other official reference to Operation Rockingham is on record, in an aside by Brigadier Richard Holmes when giving evidence to the defence select committee in 1998. He linked it to Unscam inspections, but it was clear that the Rockingham staff included military officers and intelligence services representatives together with civilian MoD personnel. Within, therefore, the UK intelligence establishment - MI6, MI5, GCHQ and defence intelligence - Rockingham clearly had a central, though covert, role in seeking to prove an active Iraqi WMD programme.

One of its tactics, which Ritter cites, is its leaking of false information to weapons inspectors, and then, when the search is fruitless, using that as "proof" of the weapons' existence. He quotes a case in 1993 when "Rockingham was the source of some very controversial information which led to inspections of a suspected ballistic missile site. We ... found nothing. However, our act of searching allowed the US and UK to say that the missiles existed."

A parallel exercise was set up by Donald Rumsfeld in the US, named the Office of Special Plans. The purpose of this intelligence agency was the provision of selective intelligence which met the demands of its political masters. Similarly, in the case of the UK, Ritter insists that Rockingham officers were acting on political orders "from the very highest levels".

Both Ritter and British intelligence sources have said that the selective intelligence gathered by Operation Rockingham would have been passed to the joint intelligence committee (JIC), which was behind the dossiers published by the UK government claiming Iraq had WMDs.

The significance of this is highlighted by Tony Blair's statement: "The intelligence that formed the basis of what we put out last September... came from the JIC assessment." So Rockingham was an important tributary flowing into the government's rationale for the war.

This shoehorning of intelligence data to fit pre-fixed political goals, both in the US and the UK, throws new light on the two most controversial elements of the government's dossier of September 2002. One was that Iraq could launch WMD within 45 minutes. Was this "sexed up" on the orders of No 10 or - derived allegedly from an Iraqi brigadier via an informant - did Rockingham put a gloss on it to please its political masters? The other highly contentious item in the dossier was that Saddam tried to buy uranium yellowcake from Africa. How did material that the International Atomic Energy Agency concluded on February 4 was a blatant forgery come to be included in President Bush's January 28 State of the Union address? And, since the British were named as the source, why did MI6 not spot this outlandish forgery? In fact, they alleged that the Niger claim came from another independent source, which has never been identified. Could this be

because this disinformation served the Rockingham purpose only too well?

It is not only the massaging of intelligence that seems to have gone on, but also the suppression of the most reliable assessment of the facts. David Kelly, we now know, had been advising privately prior to the war about the likelihood of Iraqi WMD. He told the foreign affairs select committee: "I have no idea whether there were weapons or not at that time [of the September 2002 dossier]". And to the intelligence and security committee the next day he added: "The 30% probability is what I have been saying all the way through ... I said that to many people ... it was a statement I would have probably made for the last six months." Yet this view from the leading expert within government never saw the light of day. Why not?

If the tabloid headlines the day after the September dossier was published had read: "Blair says only 30% chance Iraq has WMDs" rather than "Brits 45 mins from doom" (the Sun), would the Commons vote still have backed the war? Rarely can the selective use of information have had such drastic consequences. If there is one conclusion which must flow from the Hutton revelations, it must surely be the demand for a full-scale independent inquiry into the operation of the intelligence services around the top of their command and their interface with the political system.

· [Michael Meacher](#) was environment minister, 1997-2003.

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