

Thanks for listening to The Rest is Politics. Sign up to The Rest is Politics Plus to enjoy ad-free listening, receive a weekly newsletter, join our members' chatroom and gain early access to live show tickets. Just go to TheRestIsPolitics.com. That's TheRestIsPolitics.com. Welcome to another episode of The Rest is Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart.

And this is going to be one of those where we are only talking about one subject. And it's a subject on which I have spoken many, many times, of which Rory and I both have our own personal experience. It is about Iraq, and the reason being it is 20 years now. Incredible to think really. It's 20 years since the American-led coalition invaded Iraq, toppled Saddam Hussein relatively quickly, relatively straightforwardly. And since when Iraq has been and remains one of the most controversial issues, certainly of Tony Blair's time and of George Bush's and of all the other leaders who were involved.

So, Alistair, let's start with that. And I'd love for us to come in and out of this. And just to remind listeners where we all were during this period and how this worked. In a sense, I went to Iraq because of you. I was sent there as a British diplomat. And previous to that, I'd been in Afghanistan, I'd been in Bosnia, I'd been in Kosovo. So, we can talk a little bit about what led up to that. But you were right at the very, very heart of this because you were incredibly close to Tony Blair. You were in a lot of the key meetings with President Bush from 9-11 onwards through 2002 and 2003. You played an central part in bringing together the arguments around why the British government was joining the US and going into Iraq. So, we'll have a chance to get into that. We'll have a chance to remind listeners a little bit about some of the basic chronology of it. But before we start it, I wanted to give you a chance and we'll come back to this throughout the program. But what is your sense looking back now on that Iraq decision? How do you think about it? How do you, yeah, how do you, yeah, how do you think about it?

Well, I think about it a lot. I do have the odd sleepless night, to be honest, thinking about it. I think it was, without doubt, one of, if not the biggest decisions that Tony Blair took. And ultimately, we can talk about cabinets and advisers and all the rest of it. Decisions like that, they ultimately do lie in the hands of the Prime Minister who then has to, you know, he had very solid cabinet support most of the time. Robin Cook resigned, Claire Short resigned. But generally, he had very solid support. He made and won the case in parliament with a huge majority, a very big labor rebellion, but the conservatives backed the decision. They like to pretend they didn't these days, but they backed it. And I actually, funny if I was at an event the other day, turn the tables, which you may have done where I was grilled by your friend, Julian Keegan, and Emily Maitlis was grilled by Keir Starmer. And in the questioning, a woman in the audience, she asked me very directly. She said, do you still stand by the decision that Tony Blair's government took in relation to Iraq? And do you understand why people are still so angry about it? And I gave a fairly long-winded nuanced answer. And she said, I don't feel you've answered my question fully. And I said, well, I'll answer it. Yes, I stand by him. And yes, I do understand why people are angry. I do. I do understand that.

Yeah.

Well, let's keep, keep looping back to this. But before we do that, let's, let's set the context. So 1989 to 2003 was the time of extraordinary optimism. It was the time

of real U.S. dominance. And it was the period collapse of communism, rise of democracies around the world during that period, the number of democracies in the world doubled from 1988 through to 2003. There were these interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo. And I was involved in them as a young British diplomat. I was sent out to the Balkans during that time. And one of the things I think that fed in, and I'd be interested in your views on this, but I certainly felt that one of the things that fed into the optimism around Iraq is that many people had been predicting that the interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo would be a catastrophe. There were books produced saying centuries of ethnic hatred, there'll be insurgencies, the whole thing will be a failure. And of course, people were still haunted by Vietnam, which after all, at that period, didn't feel that long away. Remember, Vietnam in relation to Bosnia was the same distance away that the Iraq war is from us today. So people were very, very haunted by the memory of Vietnam. And then surprisingly, those interventions

were in their own terms relatively successful. The war criminals were arrested and put on trial. The big militias were disbanded. The war ceased. And above all, there was no insurgency. The most dangerous place for a American soldier to be was on the basketball court in Sarajevo. And there were no casualties from insertion to tax against U.K. U.S. forces.

So let's begin with that. Do you think that this created a mindset in the mind of Tony Blair and others around him where they felt, well, we've been told in the past that these things are going to be a disaster. And last time around, they weren't. So now we've got all these people saying Iraq's going to be a disaster. But if we just hold our nerve and push ahead, it'll be fine.

Well, there's a couple of things I'd say at the start of that. The first is the you started the story fairly well advanced. I think it is important to remember further back from that that Saddam Hussein took power in Iraq in 1979. Torture, execution, 1980, Iran launched this invasion of Iran, used chemical weapons extensively from 1984, invaded Kuwait, 1990, and on it goes. And so I think that I think it's worth just sort of putting that now and also because I think this come this will be relevant to when we get on to talk about the case for war, as it were. Also, what we knew he was developing chemical and biological weapons because he was using them and had used them, including against his own people.

Yes. So just to interrupt, you knew that he had been developing them in the 1980s. What we didn't know is whether in 2002, 2003, he was still actively developing them.

Well, we now know that there was no evidence post war of that program. But when you say we didn't know it at the time, the intelligence was telling Tony Blair clearly that there was and we can come on to that. Don't forget as well in 90 Tony Blair's first as it were authorization of military action overseas was in Iraq in 1998, when they kicked the inspectors out and Clinton put together again with UK probably as the second partner. And with considerable public support at the time, including I mentioned Robin Cook earlier, including from something like Robin Cook. So that was there was the rack of Sierra Leone, where that was post Tony Blair Chicago speech, where he'd identified that, you know, military action for humanitarian purposes in the as a last resort was a legitimate thing to do. And that was very successful. There was a smaller military operation in East Timor, involving the Gurkhas.

Yes, I mean, again, East Timor was another file that I was very much involved in. So I was a young diplomat in Indonesia. I remember Robin Cook visiting Jakarta, I was working

on East Timorese independence was very, very involved in the attempts to challenge Indonesia around its human rights record. And again, the independence of East Timor in 99 felt like part of a general move through the 1990s, which was happening all around the world happening in Latin America, it was happening in Asia, it was happening in Africa, away from authoritarian regimes towards democracy. And the three that really stood out at the time that we kept talking about when I was in the foreign office. And of course, you and Tony Blair then started talking about a lot and George Bush talked about a lot, where Iran, North Korea and Iraq, which became these sort of massive symbolic examples of brutal authoritarian regimes. And of course, the other one was Afghanistan, post 9-11. And I do think it's important again to set the context of the significance of this September 11 attacks. I think that there's this phrase that lots of people use that the many, the several various inquiries that have been about the calculus of threat being changed. And I do think I can remember on 9-11 itself when we're at the TUC in Brighton, we canceled the speech or Tony Blair went to the conference and said, he's not staying, he's back to London and sitting down on the train and writing down him sitting with a pad and a pen and just writing down all the issues we had to deal with and address when we got back. And I think I've said to you before, one of them, it just said WMD slash rogue state. So that was, I think what he meant by the calculus of threat that there'd been this approach with Iraq of containment, you know, well into double figures of United Nations security resolutions that he'd defied, absolute obstruction and expulsion of the inspectors. So there's this idea that you could contain through inspections and sanctions and no fly zones and what have you. And I think the feeling was that the threat, this is what I think our critics on this can't really accept, don't buy. But that sense that the threat was real, that the chances of a rogue state with access to weapons of mass destruction operating in league with people who are prepared to fly planes into the Twin Towers, that was the mindset.

It was the mindset and it became an amazingly powerful mindset, which I remember very strongly. So obviously I served in Iraq, I served in Afghanistan and it made it all the way through to Obama who gave an extraordinary speech in 2008 where he made these very, very elaborate connections which had been begun by Tony Blair and George Shabli Bush but were continued by Obama between terrorism, rogue states, failed states, democracy and all of this stuff became a sort of paranoia, an amazing paranoia that these states pose an existential threat to the world combined bizarrely with a very, very extreme optimism about our ability to actually reshape these states. And it sometimes strikes me that at the moment at which the US, the UK and the West was at its moment of greatest power, it became almost manic depressive. It began to lurch between the most extreme negative dystopian descriptions of the threat and the most extreme optimistic statements about our capacity to be able to deal with it. And so the argument would be these places pose an existential threat to global security and they have every kind of ill in the world in them. They're places where there'll be weapons of mass destruction, where terrorism will thrive, where human rights abuses will thrive, they will be a danger to the world and then they go on to say, but if we intervene, we can bring down the dictator, we can nation build, we can restore democracy, we can end terrorism, we can bring peace. So it was a very, very peculiar mindset driven by people who didn't know very much about these countries in the sense that none of you had actually lived in these places or spent any time in them. I mean, Tony Blair

was very bright, obviously, very articulate. George Bush, perhaps less so. But the one thing that people had in common is that you were, if I was going to be rude, I'd say your perspective was very US European. None of you had spent much time living in the Middle East. I know Tony Blair tried to read the Quran, but what he meant by that is he was trying to read it in English translation. He had very, very little cultural context or background on that. And therefore, your ability to really understand that these places might be less of a threat than you thought and that our ability to deal with them might be much less than we thought.

But that's what I think it's a bit much to expect a president or a prime minister to speak every language in the world so as to be able to understand the world. That's why you do have advisors and experts and diplomats and intelligence and so forth. And I think that just on the point about the direct link, so-called between Iraq and Al Qaeda, there was definitely a strand within the American system that was trying to push that the whole time. We did not. We didn't then and we don't now. But I think what Tony's, what you call the paranoia, what I ask people to understand in this is that he's the prime minister and it's true that the reason why that lady that asked me that question, a lot of the anger is driven by the fact that people say that the case for war that we made was weapons of mass destruction. That was the case for war. Now, what I'd argue is that it was part of the case for war. His record was part of the case for war. The fact that he constantly defied the UN and got away with it was part of the case for war. But 9-11, as I say, did change that sort of sense that containment could no longer work. It was too big a risk. There had to be a stepping up of the action against Saddam.

Now, what I think I'd say about Tony's approach is that it's twofold. One, he genuinely, you call it paranoia, he genuinely saw that as a threat. The reason for that was the fact that the intelligence picture was developing the way that it was. Now, there's all sorts of criticisms we can make of that. Tony, when the Chilcot Inquiry came out, he said he is not going to criticize the intelligent people. They did a very difficult job and very brave and difficult circumstances. He would take responsibility for those failings of intelligence. We have to accept there were failings of intelligence. I would agree with you that within the American

system, there was a division going on that we witnessed to it. There was one occasion I remember at Camp David where Dick Cheney, the vice president, and there was Colin Powell Secretary of State on one side who was pretty cautious. Cheney and Rumsfeld and Rolfowitz and these neocon guys on the other side who were just for Christ's sake, why are we hanging around on this? Bush was trying to manage them. Bush literally was asking Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, to persuade Cheney that we had to take this down the multilateral route, try and take it back to the United Nations, try and get them to say one last chance.

Can I come in on this and then let you develop the story? I think it's fascinating, Camp David's story, but again, for listeners to remind people, it's clear that the neocons within George W. Bush's administration wanted to get into Iraq almost immediately after 9-11. They had an idea and I actually saw a lot of Paul Wolfowitz at the time. Paul Wolfowitz, who was the deputy secretary of defense, a very, very major player in this. I spent a lot of time talking to Wolfowitz. I saw him in Iraq. I saw him in Afghanistan. I saw

him a lot in Washington. They had developed a theory that by toppling Saddam Hussein, they would be able to spark a chain reaction of democracy across the Middle East and that Iraq would be the start and then Iran would follow and that would reshape Syria and ultimately you would end up with a democratic stable Middle East and they thought all you needed to do was the courage to hit Iraq. Now, Tony Blair encountering this as he comes into 2002 is facing a situation in which France, Russia and China and actually strangely amongst these very strongly France and then later Germany are very much on the other side of this argument. They very much are in favor of containment and they are doing their best to say the weapons inspectors need to have more time, etc. Tony Blair concludes that the only way in which he thinks that it will be legitimate to bring Britain in with the United States is if there is a UN resolution, if there's UN support and initially the UK Attorney General seems to suggest that this UN resolution is going to be absolutely vital for Britain coming in. That's the legal advice. George W. Bush is much less interested in that. He wants to go, he's ready to go, but almost as a favor to Tony Blair to try to build the coalition. He gives Tony Blair time to try to get these resolutions together. So, one's put together towards the end of 2002 and then as we go into 2003 an effort starts to try to get a second resolution and the resolution is all about saying, Saddam is not complying with weapons inspectors so we're going to have a vote in the Security Council and we're going to go in. And against Tony Blair and all of this is not just France, but also statements from the weapons inspectors themselves, which although ambiguous, in retrospect, you can see Hans Blix saying, it would be a bit unfortunate if 250,000 people went onto the ground and you didn't find any weapons of mass destruction and you've got Al-Baradai saying, we really don't have any evidence that they've restarted a nuclear weapons program. I think they're welcome to say and give us a few more months. So, when you're sitting in Camp David to go back to this, we're in a situation in which the US wants to push ahead with a very strong push from the DOD and against that push is Tony Blair and yourself trying to say, let's take it more gently, let's try to get an international coalition, let's try to get a UN resolution. Right. At that point, I'm handing back to you with you trying to convince Cheney. Well, just a couple of things before we do that. I mean, on the Attorney General point, it's true that at one stage, Attorney General was concerned about the legal basis, but that's because at that stage, he wasn't aware of the previous negotiating history. And when he went to the States, there was no consp... Again, we get accused of all sorts of conspiracies. There was no conspiracy here. When he went to the States, he discovered that in the negotiating history, and this had been the same for the UK and for the US, the resolution 1441, which is the one that you're talking about, was linked to prior resolutions, 678 and 687, I think they were, which as it were, he was already in last chance saloon. And two things happened is that he realized that actually, what happened when the debate around this resolution happened is that France in particular and Russia tried to get written into the new resolution that they'd have to go back for explicit authority for further action, and they failed in that endeavor. And that is what made the Attorney General find that actually that meant that the previous resolutions gave the authority. So we're slightly fast-forwarding. So we'll just finish that bit of story, and then we'll take you back to your conversations with Bush and Cheney and Ken Powell. So the end of the story is that the UK Attorney General, Goldsmith, changed his advice, set a second resolution

wasn't necessary. And the UK government concluded that they were not going to get the votes in the Security Council. They probably wouldn't get the nine votes that they wanted. They certainly wouldn't get France on side. And therefore, they decided not to proceed with the second resolution. And you were right up against a timetable where the US was making it increasingly clear that they were going to go into Iraq at the beginning of March, regardless, want to go in at the 10th of March, regardless of whether or not this resolution happened. And that then put Tony Blair on the spot because it forced him to decide I think two things. Did he fully believe in this, regardless of what the US sought or was he going in because of special relationship? And secondly, was he prepared to go in with the US without getting the rest of the Security Council on side? So take us back to your sense of Cheney and Paul and everything. Cheney was, I would say, quite grumpy that this sort of young British Prime Minister. And bear in mind that when it came to it, the Americans are going to be providing 95% of the input into the into the military action. 95%. That's a lot. We were very much, as it were, junior partner in this. And don't forget there were other countries involved as well, right? To start Poland, Australia, Denmark, others. And but Cheney was, yeah, I'd say grouchy, grumpy. I remember once where he, he kept going on about, no, George Bush was asking why we thought there was so much anti Americanism in the world. And one of the things I liked about Bush is that he liked to take opinions around the room. So he did see, obviously, Tony was the Prime Minister and the leader. And he was the guy that was the main guy in the room with Bush. But he was always interested in my take, for example, on, on messaging and communication and how things were perceived. And so he said, What is this? Where do you think this all comes from? Why we're so kind of hated in so many parts of the world? And I said, I think partly there's lots of kind of history there. But I think partly they hear you constantly talking about democracy. And they don't hear democracy. They hear you think everywhere should be like America. They hear Americanization. And Cheney, who'd been pretty silent for the most time, he just sort of grouch and said, You know what, so we stop talking about democracy, we start pretending we're not a democracy. And I said, No, I just think you should maybe frame this in a in a different way. And the other the other reason why I defend Tony so strongly as I do is I actually thought I remember David Manning, who was Tony's main foreign office policy advisor at the time, I remember at the end of this meeting, him saying to me and Jonathan Powell, he said, God, that was pretty remarkable. That was an American president asking a British prime minister to persuade the vice president to take this thing to the United Nations and to reactivate the Middle East peace process and show real commitment to that. That was pretty amazing. And if they do it, he said, This will be quite a considerable diplomatic success. And of course, he did do it. Bush went to the UN. And he made a speech and okay, he was basically saying, you know, these were not the words, but he was essentially saying, you know, Saddam may be in the last chance, but in a way, so are you guys because are you going to face up to this or not?

The tragedy, of course, of it, though, is that David Manning there in the room. And I think this is something to remember when I think about my time as a minister, particularly in these exciting events, that you can get very, very carried away and think that you're doing something world historical. When in retrospect, it doesn't really work out what Manning seems to be saying there is this is amazing. Tony Blair is convincing the US

president to go through the UN process and restart the Middle East peace process. True, in a sense. But it turned out that neither of those things worked out in the way that Manning would have hoped the Middle East peace process went nowhere. The US appearance in front of the UN didn't actually get the security clearance to go forward. So the special relationship got the US to move a bit. But it didn't actually achieve the long term strategic objectives, which is sorting out the Middle East or getting a good settlement out of the UN.

You know, I accept that. And my point is, I would say there was a strand within American, the American inspiration without a doubt that was kind of war come what may. I'm not convinced that Bush was there in the same place as Cheney and the others. For Tony, right to the very end, he was motivated by a desire that this should not ultimately go to war. And he was essentially trying everything he could to delay that.

Can I question that for a second? Because I think that that is something that listeners will find difficult. I mean, in the end, he wasn't doing all that he could to delay it because an option remained as Robin Cook pointed out in his speech, which was to take the position that France and Germany took.

But that was the fundamental decision. And you said earlier about the so-called special relationship. That was a part of his thinking. There's no doubt about that. Part of his thinking, having had this very close relationship with Bill Clinton, which was helpful on many, many ways in relation to Kosovo, in relation to Northern Ireland, all sorts of other ways where that relationship benefited the UK national interest. Likewise with Bush, he was determined to be close. And I think he believed in the threat. He believed that the threat was real. He believed that Saddam had been tolerated by the world for far too long. He would rather that the world had come together and somehow brought him down through peaceful means. But there was a part of him that thought for us to break from the Americans on an issue of such significant strategic importance to them was a very, very big and dangerous decision for us.

I think this isn't really important. Maybe we'll go to a break after this. But I absolutely believe in your belief. I don't think the problem here is that Tony Blair was somehow insincere. I think he genuinely got himself into a headspace where he believed that Iraq was somehow an existential threat. And I think he genuinely believes that it was vital. The US and the UK remained very close. The problem is, and this is something we can return to after the break, is that he was probably wrong on both those counts. Iraq wasn't an existential threat to global security. And actually, the US and the UK, their relationship would have been able to survive the UK not going into the Iraq war, just as Germany and France has managed to rebuild their relationship. And just of course, as Britain was able to rebuild its relationship with the US when Harold Wilson made the very correct decision, despite all the pressure in the opposite direction not to get involved in the Vietnam War.

I think first of all, I think you are in making that statement so boldly and so clearly. I think you are underestimating the extent to which Saddam's record played into this thinking. You know, the Iraq around war, now a million casualties, the fact that he had used, as I said before, chemical weapons against his own people, the fact that he did, you know, invacuate in the way that he did and survive it at the end of it. So I think all that played in. And likewise, I think it's very easy now. Look, we can get onto this later. You can make

the case. There has been considerable progress in Iraq. There has also been considerable setback. And there's no doubt at all that the aftermath and the lack of proper planning that we assume the Americans were doing, it was pretty catastrophic. But the big thing, the big thing that really changed things in the aftermath was the involvement, I think, of Iran and al-Qaeda that was not foreseen. You could argue that was a policy mistake, you were an intelligence mistake, whatever, not foreseen. We were preparing for, you know, the fact of or the probability of some of our own soldiers coming under attack from chemical weapons. I can remember going to a briefing at the Defense Ministry with Tony Blair, where we were briefed on the level of, let me finish, we were briefed on the level of preparedness of our troops. I can remember Clare Short coming in and Clare Short were obviously totally opposed. And, you know, I understand why, as I said earlier, but she was focusing very much on the fact that there was likely to be a refugee humanitarian crisis. We ended up, we were focusing on the wrong things. That I accept. The truth is, none of us can prove the counterfactual. None of us can prove what would or would not have happened if Saddam Hussein had power. None of us can prove whether actually the, you know, people like to say, well, the insurgency that happened afterwards, that was because we provoked it. That was people opportunistically exploiting a situation. I accept that. Yeah, we're getting on to getting on to a much bigger issue. So I think let's take a break and try to come back to the post war stuff afterwards and get all sent a little bit of the justifications around the war.

Cool.

As we deal with the challenges of hybrid working and talent wars in this new world of work, the financial times helps you understand what might be next. I'm Isabelle Barrick, the host of the FT's Working It podcast. Each week we discuss the ideas and trends shaping the future of work. The FT's broad coverage and unique insights can help you to make sense of it all. Check out our podcasts and read selected articles free at [ft.com slash insights](https://ft.com/slashed/insights). Welcome back to the rest of politics with me, Rory Stewart and me, Alistair Campbell. So there are many, many things to talk about in this. And one of them is we started just before the break talking about the fact that I don't think the question is whether or not Tony Blair and you believed you were doing the right thing. I'm sure you did. I think it was a catastrophic error and it'd be interesting to try to examine how you got yourself in the headspace and you've begun to suggest some of the history that led up to it and why you thought this stuff.

But the other thing I think that has been very controversial and of course relates very closely to you because you were right at the heart of the communications machine was the way in which this intervention was explained to the British public. And the Chilcot inquiry came up with a letter written by Tony Blair and he's trying to explain to the US what's required to get the British public on side at the end of 2002. He says, if we recapitulate all the weapons and mass destruction evidence, add Saddam's attempt to secure nuclear capability and, as seems possible, add an al-Qaeda link, it will be largely persuasive over here, plus of course the abhorrent nature of the regime.

So somewhere in the discussions around this, a decision seems to have been made somewhere in Tony Blair's head that a lot of emphasis needed to be put on weapons and mass destruction and that that was going to be the thing that was going to persuade the British public.

Do you want to sort of explore why that became the thing that you focused on rather than the human rights of the Iraqis, democratization or any of the other arguments that might have been made?

I think those other arguments were made. But what was happening at that time was that this was obviously a really big issue. It was a subject that was dominant in Parliament. It was dominant in the media for quite a long time.

Well, every year, I mean, I've been almost here and I've been looking at your diaries and one of the things that's striking is you and Tony Blair go on a tour to South Africa and the whole thing is then derailed by questions around Iraq.

Yeah.

And of course, beginning at 2003, you have a million people in the streets demonstrating against the Iraq war and you're having to worry about the Parliamentary Labour Party because you're about to go into the biggest rebellions that have been seen since the 18th century in terms of the number of MPs voting against. So you guys are having to think very, very hard about how you make the case for the war.

And what Tony is saying to media, to other leaders, to the PLP, when he's at PLP meetings and saying, for God's sake, Tony, we're not going to do this, are we? He was saying, well, look, I'm seeing the intelligence day after day, week after week, and it makes me more not less concerned. It makes me more not less concerned. And if you just go through, if you look at the Butler report, you look at the Chilcot report, I mean, the thing that people can actually see the raw intelligence now or not the raw intelligence, they can see the intelligence reports that Tony Blair was getting. So for example, March 2002, the Joint Intelligence Committee. So this is crossing his desk. Okay. It's clear that Iraq continues to pursue a policy of acquiring WMD and their delivery means. Intelligence indicates planning to reconstitute some of its programs began in 1995. WMD programs were then given a further boost in 1998 with the withdrawal of UNSCOM inspectors. Then goes on to say Iraq is pursuing a nuclear weapons program. We continue to judge that Iraq has an offensive chemical warfare program. Iraq currently has available number of biological agents could produce more within days. September, Iraq has a chemical and biological weapons capability and Saddam is prepared to use it. Now, yes, he can challenge that. He can test it. He's reading that and he's the prime minister. He's not, he's not some Tory backbencher. He's not some commentator on the, on the papers. He's the prime minister.

So let's, let's, let's get into that for a second, because I absolutely agree the JIC was saying that there was an incredibly deep in, in Chilcot's word, ingrained belief in the UK and US intelligence community that Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons. And there was also no real desire to examine the possibility that there were none, despite the fact that there had been no significant fines. And it's a very, very striking, strange failure of the whole system. And I'm not here putting the blame on you or Tony Blair. I'm partly putting the blame on John Scarlett and Richard Dearlove on a lot of the key players, the people who chaired the Joint Intelligence Committee, the key figures in MI6. Why was it they were not putting the effort into examining the possibility, which turned out to be true, that the guy didn't actually have these things? How did they get themselves in this world of believing that he had them?

But if you read, if you actually read, so, you know, we're talking here about the case

that we were making, and this centre, this is why I became so central to this, this became this centre on the weapons of mass destruction, so-called dossier, not to be confused with the so-called dodgy dossier, which was a kind of very, very minor part of this whole story, which has been conflated. But the September weapons of mass destruction dossier at the time.

Okay, interrupting, just explain what's said. 24th of September, 2002, the British government, and this is Alistair Campbell helping on this document with Tony Blair, publishes a document on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. And it's out of that, that the sun produces the headline Brits 45 Minutes from Doom. And that becomes one of the most central claims. And very controversial within this dossier is the fact that since it was published, a memo has now come to light from John Scarlett, the key figure, eventually running MI6, saying, talking about the benefit of obscuring the fact that in terms of WMD, Iraq is not exceptional. In other words, although the international, I completely agree, the intelligence community is all saying Iraq has WMD, but of course-

By the way, including the French and the German.

Including French Germans. But that in terms of the threats to the world, most people didn't put Iraq in the front rank. They would have put Iran and North Korea ahead of Iraq in terms of the kind of threat it plays to global stability and Iraq had become almost a choice of the United States because it seemed the more convenient place to go rather than a real statement that it was more dangerous than Iran or North Korea.

That is all fair and that's all reasonable. However, I go back to my point, Tony Blair sitting there, he's seeing this stuff. Now, he's, yes, did we challenge this stuff? Did we say, well, how do we know this stuff? Did we say, well, can we be sure? And they would often say, and I think this did come across in the dossier, there were caveats. In fact, at the time, most of the media, including the Richard Gilligan, who later became central to this story himself, Andrew Gilligan, the BBC guy, most of their reaction was there's nothing much here we didn't know. It was subsequently, even the point about 45 minutes. So that was within the intelligence reports that they wrote. Okay. We went through a very careful process. And this was, by the way, this was a difficult exercise for the intelligence agencies. And actually, I absolved John Scarlett on this. I think John Scarlett was incredibly cautious the whole way through. I think dear love possibly got a little bit too caught up in the closeness to power and being the guy in the room with the Prime Minister and all that. But even he, I think was, they weren't sort of saying this is slam dunk. They were saying, look, it's a very, very difficult place to get in together intelligence. But this is the best that we can do. This is what we genuinely think based upon all that we do know.

Quick one of that, because again, I was very close to the intelligence community at that point. And one of the things, one of the dynamics that I felt was very, very unhealthy and very dangerous if we want to learn lessons from this, is that because everybody assumed that Saddam had chemical weapons, and one of the reasons they assume that he had chemical weapons is that he wasn't cooperating with weapons inspectors. So the assumption was, And don't forget, and that he'd used them before.

He certainly had them in the past. And certainly, he certainly had them in the past, used them in the past. So everybody assumed he still had them. And if he didn't have them, why

wasn't he cooperating more with weapons inspectors? So as a result, when people produced intelligence

reports saying that Saddam Hussein had weapons and mass destruction, they were not approached with the skepticism that they might have been had people not all assumed in the background, he had them anyway. And what seems to have happened, I think, is that there was a huge demand for these reports. And when there's a huge demand, what happens is intelligence officers go out into the field, they look up agents, many of whom don't have very good access. It's quite difficult actually to penetrate the Iraqi regime. You ask them questions about weapons and mass destruction, and they will say to you, because the agent is paid by the intelligence officer, and they want to keep getting paid and they want to seem relevant.

Yes, yes, yes, Saddam Hussein has weapons and mass destruction, and you say, well, where does he have them? Oh, he hides them. Where does he hide? He hides them in the desert.

How quickly can they use? Oh, I heard somebody say they can be used in 45 minutes. This is then packaged into a report that's sent by the intelligence officer up to their boss

through a reports process, and then finds its way up to the desk of a minister, eventually the prime minister. And the problem is that in this process, everybody could be Richard dear love, but everybody wants to be relevant. Everyone wants to be the person bringing that document into show. And there aren't enough people in the system saying, is this really true because the bar is very low because the background assumption is that he's got them anyway. So it doesn't really matter that this might be a pretty dubious out of date.

Well, I think you're applying an awful lot of hindsight here. Let me paint an account narrative, which explains, and I'm speaking here as somebody who was sitting alongside Tony Blair, but obviously seeing people like Richard dear love and John Scarlett and the others who were coming in and briefing him, you can't just wipe out that sort of record as being a big part of the of the thinking. Nor can you write out the fact that the inspectors were being kicked out. There was also an assessment that what Saddam was doing in terms of sort of playing down the sense of him being not being a threat was all about getting sanctioned stops so that he could then this came out in the Iraq survey group after the invasion, after the war came out, he was hoping to get rid of sanctions so that he could reconstitute, for example, the nuclear program. All I'm saying to you is to it's very easy to see here and say, well, all these intelligence agents were carried away with the sort of, you know, the drama of the thing. I think that's very unfair on them.

Well, let me come in on that because I want to be unfair to them. They got it catastrophically wrong. Their sources were bad, their intelligence was bad, and it turned out on the biggest call imaginable, a call that ended up with hundreds of thousands of people being killed, \$3 trillion being spent. There were no weapons of mass destruction. That was the one call the intelligence agents need to make. Right. But I'm totally wrong. So we can't exonerate dear love and scarlet and that system. They fucked up really, really bigly.

I'm not exonerate. I'm okay. Okay. I'm simply saying I think your portrayal of them is unfair. I also think what's unfair about it. You think they were diligent that they had their sources were good, that their information was good?

Look, there were failings in the intelligence process. I think everybody accepts that. When I watched the way that John Scarlett in particular was operating, I saw somebody who was really, really conscious of how difficult it was. He never went in there. Not once did I see

him go in there and say, this is so slam dunk compelling. He went in there with all the caveats. Ultimately, Tony Blair in the cabinet had to make a judgment. There's a judgment call. I'm simply saying to you that you let me just try and give you a counterfactual that actually that he did have a weapons of mass destruction program that the invasion happened and they were found and they were used and they were used against our troops. Okay. Or let me give you another one. Let's imagine that he had it and that in fact they did eventually get used. Okay. And then these intelligence reports come out. Tony Blair was advised about all this and he did nothing. Tony Blair sat on warnings that this was happening and that was one. So all I'm simply saying, I think it was one of those situations, which was interesting. It was a very difficult place to gather intelligence. They never said there's a 100% clear picture. We were dealing with the reality of the part of the American administration that we were trying to restrain, but they were going gung-ho. I'm simply asking you, I think to be a bit more reasonable in your assessment of why Tony Blair was making the decision in that way, going through a process where, and this is why I get personally so kind of angry at the levels of criticism. And okay, you're saying, you're clear, you're not saying that Tony Blair was deceiving anybody or that I was, but that is what we get accused of the whole time. That is where we decided we were going to help the Americans come what may and we sort of manipulated this thing, exaggerated and so that's what comes out of. I don't think you would, I don't think you'd, and I think we were, and I think we were challenging intelligence by the way, we were challenging them, but you, but you probably didn't know enough to know how to challenge them properly.

But that goes back to your point about the fact that, you know, Tony Blair can't read the Quran in English.

Well, it's not just that. He probably doesn't, he probably, but did you, I mean, be interesting question. Did you try to understand who their sources were, how reliable they were, how they'd reported in the past? Because it turned out that the 45 minute claim came from somebody sitting in a taxi who'd overheard a comment.

Well, so it is said.

Well, did you try to get into it, I guess?

No, I think we did, we did in terms of saying, you know, I can, I'll give you another example.

I can remember very, very late on in the process, I think it was, there was a new piece of intelligence came in that we did challenge it and we did say, look, you know, because this was the, while the dossier was still being prepared and in the end we didn't put it in because we were challenging it.

So look, I think you're asking, you're asking us, you're asking me now whether we challenged every single line of intelligence that came through the door, probably not, probably not.

Were we challenging it at the level of, are you sure? Is this something that you can be?

And their argument would be, you know, we are reasonably sure, we're as sure as we can be.

You know, so I think, and I do think that there were people in the intelligence communities, you know, who were not dear love and not John Scarlet, but who were lower down in particular, who were not at all happy that we were doing this exercise was happening at all.

But the back to my point about how Tony Blair was, when he was out in public and in Parliament, essentially he was saying, if you, the line, his argument really was, look, if you people

saw what I saw, you'd be a little bit more worried than you seem to be.

That was what led to us wanting to share the intelligence with the public.

That's what led to the dossier.

Now, was that a good idea or a bad idea?

People can argue about it.

I think in the modern age, it's no longer the case that you can just say, we never comment on intelligence matters, because intelligence gets out there anyway.

I'm with you.

I mean, I think the tragedy of the thing isn't really about the question of you and Tony Blair lying.

I mean, I think that's, in a sense, has put the whole conversation off half cock.

I think the more fundamental point is an enormous failing of the British system, of the intelligence system, which ultimately said that they were reasonably sure about stuff that they were completely wrong about.

I mean, not only were they not reasonably sure about it, they had no evidence for it at all.

I mean, literally no evidence.

So they were claiming they were reasonably sure basically on the basis that he'd had this stuff a few years earlier, and they assumed he still had it.

So they were selling something to you, which was a crock of shit, right?

I mean, there was literally not a single agent who was in that chemical weapons program who'd seen a single batch of chemical weapons anywhere within Iraq within the previous 12 months.

I mean, it was completely nonsense.

And I think this is to do with something that worries me about the British system, which is there is a sense that it's part of the sort of smugness of Britain, of, well, if you saw what I was saying, and you know, my agents on the ground and, and also all our difference.

I mean, you're incredibly polite about people, and it's part of the thing that I worried me in government.

People are incredibly differential towards intelligence officers, soldiers, police officers don't like to challenge them because they think these are public servants who are doing a good job in dangerous circumstances.

Well, that's true.

That is true.

Politicians and journalists feel a bit shy about saying, you may be making this stuff up.

What's the difference?

Where's the information here?

Where is this agent?

Who did he meet?

Well, listen, I think honestly, Roy, I think you're mischaracterizing it because you're asking with the benefit of an awful lot of hindsight questions that are basically asking us to reprocess something that was going on over months.

I can remember being a meeting at SIS headquarters, having exactly that sort of conversation. How do you know what are the methods that you use and so forth?

When it came to publishing my diaries, for example, as I've said to you before, some of the stuff that was removed was because of intelligence.

It wasn't because of to help them or to present them in a better light.

It was because they were telling us stuff and we were challenging it.

I think some of it, they probably could reveal these days, but maybe it will be done in longer time.

The other thing, Roy, just remember, this all gets overlooked because it doesn't fit the picture.

The Iraq Survey Group, which that was there afterwards and that was 1400 people headed by UN weapons inspectors and not just the sort of British American thing, 1400 people who go there on the basis of interviews, including with Saddam, not necessarily the most reliable witness, but including with Saddam, including with all the leading people who had been arrested and been locked up, including with lots and lots of people at every level of the regime, including some people who turned against Saddam.

They reported in the late 90s and in 2000-2003, the priority of the government was to get sanctions lifted and once they were lifted, to reconstitute a program because he believed it was essential to his personal and political survival and they found that he had plans to go back to a nuclear program because he feared the development of nuclear weapons in Iran.

So that's big stuff to just say, oh, well, you're not showing me where the phone call is that says you were there, therefore, we're not going to act on it.

So I mean, there are, I think, lots and lots of different problems, but one of the problems is even if he were doing this, what kind of a threat really was it to the UK or the US?

So the nuclear program, yes, he might well have wanted to get it going again, but it would have taken him a very, very long time to get himself in any position to pose a threat on a nuclear program.

Even if he had the uranium to hand, the capacity within Iraq to process that was a process of a year, two years, three years, hence people arguing for containment.

And again, he didn't have the delivery systems for his chemical weapons.

So in a sense, we get caught up in the fact that he had had chemical weapons, which allowed him to be an unbelievably brutal, horrifying dictator who used them against his own people, notably the Kurds, kill.

But that's quite different from saying that these weapons of mass destruction pose the next essential threat to the United Kingdom.

They didn't.

And in fact, the French and Germans turn out to be entirely vindicated and saying it would have been much more sensible to contain.

No, you can't say they turn out to be entirely vindicated.

You wouldn't say that.

What you don't accept, refuse to accept, is the possibility of that insight that Tony Blair had about rogue state getting in league with terrorist organization, right?

That was driving a lot of this.

The feeling that this guy had been tolerated for so long, and he had finally to be confronted. And I also think you are being, you're sort of just dismissing this.

I mean, for a fact, he'd used those chemical weapons against his own people and against other nations.

For a fact, had consistently lied about them, obstructed the inspectors, et cetera, et cetera.

For a fact, had killed thousands of his own people with no respect whatsoever for human life, norms of civilized behavior.

Now what you're saying is there's no point at which you actually say, you know what, having defied so many times the United Nations, having continued to show that the kind of regime that this is, are we seriously saying that stays there forever?

At a time when that threat, which you, fair enough, is your principled, held with conviction opinion, just as Robin Cook held it, just as Jack Shearer actually held it, just as Gerhard Strode held it, but Tony Blair held a different view.

And you can't say with absolute conviction that he was wrong and they were right.

Because one is they made a different decision and that meant that they can now sit there and say, told you so, but actually they can't sit there and told you so.

They can't.

They can't.

They can say they don't agree with what's happening.

I think what we can say, or people like me would like to say, and I, sorry, put my cards on the table.

I was wrong about this too, right?

I went out to Iraq to work in Iraq as somebody who believed this intervention was going to do good.

I was completely wrong.

I mean, I think the difference between you and me is that I've changed my mind, right?

And the longer I spent on the ground, the more catastrophic it became clear it was.

It now seems to me self-evident that the correct policy was containment, that Saddam did not pose a sufficient threat to justify the unbelievable horror, carnage, expense, misery that was inflicted on the world by invading Iraq.

It would have been much, much better to give more time to the weapons inspectors and try to contain.

Will you say give more time to the weapons inspectors?

The weapons inspectors were being given the run around the whole time, but do you at least accept, do you at least accept that there were risks to containment as well?

Yes, there definitely were.

And I absolutely accept that a lot of what we're saying here is with the benefit of hindsight.

But I think the benefit of hindsight and the judgment of the historians will be that, given what we know now, containment would have been by far the better policy.

But yeah, okay.

Well, at least you do accept that.

And so he was, so Tony's sitting there, seeing this stuff, he's thinking containment, he's essentially he's saying containment has run its course.

The threat has increased because of what we saw happen in 9-11.

Alongside that, we're seeing all this intelligence suggesting a growing program.

I take your point about the intelligence agencies, and clearly they do have questions to answer.

I've not heard, I'm going to listen to it, but I know Gordon Carrera has done, is doing this 10-part series of the BBC, somebody at the swimming pool this morning who has been listening to it said that they felt that Richard D. Love came across very, very badly in whatever interview he has done.

I think we did challenge the intelligence agencies, I do, but you're right that we're not neither I nor Tony Blair nor David Manning, I mean, well, I suppose, there are people who work in the foreign office who've got that experience of intelligence of that region. But in the end, the reason why, when I was asked by that lady that I mentioned at the start, do you still support Tony Blair, yes, is because I saw the care with which he took the decisions that he made in his position as prime minister.

Do I understand why people are still very, very angry?

Yes, I do, because things did not work out as we hoped and said they would.

I get that.

What I don't accept and never will accept, and it's fine you say, oh, that sort of debate is dealt with, but honestly, Rory, take a look at my social media most days of the week, take a look at social media after we've done this.

It is still the deception, the lie, the deceit, the false reasons, and that's the stuff that gets thrown at us most.

I think one of the most striking things is the sense of absolute belief from Tony Blair and that it wasn't just about the US relationship.

He gave this extraordinary interview to The Guardian and actually in your diary, you have him saying something very similar to the cabinet.

He says, if the Americans were not doing this, I would be pressuring them to do so.

It's worse than you think.

I'm truly committed to doing this, irrespective of the US position.

I think he had really got himself worked up into a lather where he had decided that there was this extraordinary combination.

Rory, can we at least...

I mean, look, Parallel lawyer worked up into a lather, got it into his head.

I mean, you'll be very dismissive here of a prime minister that I saw going through a very, very rigorous process and judgment.

And ultimately, the reason why some people are prime minister and president and so forth is they have to make these massive decisions.

He wasn't just developing an opinion.

He had to make a decision.

But the fear is, I mean, sorry, I'll take back the language about getting a lot of the word against him, but I think my intuition is, and I think there's just gesturing with that language, is that he had somehow taken on a worldview that he believed in very, very, very strongly.

And it's a worldview that turned out, and this is maybe what we can get onto when we return to this.

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / The Iraq War

It's in our second episode, which we're just about to do, where we'll look at the post-war events, a judgment which I believe will turn out to have been completely wrong. But it's a judgment and a worldview which was shared by people as various as George W. Bush, and ultimately, even in this 2008 speech by Obama, and it's a very strange worldview.

It's a post-911 worldview, which is very difficult to recapture today, but I'm not doubting his sincerity in any way at all.

Anyway, thank you for your time.

And we'll come back tomorrow to watch, talk about when you were running part of Iraq. Exactly.

Thank you, Alastair.

Thank you very much for your time, Alastair.