

NEWSNIGHT JUNE 4 2003

SUSAN WATTS (WMD 2)

PAXMAN:

Well the Government's fightback focused on the assertion that intelligence chiefs stood behind the contents of the Iraq dossier published last September. Only so-called rogue elements of the security services were unhappy. Yet, the concerns voiced to this programme and others do reflect a wider unease at the way intelligence about Iraq was handled. Our science editor Susan Watts reports.

SUSAN WATTS:

The row over intelligence information and how coalition governments used it in the build-up to war reverberated around the capitals today. A senior Australian intelligence officer, who resigned over his country's involvement in the war with Iraq, kept up the barrage of highly damaging assertions.

ANDREW WILKIE:

I feel that all three governments in Washington in London and in Canberra, in all cases were dishonest in selling the Iraq problem to their people and trying to persuade them to go to the war. Yes, they were dishonest. Some people would call that lying.

RAY MCGOVERN.

I sympathise with your professional intelligence experts because I know a lot of them and I know the degree of care and professionalism they bring to the task. And to see them watch their product be prostituted really to higher purpose is something that is almost, there is nothing more painful for an intelligence professional to watch

WATTS:

The questions for any inquiry are piling up. First, how sound was the Government's assertion that Saddam could launch banned weapons at 45 minutes' notice. The issue dominated today's debate. Tony Blair flatly denied that the 45-minute claim had unsettled the intelligence services.

TONY BLAIR

The claim about 45 minutes provoked disquiet amongst the intelligence community who disagreed with its inclusion in the dossier. Again, this is something I've discussed again with the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee. That allegation also is completely and totally untrue.

WATTS.

But a source we've spoken to, a senior official intimately involved with the process of pulling together the original weapons dossier in which the claim was made, told us that he and others felt considerable discomfort over it.

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ACTOR'S VOICE:

I was uneasy with it. My problem was I could give other explanations which I've indicated to you, that it was the time to erect something like a Scud missile or it's the time to full a multi-barrel rocket launcher. All sorts of reasons why 45 minutes might well be important.

WATTS.

In other words he is saying that Saddam might have rocket hardware that takes 45 minutes to assemble but not necessarily the weapons of mass destruction to which Tony Blair referred in his weapons dossier, when he said of Saddam: The document discloses that his military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them. The Prime Minister appeared to want to shift the focus of the argument, moving away from how the 45 minute claim was used to who put it in the weapons dossier.

TONY BLAIR:

...including the judgement about the so-called 45 minutes was a judgement made by the Joint Intelligence Committee and by them alone.

WATTS

Our source was not disputing that the 45-minute assessment was included in the dossier by the intelligence services although he did say he felt that to have been a mistake. His point was that the emphasis placed on that element of the intelligence in the foreword to the dossier went too far. He felt this emphasis turned a possible capability into an imminent threat and a critical part of the Government's case for war. Our source cannot be described as a rogue element. On the contrary, he is exceptionally well placed to judge the prevailing mood as the dossier of September last year was put together.

MCGOVERN:

It's fair to describe these folks as rogue elements only if you are part of a government that has a lot of defensiveness and a lot of need to dismiss such allegations as being untrue. You are not a rogue element if you have a devotion toward truth that transcends this or that regulation.

WATTS:

The Government denied, today, that the 45 minute claim originated from an Iraqi defector, whose credibility some might doubt, but instead from a reliable source trusted over many years. Nevertheless, its inclusion was unusual since a minister has conceded that the information came from a single source.

WILKIE:

I don't think it should have been included at all. One of the worrying things about this whole Iraq mess is the way the intelligence process has been allowed to break down. Intelligence officers would never rely on a single report as evidence of such an important point.

WATTS.

So is the intelligence information itself sound? Tony Blair was also asked about the conclusion by nuclear inspectors that forged documents were behind claims included in the same September dossier that Saddam was trying to obtain uranium from Niger for a revived nuclear programme. The Prime Minister said he was not able to say if this was accurate or not.

MCGOVERN:

What I would suggest is that Mr Blair needs to talk with Secretary Powell and find out why it is that Secretary Powell has conceded that that was a forgery.

WATTS:

Can we rely on the Government's dossiers? It's not as if the British Government's record is clean when it comes to embellishment. A Cambridge academic uncovered that a second dossier published in January, shared ten of its 19 pages, with an article written by a lecturer in Middle East studies in California. But where the original talked of the Iraqi intelligence service aiding opposition groups in hostile regimes, the British document translated that to "supporting terrorist organisations in hostile regimes."

WILKIE:

There was no doubt that Iraq was pursuing some sort of WMD programme. That is what all of the intelligence agencies were assessing. I agreed with it at the time. The issue here is one of degree, the fact that in all three countries the intelligence agencies were coming up with reasonably measured assessments. But in all three countries it was the governments that were taking those measured assessments and exaggerating them to quite a substantial degree.

WATTS

The Prime Minister said the real hunt for weapons begins today, with the Iraq survey group. The question now is can this team, which includes former inspectors, succeed where the coalition forces have so far failed?