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Tony Blair statement in response to The Report of the Iraq Inquiry

The decision to go to war in Iraq, and remove Saddam Hussein from power, in a coalition of over 40 nations led by the USA, was the hardest, most momentous and agonising decision I took in my 10 years as British Prime Minister.

For that decision, I accept responsibility in full – without exception or excuse.

I recognise the division felt by many in our country over the war. And in particular, I feel deeply and sincerely, in a way no words can properly convey, the grief and suffering of those families who lost those they loved in Iraq, whether they were members of our Armed Forces, the Armed Forces of other nations or Iraqis.

The Intelligence statements made at the time of going to war turned out to be wrong.

The aftermath turned out more hostile, protracted and bloody than we ever imagined.

The Coalition planned for one set of ground facts and encountered another.

A nation whose people we wanted to see free and secure from the evil of Saddam became instead victim of sectarian terrorism.

For all of this I express more sorrow, regret and apology and in greater measure than you can know or may believe.

Only two things I cannot say.

It is claimed that by removing Saddam we unleashed terrorism in the Middle East today.

I profoundly disagree. Saddam was himself a wellspring of terror, a continuing threat to peace and to his own people. Had he been left in power in 2003, then I believe, for the detailed reasons I shall give, he would once again have threatened world peace, and when the Arab revolutions of 2011 began, he would have clung to power with the same deadly consequences as we see in
the carnage of Syria; whereas at least in Iraq, for all its challenges, we have today a Government, recognised as legitimate, fighting terrorism with the international community in support of it.

The world was and is better off without Saddam.

Secondly, I will never agree that those who died or who were injured made their sacrifice in vain. They fought in the defining global struggle of the 21st Century against the terrorism and violence which, the world over, destroys lives and divides communities, and their sacrifice should always be remembered with thanksgiving and honour when finally that struggle is won, as it will be.

I know some of the families cannot and do not accept this is so.

I know there are those who can never forgive me for having taken this decision; or who think I took it dishonestly.

Today this report puts some allegations which have poisoned the well of debate on this issue – those of bad faith, of lying or deceit or deliberate misrepresentation – to rest.

As the report makes clear, there were no lies, Parliament and Cabinet were not misled, there was no ‘secret deal’ with America, intelligence was not falsified, and the decision was made in good faith.

However, I accept that the report makes serious criticisms of the way decisions were taken. Again I accept full responsibility for those points of criticism including where I do not agree fully with them.

I do not think it is fair or accurate to criticise the Armed Forces, Intelligence Services, or civil service. It was my decision they were acting upon. The Armed Forces in particular did an extraordinary job throughout our engagement in Iraq in the incredibly difficult mission we gave them. I pay tribute to them. Any faults derive from my decisions and should not attach to them. They are people of enormous dedication and courage and the country should be very proud of them.

Today is the right moment to go back and look at the history of that time so that those, even if they passionately disagree, will understand my reasons and
motives; and to learn lessons so that we do better in future and can more effectively confront the continuing security challenge we face.

WHY SADDAM WAS A THREAT


9/11 was the worst terrorist atrocity in history. Over 3000 people died that day in America, including many British people, making it the worst ever loss of life of our own country’s citizens from any single terror attack.

In fact, 9/11 was not the first attack. Prior to September 2001, 23 countries had suffered terrorist attacks of this nature. In 2002, 20 different nations lost people to terrorism.

For over twenty years, as well, the regime of Saddam Hussein had become a notorious source of conflict and bloodshed in the Middle East.

He had attempted a nuclear weapons programme only halted by a preventive strike by the Israeli military in 1981.

He had used chemical weapons in the war he began with Iran, a war which lasted 7 years, with around 1m casualties. Out of the Iranian experience in that war, came Iran’s own nuclear weapons programme.

He invaded Kuwait in 1990.

He used chemical weapons extensively against his own people, for example in the massacre of Halabja where thousands died in a single day.

The international community made frequent attempts to bring Saddam into compliance with UN resolutions calling for him to give up his weapons programmes. As at March 2003 he was in breach of no fewer than 17 such resolutions.

In 1998, following his ejection of UN Weapons Inspectors from Iraq, President Clinton and I authorised military strikes on his facilities; and regime change in Iraq became the official policy of the U.S. Administration.

In a country where a majority of Iraqis were Shia Muslims and 20% of the population were Kurds, he ruled with unparalleled brutality with a
Government drawn almost exclusively from the Sunni 20% minority, though many of his victims were also Sunni.

Saddam was not the only developer of weapons of mass destruction.

Libya had such a programme. North Korea was trying to obtain nuclear technology. The network of the Pakistani scientist AQ Khan was an active proliferator of such technology. Iran’s programme had begun.

But only one regime had actually used such weapons: that of Saddam.

Intelligence – still valid – indicated Al Qaida wanting to acquire such material. 9/11 showed that there were prepared to cause mass casualties.

It is important 15 years after 9/11 to recall the atmosphere at that time. America had never suffered such an attack on its own soil before. It had a devastating impact on the population. They regarded themselves as at war.

The Taliban, who had given sanctuary to AQ, had been removed from power in Afghanistan in November 2001. But the 2002 Bali bombing, in which over 200 victims, mainly Australians, lost their lives, showed the continuing threat.

All Western nations were changing their security posture. We were in a new world and one in which we did not know where the next attack, threat or danger would come from.

The fear of the U.S. Administration, which I shared, was of the possibility of terrorist groups acquiring, either by accident or design, chemical weapons, biological weapons or even a primitive nuclear device.

We did not know how such a nexus between such weapons and terrorist groups might arise. It could be deliberate because a rogue regime, for whatever reason, saw an advantage in their use by terrorists and gave them the weapons or the capability of making them, possibly on a deniable basis. Or it could be that in the chaos or instability such regimes engendered, they could fall into the wrong hands.

After 9/11, as the report accepts, the calculus of risk changed fundamentally. We believed that we had to change policy on nations developing such weapons in order to eliminate the possibility of a link between WMD and terrorism.
Saddam’s regime was the place to start, not because he represented the only threat, but because his was the only regime actually to have used such weapons, there were outstanding UN resolutions in respect of him and his record of bloodshed suggested he was capable of aggressive, unpredictable, catastrophic actions.

In addition, the UN sanctions imposed on Iraq because of its WMD programme, were crumbling and therefore containment – the policy up to then – was faltering.

The final Iraq Survey Report, which was conducted into Saddam’s WMD programme and ambitions after the Iraq war and whose findings are accepted in this report as in earlier reports, found that Saddam did indeed intend to go back to developing his programme after the removal of sanctions.

I ask you to put yourselves in my shoes as Prime Minister, barely more than a year on from 9/11, in late 2002 and early 2003. You are seeing the intelligence mount up on WMD. You are doing so in a changed context of mass casualties caused by a new and virulent form of terrorism. You have at least to consider the possibility of a 9/11 here in Britain. And your primary responsibility as PM is to protect your country.

These were my considerations at the time.

THE LEAD UP TO WAR

There was no rush to war. The Inquiry rightly lays to rest the conspiracy theory that I pledged Britain unequivocally to military action at Crawford, Texas, in April 2002 in my meeting with President Bush. I did not and could not as the Inquiry explicitly concludes.

I was absolutely clear publicly and privately that we would be with the USA in dealing with this issue, as I made clear in the note to President Bush of 28 July 2002, but we had to proceed in the right way and I set out the conditions necessary especially that we should go down the UN path and avoid precipitate action as the report finds.

So, as the Inquiry also finds, I persuaded a reluctant American Administration to take the issue back to the UN. This resulted in the November 2002 UN
resolution 1441 giving Saddam a ‘final opportunity’ to come into ‘full and immediate compliance’ with UN resolutions and to cooperate fully with UN Inspectors. Any non-compliance was deemed a ‘material breach’.

Finally and only under threat of military action, Saddam permitted Inspectors to return.

His cooperation was neither full nor immediate – see the report of the Inspectors to the UN in January 2003 and that of 7 March 2003.

However, by then, there was substantial disagreement in the Security Council. America wanted action. President Putin and the leadership of France did not.

In a final attempt to bridge the division I agreed with the Inspectors a set of 6 tests, based on Saddam’s non-compliance, with which he had to comply immediately, which included things like interviews with those responsible for his programme and which up to then had been refused except in country where obviously they could be subject to intimidation.

This was drawn up in a resolution accompanied by an ultimatum that non-compliance would result in military action.

So I had again secured American agreement to a new resolution setting tests for Saddam; which if he had passed would have avoided military action.

But the USA understandably insisted that in the event of continued failure, the UN had to be clear that action would follow.

This approach was rejected by Saddam.

The Americans and the UK and other partners from over 40 nations had assembled a force in the Gulf ready for military action. President Bush made it clear he was going to act. The British Government chose to be part of that action, a decision endorsed by Parliament with leaders of the Opposition being given access to exactly the same intelligence and advice presented to me.

The Inquiry finds that as at 18 March war was not the ‘last resort’. But given the impasse at the UN and the insistence of the USA – for reasons I completely understood and with hundreds of thousands of troops in theatre which could
not be kept in situ indefinitely – it was the last moment of decision for us, as the report accepts.

By then, the US was going to move with us or without us.

‘UNDERMINING THE UN’

The Inquiry finds that going to war without a majority of the UNSC in agreement ‘undermined the authority of the UN.’

The reality is that we – Britain – had continually tried to act with the authority of the UN. I successfully convinced the Americans to go back to the UN in November 2002 to secure resolution 1441.

After the initial conflict it was again Britain which put UN authority back in place for the aftermath so that from June 2003 British troops were in Iraq with full UN authority.

However as at 18 March 2003, there was gridlock at the UN. In resolution 1441, it had been agreed to give Saddam one final opportunity to comply. It was accepted that he had not done so.

In that case, according to 1441, action should have been agreed.

It was not because by then, politically, there was an impasse.

The undermining of the UN was in fact the refusal to follow through on 1441. And with the subsequent statement from President Putin and the President of France that they would veto any new resolution authorising action in the event of non-compliance, it was clearly not possible to get a majority of the UN to agree a new resolution. As the then President of Chile explained, there was no point since any decision by a majority would be vetoed.

THE NATURE OF THE DECISION

So, on 18 March, we had come to the point of binary decision. Right to remove Saddam or not? With America or not? As the report says it was a ‘stark choice’.

I thought of Saddam, his record and the character of his regime. I thought of our alliance with America and its importance to us in the post 9/11 world.

I weighed it carefully.
I took this decision with the heaviest of hearts.

I had already, as the Inquiry finds, consulted our Armed Forces and received their commitment to be part of it and their view that we should be part of it.

Read my private notes to President Bush from March 2002 onwards and you will see my caution, my recognition that this was not like Kosovo or Afghanistan and my desire to do this if at all possible, peacefully.

But as of the 17th March 2003, there was no middle way, no further time for deliberation, no room for more negotiation.

A decision had to be taken. It was mine to take as Prime Minister of our nation. I took it. I accept full responsibility for it. I stand by it.

I only ask with humility that you the British people accept I took this decision because I thought it the right thing to do based on the information I had and the threats I perceived and that my duty as PM, at that moment in time in 2003, was to do what I thought was right however imperfect the situation or the process.

At a moment of crisis such as this, it is the profound obligation of the person leading the Government of our country to take responsibility and to decide. Not to hide behind politics, expediency or even emotion. But to recognise that it is a privilege above all others to occupy the leadership of this nation; but the accompaniment of that privilege when the interests of the nation are supremely and plainly at stake, is to lead and not to shy away, to decide and not to avoid decision, to discharge responsibility and not to duck it.

Neither history nor the fierce and raucous conduct of modern politics, with all its love of conspiracy theory and its addiction to believing the worst of everyone, should falsify my motive.

I knew it was not a popular decision. I knew what its cost might be politically, though that shrinks into complete insignificance alongside its human cost.

But I did it because I thought it right and because I thought the human cost of inaction – of leaving Saddam in power - would be worse for Britain and the world.
THE INVASION AND THE AFTERMATH

The action commenced on 18 March 2003. In less than two months American and British Armed forces and those of other nations successfully deposed Saddam. That part of the campaign was brilliantly conducted by our military and we should never forget that.

In June 2003 a UN resolution was agreed putting the coalition forces in charge of helping the country to a new Constitution with UN support and under a UN mandate.

In August 2003 the UN mission had to withdraw following the bombing of the UN HQ in Baghdad by AQ.

In 2004, the country slid into chaos and instability especially following the AQ bombing of the Samarra Shia Mosque.

A state of near civil war continued until the surge of American forces began in 2007 which restored the country to relative calm.

In 2010 a largely peaceful election – in which the Party with the most votes was a non-sectarian coalition – was held.

AQ in Iraq was effectively defeated.

In 2011 the Arab Spring began. The remnant of AQ Iraq left for Syria, built its base in Raqqa and then came back over the border into Iraq renamed as ISIS and, helped by the sectarian nature of the Maliki Government, exploited the situation in Iraq and created what we see today.

We should never forget that as a result of the removal of Saddam in 2003, Libya agreed to yield up its nuclear and chemical weapons programme. This led to the complete destruction of a programme, under international Inspection, which turned out to be much more advanced than we knew, and which, had it remained in the hands of Gaddafi, would have itself posed a serious threat.

The AQ Khan network was shut down.

THE ALLIANCE WITH AMERICA
Whilst they accept that it was my prerogative as PM to decide to be with the USA in military action, the Inquiry questions whether this was really necessary.

9/11 was an event like no other in US history. I considered it an attack on all the free world. I believed that Britain – as America’s strongest ally – should be with them in tackling this new and unprecedented security challenge. I believed it important that America was not alone but part of a wider coalition. In the end, a majority even of the European Union nations supported action in Iraq.

I do not believe we would have had that coalition or persuaded the Bush Administration to go down the UN route without our commitment to be alongside America.

Throughout my time as PM – first with the Clinton Administration and then with the Bush one – Britain was recognised as the USA’s foremost ally. It served us well in Kosovo and allowed us to protect more innocent people than we could have alone.

We were America’s core partner in the post 9/11 world.

I believe that there are two essential pillars to British foreign policy: our alliance with the USA and our partnership in Europe. We should keep both strong as a vital national interest.

SADDAM AND WMD

For more than half a decade, I have always apologised for the inaccurate intelligence, in particular for the intelligence that Saddam had a stockpile of chemical weapons.

The inquiry endorses the findings of both the Hutton Inquiry and the Butler Inquiry that there is no evidence that intelligence was improperly included in the September 2002 dossier or that No. 10 improperly influenced the text.

I would point out two other things.

First, virtually every intelligence agency had reached the same conclusion for very good reasons: his previous use of such weapons, his complete disregard
for the mass destruction of human life; and the eviction of the UN Inspectors in 1998.

Secondly, it is essential to consider the findings of the Iraq Survey group report, conducted by a leading UN Weapons Inspector, with 1400 people in his team.

This was done after the war in 2004 on the basis of interviews including with Saddam himself and his leading officials, the very interviews denied the Inspectors in 2003.

It is authoritative.

It finds that his priority in the late 1990s and in 2001-2003, was to get sanctions lifted; but once they were lifted, then it was his intent to reconstitute his programme since he believed it to be essential to his personal and political survival.

Above all, the ISG find that he intended to go back to a nuclear programme, fearing the Iranian development of nuclear weapons, and that he kept his teams and capability to develop those, and chemical weapons once sanctions were removed.

Now of course we don't know he would have done this, but I ask:

If you knew that:

A) For a fact this dictator had used chemical weapons on his own people and those of other nations;
B) For a fact he had lied about having them so he could continue to produce and use them; and
C) For a fact he had killed thousands of his own people and those in other countries with no respect whatever for human life or norms of civilised behaviour,

Would you have wanted to take the risk? Or would you have wanted to eliminate it?

Saddam was going to pose a threat for as long as he was in power.

PLANNING AND THE AFTERMATH
The Inquiry makes several criticisms of the planning process for the aftermath of the invasion. I accept that, especially in hindsight, we should have approached the situation differently.

These criticisms are significant and include failures to seek assurances of better planning from the American side which I accept should have been sought. The failures in American planning are well documented and accepted.

I note nonetheless that the Inquiry fairly and honestly admit that they have not even after this passage of time been able to identify alternative approaches which would have guaranteed greater success.

This – I would suggest – is for the very simple reason that the terrorism we faced and did not expect would have been difficult in any circumstances to counter.

This is the lesson we learn from other conflict zones today, especially Libya, Yemen and Syria.

Our planning proceeded on the basis of those risks, of which we were principally warned, namely the possibility of a humanitarian disaster, the use of WMD by Saddam, resistance from the regime, and the challenges of reconstruction.

In the event, the real problems were those caused by terrorism and from quarters we did not expect: AQ, whose attacks on the UN, on reconstruction and on the Shia population tipped the country to the brink of civil war in 2004-6; and IED attacks and other acts of terrorism from Shia militia supported by Iran.

The Inquiry finds that there were some warnings about sectarian fighting and bloodletting. I accept that but would point out that nowhere were these highlighted as the main risk and in any event what we faced was not the anticipated internal bloodletting but an all-out insurgency stimulated by external arms and money.

We also now know that the Assad regime in Syria was deliberately sending terrorists across the border to cause terror and instability. This had a major impact on the Coalition’s ability to make progress in the country.
In short, we ended up fighting exactly the same elements that we're fighting everywhere in the world today from the same origins - Shia extremism on the one hand and Sunni extremism on the other.

The consequence was that as we were trying to rehabilitate the country, those elements were trying to wreck our efforts by sectarian violence. This was what we did not foresee.

The Inquiry finds that in particular in January 2003 there was no full options paper presented to Cabinet. But Cabinet alone debated Iraq 26 times in the run up to conflict, including in detail at the 16 January Cabinet meeting. There were 28 meetings of the ad hoc Committee with the relevant Ministers present. However, I accept I could have and should have insisted on the presentation of a formal options paper to Cabinet.

LEGALITY

The report does not dispute the legal judgement of the then Attorney-General.

This is for very good reasons. The whole negotiating history of resolution 1441 in the UN made it clear that the USA and UK had refused language that obliged a second resolution. The defining of the obligations of Iraq and the agreement that failure fully and immediately to comply was a material breach was a reasonable basis for the action.

The advice of the A-G was in line with that of other law officers in other nations and distinguished legal experts though I fully acknowledge others took a different view.

Where the politics is hotly contested, the law will be also.

I understand why the Inquiry finds that the process of coming to the legal opinion was far from satisfactory. But it does not alter the legal conclusion.

It was after the detailed meetings the A-G had with US and UK officials explaining the negotiating history of 1441 that he came to the view that it was not necessary for a second resolution.
On 27 February he gave that view orally. On 7 March he provided that advice in writing.

I accept in retrospect that it would have been better to have provided the full written advice to Cabinet, though that was not the legal precedent, and as the Inquiry notes, it was not requested by members of the Cabinet.

I accept there is a case for providing it to Parliament.

But none of these matters of process alter the fact that his advice was in the end clear and is not challenged by the Inquiry.

The Inquiry say that there was no indication of why I gave my view to the A-G that Saddam as at 13 March 2003 was in material breach of 1441.

As the A-G has explained, my view was not legally necessary, since 1441 had determined what constituted a breach. But nonetheless the A-G sought my confirmation of what I thought.

Saddam was accepted by everyone including the Inspectors not to be fully complying. He had a long history of deception. The whole basis of my 6 tests was to address the failure to comply. Indeed intelligence, that is still considered valid, shows Saddam, at the time, in breach of UN resolutions instructing his officials to remove any evidence of WMD or programmes for its development.

The issue was rather whether despite the breach, he should be given more time. I accept of course it is better, politically, if the Security Council make such a determination but by then, given the position of President Putin and the leadership of France, it was clear there would be no agreement irrespective of the circumstances.

IS THE WORLD SAFER OR LESS SAFE AS A RESULT OF THE REMOVAL OF SADDAM IN 2003

I ask that fair minded people at least consider the following.

If we had withdrawn the threat of action in 2003, and pulled back our forces, we would have found it almost impossible to reassemble those forces in that
number. Sanctions would have swiftly eroded. Over time, I would suggest it would have been hard to have kept an invasive process of Inspection in place. Saddam would have remained, and immensely politically strengthened. He would then have had the benefit of 100$ a barrel oil. The Iraq Survey report indicates that he would have resumed his earlier development of nuclear and chemical weapons. If that is conceivable as it surely is, then his removal avoided what would otherwise have been an unacceptable risk. I acknowledge completely and respect the other point of view. I just ask that my view is likewise acknowledged as reasonable. We then come to the state of Iraq today. It is still engaged in conflict. But to those who say, but for the action in 2003, Iraq would be peaceful in 2016 I ask them to consider the following. There is no doubt that the sectarian policies of the Maliki Government contributed to the renewed conflict in Iraq. But the decisive event of the last 5 years in the Middle East is the Arab Spring which began in 2011. Starting in Tunisia, regimes across North Africa and the Middle East were toppled or put under sustained attack. In the case of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, the regimes fell. In early 2011, the revolt of the Syrian people against the Assad regime began. In Syria, as with the Saddam regime in Iraq, effectively a small minority ruled the majority on sectarian lines, except in this case with the Sunni in the majority. Between 2003 and 2011, all of those regimes had remained in power. Supposing Saddam had stayed in power in 2003. I ask the counter factual: is it likely he would still have been in power in 2011; is it likely that Iraqi people would have joined the Arab Spring – after all, his was the most tyrannical regime of all of them with the vast majority of the people excluded from
power and brutally oppressed; and is it likely that if the Iraqi people had revolted, he would have reacted like Assad in Syria?

Surely it is at least possible that the answer to all of those questions is affirmative.

In that case the nightmare of Syria today would also be happening in Iraq except with the Shia/Sunni balance inverted. Consider the consequences. Even if you disagreed with removing him at the time, be thankful we’re not dealing with him or his two sons now.

Saddam was himself deeply sectarian. As the latest research shows, the leadership of the regime was heavily sectarian and deliberately made so.

To those who think removing Saddam is the cause of the turmoil in the Middle East, and that there is some unbroken line between the removal of Saddam in 2003 and what is happening in Iraq today I say the following:

After the surge of 2007, Al Qaida was defeated and marginalised. In 2010, Iraq was relatively stable. It was in Syria after the Arab Spring that AQ became ISIS, headquartered itself in Raqqa, Syria where we failed to intervene, Syria – the very opposite of the policy of intervention - where more have died than in the whole of Iraq, with the worst refugee crisis since WW11 and with no agreement as to the future.

At least for all its challenges, there is a Government in Iraq today fighting the terrorists, doing so with Western support, internationally recognised as the legitimate Government including by both Saudi Arabia and Iran and with a PM welcome in the White House and in capitals across the globe.

None of this excuses the mistakes we made or the failures for which I repeat I take full responsibility and apologise.

But it shows that in the uncertain and dangerous world we live in, all decisions are difficult, each has consequences predicted and unpredicted and in the end the only thing a decision maker – be they President or PM – can do, is to take those decisions on the basis of what they genuinely think to be right.

LESSONS FOR FUTURE LEADERS
I was PM in the period after 9/11 and through Iraq and Afghanistan. Since then, I have spent the bulk of my time in the Middle East and studied the origins and the character of Islamist extremism.

What is clear is that this extremism is a global problem not confined to the well known theatres of the Middle East, Pakistan or Afghanistan but across Africa – including Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Mali, and Somalia – and Asia including the Philippines, Thailand and Bangladesh. It is in Central Asia and of course we have had terrorist attacks in Europe, and the USA.

I have watched today’s decision makers wrestle in Libya and Syria with the same types of dilemma I did.

I will at a later time publish more detailed proposals about lessons from Iraq and other areas of conflict.

But I will summarise them briefly here.

1. The danger of revolution or regime change in any country where Islamism is likely to be a major factor in the aftermath, is that once the dictatorship is removed, no matter how abhorrent, elements of extremism will move into the vacuum to cause chaos and instability. Therefore unlike e.g. Kosovo, or Germany after WW11, the challenge becomes not one of reconstruction but of security, because these groups thrive on instability and seek by terror to create it.

   Therefore, if possible, evolution or an agreed process of change is better than the overthrow of the existing order without agreement. That is why when the Arab Spring began, it would have been better to have tried to agree processes of transition in Libya and Syria so as to control the aftermath and make change without destroying stability.

2. It would be sensible now, as a precaution to invest in nation building in those parts of the world where we are plainly over time at risk of failed states collapsing and leading to further centres of extremism. Certain states in Africa are a clear example. Some parts of development aid should be devoted to this.

3. Where we have decided to intervene in a majority Muslim country, then we need to do so in a strong alliance with Muslim nations. Otherwise we
risk being accused, however unfairly, of intervening in those countries because they are Muslim not because they represent a security or humanitarian threat.

4. The war waged by terrorist groups requires a completely different type of military strategy and capability from conventional warfare between nations. We now have huge experience of this from around the world. We need to construct the new doctrines and capabilities which allow us to do so effectively and with the right alliances, within the West, within the Muslim world (as the KSA is now doing) and between us.

For us in the West, the pain of taking casualties in a fight that is often politically controversial and which does not involve defence of our own national territory, is now so great that we risk a situation where political leaders are reluctant to commit especially ground forces to combat. On the other hand Western forces, particularly USA and UK, have the most experience and the highest level of capability. This needs an active consideration of whether we require a different level of volunteering for these missions. Otherwise we're fighting without the best available forces to do the work.

5. For the UK, we have to have an active debate including with our Armed Forces about our desired levels of participation in such missions, given that we will always be a partner and in the case of the USA a junior partner in terms of assets and capacity.

6. We can all agree in principle that the UN is the right body to decide issues of international policy including the justification for the use of force; but the reality is that the UN is gridlocked effectively with Russia and the USA regularly on different sides on similar issues. How can the UN be reformed? How can a clearer set of rules be agreed with a greater measure of objectivity?

7. We must understand the true nature of the threat we face. It is Islamist extremism and its ideology. We need urgently to put in place a unified, comprehensive strategy to defeat it. This should be a combination of hard and soft power, including a Global Commitment on Education to reform education systems educating young people to an intolerant and closed-minded view of religion; the encouragement of modern minded
and reformist clerics within Islam; and effectively countering the propaganda of the extremists on social and other media.

8. We need an honest debate in the West about our own values and level of commitment to them. The West has a big decision to take: does it believe it has a strategic interest in the outcome of the struggle in the Middle East and elsewhere around the issues of Islamist extremism? And if so, what level of commitment is it prepared to make to shape the outcome? My view obviously is that it does have such an interest and should make the necessary commitment.

Many will find it impossible to reconcile themselves to the decision to remove Saddam or to my motives in taking it.

But it is vital we do not continue to allow controversy over Iraq to obscure what are real, contemporary threats to world security, which reflect absolutely the difficulties we encountered in Iraq.

This extremism menaces so many nations, those who were with us in Iraq and those who opposed Iraq, those who have an aggressive foreign policy and those who have a pacific one, developed and developing nations, north and south, wealthy and poor.

This is the scourge of our time. It is the challenge of our generation. It requires us to act bravely even when imperfectly.

At some point we will reach for and achieve the comprehensive foreign and defence policy that can defeat it.

Iraq will be a chapter in this struggle, and an important one, but it wasn't the first and it won't be the last.

I want to thank Sir John and his team for the report and for the time and care it has taken. I want also this day to pay tribute to Sir Martin Gilbert who so tragically passed away before the report was concluded.

We can't make decisions with the benefit of hindsight. But we can and should learn from our experience and the mistakes made. I hope future leaders can learn from those I made so that our determination in confronting terrorism and violence is not less but our ability to do so effectively is much greater.
The decisions I made I have carried with me for 13 years and will do so for the rest of my days. There will not be a day of my life where I do not relive and re-think what happened. People ask me why I spend so much time in the Middle East today. This is why. This why I work on Middle East peace, on the dialogue between faiths on how we can prevent young people growing up with hatred in their hearts towards those who look, think or believe differently from them.

It is my belief that if we learn the right lessons today, the next generation will see the dawn of a lasting peace in the place where all of this began and where it must finally end: the Middle East.