

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Howard's Folly: The Invasion of Iraq

John Howard's decision to send thousands of Australian troops to participate in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 ranks as one of the two great failures of Australian foreign and security policy since the Second World War. The other is Menzies' decision to send forces to Vietnam. Both cases represented an abysmal failure of Australian political leadership, driven by an unnecessary capitulation to strategically foolhardy decisions by the US administrations of the time. Both decisions were taken without independent Australian analysis of the legitimacy of American war aims, the credibility of American military strategy to both win the war and secure the peace, as well as the long-term consequences for Australian national interests. And both turned out to be disasters against virtually every measure. After a decade of heroic military commitment by Australian forces in Vietnam, we would witness the fall of Saigon, total victory by the north and the deaths of tens of thousands of Vietnamese civilians as American 'collateral damage', all resulting in a significant assault on America's future standing in Asia and the world. In the case of Iraq, after more than five years of equally heroic efforts in the field by Australian troops, we would witness the outbreak of sectarian violence between the Shia majority and the Sunni minority, the effective expulsion of Christians from a region where they had managed to cohabit with Muslims for more than 1300 years, the 'gifting' of Iraq to

Iran as part of a Shia condominium within the wider strategic balance in the Middle East, and, a decade after the US-led invasion, the implosion of Iraq into another full-scale civil war, with the emergence of new terrorist organisations such as ISIS, for whom Iraq would become the principal base of operations for Syria, the wider Middle East and Europe.

In defence of Menzies, at least Vietnam lay within Australia's long-defined sphere of strategic interest of East and South-East Asia.¹ Iraq never was. In fact, most Australians had to reach for an atlas to find out where Baghdad and Basra actually are. Yet while the Iraq War is now almost universally regarded in the US and the UK as a profound strategic error, John Howard – dubbed a 'man of steel' by George W. Bush and later awarded the US Presidential Medal of Freedom for his efforts in Iraq² – remains totally unrepentant.³ I served as shadow foreign minister, leader of the Opposition and then prime minister from the beginning to the end of the Australian military commitment in Iraq. It is high time Howard was held to account for his role in Bush's Coalition of the Willing, which produced the rolling disaster that has become Iraq. This is important not simply as a matter of historical record, but as a cautionary tale for subsequent Australian governments not to be led by the nose by future American administrations into other such follies.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 has a complex history. Iraq had suffered under the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party since 1979. Estimates vary as to the number of Iraqis killed and tortured during Saddam's twenty-four years in office, but Human Rights Watch put the figure of those killed or 'disappeared' at a quarter of a million, if not more.⁴ This made his one of the bloodiest dictatorships in the world, surpassed only by regimes such as North Korea and Cambodia. But Iraq under Saddam had also been a critical US ally in a decade-long border war with Iran from 1980 to 1990. The Reagan administration's view was that this war was useful in pinning down the Iranians as much as possible within their own borders following Ayatollah Khomeini's seizure of power in Tehran in 1979, with American diplomats held as hostages,⁵ and his declaration that the United States was the 'Great Satan'. By 1990, Saddam had developed a close strategic relationship with Washington. When the US ambassador in Baghdad responded with ambiguous signals to Saddam's interest in annexing the neighbouring state of Kuwait, long considered a renegade province by Baghdad, a full-scale Iraqi invasion soon followed. This move met with no ambiguity on the part of the administration of

George Bush senior, however. Concerned about the impact of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on the future political stability of the Gulf monarchies – particularly Saudi Arabia, a key American ally and oil supplier over many decades – the US acted. With the full support of UN Security Council Resolution 678,⁶ the US led a multilateral military coalition into Kuwait in what would become known as the First Gulf War, easily repelling the Iraqis back across the border. Australia, under the Hawke government, participated with a modest naval force but no ground troops.⁷

At this point the US, after fierce inter-agency debate in Washington, as well as concern that the UNSC mandate would not be expanded to include regime change in Baghdad, decided to halt its advance. Instead the UN, at the insistence of the US, imposed a comprehensive set of military, trade and financial sanctions against Iraq to prevent it from acquiring the capacity to threaten its neighbours again.⁸ These were enforced by an effective naval and air blockade of the country until 2003 when it was removed by UNSCR 1483.⁹ As a result, Iraq was effectively strangled economically. Only humanitarian trade and aid was permitted through what would become known as the UN's Oil-for-Food Programme.¹⁰ Both the US and the UN were concerned that Saddam continued to possess chemical weapons; he had already used them in the Iran–Iraq War, and would use them again in 1991 in the cities of Najaf and Karbala against his own people following a local uprising.¹¹ UN military sanctions were therefore targeted on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction capability in general, and the future of any Iraqi nuclear program in particular. This was to be enforced by regular UN weapons inspections within Iraq.¹² From 1991 to 1998, Saddam would endure more than seventy inspections by UN weapons inspectors under the United Nations Special Commission for the Elimination of Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction, or UNSCOM, resulting in the destruction of forty-eight ballistic missiles, 40,000 chemical weapons and thirty-seven biological weapons, although no nuclear weapons had been developed or deployed at that time.¹³ After Saddam expelled UN weapons inspectors in late 1998, a further UN Security Council resolution, combined with the threat of US military action, saw weapons inspectors return to Iraq under a reconstituted UN mission named the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC).¹⁴ Between November 2002 and March 2003, this second mission would conduct a staggering 731 weapon site inspections, with the International Atomic Energy Agency also undertaking an

additional 237.¹⁵ These inspectors were withdrawn without completing their mission in mid-March in order to make way for the launch of the US invasion, supported by British and Australian forces, on 20 March.¹⁶ This was in large part because the White House of George W. Bush was dominated by a group of neo-conservatives, or 'neo-cons' as they would come to be known, who had long been determined to complete the 'unfinished business' of 1991, remove Saddam Hussein by force and as a result rewrite the politics of the wider Middle East.¹⁷

These then were the origins of what would become the Second Gulf War, resulting not simply in the removal of a regime, but in time the destruction of a nation and the deep destabilisation of the region. No weapons of mass destruction would ever be found, destroying any vestige of legal or moral legitimacy for the invasion.¹⁸ This would result once again in the diminution of American global power, prestige and authority, heralding a period of American military retrenchment internationally and the rise of a new isolationist America grown tired of its post-war role in the world. Nearly a quarter of a century after the fall of Saigon, it was Vietnam redux, but this time on a global scale rather than a regional one. And John Howard – like Tony Blair – would be at the centre of it all.

Being responsible for our party's policy on Iraq throughout this period, both in Opposition and in government, was not exactly a cakewalk. It's difficult to reconstruct for today's audience the political sentiment of the time. In the aftermath of September 11, the US Congress, cowed by President Bush's political ascendancy and his deliberate conflation of al-Qaeda and Afghanistan with Saddam Hussein and Iraq, introduced the 'Iraq Resolution', empowering Bush to take whatever measures he deemed fit to 'defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq'.¹⁹ In the US it made dissent from the war virtually politically impossible. Under Blair, a similar pro-war hysteria was unfolding in the United Kingdom. Rupert Murdoch's mastheads in the US, the UK and in Australia led the charge. To challenge the war was unpatriotic. Here at home, Howard came to the war from a position of dominance of the national security agenda during the Opposition leaderships of Beazley, Crean and Latham. He knew it would be hard for Labor to oppose a war when Australian troops were in harm's way as we would face the politically lethal accusation of not supporting our soldiers in the field. Howard also knew he could accuse us of being disloyal to our principal ally, the United States, even though there was no treaty

obligation on us to join a fight in distant theatres such as the Middle East. Being opposed to the war was, therefore, for many months a lonely position to take, particularly as the initial military campaign in March–April 2003 proved to be quick and decisive.²⁰ But the Labor Party, to its great credit, held its nerve, voting against the parliamentary motion in favour of war introduced by Howard on 18 March.²¹ In our view, there were profound questions at stake. We were determined to be on the right side, if not exactly the convenient side, of history. We were concerned about the real as opposed to the stated grounds for taking the extraordinary decision to go to war. What was the legal basis for the decision? Why had the UN weapons inspections and the cautionary nature of its reports been so summarily discarded in the rush to war? What would be our responsibilities in Iraq, as one of only three occupying powers, for the protection of the civilian population and prisoners of war? How long would our forces remain in Iraq? What was the advice of the Australian national security and intelligence community in relation to the government's decision to go to war, or weren't they asked? We would pursue these and other questions in the parliament over the months and years that lay ahead, as hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians were killed or injured. By the change of government in 2007, a large part of the picture of the government's deceit, negligence and rank hypocrisy on Iraq would be laid bare, but Howard's arrogance and hubris would prevent him from ever admitting any error.²²

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Howard's formal justification for going to war was outlined in his statement to parliament on 18 March 2003.²³ It was one of four set-piece speeches he made in the six weeks before the commencement of hostilities.²⁴ In addition he gave multiple media interviews over the long year before the war began, starting from the time of Bush's 2002 State of the Union address on the 'axis of evil' of Iraq, Iran and North Korea,²⁵ as Howard sought to persuade the Australian public of the virtues of his Iraqi enterprise.²⁶ Howard's public case rested on five core arguments. First, that Iraq possessed an 'arsenal' of chemical and biological weapons, the product of a 'massive program' that had been enhanced by the 'recent production of chemical and biological agents'.²⁷ Second, that Iraq was in pursuit of a nuclear capability as demonstrated by 'clear evidence' that the regime had obtained uranium from Africa.²⁸ Third, that the

UN's disarmament efforts on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) had failed.²⁹ Fourth, that a failure to dismantle Iraq's WMD capabilities would encourage other rogue states like North Korea to continue their own nuclear programs.³⁰ Fifth, that allowing Iraq to retain its WMD capabilities would make it possible for terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda to obtain WMD, thereby threatening the security of other states, including Australia; by disarming Iraq through an invasion, this terrorist threat would be reduced.³¹ Howard would repeat these arguments, *ad nauseam, ad infinitum*, sometimes with greater embellishment, over the course of a year. The problem for Howard was not just that each of his five justifications for going to war would be proven to be false after the war, though that was bad enough. The much greater problem for Howard, and for his long-term credibility as Australian prime minister, was that the intelligence advice received by his government before the war did not justify his core claims either. Put simply, Howard misled the Australian public on the reasons for taking the country to war. Why he did so is a matter for separate speculation. I will return to this later.

Some may think this is an excessively harsh judgement on Howard. But should anyone doubt the extent to which Howard misled the nation on his grounds for going to war, they should take the time to reread the report of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, or PJCIS,³² (at that time called the Parliamentary Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD) of December 2003, chaired by the late David Jull, a senior government MP appointed by Howard himself to review the performance of the intelligence community in the lead-up to the war. More than a decade later, the report still makes for disturbing reading, notwithstanding the fact that the committee was given limited terms of reference and, more significantly, limited access to the intelligence material available to the government at the time. The parliamentary committee nonetheless did examine the full record of the reports produced over a decade by the two UN weapons inspections missions (UNSCOM and UNMOVIC), which were publicly available to Howard, Downer and their advisers before taking the decision to go to war.³³ More importantly, the committee was also allowed to examine forty separate intelligence assessments prepared by the Australian Intelligence Community (AIC) in the three-year period leading up to the March 2003 invasion. These came from the Office of National Assessments and the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), the government's principal

intelligence assessment agencies, whose reports were addressed to the prime minister personally.³⁴ The government also had complete access to reporting by the British and American intelligence agencies over this time, much of which was also sceptical of the public claims made by their own countries' leaders. We do not know how many intelligence assessment reports in total the government elected not to show the committee. Despite all these constraints, the report's conclusions are stark, particularly given the majority of the committee were government members. As the committee concluded: 'Therefore, the case made by the government was that Iraq possessed WMD in large quantities and posed a grave and unacceptable threat to the region and the world, particularly as there was a danger that Iraq's WMD might be passed to terrorist organisations. This is not the picture that emerges from an examination of all the assessments provided to the Committee by Australia's two analytical agencies.'³⁵

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Howard's claim about Iraq's 'arsenal' of chemical and biological weapons flew in the face of the evidence he had available to him before the war.³⁶ Howard said that 'Iraq has a viable biological and chemical weapons capability which has included the recent production of biological and chemical agents'.³⁷ On chemical weapons specifically, quoting the director of the CIA, Howard stated that Iraq had 'begun renewed production of chemical warfare agents, probably including mustard gas, sarin, cyclosarin and VX'.³⁸ On biological weapons, he stated that 'all key aspects – R and D, production and weaponisation – of Iraq's offensive biological weapons are active, and most elements are larger and more advanced than before the [First] Gulf War'.³⁹ Howard also used as evidence the UN's debriefing of Saddam Hussein's son-in-law back in 1995 to claim that as of 2003 Iraq had a 'massive program of developing offensive biological weapons – one of the largest and most advanced in the world'.⁴⁰

However, Howard chose to ignore the formal advice delivered to him by Australia's Defence Intelligence Organisation. In reports sent to Howard personally between September 2002 and March 2003, the DIO warned that they had 'no evidence' that Iraq had restarted the production of chemical weapons and 'that there was no known CW production'.⁴¹ In a specific report dated 31 December 2002, the DIO stated that 'there has been no known offensive biological weapons research and development since 1991, no known production since 1991,

and no known testing and evaluation since 1991'.⁴² On Howard's use of the debriefing of Saddam's son-in-law, the PJCIS report was scathing, making plain that this debriefing referred to Iraqi biological programs before the arrival of UN weapons inspectors way back in 1991 and that the subsequent arrival of inspectors had seen 'the destruction of weapons and agents associated with the chemical and biological weapons programs and the overall success of UNSCOM weapons inspections'.⁴³

Howard's claims concerning Iraq's nuclear capabilities prior to the war were an even greater departure from the picture given him by Australian intelligence agencies. Howard stated that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program and claimed that 'uranium has been imported from Africa that has no civil nuclear application in Iraq' by the Iraqi authorities.⁴⁴ Once again, the Defence Intelligence Organisation had a different view. The DIO advised Howard both in October and December 2002 that Iraq obtaining fissile material was an unlikely event and, even more starkly, 'we assess that Iraq does not have nuclear weapons'.⁴⁵ The claim that Iraq had imported uranium from Africa, originally sourced to the British intelligence community, had long been a matter of high-level contention within the US intelligence community; the State Department's Institute of National Research (INR) had long argued this was untrue and the CIA was also sceptical.⁴⁶ It is impossible to believe that both Howard and his office were unaware of this when preparing the first of the prime minister's 'preparation for war' speeches.⁴⁷

Howard would also claim in his war speeches that Iraq stood ready to use its weapons of mass destruction.⁴⁸ Of course, this presupposed Iraq's actual possession of the 'arsenals' of WMD in the first place. But even on the question of Iraq's preparedness to use WMD, the intelligence community offered a different view. The CIA, for example, had 'low confidence' in its assessment of whether Saddam would use chemical and biological weapons,⁴⁹ a view also made available to Australia in the US National Intelligence Assessment on Iraq in January 2003 before Howard's first speech.

Howard claimed further that the military invasion of Iraq was necessary because UN weapons inspectors, and the UN more broadly, had failed to disarm Iraq.⁵⁰ Once again, the Australian PJCIS report reflected a radically different view. Drawing on the work of UNSCOM, the first weapons inspection regime, the committee cited precise details of missile, chemical, biological and nuclear capabilities declared by Iraq, accounted

for by inspectors and then destroyed or removed by them.⁵¹ This was not classified information; it had been publicly declared to the international community, including Australia, in 1999.

The UN's second mission to Iraq (UNMOVIC) conducted 731 inspections across 411 different sites, including 88 new sites which had never been inspected before.⁵² Nothing of substance was discovered. UNMOVIC's findings on Iraqi nuclear capabilities are also worth noting. 'It had not found any substantiated evidence of the revival of a nuclear weapons program. In the areas of uranium acquisition, concentration and centrifuge enrichment, extensive field investigation and document analysis revealed no evidence that Iraq had resumed such activities. It had "observed a substantial degradation in facilities, financial resources and programs throughout Iraq that might support a nuclear infrastructure."' ⁵³ This information, while not formally reported to the UN until after the invasion of Iraq, was nonetheless progressively available to the Australian and other allied governments before Howard's fateful decision to go to war. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that on no occasion did Howard repudiate the findings of either of the UN weapons inspections missions. But for political purposes, he simply ignored their most troublesome conclusions.

The full tragedy of all this would be confirmed not long after the war, when the US, British and Australian governments, realising that the discovery of Iraqi WMD capabilities was fundamental to their individual and collective credibility, dispatched the Iraq Survey Group to find them.⁵⁴ Despite having up to 1600 staff, drawn from these three countries, at a cost of some \$US900 million, again nothing of substance would be found.⁵⁵

Howard also argued repeatedly that 'if the world cannot disarm Iraq it has no hope of disciplining North Korea'.⁵⁶ Having examined all the material put before the Australian Parliamentary Joint Committee, as outlined in its report, I can find nothing to substantiate this. It seems this particular prime ministerial claim fell into the category of what the committee called the 'deductive logic, assumption and assertion' often used by the government, in the absence of intelligence, to make its argument.⁵⁷ In this case, it certainly was a combination of assumption and assertion, and flawed logic. If the North Koreans concluded that external invasion was the price a country paid for trying to acquire WMD, then surely an equally valid response was for a country to accelerate its WMD

program as a deterrent to any such external invasion, particularly one explicitly aimed at regime change. Indeed this is precisely what would happen in the case of North Korea.

Finally, there was the granddaddy of all Howard's justifications for going to war: his deliberate conflation of the post-September 11 threat of terrorism with the 'necessity' of removing Saddam Hussein. This was the most prominent of his many arguments, and the one designed to induce the greatest fear. It dominated his many speeches, statements and interviews throughout this period. Invoking Prime Minister Tony Blair as his authority, Howard maintained that there were 'two grave issues the world must now confront: the problem of weapons of mass destruction and the challenge of international terrorism . . . and that if both are not dealt with, they will sooner or later come together with devastating consequences for the world.'⁵⁸

Once again, the core problem with all this was that Howard's purported link between Iraqi WMD and al-Qaeda was a fabrication.⁵⁹ Based on all the material provided to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security for its post-war inquiry, there is nothing in Howard's pre-war intelligence briefings to substantiate this claim, nor any broader claim that Iraqi WMD, assuming they existed, would find their way into the hands of terrorists.⁶⁰ As with the previous discussion of North Korean nuclear proliferation, no other conclusion is available other than Howard just made it up. Mind you, so did Bush and Blair. But Howard was making a case to the Australian public to send thousands of Australian troops to war, so it is right to hold him separately to account for the information he was purportedly drawing on at the time. There are indeed multiple flaws with Howard's argument linking the threat of terrorism with the removal of Iraqi WMD, leaving aside the most fundamental flaw of all: that UN weapons inspectors had in fact already disarmed Saddam's regime over the previous decade. First, Howard strives to forge a connection between al-Qaeda and Iraq which just didn't exist.⁶¹ He pointed out that al-Qaeda had stated that it wanted to gain access to WMD (which was true); that al-Qaeda had declared a general jihad on the west (again true); and that al-Qaeda had specifically targeted Australia because of our participation in East Timor and later Afghanistan (once again, true). Therefore, he concluded, Australians should legitimately fear al-Qaeda accessing WMD from Iraq because it would then be able to use those weapons against Australia.⁶²

But Howard's impeccable 'logic' was based on a false premise: that a relationship had existed between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda since the latter's inception in the 1990s.⁶³ Saddam led a secular military dictatorship; Osama bin Laden was the leader of an Islamic caliphate whose entire ideology was pitted against secular rulers in the Islamic world, who stood in the road of the caliphate's advance. Later, in Saddam's post-war interrogation, he would say he was baffled by any claimed link between himself and al-Qaeda, since he saw himself as a bulwark against Islamic religious fundamentalism in the wider Middle East.⁶⁴ Indeed, no credible intelligence has ever been advanced to prove such a link existed.

Even worse for Howard's credibility were the September 2003 findings of the British parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee referring explicitly to an intelligence report put together by the Joint Intelligence Committee (on which Australia also sits, through its intelligence liaison officer in London):

In their assessment International Terrorism: War with Iraq, dated 10 February 2003, the Joint Intelligence Committee reported that there was no intelligence that Iraq had provided CB materials to al-Qaida [*sic*] or of Iraqi intentions to conduct CB terrorist attacks using Iraqi intelligence officials or their agents. However, JIC judged that in the event of imminent regime collapse there would be a risk of transfer of such material, whether or not as a deliberate Iraqi regime policy. The JIC assessed that al-Qaida [*sic*] and associated groups continued to represent by far the greatest terrorist threat to Western interests, and that threat would be heightened by military action against Iraq.⁶⁵

This flew directly in the face of what Howard said in his address to the nation on 20 March 2003, the day that hostilities commenced in Iraq: 'We believe that so far from our action in Iraq increasing the terrorist threat it will, by stopping the spread of chemical and biological weapons, make it less likely that a devastating terrorist attack will be carried out against Australia.'⁶⁶ It must be remembered that Howard made this statement nearly six weeks after his government received the intelligence advice from the Joint Intelligence Committee in London. Not only had Howard misled the Australian people about the possibility of Saddam giving WMD to al-Qaeda, he had failed to disclose the fact that the intelligence community's sombre judgement was exactly the reverse: that

the only basis on which any Iraqi WMD could find its way into the hands of al-Qaeda was if the regime collapsed through the sort of invasion that was being planned.⁶⁷

So why did Howard persist in arguing the opposite? I can only assume that he did so because he knew the rest of the case he was putting to the Australian people was inherently weak. He needed to justify the invasion of Iraq by citing a direct security threat to the Australian people. Al-Qaeda and terrorism, so fresh in Australian minds from September 11 and, more recently, the Bali bombings of October 2002 (which he also invoked in his statements on Iraq) provided the emotional link he needed to seal the argument.

Other arguments would also be put from time to time by Howard. Displaying a sudden interest in human rights, and even the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Howard declared that Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator – which was true – and that the Iraqi people would benefit from his removal.⁶⁸ The problem with this argument was that if regime change was now to be justified on the grounds of removing dictators, religious or military, there would be a long list to choose from, starting with North Korea and Zimbabwe. Also, if Howard was serious about this as an argument, he could perhaps have explicitly invoked the newly developed legal doctrine of ‘international humanitarian intervention’ in defence of his actions in Iraq, a doctrine which had emerged from the atrocities of Slobodan Milošević’s dictatorship in Serbia and NATO’s belated intervention, outside the framework of the UN Security Council, in the late 1990s.⁶⁹ But Howard did not.

The other, more substantial problem with Howard’s humanitarian argument was his specific claim that the Iraqi people would be better off after the removal of a brutal dictator. Superficially, of course, this argument has considerable appeal. But it takes us to the question of how many had been killed under Saddam’s twenty-four-year rule compared with what happened to Iraqi civilians both during and following the invasion. There is the aforementioned 2004 Human Rights Watch estimate of a quarter of a million Iraqis, if not more;⁷⁰ as for deaths following the invasion of Iraq, there are a number of different ‘body counts’ and surveys done by different organisations. A survey done by the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, covering the period from March 2003 to June 2006 found that there were 601,000 violent deaths out of 655,000 excess deaths during the period.⁷¹ Also, as of 2007, there were some four million Iraqi refugees,

including 1.9 million within the country, two million in neighbouring countries and some 200,000 elsewhere in the world, including Australia.⁷²

Howard also said Australian participation in the invasion was necessary because of our bilateral military alliance with the United States.⁷³ Of course, it is no easy matter for any Australian government to deny a US request for military assistance. Yet this is the stuff of Australian national political leadership: not to fawn over the Americans, but to challenge them if their proposed project does not measure up to our own analysis of the threat. This is what our American friends routinely call 'speaking truth to power'. The uncomfortable truth for Howard was that the ANZUS Treaty did not mandate combined military action in an area outside the treaty area, namely the Pacific.⁷⁴ Nor had there been an attack on the armed forces of the treaty partners. Nor had there been an attack on the metropolitan territory of either party, as had occurred on September 11, after which Howard had correctly invoked the treaty. Therefore, Howard's reference to the centrality of the alliance as a reason for saying yes to Bush was, in reality, an entirely discretionary decision for the prime minister. It was not mandated by the alliance at all.

To be fair to Howard, he was generally more cautious than the more extreme elements of the neo-cons occupying key positions in the US administration at that time. But it is puzzling why, in addition to the array of other arguments he threw into the Iraq debate, he also bought into one of the more bizarre ideas of the neo-cons: that the removal of Saddam Hussein was necessary to usher in a new era of peace in the Middle East.⁷⁵ Anyone with a passing familiarity with the history of the region would view any such idea as fanciful. The subsequent history of the Middle East has proven to be more violent, politically unstable and racked with terrorism than at any time in the previous century. The tragedy for the region was that the invasion of Iraq – with the mayhem it unleashed on the Iraqi people, the strategic vacuum it created for Iran, the disintegration of Syria and the explosion of terrorist activity both in and beyond the Middle East – was a major contributing factor.

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In one way or another, most of these arguments were the subject of intense domestic political debate before, during and after 20 March 2003. And I was in the middle of it. In fact, Howard's principal defence in the fifteen years since the invasion of Iraq has been to blame me. This is

curious given that at the time I had the less-than-exalted status of foreign policy spokesman for the Opposition. In virtually every speech Howard has given on Iraq, he has sought to justify his decision to go to war on the grounds that I too had said at the time that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, as in fact had most people.

Unlike the government, I did not have comprehensive access to a treasure trove of pre-war intelligence material on Iraqi WMD capabilities, so I had based my statements on two sources. First, like most Australians at the time, I accepted what the government said about the existence of Iraqi WMD at face value: that it was an accurate reflection of the content of the intelligence material the government possessed. In my mind, the real policy question was what the international community, including Australia, should do about it. It did not really cross my mind at the time that an Australian government would be so desperate to make its case for going to war that it would grossly distort the intelligence when presenting their case to the Australian public.

The second source I used was the Federation of American Scientists, which had produced a public report in 2000 that listed Iraq, together with twenty-five other states, as possessing chemical weapons, nineteen other states as possessing biological weapons, and sixteen others with ballistic missile systems.⁷⁶ The report did not evaluate whether any one of these states was more of a threat to international security than the others. Once again, the relevant policy question, beyond the question of possession, was what the international community should do about it, and why Iraq was more of a threat than all other states possessing WMD to the extent it would warrant military invasion.

The bottom line is that apart from the manipulation of pre-war intelligence by the government on the status of Iraq's WMD capabilities, the real policy questions facing the nation were clear. Howard said that Iraq stood ready to use its WMD.⁷⁷ We said there was no evidence of that.⁷⁸ Howard said Iraq would be able to give its WMD to terrorists.⁷⁹ We did not agree.⁸⁰ Howard said disarming Iraq by military invasion was necessary to deter North Korea.⁸¹ We disagreed with that too.⁸² Howard said Australia's security was at risk if we failed to disarm Iraq by invasion.⁸³ We disagreed again.⁸⁴ And then there was the overall question of whether to go to war or to wait for the expiration of the UN weapons inspections process. We chose peace. Howard chose war. And that is the end of the matter.

In his post-facto efforts to 'prove' that I too would have chosen war were I in his shoes, Howard doth protest too much. His repeated claim that his decision to go to war was justified because I, like many others, accepted his pre-war word on the existence of Iraqi WMD sounds desperate. It's like the performance of a third speaker in a high school debating team trying frantically, when all else has failed, to define his way out of trouble, to construct a new rhetorical frame for the debate, and then to repeat, repeat, repeat in the hope that multiple repetition of an un-truth will somehow become truth. Others have tried that in modern history. It may work for a season. But in Australia it just doesn't pass the pub test. And in the end the truth does out. As it has on Iraq.