

# Sexing it up: Iraq, Intelligence and Australia

**Geoffrey Barker**

**Reviewed by Dr Hugh Smith**



The term 'sexing up' appears to have entered the vocabulary of politics as a type of 'spin' placed by politicians on information and assessments provided by intelligence agencies. Geoffrey Barker, a highly respected Australian journalist, has written an extended essay on this phenomenon in relation to the war in Iraq. The focus is Australia and Howard but George Bush and Tony Blair also feature prominently.

The book was completed by October 2003 and so does not cover more recent developments. But this does not detract from Barker's central purpose, which is to raise important questions about the relationship between intelligence and policy. Nor does the fact that the tone of the book is critical of Howard's policy undermine the significance of the issues he canvasses. Even those who believe that Australia was justified and/or prudent in joining the war against Iraq need to reflect on his critique.

Clearly, there was some disjuncture between what intelligence agencies were concluding about Iraq and what politicians were telling the public. There were also differences between what both of these groups were saying before the event and what has been discovered about Iraqi capability since the war. The reasons for this, as Barker recognises, are complex and subtle. It is not a matter of intelligence agencies heroically presenting the truth to government and of villainous politicians twisting the facts. Nor is it a matter of inaccurate intelligence reports misleading national leaders. The reality is rather more subtle and more obscure.

Most Western intelligence agencies, if not all, apparently failed to pick up the substantial collapse of Saddam Hussein's efforts to maintain weapons of mass destruction in the course of the 1990s. Few were prepared to go out on a limb and say that he was no longer dangerous. The Iraqi dictator's own behaviour made that conclusion even more difficult. It is possible, too, that Saddam Hussein was never told by his officials that the programs were failing—for fear of unpleasant consequences. At the same time, Barker argues, President Bush was determined to rid the world of Saddam Hussein for reasons that included finishing the job his father had begun, giving a clear warning to nuclear proliferators and democratising the Middle East—a 'complex mix of revenge, self-interest, logistical necessity and idealism' (p. 86). Against this background, politicians presented so-called intelligence to the public with a degree

of confidence and lack of qualification that some would regard as reckless, others would regard as simply politics.

In this swirling maelstrom Australia was a small eddy that had no significant impact on the outcome. Yet the questions to be answered remain critical. Some relate to the place of intelligence in national policy, including: was there a 'policy cringe' in the agencies; had careerism become rife; was there a layered massaging of assessments as they made their way to the top; what did it mean when John Howard stated that ONA approved everything he said about Iraq; how reliant was Australia on US and British intelligence; did Australia's leaders challenge and question the basis of intelligence reports sufficiently and how can and should intelligence matters be responsibly presented to the public?

A related set of questions deals with the public justification for the war—and any future war. Does it matter that different reasons were given prominence after the war (good riddance to an evil dictator) compared with before the war (elimination of the WMD threat)? Does it matter that talk was of actual WMD before the war and 'programs' after the war? Does it matter that the imminence of the threat from Saddam Hussein was not precisely as claimed? Does it matter that the degree of certainty about the threat evinced by political leaders was apparently somewhat greater than intelligence warranted? Public opinion in each of the three coalition members may reach rather different views on these matters.

Geoffrey Barker's conclusion is that the war was not justified and that its costs outweigh the benefits. This, of course, as John Howard has said, is a matter for political judgement and is likely to remain contentious for some time. The full consequences are yet to reveal themselves, and it may be years before the war can be judged a creeping disaster or a brilliant triumph—or somewhere in-between. Yet national leaders in democracies had to take decisions on a mixture of uncertain intelligence and reasoned speculation—and sell their conclusion to their electorates.

*Sexing it up* is a valuable introduction to these issues. Unburdened by footnotes, the text is short, clear and readable. Whether one agrees with Barker's views or not, the issues are important and will not, or should not, go away. ♦

*Geoffrey Barker, 'Sexing it up: Iraq, Intelligence and Australia', UNSW Press, Sydney, 2003, paperback, 112pp, RRP 16.95.*