

The Covert Colour Line

‘Raises a fascinating question: what if the biggest failures of intelligence are not the factual errors, but the inbuilt biases that shape what types of information is deemed useful, or even legible, to the state?’

—Lisa Stampnitzky, University of Sheffield and author of
Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented ‘Terrorism’

‘A ground-breaking contribution to the field. Elegantly written, the book decodes a plethora of declassified documents showing the racialised assumptions underlying the use and abuse of intelligence in contemporary Western politics. This is a must-read for anyone interested in democratic politics, recent armed conflicts in the Middle East or asymmetrical global power relations.’

—Elisabeth Schweiger, University of York

‘Your jaw will drop and your heart will break. We urgently need this reckoning with the role of race-thinking in international politics. Lives depend on it.’

—Gargi Bhattacharyya, co-author of *Empire’s Endgame: Racism and the British State*

The Covert Colour Line

The Racialised Politics of
Western State Intelligence

Oliver Kearns

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Introduction

Ukraine, Iraq, and the failure of intelligence failure

When do we think intelligence has failed, and what does it take for it to succeed? More than any other term, ‘intelligence failure’ sums up the popular understanding of what secret service analysts do and how they should be judged once their writings and discussions with politicians become public. It is seen as reflecting an objective measure of what makes intelligence good or bad, untainted by politics or cultural bias. And no intelligence failure has more public salience today than the false claim that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq. The point of this book is to demonstrate that the intellectual tools used by practitioners to measure good or bad intelligence are most certainly biased, have been shaped by US and British imperial history, and prevent us from understanding how intelligence makes global inequalities and state violence appear plausible and legitimate.

THE LIMITS OF ACCURACY

Twenty years after the coalition invasion of Iraq, this event continues to cast its shadow on how we discuss intelligence. As I write in the autumn of 2022, it is over 200 days since Vladimir Putin sent Russian forces across the border into Ukraine on the spurious grounds of uprooting Nazism in the country’s politics, although the Russian Government’s objective now seems to be to annex large parts of Ukraine’s south and east.¹ One small part of this horrific war’s story has been the charges of intelligence failure thrown back and forth by both Russia and those states who are supporting Ukraine’s government. As an invasion appeared more and more likely in early 2022, the intelligence services of the United

States, including the Central Intelligence Agency, calculated that Russian troops would overthrow the Ukrainian Government within two weeks. The director of the Defence Intelligence Agency later admitted that their officers had misjudged the state of Russia's military and underestimated Ukraine's defence capacity.² On the other hand, the same intelligence officials have claimed that Putin himself was badly misinformed before the war by his subordinates about the relative capabilities of Russian and Ukrainian forces, as well as the strength of resistance from Ukrainian society. Russia saw 'a failure of honest upward reporting of intelligence'. Two months later, Putin fired or arrested members of his secret service held responsible for this faulty analysis.³ On all sides, then, intelligence failure has been defined in the most obvious way: being inaccurate about the world out there.

That is not quite how Iraq enters this story though. Why, in public debate about Russia and Ukraine, has Iraq kept coming up? At one level, it was simply a matter of remembering another time 'when US intelligence assessments have proven to be faulty', to warn US and other states' intelligence agencies not to become 'overconfident' in their judgements and 'exaggerat[e] claims, as happened in the run-up to the Iraq war'.⁴ But past failure in Iraq was also framed as having political consequences, which the war in Ukraine was now rectifying. Intelligence agencies had been following Russian troops massing on the border for months, along with Russian support for separatists in Donbas. Weeks before Putin gave the order, President Joe Biden's administration began briefing that an invasion could be launched at any moment and that Russia had prepared hit-lists of political opponents. In the words of a London *Telegraph* commentator, the subsequent invasion was 'a very public vindication of Western intelligence capabilities'. More than this, it was 'a rebuff to those still stuck on the failures of Iraq'. Truly, having been 'mocked after Iraq', 'Western intelligence [...] has redeemed itself'.⁵ US military observers agreed: '[d]omestically, the reputation of US and UK intelligence has been restored after the Iraq fiasco'.⁶

And the prize for this redemption and reputation? These intelligence services can now contribute to the public information war against Russia. Having left behind 'the use – and abuse – of intel-

ligence to justify the US invasion of Iraq, agencies like the CIA were now regaining public trust through a ‘novel declassification strategy’ that has successfully ‘colour[ed] public discourse and debate’ around Putin’s war rationale. Having learned the lessons of Iraq, according to former CIA analyst Jeff Asher, the intelligence community could now ‘provide effective messaging in support of US foreign policy objectives.’⁷ Their assessments also ‘offered lead time to assist, equip, and train the Ukrainians.’⁸

The changed fortunes of intelligence in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion demonstrates something well-understood by intelligence officers and scholars – often a very thin distinction – but that rarely gets stated explicitly in public debate. Intelligence failure, as the term is used today, is not just about inaccuracy. Two prominent scholars, both once employed by US intelligence agencies, point out that good intelligence is both accurate *and* useful for policy-makers. Gauging utility is not easy, either, since statespersons and their advisers vary in what they feel they need to make decisions.⁹ Another scholar, this time a current US intelligence officer, has pushed back strongly against the popular idea that anything less than clairvoyance is a failure. Intelligence fails ‘simply when the intelligence input into the decision-making process is lacking or unsatisfactory’, which again depends on the decision-maker and the situation. The line between intelligence and policy suddenly looks blurrier: If policy-makers have unrealistic expectations of their analysts or end up downplaying the significance of the reports they are given, where does the blame for failure lie? For that reason, ‘intelligence professionals must understand the needs and preferences of those to whom they provide intelligence products.’¹⁰ This suggests an even starker definition: Intelligence success or failure has no essential link to accuracy or inaccuracy.

A pushback here would be to say that policy-makers obviously need accurate intelligence to guide their states through international affairs without bumping into unexpected disastrous events. Intelligence needs to reveal what is actually going on in the world. But the way that intelligence has fitted into the story of international efforts against Russia makes even this more complicated than it first seems. As late as December 2021, US intelligence officials believed

that Russia's large troop deployments were designed to 'obfuscate intentions and to create uncertainty'. Across Europe, France's intelligence agencies demurred that an invasion was unlikely since 'the conquest of Ukraine would have a monstrous cost and [...] the Russians had other options'. In fact, a recent review of the intelligence war in Ukraine concludes that 'France may yet be proved right in that the invasion *has already* come at a "monstrous cost" to the Russians'.¹¹ Whether France's secret services were accurate, though, is not the point. It turns out that what often gets called accuracy is actually about which agency has the most useful evidence threshold, the point at which you decide to warn your policy-makers, like US analysts did, that something *could* happen.

The one crucial variable that this threshold could not be based upon was the inaccessible thought process of President Putin. Commentators have repeatedly emphasised that 'it is impossible to know the true state of Putin's mind' while lauding the valiant efforts of intelligence officers to do exactly that, to '[get] inside Putin's head' (Figure 0.1).¹² Figuring out 'the intentions of autocratic leaders' is always the problem. So observers turn to speculation. Perhaps those French agents had simply misjudged 'what costs the adversary was willing to take'. Maybe the 'values and concerns of Western governments' are 'not as relevant' in Putin's decision-making.¹³ Those analysts who were more willing to adopt *this* hypothesis were the ones who came up with an intelligence success. Their reports allowed policy-makers to prepare for a war despite no one knowing what Putin was thinking. Notice how quickly the lack of access to Putin's mind segues into speculation about his non-Westernness and irrationality. If he does not value the things Western governments value, perhaps 'the mental state of the man' is at issue.¹⁴ Even those who dismiss the idea that Putin has gone insane, like US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, argue that Putin's unrealistic ambitions are leading to 'more ad hoc decision-making' on his part, making it 'increasingly difficult for the intelligence community to predict' his actions.¹⁵ If he is 'isolated in a bubble of his own making', as intelligence officials believe, he will have been 'stewing' in 'a strange view of the world' based around his 'mindset and obsessions [...] with Ukraine and the West'. Press coverage of such intelligence beliefs are accompa-

nied by shots of a shirtless Putin hunting in the countryside, rifle in hand.¹⁶ Perhaps, too, Putin's ambitions stem from such illogical, emotional sources as a belief in 'Ukraine's legacy as part of this Russian Empire' – hardly a promising prospect for negotiations.¹⁷

This kind of intelligence judgement can then be used to help the war effort. 'It increasingly looks [like] Putin has massively misjudged the situation,' the head of Britain's Government Communication Headquarters reported in a public press conference. Whether this represents 'the full picture or a more selective one,' choice declassifications like this were commended for contributing to a 'psychological war,' designed to 'maintain support for the tough Western stand' and 'sow discord' in the Kremlin.¹⁸ Never mind if these public humiliations 'risk further isolating Putin or mak[ing] him double down on his aim of restoring Russian prestige,' to 'overcome the perceived [previous] humiliation of Russia' following the Soviet Union's collapse; according to a Biden official, 'Putin is going to do what Putin is going to do.'¹⁹

This risky contribution to the international war of words against Russia extends the link with Iraq even further. Back in 2003, intelligence officers felt confident enough to assign the same misjudgement to Iraq's President Saddam Hussein, on the basis not of material intelligence but of bigger ideas about race and geopolitics. The consequences of these ideas for the coalition's war in Iraq, and the lessons for how we should judge intelligence efforts on Putin and others, have not yet been given a place in public debate. The objective of this book is to make the case for doing so.

THE 20-YEAR SEARCH FOR THE SMOKING GUN

It is hard to overestimate just how much the invasion of Iraq two decades ago has utterly reshaped the country and the Middle East's political landscape. Inside Iraq, documented direct deaths from violence since the bombs began to fall in March 2003 stand at 288,000, with annual deaths today from armed conflict and terrorism remaining in the hundreds.²⁰ Iraqi protests in July 2021 against power outages only hint at the country's wider social violence. Twenty years after the coalition invasion, Iraq suffers from 'the lack of clean water and electricity, widespread poverty,



“Nervous Kremlin watchers acknowledge they can’t be sure what [Putin] is thinking or even if he’s rational and well-informed.”

John Leicester, ‘What’s Putin thinking? Tough to know for nuclear analysts’, Associated Press, 4 October 2022, with accompanying photo of Putin watching Russian military exercises in 2021 (Kremlin.ru, Creative Commons CC BY 4.0. Image cropped.)

Figure 0.1 The effort by intelligence officers and others to understand Vladimir Putin’s strategy has been framed as an attempt by objective Westerners to decipher an alien, culturally-fixed mindset.

"[Former CIA operative Glenn Carle highlights] the difference in how the West views international relations versus how Putin sees them [...] The Russian leader subscribes to a Eurasianist philosophy [which] sees foreign policy as a zero-sum game [...] 'He is behaving rationally within the confines of a fundamentally irrational set of beliefs.'"

Sonan Sheth and John Haltiwanger, "Rational, consistent and ruthless': National security veterans warn against painting Putin as an unhinged madman', *Business Insider*, 3 March 2022

"Russia's leader Vladimir Putin is trapped in a closed world of his own making, Western spies believe. And that worries them [...] [He is] a man angry and obsessed with Ukraine and the West."

Gordon Corera, 'Western agents seek to get inside Putin's head', *BBC News*, 20 March 2022

"Putin has concocted all of these threats in his mind to justify a war of aggression because his autocracy is threatened by Western values, by Western liberal ideas of civil liberties and individual freedom and self-determination."

Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, former CIA Moscow station chief, *CBS News*, 12 October 2022

high levels of unemployment, government corruption, and dismal prospects for the largely young population. Mass privatisation and predatory contracts with multinationals during the occupation 'drained the country's resources', leaving 'a totally bankrupt economy' when coalition forces largely withdrew in 2011. Iraq's unprecedented 'lack of development, services and resources [...] food scarcity, poverty and unemployment' are reinforced by 'the West's political support of Iraq's corrupt political elite'.²¹ Across the region, the Iraq War's public framing within a 'War on Terror' allowed governments of all stripes, from conservative monarchies to revolutionary autocracies, to position their own long repressions and counter-insurgencies as counter-terrorism efforts, gaining US and British backing in the process. The removal of Saddam paved the way for increased Iranian influence against Saudi Arabia, while Iraq's insurgency and then the Syrian civil war have helped to legitimise a sectarian view of regional power struggles, militarising many societies in the process.²²

Intelligence did not cause all of this. But to the extent that intelligence rationalised the view of Saddam as a threat and the aim to remove him from office, analysts' ideas about who Saddam was, what Iraqi society was like, and how Middle East geopolitics worked were crucial. These ideas would have been part of US and British policy debates, even part of the atmosphere in each administration of what it was acceptable to think about as a possible policy action or not. Critics of the invasion have a stake in knowing how intelligence is likely to have shaped that atmosphere.

Yet critical discussion of this intelligence analysis has almost exclusively centred on the question not of ideas but of accuracy. When then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced an independent inquiry into the Iraq War headed by John Chilcot, to cover all events from 2001 to 2009, British intelligence on Iraq had already been the subject of four legislative and commissioned independent investigations. These past inquiries had each been tainted by accusations of deception and powerlessness: The Foreign Affairs Committee was refused access to documents and witnesses; the Intelligence and Security Committee was too trusting of officials and used the mildest language to rebuke them; the inquiry led by James Hutton prevaricated on the term 'sexed-

up' – the accusation made by a BBC journalist about the public case for war – and was prevented from comparing government statements with the intelligence basis; and the review led by Robin Butler, aimed specifically at studying intelligence which had now been proven false, was seen to have pulled its punches on policy-makers' use of officers' analysis.²³ The momentum of these inquiries from 2003 to 2004 and the dissatisfaction that grew with them, especially once the WMD claim was disproven by inspectors in Iraq, filed the intelligence issue down to one sharp, narrow question: Had intelligence reports been truthful?

Lack of truthfulness has always been seen to have two possibilities: Was the intelligence analysis fallible at its roots, or was it distorted through public presentation? For those wanting to, in Chilcot's words, 'establish, as accurately as possible, what happened',²⁴ this suggests two possible culprits: Either intelligence officers incorrectly analysed the Iraqi Government's behaviour and miscalculated Saddam's acquisition or possession of WMD; or government officials, having received what was correct intelligence, misread or misrepresented these conclusions to the public to make the case for war. This way of understanding what went wrong feels like a strong critique of state power because it insists that the security services can be useless lackeys and politicians are often deceptive – 'Blair lied, thousands died'. Putting the question like this, however, has always been valued by many among the British political elite because they believed the answer would provide 'practical lessons' for policy-making, so that 'the failings that have been brought to light [...] are never repeated'.²⁵ This attitude fits the standard aim of any commissioned inquiry in a liberal democratic state: to resolve crises in public confidence; to re-legitimise institutions that are seen to have failed in their presumed right to govern; to make clear that the failing was temporary and not grounds for re-structuring state power.²⁶ This even became explicit: When Robin Butler was challenged in a British parliamentary committee on his wariness about criticising policy, he argued that his team 'felt the proper place where government should survive or fall was in Parliament or with the electorate', as 'it would have been improper for us to say the government should resign on this matter'. His inquiry's job was 'to give

a balanced, factual picture' that would contribute to the normal workings of state representation.²⁷ If Blair lied, the fault was his alone; if thousands died, intelligence procedures could always be improved in future.

The two-part question of truthfulness gives two corresponding explanations: that flaws in intelligence assessment allowed for unjustified conclusions about the scope of Iraq's WMD programmes; or that the assessment was manipulated through political pressure or the addition of false statements on those WMD.²⁸ Both explanations put capabilities front-and-centre; they hinged on whether Iraq really had the things that intelligence attributed to them. And so a flurry of scholarship has been produced over 20 years, with intelligence officers, political scientists, and historians examining one or the other of these explanations and culprits, sometimes even combining them to propose a more complex process of failure.²⁹ Those who reject the idea of politicisation insist that intelligence officers started from a reasonable assumption that just happened to turn out to be wrong: that given his history of trying to produce WMD, Saddam was probably continuing to do so and had had some success.³⁰ On the other side, a lot of ink has been spilt over the issue of the 2002 'September dossier', a public presentation of British intelligence judgements, which included the now-infamous claim that Saddam Hussein could deploy chemical and biological weapons within 45 minutes of an order to do so.³¹ Scholars have followed the trail of private correspondence and declassified minutes which emerged through public inquiries. That trail leads to evidence that policy-makers shaped the drafting of the September dossier to more robustly and emphatically assert Saddam's possession of WMD.³² As more evidence has been released, this now includes the fact that a late piece of intelligence suggesting chemical agent production was inserted at the behest of Blair officials without being properly assessed.³³

The problem with this attempt to establish what happened, with this way of asking the question of truthfulness, has always been that it plays on the turf already fully occupied by the defenders of the invasion. The only way of proving whether intelligence officers screwed up or political officials sexed up reports is if the people involved admit to it or if they left behind a documentary

trail. These same people have been using this to their advantage for two decades. ‘That is four inquiries now that have cleared me of wrongdoing,’ said Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair’s former communications director, in response to Chilcot’s report. ‘I hope,’ he continued, ‘that the allegations we have faced for years – of lying and deceit to persuade a reluctant parliament and country to go to war [...] are laid to rest.’³⁴ Campbell is skipping over what he *was* accused of, but on lying, he was indeed absolved by every inquiry’s chair. If Blair and his acolytes are judged to have made no ‘personal and demonstrable decision to deceive,’ as Chilcot himself concluded,³⁵ then the worst that can be said is that these people suffered from self-deception, a zealous belief in their own convictions that blinded them to alternative readings of intelligence.³⁶ The only way to get beyond that conclusion is to find a written record of deceit, what Anna Stavrianakis calls an analytical ‘smoking gun’ of ‘that moment of decision’ which reveals ‘someone [...] in control of events.’³⁷ With many records of Cabinet discussions and conversations between Blair and Bush remaining classified even after Chilcot, this search for the smoking gun sets a very high bar for establishing what went wrong with the Iraq intelligence. It also risks keeping debate within the exact arena that most suits political elites: how to fix that temporary failure and re-legitimise the state.

I am not saying that the issue of whether political figures lied to make the case for war should be dismissed. Those classified records may yet reveal in more detail how that happened. Those records which *are* now in public, however, can reveal crucial aspects of intelligence’s role in that war that have so far been overlooked. As a result of Chilcot’s Inquiry, hundreds of previously secret documents have entered the public record. These include dozens of British intelligence assessments, along with discussions among and between analysts, their superiors, and politicians. In a system of government which normally keeps such records classified for decades, this revelation of documents from as recently as 15 years ago offers an unprecedented opportunity. The Chilcot Inquiry also produced thousands of pages of witness hearings, including with intelligence analysts whose rare discussions of their own work

are now available for public consumption, even if the hearings themselves were held in private. The cosiness of the inquiry's proceedings may also have encouraged intelligence witnesses to speak as if chatting with colleagues of a similar mindset. Witness hearings involved no 'Iraqis, Americans, or foreigners of any sort' and were often run 'like a private conversation in a Whitehall club', with John Chilcot himself 'treat[ing] witnesses like a therapist with a nervous patient'.³⁸ One member of the intelligence services felt at home enough during their session to share a Latin quip from Virgil's *Aeneid*, to which Chilcot responded in kind.³⁹ This was a comfortably elite environment, making the witness sessions even more insightful for what they inadvertently reveal about intelligence analysts' thoughts and assumptions.

To uncover new lines of inquiry from this voluminous evidence, we need to use this declassified material to start going beyond what has been called juridical individualism. This is a way of discussing responsibility for crimes that centres on *intent* rather than *motive*. With intent, one asks whether a person meant to commit a certain action. With motive, one asks how they justified themselves. Law in liberal democracies reinforces societal inequality by focusing on intent: You can no longer get away in a courtroom with stealing a loaf of bread by explaining that you are poor.⁴⁰ Again, sticking only with the question of intelligence's accuracy and its causes can end up contributing to that same process, by only searching for elite duplicity rather than asking what they thought they were doing and what assumptions they made about today's vastly unequal international state system. Thinking instead about motive means considering *how* ideas about the world are formed over time. As Owen Thomas puts it, in the case of Iraq, it would mean examining 'the ways of thinking that made the British case for war possible', and that helped to bind together 'a political community' on the basis of a shared understanding of the world.⁴¹

For those who want justice for victims of state violence and a democratisation of societal power, it also means going beyond a definition of the security services by their organisational power. Critiques of security and intelligence agencies tend to imagine these agencies first and foremost as competing bureaucratic struc-

tures, tightly regimented groups in closed-off corridors that push for more control over the state apparatus against other political actors, such as elected politicians. The question of 'democratising' intelligence becomes one of avoiding two extremes: an autonomous agency carrying out its own surveillance and policy, a 'rogue elephant' as the CIA was famously charged in the 1970s; and a personal security service for a leader trying to avoid legislative accountability, a private army.⁴² Scholars of intelligence have pursued this kind of typology of intelligence's position and power within the state.⁴³ Ironically, they share that interest with Anglo-sphere dissidents and critical social scientists. The latter tend to define security organisations' impact on politics using terms like a 'surveillance state', a high-tech panopticon encroaching on civil liberties, or a 'garrison state', where decision-making is dominated by what President Dwight Eisenhower famously called the military-industrial complex.⁴⁴

The limitation of this critique is that it all-too-quickly reduces the political effects of intelligence to bureaucratic power plays. It risks overlooking the political effects of intelligence *beyond* these agencies' own relative hold on instruments of state power.⁴⁵ For one thing, no matter how secretive they may be, intelligence officers are also part of society, which means their view of the world will shape and be shaped by their societal background.⁴⁶ For another, that social context will be reflected in how those officers think and talk about what the state actually is. Intelligence analysis helps to make the state – not as a neutral organisational structure but as a political identity that gets attached to people, to laws, and to policies. The ways of thinking that create a political community also create the state that this community represents.

So as well as looking for the smoking gun, we should ask: How is intelligence likely to have contributed to the state's identity and to these ways of thinking? Instead of asking who had power over whom, the intelligence officers or the politicians, why not examine what kind of social ideas were reflected in intelligence assessments, and how those assessments might then have made certain policies seem possible to policy-makers? Could this have happened *before* deception or self-deception about WMD became a factor?