

Hillary and Tony: Can They be Compared?

by Michael Curtis

To lose one email on a personal server may be regarded as a misfortune: to lose several thousand work related emails looks like carelessness. Certainly, FBI Director James B. Comey on July 5, 2016 thought that the handling of very sensitive highly classified information by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was "extremely careless." Comey raised serious questions about Clinton's judgment and contradicted a number of her assertions. Any reasonable person he held should know that sensitive information merited greater security.

Though Comey outlined the manner in which Clinton had violated government procedures and rules and had willfully transmitted or mishandled classified information, he concluded she had not violated the law and recommended there be no criminal charges brought against her.

Underlying the legal issue are political and moral issues concerning the misstatements or lies by Clinton about her behavior. A number of them are particularly important. She said she had not received any classified material on her email, but Comey said she received at least 110. She denied that any document were listed as such but Comet remarked that even if information is not marked "classified" in an email, participants, especially the Secretary of State, who know or should know that the subject matter is classified, are still obligated to protect it.

Hillary said she acted for the convenience of using one device, but Comey said she had used numerous mobile devices. She did not tell the truth in saying she had turned over her work related emails to the State Department. If the probe into

Clinton's use of emails was not thought to be criminal in character, it revealed mishandling of sensitive information. Most troubling was her use of personal email while abroad, thus making hostile actors gain access to her personal account.

Director Comey did not recommend criminal charges against but delivered a non-partisan stringing rebuke of her behavior. By strange coincidence in the same week as his announcement, a much stronger rebuke of a major political figure, former prime minister Tony Blair, was made in a British report issued by Sir John Chilcot on British policy concerning participating in the conflict in Iraq in 2003.

The commentaries on Clinton and Blair raise similar issues. One is the duplicity and dishonesty of political personnel in high places. But the two are linked on an issue that was not part of the FBI enquiry on Hillary but a political one, the war with Iraq. On this issue, she has been criticized by rivals, first by Barack Obama in the presidential debate with her in 2008 and now by Donald Trump. At issue is her vote on October 11, 2002 to give President George W. Bush authority to wage war against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. About this, Hillary has expressed regret, explaining she did so in the context of discussion of weapons of mass destruction, threats to the U.S. and the problem of the brutal Saddam Hussein.

The issue is central in the British report issued on July 6, 2016 by a non-political committee headed by a retired civil servant Sir John Chilcot. It focused on British policy towards and the war on Iraq between 2001 and July 2009. The committee took 7 years to produce the 600 page, 2.6 million word, report which is a devastating picture of British political and military incompetence.

Everyone recognized that Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator who had murdered many Iraqis and attacked neighboring

countries. But was it appropriate and legal for Britain to decide to attack Iraq on March 17, 2003, and should it have been better prepared for the consequences of the invasion?

The main conclusions of the long report were that Saddam Hussein at that time did not pose an imminent threat to British interests. It had "not been established beyond doubt" that Saddam had continued to produce chemical and biological weapons, weapons of mass destruction. Governmental policy was made on the basis of flawed intelligence and assessments. The judgment of the two major British intelligence services, both of which performed poorly, concerning those weapons was presented with a certainty that was not justified. Prime Minister Blair chose military action before peaceful alternatives to war had been exhausted.

Chilcote found that Attorney General Lord Goldsmith has decided there was a legal basis for invasion in a way that was far from satisfactory: the legality of the war could only be decided by an international court. The unintended consequences of invasion were underestimated, and planning for Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam was wholly inadequate. The Blair government had failed to achieve its stated objectives. Blair himself, writing to George Bush on September 5, 2003, had remarked, "As you predicted, the aftermath and rebuilding of Iraq is proving the most difficult phase."

The Chilcot comments on Tony Blair are the most scathing on any political figure in the democratic world in recent years. He had acted without recourse to a second UN resolution on Iraq. Blair had, on at least 11 occasions, made unilateral governmental decisions without reference to the most senior figures in his cabinet. There had not been frank and informed debate or substantive discussion within the government on the issue of invasion. Instead Blair had depended on private advisers, "a soft government," outside the official cabinet.

Most revealing are the 31 memos written by Blair to President

Bush, which appear to show both his subordination and the overestimate of his ability to influence Bush. One can suggest somewhat unkindly that Blair acted as Bush's poodle, yet Blair believed, mistakenly or not, that the so called "special relationship" with the U.S. required British unconditional support in spite of differences.

At first Blair was cautious because he could not be sure of support from Parliament, his Labour Party, public opinion, and even some of the cabinet. He realized that European countries, which did not have the same sense of urgency as did the U.S., would not support an invasion of Iraq without specific UN authority.

But at Crawford, Texas in April 2002, Blair joined Bush in advocating regime change in Iraq. The most extraordinary passage was the note Blair sent to Bush on July 28, 2002 that "I will be with you, whatever." This amazing unconditional commitment by Blair to support the US might suggest personal chemistry between the two leaders, but more likely indicated that the UK would not be on the sidelines of historical change.

The Chilcot Report leads to the view that Blair in effect deceived the British political world and public by duplicity, by bypassing proper procedure on official activity, by dependence on a small circle of unofficial advisors, and a somewhat reckless use of power. In all this his behavior appears similar to that of Hillary as reported by the FBI Director.

Interestingly, both Hillary and Blair have been threatened by the possibility of legal action and criminal prosecution. There are differences. Hillary was criticized for careless handling of classified materials, though not "grossly negligent," and for potential violations, but no legal charges were brought against her. But in Britain the Chilcot report has not put an end to the possibility of charge against Blair.

There are still calls for Blair and his political associates to be prosecuted in the International Criminal Court (ICC), charged with the crime of aggression, a military attack not permitted under UN charter.

In addition there is a very revealing difference. Blair has expressed full responsibility for his decisions "without exception and without excuse." He hoped future leaders would learn from his mistakes. Hillary simply acknowledged she had made mistakes.