

## The rush to judgment on Syria is a catastrophic and deadly error

Britain and America show contempt for the lessons of the past in pressing for action



Hard sell: to gain the support of a sceptical nation, David Cameron needs to make the speech of his life Photo: Getty Images

By Peter Osborne

7:00AM BST 29 Aug 2013

It is more than 10 years since Parliament last voted on whether or not to go to war. This was on March 18 2003, when a stirring speech by Tony Blair convinced many sceptical MPs of the case for military action against Iraq.

But Mr Blair's claim that Britain possessed "extensive, detailed and authoritative" evidence concerning Iraq's weapons of mass destruction turned out to be nonsense, and we invaded the country on the back of a false prospectus. The consequences were terrible: countless Iraqis were killed in the civil war that followed, along with 179 British soldiers.

The similarities with today's Commons vote are haunting. The Prime Minister is contemplating an attack on Iraq's near neighbour Syria, also ruled by a Baathist regime. At the heart of the issue are allegations about weapons of mass destruction. Once again, Britain finds herself in alliance with the United States, and without the authority of the United Nations.

Many of the same voices are cheering us on. Most zealous of all is Tony Blair, while Alastair

Campbell, the New Labour propagandist who spread the stories about WMD in Iraq, said yesterday that it would be “irresponsible and incredibly dangerous” not to intervene in Syria.

And many of the same voices are opposed. Hans Blix, the UN chief arms inspector whose investigations were cut short 10 years ago at the insistence of George W Bush, this week warned against rushing to judgment. Dr Blix might just as well have been speaking about Mr Blair when he criticised Mr Cameron on the grounds that he does not seem “to care much about international legality”.

Meanwhile, the governments of America and Britain have made up their minds. They have accepted without question that the Assad regime must be punished for what the Prime Minister called “the massive use of chemical weapons”. They are not interested in examining any contrary evidence.

As in 2003, only Parliament, in today’s vote and the one that will follow the report of the UN inspectors, stands between Britain and military action, the latest of a long series of attacks by the West on Muslim countries.

With Labour seeming likely, despite some prevarication, to support a strike, and Nick Clegg rather surprisingly on board, Mr Cameron may not have to make the speech of his life (as Mr Blair did in 2003) to win either vote. To gain the support of a sceptical nation, however, he needs to do exactly that.

He will not achieve this with the long-winded and contradictory motion he has submitted to the Commons for debate today. His problem is that the British and American foreign policy, intelligence and military establishments have made a series of dreadful mistakes over the past 15 years. It can be stated with complete fairness that the Stop the War Coalition (a miscellaneous collection of mainly far-Left political organisations, by no means all of them reputable, which marches through London this Saturday in protest) has consistently shown far more mature judgment on these great issues of war and peace than Downing Street, the White House or the CIA.

More surprising still, the Stop the War Coalition has often proved better informed than these centres of Western power, coolly warning against the diet of propaganda masquerading as bona fide intelligence.

So Mr Cameron first of all needs to show us that we have solid evidence, capable of standing up in a court of law, that proves his claim that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons on a large scale against its own people. On the face of things, it looks highly unlikely that Assad would have carried out such an action – let alone within three days of international inspectors arriving in Syria.

Consider this: the only beneficiaries from the atrocity were the rebels, previously losing the war, who now have Britain and America ready to intervene on their side. While there seems to be little

doubt that chemical weapons were used, there is doubt about who deployed them. It is important to remember that Assad has been accused of using poison gas against civilians before. But on that occasion, Carla del Ponte, a UN commissioner on Syria, concluded that the rebels, not Assad, were probably responsible.

The rush to judgment by Britain and the US looks premature, especially in view of the record of our intelligence agencies in providing misleading and fabricated evidence as a justification for war before 2003. (This time it is said that they have been convinced by intercept evidence, but this too can prove seriously misleading.)

The second question that Mr Cameron must answer is: why now? There have been numerous other atrocities, many far worse, carried out across the Middle East in the past few years. For example, there is no doubt at all that the Egyptian military junta has shot dead more than 1,000 protesters, the vast majority unarmed civilians, since seizing power. Yet there has been no outraged condemnation. Indeed, the West, by continuing to supply arms to the Egyptian army, is quietly condoning this policy of mass murder.

The moral authority of Britain and America in the Middle East is shaky, as an article published in Foreign Policy magazine last week reminds us. It provides documentary evidence that the US helped Saddam Hussein's Iraq launch a series of chemical weapons attacks upon Iran in the late 1980s, an offensive that killed approximately 20,000 Iranian troops – which dwarfs the number of victims of the Syrian attack. Iran, of course, is Assad's closest ally. Our moral indignation over chemical weapons looks selective.

This raises questions about Western objectives. Are we merely intending to teach Assad a lesson? Or does an unspoken strategy to “rebalance” the war away from him and back towards the rebels lurk behind this intervention?

It must be said that something terrible happened in Damascus last week, and interventions of the sort that Mr Cameron will argue for today are not always wrong. The Prime Minister and President Obama are decent men, acting for honourable reasons out of horror at the atrocity that took place.

This means that there are some important differences between the circumstances of today's debate and the one in March 2003. I do not believe that Mr Cameron and Mr Obama are part of a conspiracy to mislead the public and twist the truth, as Bush and Blair were. Significantly, France is part of the coalition, not against it, as was the case 10 years ago. The action contemplated is limited, and unlikely to lead to the dreadful consequences of Iraq.

Nevertheless, on the basis of what I know at the time of writing, I could not vote for war. As Talleyrand said of the Bourbon monarchs, London and Washington have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing since the invasion of Iraq.

They are showing the same contempt for evidence, for international institutions and for the lessons of history.

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2013