

A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies

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In **A Pretext for War**, acclaimed author James Bamford—whose classic book **The Puzzle Palace** first revealed the existence of the National Security Agency—draws on his unparalleled access to top intelligence sources to produce a devastating exposé of the intelligence community and the Bush administration. **A Pretext for War** reveals the systematic weaknesses behind the failure to detect or prevent the 9/11 attacks, and details the Bush administration's subsequent misuse of intelligence to sell preemptive war to the American people. Filled with unprecedented new revelations, from the sites of “undisclosed locations” to the actual sources of America's Middle East policy, **A Pretext for War** is essential reading for anyone concerned about the security of the United States.

A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies Details

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From Reader Review A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies for online ebook

Eric_W says

James Bamford makes a convincing case that the United States was ill-served by our intelligence communities before 9-11 in *Pretext for War*. Part of the problem was the agencies were still fighting the Cold War and agents were enjoying the perks traditional with service in overseas embassies: good food, cars, great shopping, and other fringe benefits.

The beginning of the book provides a nice compliment to the 9/11 Commission report of the hijackings, a step-by-step reenactment, fascinating yet horrifying. He then provides how the spy agencies work in this country and how information was transmitted to the policy makers. The overall effect is not reassuring as evidence is provided that shows intelligence manufactured to support a policy and how Congress is routinely bypassed. The implications for balance of power and the tri-partite government created by the Founding Fathers are disturbing. The trend is away from public scrutiny, when, in my opinion, more is needed. The Bush administration appears to be heading toward increased secrecy and less congressional oversight.

Rumsfeld has gradually lobbied for and been giving extraordinary powers for "black bag" operations around the world (see Seymour Hersh's article in the January 24th, 2005 issue of *The New Yorker*.) The idea is that we have to become more like the enemy and act like them, i.e. giving them a taste of their own medicine. Aside from the questionable morality of such behavior, one wonders whether it will work in the long run or perhaps come back to bite us in the ass.

In a rather frightening example of how easy it can be to blow up a plane, James Bamford, in *Pretext for War* describes how, in 1995, a terrorist group in the Philippines blew up part of a 747. They used a digital watch with an alarm, some fine wires, a contact lens solution bottle filled with nitro glycerin soaked in cotton, to create a nasty little bomb that was placed under the seat and then detonated 4 hours later after the terrorist had left the plane at an intermediate stop. Note that none of these items would appear suspicious to airport security or show up on an x-ray.

The bomb detonated as planned, killing a Japanese businessman and disabling the plane, which was able to return to the airport with some difficulty. The terrorists were so pleased with their success that they planned several more such attacks. They were thwarted only when their apartment caught fire and a member of the cell was captured. Following interrogation by the Philippine police, it was learned they had also planed [bad pun:] to fly an airplane into the Pentagon in a suicide attack. The terrorists claimed the attacks were in protest of American Israeli policies, particularly the savage attack on a Lebanese town in which numerous women and children were killed.

The Philippine police promptly informed the FBI of what they had learned. This information, a preview of the 2001 attack, was either lost or disregarded in one of the intelligence failures that Bamford delineates in a most interesting book. The astonishing thing is that the NSA had information about the hijackers, they knew Osama was about to do something big, the FBI had information that airplanes would be used as weapons, the hijackers entered the country using their real names, they took flying lessons, they lived in a hotel within blocks of the NSA, used credit cards for their purchases, communicated daily with Osama and others using public chat rooms, and called him on the phone to discuss the impending operation. Bush had been told that something big was in the works, but he chose to go golfing. I mean, really.

M Nagle says

An interesting account of the Bush administration's gross negligence in committing the grave act of taking the nation into a "war of choice", twisting intelligence information at every step along the way to fabricate the rationale for what to date appears to have been a massive strategic blunder.

Spook says

This is easily the most detailed account of how we got into Iraq from within the depths of the C.I.A. Utterly fascinating, and well worth the read.

Unless you're carrying notepaper with you, don't get the audiobook if you plan on examining it further later.

Aram says

The first half of the book is OK, if a little too obsessed with Pentagon gadgetry. But the second half is A MUST READ for anyone who wants to understand where this Iraq quagmire came from. James Bamford doesn't pull any punches. And he has done his homework. Very convincing.

Lisa says

Lots of information in this book. Intense amount of history (at least I thought) on various agencies both in US and abroad. Some of it helpful to the context, some not so much. Overall, I found it very informative regarding the Iraq war "sales pitch" and the breakdown of agencies that failed to warn of 9/11 threat. Lots of inside information from unnamed sources within the government.

Will Byrnes says

A very interesting book. Spookdom is Bamford's turf. He has written about the NSA (Body of Secrets, a very good look at that agency) and the world of spying. He presents mucho specificity in support of the fact that the Iraq war had little or nothing to do with the rationales for war presented by the administration. He talks about the establishment of politically oriented entities within the Pentagon, State Department and Ariel Sharon's government to foster conflict. There is much here on the staffing challenges facing the intelligence community (although there is little on the details of how those budgets were cut) There is a fair bit of detail on how analysts were pressured to fulfill the administration's fantasies re Iraqi WMD and connections to Osama. Pretty good stuff. I was particularly impressed with his discussion of how intelligence is shared among countries, and what factors are at play in such sharing. It is also notable that the Qana massacre is one of the sources of Osama's rage.

Christopher Sutch says

Although all this was perfectly clear to me at the time it happened (Bush, Cheney, etc. hold us common people in so much contempt they thought we'd buy anything), this still has some pertinent disgusting details of the dishonesty and treachery (to our country) of those behind the decision (made ON THE DAY of 9/11) to invade Iraq. They're filthy little toadies of men (I count Condi as a man) who deserve the death sentence.

Tim Painter says

This book makes me very sad because if it really is true what this book is telling us then we have caused the deaths of thousands of service men and thousands of Iraqi civilians because of the personal vendetta of president Bush.

This book details the lies and deceptions that the Bush administration pushed on us pre-Iraq war to convince the country that we should go to war with Iraq. So thorough was the deception that congress bought into it. Since then the whole thing has been shown to be a fabrication. Study after study has come up with nothing to substantiate the lies.

Jeff Price says

I read this book when the investigations into the alleged Russian interference of the US 2016 elections were ongoing. I was struck by the similarity of how the press and public were manipulated by disinformation by the US and U.K. governments and tactics used to manipulate voters in the presidential campaign.

We all know that Saddam Hussain had nothing to do with the 9/11 bombings. In fact both Bush and Hussain wanted to eradicate Al Qaeda.

It seems Donald Rumsfeld considered the first Gulf War as unfinished business. For Bush it was personal. Hussain had attempted to kill Bush senior, George W's mother, wife and brothers during their visit to Kuwait. Blair it appears wanted his ego stroked. Perhaps he felt inferior to Margaret Thatcher since she had her war to fight.

So the three accomplices set out to convince the world that Iraq had or was about to start producing weapons of mass destruction. Undaunted by the fact that the weapons inspectors had been in Iraq for years telling the UN and IAEA that no weapon facilities existed, they concocted "evidence" to proof their point.

The rest as they say is history except for one point. The legacy of Gulf War 2. The vacuum left by the overthrow of Hussain and the inept plan for a post war transition gave rise to armed bands of terrorists/freedom fighters depending on your view point, each vying for power. These groups morphed into ISIS.

Bush, Rumsfeld and Blair have a lot to answer for.

And could it happen again? Could the media and public be duped again? Of course. Don't you agree President Trump?

Jose says

good audio book...had learned a lot of this already in other books...still interesting.

Ushan says

The first part of this book tells how the American intelligence agencies failed to prevent 9/11; I was already familiar with the story from other books including Bamford's *The Shadow Factory*. They deemed infiltrating Al-Qaeda too difficult, which would have come as a surprise to John Walker Lindh and Richard Reid. The second part tells about their role in launching the Iraq War. An anonymous CIA official tells that they were ordered, "If Bush wants to go to war, it's your job to give him a reason to do so." So they did; Colin Powell's United Nations speech consisted of assertions obtained from two sources: neoconservatives with ties to Israel and Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress; the CIA presented these assertions to the Secretary of State as facts. The intelligence agencies failed to successfully spy on Iraq but the NSA did eavesdrop on the UN diplomats from the Security Council member nations like Cameroon that were undecided on whether or not to vote for the war; they were then bribed into voting with the U.S. and Britain.

Cort Ockfen says

Writing is a little disjointed but his sources are fantastic and details of issues like the CIA and George Tenet are a must read. This book made me more curious about George Tenet.

The 9/11 chapter is once again sobering.

Bruce says

This book discusses the abuse of intelligence by recent administrations. Under some the main problem was not providing the funds and leadership. During other administrations (the current one) American intelligence agencies were used to provide cover for what can best be described as 'private' intelligence agencies. I find it interesting the recent CIA report comes to conclusions similar to those of the author.

In Chapter 4, and earlier, the author discusses alternate sites for government in case of need. This was the Cold War and people were concerned with the Continuity of Government (as they are now). He goes on to compare the flight of Bush to a military base in the middle of the country, rather than back to Washington with that of LBJ after the Kennedy assassination.

Many of the failures surrounding 9/11 were the result of human foibles, e.g., Tenet's failure to back words with action and the head of CIA's OBL division taking trips instead of leading the division. This is one part of the book. The other is more sinister.

While under Reagan, Bush (41) and Clinton the intelligence agencies were not supported properly, it is under Bush (43) that the executive has tried to force the intelligence to support policy. This book supports the thesis that Bush/Cheney/ Rove and company had decided to invade Iraq from even before the 2000 election. All they needed was a pretext, even if that pretext turned out to be fictional.

Jordan says

This book is an interesting look at the problems of our intelligence system, and why it has been such a problem lately. It is also full of conspiracy theories, and lot of unconnected dots that Bamford tries to pull together. Interesting, if nothing else.

Andrew Skretvedt says

I won't call this a formal review. It's more a personal commentary about the book and about the issues the book raises. Review does take place, however.

Some personal background: back in the day, I was a solid supporter of Bush-43, and the case for and decision to make war on Iraq. I remember thinking and feeling that even if the intelligence wasn't solid, even if we didn't end up finding the WMDs we decided to fight to find and destroy, the war would still be worth it to liberate the population from an evil tyrant, and to finish the unfinished business of Bush-41's Gulf War (well, it felt unfinished to me at the time, as close as we were to totally collapsing the bombed-out shell of a regime we'd left Hussein's government then).

My opinions on the war, the case for war, the war's objectives, and basic notions of things connected to this have all undergone a gradual 180 in the years since. I hate the war, I was wrong to have supported Bush-43 and the war. I think any weak-sauce notions we can extract and call victories out of that quagmire are or will be proven out to be Pyrrhic for our nation, in time. The ends we've wound up with are hardly the shining embodiments of some American ideal on freedom and justice or even security for our nation which we'd imagined before boots hit the ground. The means we employed cannot justify either set of ends, ideal or real. So I had a bias then, as I also have one now.

This stated, there appears to be enough in this book that one can at least credibly say that the preponderance of the evidence appears to support the author's premise and his claims. However, I would not go so far as to call his case proven. I am (perhaps due to my new biases), willing to accept Bamford's text pretty much as presented, but rigorous skeptics (or unfortunately, neoconservative apologists) may be able to highlight important flaws in the argument, if not it's architecture, at least in the substance of the material it's been built on.

Roughly two-thirds of the book was unnecessary (if interesting) filler. This is all of part I and most of part II. These chapters provide an historical recap of the people and events leading up to the 9/11 attacks, and how the intelligence apparatus fit in with the information it had. It's great stuff, good history, and it's presented in way that reads like a good intrigue/thriller novel.

But only sparsely in part II and more fully in part III does Bamford finally get to the point upon which the title for the book is taken: that Al Qaeda was somehow connected to Iraq, and therefore good reasons could be found to make war on Iraq. You don't need the expansive backgrounder on Al Qaeda to understand that if such a connection could be shown, the case for war would be far easier to make.

The structure of the book then, reserved the set-out of the "pretext" for going to war in Iraq for its third-act.

Within this final part, everything builds towards proving the premise that the Bush administration systematically and deliberately misled the public and the other branches of government, and misdirected the intelligence and defense agencies into suborning his plan for war.

Though frightening and compelling, I am not sure he proved his case. The smoking-gun doesn't appear until the final chapter, and disappointingly, it appears to be entirely based upon an anonymous 2004 interview source purported to be a "senior official" in position to know about and have documented first hand the events and statements of the other administration officials which, taken together, created that smoking-gun. The whole "reveal" scene consists of excerpts presented from this anonymous source.

The book is also not as well or tightly formatted for permitting an interested viewer to do their own fact-check or further investigation. Rather than traditional footnote citations, or superscript note numbers to cross-reference particular facts or statements within the text, the entire text is presented uncited, with only its normal narrative formatting. There is a 30-odd page section of notes at the back of the book, but they are organized by page number of body text, and contain no precise callout to the particular sentence or statement to which they refer. For example, in the listing you see five entries labeled "130", for page 130 of the text. It's up to you to properly suss-out what specific sentence or phrase in the text of page 130 each of these notes refers. Sometimes a short quotation from the text is prepended to the note to help localize you in the text. This is a ham-fisted and amateurish way to cite your source material, IMO.

Most of the source material appearing in the notes are mainstream media publications. Well, okay that's fine as far as that goes, but I was kind of expecting Bamford has some sort of "inside-baseball" connection to the facts here. At least some first-source material. Media reports can only honestly be second-source material, as you'd be relying on what they had for sources in their original piece. And, I think it's no surprise to anyone anymore that mainstream media these days is overtaxed and underfunded to do much of any real journalism. It's more often simple re-writing of press releases, hear-say analysis, and one outlet copy-pasting the work of another outlet (maybe with attribution) ad absurdum until it's worked its way magically into common-knowledge fact.

The notes do seem to contain some first-level sources, but these are relatively few compared to mass media sources.

The notes also indicate a few interviews, but they do not often indicate who was the subject of the interview, or who actually conducted the interview. It's half-assed, IMO. I retraced my way through the text after encountering a few of these interview notes. The notes themselves never indicating the subject, in the text the subjects are identified by phrases like: "according to officials familiar with", "said one knowledgeable NTP official", "one former DO official", and so on. Come on man...really?!

Alright, sorry for the digression, it serves to underscore the conclusion. One of the most important sources for tying the whole case together is saved for the end of the final chapter, when Secretary of State Colin Powell is working on and then presenting the administration's best case for going to war with Iraq to the UN Security Council. This source is also anonymous, called out only in the body text as, "a senior official closely associated with the event". Unfortunately the notes stop with the very page this source is first referenced, the last note relating to an unrelated quip made by Secretary Powell, presented a couple of paragraphs before this super-important anonymous is first referenced.

What?!

There are no notes or citations or references or anything to authenticate and validate the statements made

after this point. And I would argue that what this source purports to say about the events written in the last few pages are quite important to the nature of the author's premise for the entire book.

...you'll just have to take Bamford's word on it.

Now, when you consider that the above standard is often how many primary sources get treated by so-called journalists everywhere within the mainstream media, you begin to understand why Bamford's heavy reliance on mainstream media articles and publications doesn't help to bolster my overall confidence in the credibility of his arguments.

I'd call the whole mess plausible. Hell, I'm cynical enough to even call it damn likely, but Bamford's simply told us a story here. The real truth could be as far from this depiction of reality as President Bush's alleged conviction that Iraq had WMDs.

If anything, this book has reinforced my pessimism that democracy can be viable in the long-run for protecting a free society. I don't need to point out that the USA was created not as a democracy, but a representative republic...with some democratic process. It seems that the bias toward and effect of increasing the size and scope of that initial democratic influence has only accelerated the rate at which the State has degenerated. I don't have a solution. Proper democracy depends on an informed electorate. Popular support for the war in Iraq was indeed fairly high just as war began. I, as many other Americans, were going on the information we had available. So much of this information was garbage, and a lot was propaganda. But how else could we, as the electorate, have acted? Corrupt leaders, corrupt information, corrupt reporting, corrupted popular opinion, corrupted voting and lobbying, and we get corrupt policy, corrupt representation, feeding corrupt leaders, leading to destroyed populations and corroded society.

Yay!

As I stated near the top, I think the book does a job sufficient to comfortably say that faults aside, the preponderance of the evidence is on Bamford's side. It seems to me it's likely that the reality was as he characterizes.

Iraq did end up liberated from that awful dictator. That's a win. But Iraq could still today provide support to Al Qaeda or similar terror groups. The support doesn't have to be state-sponsored, or even sanctioned. There only need to be people sympathetic to the terror group's goals. So that one's a wash. Too many of our great citizen soldiers were killed in the process, too many innocent Iraqi civilians became collateral damage to one faction or another (and by that I guess we're talking hundreds of thousands killed, injured, or otherwise adversely affected). Iraq is still a broken country today. And our national goodwill and financial treasure have been eroded by amounts too vast to yet be fully appreciated. These are all losses. In my mind they (far) outweigh the good that's come of the war, and hopefully will stand for this nation as a lesson. This sort of capricious adventurism is the real threat to our national security. Followed on the impetus of combating global terror, it can only ultimately transform us more fully into a modern Rome. Old Rome only lasted so long as there were new lands to conquer and wars to wage so that the spoils and plunder could feed her. Our wars don't even supply plunder. They just eat our capital, buying us death.

[140125 original post, raw, not proofread]
