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Lying in the Practice of British Diplomacy

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Lying, in its numerous forms, has always been a common, possibly integral, feature of international relations and diplomacy. Equally, should we choose to focus more narrowly on the particular practice of British diplomacy over the past century the question of lying, at different levels and in varying degrees, plays no less a central part. Much the same conclusion could no doubt be reached with regard to other countries' diplomacies. The examples of how lying played a role in the conduct of British foreign policy over the course of the twentieth century are probably too numerous to list here. Furthermore, by their very nature, the best examples of diplomatic lying may well have gone, at least partially, undetected.

The following paper focusses on four case studies that can be seen as examples of the ways in which British foreign policy was conducted over this period. The first concerns British policy towards Palestine in the First World War: a complex story of stunning diplomatic chicanery and underhand practices that were often hidden, although barely, behind a façade of noble sentiment. The second will look at the "Hoare-Laval" Pact and the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935-36, a story that is less well-known today but which, at the time, provoked a major crisis both in Britain and internationally. The third is perhaps one of the most well-known examples of diplomatic lying and one that was done on a monumental scale: The Suez Crisis of 1956. Finally, the Iraq War of 2003, with its "dodgy dossiers" and "sexed up files," shows that many of the past practices in the conduct of British foreign policy remain in some ways unchanged today. All four of these crises were major world events with a direct impact on Britain, its foreign relations and its domestic politics. As such they are important events in themselves. They are also interesting examples of various forms of "lying" in the conduct of British foreign policy and, at times, of the quite cynical use of "lies" to achieve the aims, domestic and/or international, of those involved in perpetuating them.

These four case studies share certain common features. Firstly, they all concern the Middle East and Britain's interactions with this region. These relations have rarely been carried on in anything approaching an open and honest fashion. With the exception of the first case, one that was conducted over the course of the First World War with all the particularities that come from such a wartime context, all these case studies had direct, and often fatal, consequences for the political careers of those politicians who played the leading roles. For Samuel Hoare the revelation of his underhand and secret negotiations over the future of Ethiopia in 1935 brought about his downfall as Foreign Secretary. Although the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin,

survived this crisis his reputation never fully recovered thereafter. In 1956, the stance taken by Anthony Eden over Suez brought his political career to an end within months. It has seriously damaged his reputation ever since. The final case, that of the war in Iraq, is perhaps still too recent to allow a final judgement but it appears unlikely that Tony Blair will shake off the tarnished image that resulted from his personal conduct throughout this crisis. The last, but not the least important, similarity between these four examples is that they all ended in failure with few of the policy aims that were initially set out being achieved.

The standards and conduct of British diplomacy abroad: lying to a (foreign) "other"

There is little in the four examples outlined above that is positive, either in the ways British policy was conducted or in the final outcomes. This is not to say that lying is always a question of malpractice or skulduggery that necessarily ends in failure, with the guilty parties receiving their just rewards, at least in the form of public reproach. It is possible to find other, more positive and beneficial, examples of the use of lies in the conduct of British diplomacy. For example, those lies perpetuated by the secret services in order to deliberately mislead Germany in the Second World War prior to the Normandy landings. Other examples can be taken from the world of espionage. Lies and lying can, on occasion, therefore be regarded as justifiable or as being required by circumstances. Kant's categorical imperative opposing lying in all circumstances hardly seems applicable at the height of war, in the darkest hours of 1940 for example.

In the four case studies being considered here we can find evidence of unquestionably barefaced lies but more often than not of subtler forms of lying. Garrett Mattingly, an historian of international relations, wrote of how one Renaissance diplomat "exchanged smooth lies with princes" (Ure 216). In the events being described in this paper we might also talk of "distortions of the truth," "mistruths," "alternative truths," of a "lack of straight talking," "dissembling," "failing to divulge vital information," or of being "economical with the truth." The terminology of political and diplomatic lies and the euphemisms we resort to are almost endless. But in each of them it is nonetheless fair to talk in terms of lies, and therefore of liars.

In practice, and especially in diplomatic practice, a "lie" is, of course, not so easily defined or determined. Or identified as such. Harold Nicolson, the British diplomat and author, writing before the Second World War, listed what he regarded as the "qualities of [his] ideal diplomatist [and] of an ideal diplomacy." He placed "truthfulness" first on his list followed by "intellectual [and] moral accuracy" (Nicolson 112). In similar vein, one guide book written for

British diplomats in the 1920s by Ernest Satow argued that a candidate for the Foreign Office should have the following qualities: "Good temper, good health and good looks. Rather more than average intelligence, though brilliant genius is not necessary. A straightforward character [...] A mind trained by the study of the best literature, and by that of history. Capacity to judge of evidence. In short, the candidate must be an educated gentleman" (qtd. in Ure 237). This latter term is open to varying interpretations but if we take "gentleman" as defining, as the author of this work no doubt intended us to, not just social rank but as also relating to standards of behaviour then this implies a certain honesty. *Webster's Dictionary* describes a gentleman as "a man whose conduct conforms to a high standard of propriety or correct behaviour" while the *Oxford English Dictionary* includes the idea of being an "honourable man." Yet to talk of "being diplomatic" can be equated with a lack of straight talking. Equally the actual conduct and language of diplomacy is rarely seen as being entirely honest. Lord Granville Leverson Gower, a British diplomat to Russia in the early nineteenth century and someone who would have undoubtedly qualified as an "educated gentleman," accepted this. He wrote to a friend in 1805:

> Are you aware that the diplomatic Service is a school for falsehood and dissimulation? I am really sometimes shocked at myself for the degree of deceit which I am under the necessity of practising. It is not sufficient to be silent or to pretend to be ignorant of things of which one is informed, but one must hold a language calculated to inculcate a Belief of what is directly the contrary to the real Truth, and you Cannot conceive the degree of amusement the persons who are in the secret derive from the dupery of those whom they deceive (qtd. in Ure 234).

"Rivers flow backwards; Valleys are high; Mountains are level; Truth is a lie" (Parton)

Diplomats in general have been reluctant to think in terms of a clear-cut distinction between truth and lies. Likewise, in politics, and in particular in international politics, it is not always easy to distinguish a lie from the truth. Or to identify precisely when someone is lying. The two have even been confused in certain diplomatic practices with truth being deliberately distorted into a lie in order to mislead adversaries. In this way the seventeenth-century diplomat Sir Henry Wotton advised: "always, and upon all occasions speak the truth for [...] you shall never be believed; and by this means, your truth will secure yourself, if you shall ever be called to any account; and 'twill also put your Adversaries (who will still hunt counter) to a loss in all their disquisitions and undertakings" (Ure 234).

Lord Palmerston, British Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister in the nineteenth century, was noted by Ernest Satow for his "fearless truthfulness." However, the same source argued that

this seemingly honest approach often served to confound foreign diplomats who "went away convinced that so skilful and experienced a diplomatist could not possibly be so frank as he appeared, and imagining some deep design in his words, acted on their own ideas of what he really meant, and so misled themselves" (qtd. in Ure 235-236).

More recently, lawyers and judges have become mixed up with diplomats and politicians in the legal assessments of certain aspects of British diplomacy, most notably in the Chilcot enquiry into the British government's decision to go to war in Iraq. Like diplomats, they too are not renowned for their straight talking or their use of plain language. Describing some of the actions of the politicians and diplomats during these four crises as out-and-out lying is, therefore, far too simple. No matter how much protestors delighted in presenting Tony Blair in the guise of a Pinocchio-like "Bliar" with his elongated nose, lies are rarely if ever as plain as this. Alarm bells rarely ring in such circumstances, particularly in the realms of international diplomacy where a great deal of the exchanges are carried out behind closed doors. As Byron put it, "after all, what is a lie? Tis but the truth in masquerade" (Byron 438) or, as Tennyson argued, "a lie which is all a lie may be met and fought with outright; But a lie which is part a truth is a harder matter to fight" (Tennyson 5). For some observers, and for some of its practitioners, lies and liars are an integral part of politics and political activity. For George Orwell "Political language [...] is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (Orwell 25). Accusations of lying are certainly part and parcel of political exchanges and debates in Britain as elsewhere in the world.

The diplomat as liar: "an honest man sent to lie abroad for his country" (Ure 230)

These sentiments are perhaps even more present in the popular images of the sphere of international politics and diplomacy. It is often said that the best definition of a diplomat remains that given by Sir Henry Wotton in 1604: that he is as "an honest man sent to lie abroad for his country" (Ure 230). The American statesman John Hay, Secretary of State 1898-1905, made a similar point about what he saw as the inherently devious nature of diplomacy when he said that there "are three species of creatures who, when they seem coming are going; when they seem going, they come: diplomats, women and crabs" (Shea 1). For Machiavelli and Hobbes this type of diplomatic practice was a natural part of the conduct of diplomacy given that it made no sense to be truthful to your rivals and enemies. According to this approach, seeking to deceive your adversaries and enemies, even your allies and friends, was in fact a requirement of good diplomacy. Secrecy, holding back vital information and keeping others in the dark as to your true intentions and position, being disingenuous or "economical with the truth," or sometimes even downright deception and lying, are all part of this school of thought.

In wartime seeking to deceive an enemy is a necessary strategy and if, as Zhou Enlai argued, "all diplomacy is a continuation of war by other means" (*Saturday Evening Post*, 27 March 1954) then misleading others in peacetime is an equally obvious approach.

From this perspective lying should be regarded as an integral, unavoidable and even necessary, part of human nature especially in the field of politics. This state of affairs may be regrettable but it is the way the world operates. Indeed, in popular discourse whole countries can sometimes be defined in terms of their tenuous relationship with truth. That Britain should be regarded in France as intrinsically treacherous, as *Perfide Albion*, continues to be taken as a given. Equally, do the British fundamentally think any differently of the French? Douglas Hurd, one-time British diplomat and later on Foreign Secretary, despite his overall pro-European and pro-French reputation, nonetheless still warned of the dangers of being inveigled by the French foreign service whose diplomats were far too clever to be honest. "When I was a young diplomat," he wrote, "I was really rather terrified of the French […] There lingered for a long time a feeling that it was not quite safe to have a discussion with a French man, not because he would deceive you but because he was actually cleverer" (Powell 16). Hurd was far too much the diplomat to resort to an unequivocal accusation of lying. His predecessors, however, did not always show the same restraint when it came to describing their French counterparts. The example of Pierre Laval's reputation for dishonesty and deviousness during the Ethiopian crisis stands out. In 1936 Harold Macmillan, for example, condemned his "Gallic wiles" while Ramsay MacDonald argued more generally that "one cannot trust the French further than they can be seen" (Dockrill 8). Even General de Gaulle came in for criticism of this sort: In 1963, Harold Macmillan, by then Prime Minister, complained that "French duplicity has defeated us all" (Macmillan 368). From the French perspective, on the other hand, it was the British who were playing false in their diplomacy. For them Britain was motivated in its application to enter the recently created EEC not by the desire to join with the other Europeans in a true partnership but rather to seek to destroy it from within after the dissembling fashion of the Trojan Horse, this one directed from Washington. It is not difficult to find numerous examples of how British diplomats and politicians have sought to denigrate other countries and their conduct of diplomacy. However, any claims that might be made to an inherent fair play or an exemplary sense of justice in British diplomatic practices need to be treated with the utmost caution. Images of upright, righteous, moral Britons do not stand up to the evidence of their diplomatic record.

British diplomatic malpractice: the record from the Middle East

With regard to British diplomacy in the Middle East the records clearly illustrate an underlying British belief that the peoples of this region could not be trusted; that they were, in fact,

inveterate liars. In December 1920, for example, Lord Hardinge, previously Viceroy in India and by then Ambassador to France, described King Feisal, whom the British later placed on the throne in their Iraq mandate after having abandoned him in Syria where he had been ousted by the French, as a typical Arab chief "whose duplicity and love of intrigue and desire to profit by setting one government against another were notoriously typical of the Arab character in every aspect" (qtd. in Davis 44).

Such negative views of the countries, their peoples and their leaders, with which British diplomacy operated acted, in part, as a foil for their own qualities. In this way French, Arab, or any other nation's apparent character deficiencies could be contrasted with the British diplomats' image of their own fair play and British diplomatic practices opposed to other countries' somewhat lesser sense of political rectitude. Although this was a common feature of the discourse of British diplomats, the record of British diplomacy itself hardly justifies the impression that they often sought to give. This superior image of British diplomacy does not fit in very convincingly with the reality of how that diplomacy was actually conducted.

The falsity that lay at the heart of British diplomacy in the Middle East is clearly shown by the series of inconsistent and mutually contradictory promises made by various British diplomats and politicians during the course of the First World War. The complicated exchanges and agreements between the various wartime allies with regard to the post-war settlement of this region were marked throughout by duplicity. Writing of the various wartime commitments made by the allies to each other, to the Arabs, and to the Jews, one historian has concluded that "the only sensible conclusion to be drawn is that everybody lied to everybody else, and none with more aplomb, given their ambitions, than the British" (Holland 81). This stance was maintained beyond 1918 when British officials and ministers were torn between a series of contradictory concerns in the Middle East: the need to preserve the friendship of France and a certain idea of solidarity between the European colonial powers, a degree of sympathy, at least in some quarters, for the Arabs backed up by wartime expressions of future support for an Arab state and the Balfour Declaration in favour of the establishment of a Jewish homeland (to be achieved somehow without contravening the interests of the existing Arab population in Palestine). The attempts by the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, probably the wiliest British politician of his time, to gloss these over as somehow complementary obligations were never convincing and were not accepted by the French or by all his colleagues in London. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary and author of the famous declaration, Arthur Balfour, bluntly recognized that "the literal fulfillment of all our declarations is impossible [...] they are incompatible with each other and [...] they are incompatible with facts" (Holland 81). He went on to confess that "In so far as Palestine is concerned the Powers have made no statement of

fact which is not admittedly wrong, and no declaration of policy which, at least in the letter, they have not always intended to violate" (qtd. in Davis 46).

The linguistic chicanery of the British in reneging on their wartime promises was hardly likely to establish a firm base of confidence between themselves and the peoples of the Middle East and this proved to be the case in the following decades. The same pattern was followed in the Ethiopian crisis of 1934-36 when the Foreign Secretary, Samuel Hoare, conducted a series of secret exchanges with his French and Italian counterparts that resulted in the infamous Hoare-Laval plan of December 1935. Despite his previous statements in favour of the principles of collective security and in defence of international law, and assurances given to the Ethiopians that they would not be sold down the river, the plan he proposed in fact rewarded the Italian aggressor by conceding large territorial sacrifices. That these were to be made by the Ethiopian victim of that aggression only aggravated the sense of injustice and of underhand dealings. In 1956 the Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, in similar fashion to Hoare twenty years before, concluded a secret agreement with France and Israel which led first to an Israeli invasion of the Suez Canal zone followed by an Anglo-French "peace-keeping" intervention. Eden's denial in Parliament that there had been any prior deal with Israel was much questioned at the time and was later shown to have been a blatant "mistruth." This, as much as the diplomatic debacle that resulted from this rash undertaking, ruined Eden. The latest example of such diplomatic practice, that of the Iraq war and Tony Blair's less than honest conduct of the decision-making process that led up to Britain's military intervention alongside the United States despite the legal, moral and political doubts about taking this course, is in many ways a continuation of the practices followed by his predecessors.

The language of diplomacy: the tell-tale lies of British diplomacy and democracy

As well as focussing on foreign affairs, on the conduct of diplomacy abroad, it is also useful to look at these four international crises in their domestic political contexts; how they were played out in Parliament, the media and in the wider public domain as a whole. This raises important questions relating to the use of lies in a democracy and the often strained and distorted relationships between politicians, other unelected decision-makers including diplomats and the people.

The tensions that inevitably exist between democratic ideals and diplomatic practice, which are on some occasions outright contradictions, were exacerbated in each of these four crises. The personal roles of the then Prime Ministers also stand out as good examples of how "lying" was a central part of the events and of the conduct of British policy. With the exception of Lloyd George who had previously been involved in various political scandals and libel cases, and who

had long since gained a reputation for being "economical with the truth," the key figures in these events (Stanley Baldwin, Anthony Eden and Tony Blair) had, prior to these crises, presented themselves as essentially honest, fair-minded, open and trustworthy. Baldwin, for example, had built up an image as the down-to-earth, common sense, salt of the earth type; someone who could be entrusted with safely guiding the ship of state through troubled waters. His unintellectual, even possibly anti-intellectual, style was an essential part of his political and electoral success in a country where it is often believed that there are no greater liars than intellectuals, apart perhaps from intellectual politicians. Anthony Eden's image was in many ways quite different from that of Baldwin but he too liked to present himself as a man of principle, someone who had stood up to the dictators in the 1930s, who had resigned from government rather than be tainted with the policy of appeasement and in doing so had possibly sacrificed his career. Tony Blair, speaking on the BBC in November 1997, said "I think most people who have dealt with me, think I'm a pretty straight sort of guy, and I am" (Abrams 1). None of these reputations survived the political crises that engulfed them.

At the height of the crisis that almost brought down his government following the leaking of the terms of the Hoare-Laval plan, Baldwin set out his defence before Parliament. However, by arguing "my lips are not yet unsealed. Were these troubles over I would make a case, and I guarantee that not a man would go into the lobby against us," he only served to reinforce the impression of deviousness, of hiding the truth from Parliament and from the country. In 1956 Eden categorically denied any untoward dealings. On "the question of foreknowledge," he said, "quite bluntly to the House, that there was not foreknowledge that Israel would attack Egypt– there was not" (Williams 157). The apparent conviction of this statement failed to win over his political opponents in Parliament, the country and in his own party. Tony Blair's numerous economies with, and distortions of, the truth in the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq, maintained in the accounts he has given since, have been highlighted by numerous observers. Among these it is interesting to mention the partial, but most probably, deliberate mistranslation of the words spoken by Jacques Chirac on the eve of the Iraq war. This practice of seeking to displace the responsibility onto others, and in particular to blame the French, is a well-tried one in British diplomacy. In this case it allowed Tony Blair, at least temporarily, to disingenuously accuse the French for the failure of international sanctions to force Saddam Hussein to back down. In a similar fashion during the First World War the various written exchanges conducted by the British with their French, Zionist and Arab allies allowed for a good deal of ambiguity and potential to mislead. Promises and commitments made in one language could in this way quite easily take on more or less force when translated into another one.

In each of these crises the leading political players saw their reputations damaged, sometimes fatally, their careers definitively ruined when their "lies" were revealed. Having previously built up, with some success, an image for straight talking, meant that their fall from grace was all the greater for Baldwin, Eden and Blair. Beyond these personal implications the entire conduct of British diplomacy was seriously discredited. This was heightened by the fact that expectations of a more honest and truthful approach had been raised as a result of the changes taking place, or that had just taken place, in the international environment. The First World War was, at least in the ideas being publicly proclaimed in Britain, a war for the rights of nations to determine their own futures. For some it was presented as a war in defence of democracy against tyranny. By the time of the war in Ethiopia, the old pre-1914 realpolitik diplomatic model had been widely discredited as a result of the catastrophic events of the First World War and the collapse of the old international order. In its place, some idealists claimed, diplomacy should be based on a more democratic and open style. The League of Nations embodied these hopes. In 1956 and 2003 it was the United Nations that played a central role and on which many hopes were placed for a more honest conduct of international affairs. Both the League of Nations and the UN Security Council were indeed the theatres for very public debates and exchanges between the protagonists. The same questions were debated at length, and with great passion, in the British Parliament. In each case, the lies that were made were therefore very publicly made.

Lies as diplomatic necessities: justifications and exonerations

The examples of lying in British diplomatic practice over the course of the past one hundred years raise some interesting questions about the overall conduct of British foreign policy, about the relationships between truth, lies and democracy and may lead us to ask whether democracy can truly exist without an open government or survive in an atmosphere where information is controlled and manipulated. What conclusions need to be drawn from these questions remains open to debate.

For some politicians and diplomats, the obviously incompatible and often false promises made to all sides in the Middle East during the course of the First World War were made necessary by the situation the country found itself in and the need to be assured of the maximum support in conducting the war in this region. The commitments undertaken to the Arab and Zionist causes, and to Britain's wartime allies, France, Italy and Russia, were self-evidently incompatible and included false promises. Moreover, they were knowingly made as such. The correspondence exchanged between the British High Commissioner to Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, and Husayn ibn Ali, the Emir of Mecca, in 1915 and 1916 offered the prospect, but no firm commitment, of British support for a future Arab state, although this was to be under

some form of European, preferably British, tutelage. The 1917 Balfour Declaration stated that the British Government "view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object." But it also went on to say that it should be "clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine" (Hurewitz 106). Meanwhile the various plans drawn up between Britain and its European allies, of which the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement is the most well-known, envisaged few real concessions to either the Arabs or the Jews in what would be a territorial carve-up of the region in the well-established pattern of previous European relations with the non-European world. In this, Britain, which had made the greatest contribution to the military campaigns in the Middle East, was to receive the lion's share of the spoils of victory even if this meant going back on some of their wartime promises to their European, principally French, allies.

At best British policy towards the Middle East in the First World War can be regarded as inconsistent. At worst as dishonest and manipulative. Those who, at the time and since, have sought to defend this approach may see this as an example of a necessary lie for the greater good. Above all there was the need to keep all sides on board: The Arabs fighting alongside the allies against Turkey; to assuage Jewish opinion at home and, more importantly, in the United States; finally, to keep the French happy knowing that they were assuming the greatest burden of the war effort on the western front. There was undoubtedly an element of short-termism in this approach or, to put it another way, of short-sightedness as the immediate needs to win the war pushed the British decision-makers into adopting positions and making promises that they knew to be untenable in the long-term. There is also evidence of confused thinking between various government factions. It remains open to debate whether or not, given these considerations and the context in which their policy was being conducted, British decision-makers were therefore making ill-thought-out promises, which as such may be regarded as half-truths or as almost innocent lies, or if there was an over-arching plan based on a cynical and coherent pattern of lies that were deliberately made in order to mislead and advance British interests.

The same debate around the conflict between realpolitik requirements and a certain morality in the conduct of British foreign policy can be found in the later crises of 1935-36, 1956 and 2003 with the same contradictions between the conduct of a secret diplomacy and the public commitments, made both at home for electoral reasons and internationally, in defence of international law and justice. For some observers the Hoare-Laval plan was a necessity given the need to avoid pushing Italy into the arms of Nazi Germany. Sacrificing at least parts of

Ethiopia's territorial integrity in order to buy off Mussolini was therefore a rational choice. However, this could in no way be portrayed as consistent with the promises made by the British government to stand by the principles of the League of Nations and to work against such blatant international aggression as the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The argument that the sacrifice of a small, faraway, country for the greater good was justifiable was underpinned by racist views of the world and the clear distinction being drawn between a weak black African country and the threat Britain itself faced in Europe. Samuel Hoare's argument that his plan constituted the best possible terms available for Ethiopia and that such losses were inevitable failed to convince his colleagues in government or public opinion at large. A broadly similar picture emerges from the 1956 Suez crisis. For Anthony Eden his policy was based on a necessary lie for the greater good, a lie required to achieve success in the Suez operation militarily, diplomatically and politically. However, as for Samuel Hoare, the impossibility of reconciling what was being done diplomatically with what was being said publicly led to a degree of tension that could not be maintained. Eden also failed to convince either opinion at home or internationally that his objectives, to stand up to what he saw as the danger represented by the Egyptian leader, Colonel Nasser, and to bring about his downfall, were sufficient justification for the duplicity of British diplomacy.

Lies after the event: cover-ups and "blame games," (re)writing the records and the judgements of history

The events leading up to the Iraq war present some similarities with the previous examples. However, the degree of public scrutiny and the increased difficulties of conducting diplomacy behind closed doors were significantly different from the contexts in which Lloyd George, Balfour, Baldwin, Hoare and Eden had operated. Nonetheless, some of the same fundamental questions relating to the manner in which British diplomacy was conducted, its duplicity and lies, remained the same. Among the very many critics of Tony Blair over the Iraq war the journalist and independent MP Martin Bell has perhaps put the case for the accusation most eloquently. He writes: "The case for war had been sexed up, massaged, doctored or falsified—the terms varied but the facts were indisputable. It had been presented as something other than it was" (Bell 139). Bell fell short of actually accusing Blair of openly lying but his choice of words left little doubt that this was, in fact, what he was arguing. The claims made by the British government with regard to Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), its ability to launch a missile attack on Britain with only forty-five minutes' notice and the denials that the ultimate objective of British policy was in fact regime change in Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, in contravention of basic international law, have clearly been revealed as false by subsequent evidence.

The post-war debate over the conduct of British diplomacy, and particularly of Tony Blair's personal role in it, that is still ongoing a decade later raises the fundamental question of what precisely constitutes a lie. As one writer on this subject has put it: "Lies are so often so subtle, so deftly woven into easily acceptable truths that we often fail to recognize them." At the same time "The devices of falsehood—whether simple exaggeration, pretence, or barefaced lies—have always been hard to resist and easy to employ" (Campbell 1). In the case of the Iraq war and the subsequent enquiries into the conduct of British decision-making should we consider, as one of his advisors has done, that because Tony Blair actually believed that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, then he was therefore guilty of nothing more than "a little bit of rhetorical exaggeration," of "exaggeration rather than lying"? (Hasan 1). In 2017, Sir John Chilcot, concluded that Tony Blair had been "emotionally truthful" (Wilkinson 1) in his accounts of events leading up to the invasion of Iraq while at the same time casting serious doubts on the veracity of the information he received and that he presented to Parliament and to the country. It is possible to consider this as an example of what W. H. Auden considered "The romantic lie in the brain," of coming to believe your own lies no matter how weak their bases. Or of what, Auden again, could be referred to as "the lie of Authority" (Auden 37), in this example a lie repeatedly and forcefully made and backed up by the whole apparatus of the state. Can this be regarded as no more than the usual practice of diplomacy, part of the everyday practice of politics and the need to convince Parliament, the people and the media to support the policy being followed? Moreover, who is to judge the validity, the truthfulness, of each case and based on what criteria? Political opponents, the media and the public at large have always been keen to condemn the "lies" of politicians at home and in international affairs. Long after the events historians, with the aid of hindsight and sometimes of previously unreleased information, have added their verdicts.

Whatever the conclusions that are drawn from the record of these examples of how British diplomacy has been conducted, whatever the judgements that are pronounced on the (un)truthfulness, the (dis)honesty, the duplicity, deception and chicanery, the distortions of the truth, the spin and the massaging of the facts, that have accompanied this diplomacy, the lexical field has certainly been a rich one. Perhaps due to fears of libel actions, or as a consequence of certain parliamentary usages, or simply through fear of appearing to be overly passionate, the debate has frequently resorted to euphemisms. For example, Martin Bell, the journalist and anti-corruption MP, has argued that the criticisms made against Blair in the 2004 Butler Review into intelligence gathering and the claims that Iraq possessed WMD would have been better expressed if "Lord Butler had been persuaded to write it in plain English, rather than in the silken understatements of his kind" (Bell 147). The most extreme expression used by the later Chilcot Report in 2017 went no further than to argue that Tony Blair had not

been "straight with the nation" (Wilkinson 1) over the lead up to war in 2003. In 1956 the editor of *The Observer* accused Anthony Eden of "crookedness" rather than of telling lies (Astor 1).

At the height of the Iraq crisis, the French Foreign Minister, Dominique de Villepin, speaking before the United Nations Security Council, asked if Britain and the United States were engaging in what he termed a "blame game," trying to deflect the debate onto the supposed failings of the other powers, with France at the top of the list. There is no doubt some truth in this accusation. Indeed, the tendency to seek to divert responsibility onto others, often to blame the French, has been a long-established pattern in British diplomacy, including in some of the examples being considered here. For several of his colleagues, and in parts of the media, the idea of a poor naïve Samuel Hoare being misled by the cunning of his French counterpart, Pierre Laval, was used as an excuse for his failings. In fact, Hoare entered into the talks with the French and concluded the final agreement with his eyes wide open and was in no way hoodwinked by Laval. Other colleagues came to Hoare's defence by claiming, equally unjustly, that he had been as much led astray by senior Foreign Office diplomats as by the French. In 2003, just as over Hoare-Laval agreement, the easiest card for Tony Blair to play was to deliberately seek to find a scapegoat, knowing full-well that this was unjustified. In the key parliamentary debate Blair resorted to a well-established pattern, claiming that if only the French would stand firm alongside the British and Americans in facing up to Saddam Hussein the need to go to war could be avoided. In fact, the decision to go to war had already been reached long before. To reinforce this point, and to further place the responsibility onto the French, Blair deliberately overestimated what Jacques Chirac had said in his television broadcast some days earlier and his opposition to the decision to resort to the use of force.

"History will be my judge" (Blair): "Truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long [...] The truth will out" (*The Merchant of Venice, Act Two, Scene 2*)

It is often said that "You can fool all the people part of the time, or you can fool some people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time," but does this apply to the conduct of British diplomacy in the cases looked at here? Has the "truth" come to light and have the "lies" been revealed with those who made them getting their comeuppance?

There was no great fall-out after the Balfour declaration and the various other contradictory commitments made by Britain in the Middle East during the First World War. At the time, British opinion seems not to have cared too much about this diplomacy whatever the evidence of duplicity. These practices did, however, leave a terrible legacy in the region itself where the mess left behind by the British still shows no signs of being cleared up more than a century later. In 1935, Baldwin came very close to losing office in the wake of the revelation of his

government's double standards during the Ethiopian crisis. He managed to cling onto power for another year but his reputation never fully recovered. He continued to be lampooned for his "unsealed lips" throughout the rest of his political career, notably in the cartoons of David Low. Anthony Eden lost office soon after the Suez fiasco. However, this was possibly due more to the failure of his policies than because of his lies. The extent to which Britain had connived with the Israelis and the French in concluding a secret pact prior to the Anglo-French military intervention was not fully revealed until some years later. The hopes that all written records of these conversations would be destroyed, thus avoiding any compromising evidence being exposed later on, proved to be unfounded following later leaks of information from other sources. Tony Blair, however, survived for several more years following the Iraq war again, in part, because the full truth was very slow in coming out. There are obvious similarities between the Suez crisis and the Iraq war and, as for Eden, Tony Blair's reputation was as much damaged by the failure of his policies, and his personal failure, as it was by his lies. Nonetheless, like an albatross, Iraq has been hung around Blair's neck and there are no signs of this ever being removed.

From the outset the record of British diplomacy during the Iraq crisis has been the subject of intense and passionate debate with accusations of dishonesty and deceit being made from many sides. In his defence Tony Blair has consistently sought to refute such attacks, arguing that "I've never claimed to have a monopoly of wisdom, but one thing I've learned in this job is you should always try to do the right thing, not the easy thing. Let the day-to-day judgments come and go: be prepared to be judged by history" (Blair 1). Given that the Iraq crisis is still far from over, it may well be too soon to pass a definitive judgement on the conduct of British diplomacy towards Iraq over the past two decades. For the moment, however, the case against Tony Blair and the accusations that he engaged in at the least half-truths seems overwhelming. Taken more generally, it is possible to see the writing of all history, especially the autobiographical writing of history, as a form of lying. For Jean Cocteau, "History is a combination of reality and lies. The reality of History becomes a lie. The unreality of fable becomes the truth"[1] (Cocteau 143, my translation). Winston Churchill's possibly apocryphal statement that "History will be kind to me for I intend to write it" makes much the same point. If this is indeed the case then it is possible to consider that the fundamental failure of Baldwin, Eden and Blair was their inability to manage the truth, to put the right spin on the story, or to present a record of events in a way that was favourable to them. Unlike Churchill, they were unable to write the history themselves. As a consequence, the history that has come down to us continues to judge them harshly.

[1] « L'Histoire est un alliage de réel et le mensonge. Le réel de l'Histoire devient un mensonge. L'irréel de la fable devient vérité ».

Conclusions: British diplomacy in a "post-truth" age

The word "post-truth" was chosen as word of the year in 2016 by the *Oxford English Dictionary* while "fake news" was recently chosen in the same category by the *Collins Dictionary*. These neologisms are part of an increasingly heated debate around the questions of political probity, the role of the news media and the whole issue of truth and lies in politics in general. However, while the terminology may be recent the issues underlying them are much older as the historical case studies looked at above show. The supposedly post-truth age that we are now entering is perhaps, after all, nothing new.

What these examples also show is that the frequent use of lying in diplomacy and foreign affairs raises fundamental questions about the relationship between the decision-makers and the people in democracies, and the potential breakdown in trust from the latter to the former. These practices are an important element that needs to be taken into consideration in any analysis of British diplomacy and of international relations in the broadest sense. They can also often result in far more serious consequences than those relating to the political fortunes of certain national leaders.

The debate that led up to the decision to leave the European Union was in many ways marked by a series of half-truths and occasionally by utter lies. The claim that ninety percent of United Kingdom laws were made by the EU and that, post-Brexit, the United Kingdom would transfer £350 million per week from financing the EU budget to financing the NHS were just two among numerous other examples. The decision to take Britain to war in Iraq was another vitally important decision that was in many ways based on, at best, uncertain grounds and doubtful arguments or, at worst, on a deliberate misrepresentation before Parliament and the country of the true situation facing the country.

If we accept that holding back the truth, or a part of it, can, in some circumstances, constitute a lie then it is not difficult to find evidence of this in the conduct of British diplomacy and decision-making at the highest level. In 1916, for example, the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, told C. P. Scott, the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*: "If the people really knew [the truth] the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don't know and can't know" (Pilger 1). Shortly after the war, Rudyard Kipling, who was anything but a pacifist, accused the country's leaders of the same lack of honesty in his poem "Epitaphs of the War" which included the lines: "If any question why we died; Tell them, because our fathers lied." The poem also includes the words of a "dead statesman": "I could not dig: I dared not rob: Therefore I lied to please the mob. Now all my lies are proved untrue; And I must face the men I slew" (Kipling

131). There can be fewer more damning judgements of how British policies, including the decisions of war and peace, have all too often been taken on the basis of half-truths and lies. The lessons of history, as the more recent record of Britain's wars has shown, have yet to be learned.

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