

MELBOURNE PRESS CLUB

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Speaker: Andrew Wilkie

Ian Henderson: Whistleblowers often pay a hefty price for following their conscience, a fact that's been tragically underlined by the recent suicide of British weapons expert, former UN Inspector and British Government Adviser, Dr David Kelly, who had the temerity to talk to the BBC of his misgivings about the Blair government's case for war against Iraq. Dr Kelly's death affected today's guest speaker deeply. After all, their circumstances weren't all that different. On March 10 this year with the war drums beating evermore loudly every day, Andrew Wilkie resigned from his job as an analyst at Australia's Office of National Assessments to go public with his misgivings about the Howard government's case for war. To put his case simply, he felt Australia was being led into a pre-emptive strike on a sovereign nation under false pretences. He'll tell you why himself in a moment.

When he approached Laurie Oakes with his desire to go public, Oakes told Andrew Wilkie to expect a couple of days of intense publicity and then it would all blow over as the news agenda moved on. Well Laurie's not often wrong but he was in this case. Four months on, Andrew Wilkie is still in the spotlight as the debate over Iraq's weapons programs rages on much to the discomfort of the Blair, Bush, and Howard administrations.

As Laurie Oakes so pungently put it in his column in *The Bulletin*, "Andrew Wilkie is no bleeding heart Leftie." He joined the army at 19. He graduated from Duntroon in 1984 and attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. For a time he was *aide de camp* to the Governor General. He's also worked as a consultant to a large US defence contractor prior to his secondment to the ONA first as a part timer then as one of it's senior analysts specialising in terrorism and cross border issues. His detractors will tell you he's talking outside of his specific area of expertise, he's a nuisance, an attention seeker who bit the hand that fed him. His supporters will say he's a man of conscience who feels an obligation to the people of Australia to speak the truth as he knows it. Friends describe him as hardworking, capable, competent and trustworthy. Accustomed to working behind the scenes Andrew Wilkie says he struggles with the limelight. He says he doesn't like speaking in front of crowds and he doesn't find it easy speaking to the media – gut-wrenching, I think, were the words you used, Andrew. Nevertheless he is with us here at the Melbourne Press Club today as that notional two-day campaign now moves into its fifth month. Please make Andrew Wilkie very welcome.

Andrew Wilkie: Well, thank you Ian for that very generous introduction. And thank you ladies and gentlemen for your interest in joining me today for lunch to hear my perspective on what I would describe as the Iraq mess. Now I'll start by acknowledging that I appreciate very well that amongst us there would be a very, very broad range of views on the war in Iraq. Everything from very, very strong support for the war and strong agreement with our government right through to where I sit very, very strong misgivings about why we went there, the aftermath and some very serious concerns about where we're heading. I would expect though that notwithstanding that broad range of views I think we would all agree or most of us should agree that there is a very big gap between what we were told before the war and what has been revealed since. I would remind you of the two main arguments of why we should go to war in Iraq. Firstly, that Iraq had failed to disarm and possessed a substantial arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. In fact, Prime Minister Howard on various occasions described it as massive and on at least one occasion described the arsenal as mammoth. A scary picture indeed. And of course the other pillar of the argument for war was that Iraq was a sponsor of international terrorism, was in fact cooperating actively with al Qa'ida and that it would only be a matter of time before there was some leakage of these weapons of mass destruction from this mammoth arsenal to these terrorists. There were very, very powerful images painted in London and in Washington and Canberra of mushroom clouds and of massive casualties and of the

need to act super quickly certainly so quickly that we couldn't possibly wait for the UN weapons inspectors to continue their search for these weapons of mass destruction.

OK, so there's a gap and I think most of us agree there is a gap. The question now is was it an intelligence failure or was it a failure of governance or was it a combination of the two. I think I'll start by stepping through the intelligence picture first cos that's obviously what I'm most familiar with. The facts of the matter as I recall them are that the intelligence and the Australian and Allied assessments pointed towards Saddam Hussein maintaining some sort of chemical and biological warfare program. But it was limited evidence. It didn't paint a complete picture. In fact it was quite murky because a lot of the evidence was pointing to arguable aspects of the program such as dual use facilities and dual use factories. For example that a factory lets say, had been rebuilt since the previous gulf war and (the factory) makes castor oil or made castor oil for brakes but yet it could easily be converted to produce ricin toxin. The presence also of dual use materials for example stock piles of chlorine which as we know a country would use to purify their water but it can be used a key ingredient of some chemical agents such as mustard gas. The intelligence picture was pointing towards something going on with chemical and biological programs and at least some sort of what I'll call break out capacity ie: the country could have with some lee time used its dual use facilities to start producing chemical or biological weapons. Now I know there's issues of intent and history but I should point out Australia has a break out capability. Any country has a break out capability. I could get in a cab and travel five minutes from here and I could come across any number of dual use facilities and stock piles of dual use chemicals which any half smart scientist in any one of the laboratories and industrial complexes around Melbourne could within a matter of months produce a stock pile of chemical and biological weapons. So the mere existence of those sorts of things doesn't within itself prove that a country is up to no good.

Critically, there was not enough intelligence to convince me that Iraq had a mature program and that it was weaponising its chemical or biological agents. And that is the key step. It's a huge gap between having dual use facilities and having some intent and being up to a bit of mischief and actually weaponising the stuff. Because that is technically difficult. It has quite a signature for intelligence agencies to pick up and I was not persuaded that the intelligence on this was convincing. In fact, given the way I have just described it and I describe it as the facts of the matter, I think you will understand why on the 11 March I described Iraq's WMD program as disjointed and contained and not a serious enough threat to justify a war.

Of course there were two other very important aspects of the case for war. One was nuclear. By the time the war started there was no evidence that Iraq was trying to reconstitute it's nuclear program. And any assertions to the otherwise I would suggest are cock-and-bull. In fact the reason the Niger story is so important and not just 16 words like Condoleezza Rice has said, the reason the Niger story is so important is that the claims that Iraq was trying to purchase uranium from Africa was the last remaining credible piece of evidence that Iraq was trying to reconstitute a nuclear program and the fact that that story was discredited in 2002 and communicated to US and allied agencies (I maintain in 2002) the government maintains January 2003. Either way it doesn't matter. Either way it was before the State-of-the-Union address and it was before John Howard stood in the House of Representatives and referred to it. Once that information was discredited there was effectively no evidence to make any claim about Iraq trying to reconstitute a nuclear program.

You've got to understand that a nuclear program is a massive industrial undertaking. You've got to have the know-how, the scientists, the raw material and a mammoth industrial program. Some of you may recall pictures of the US gas centrifuge factories in the 1940s and 1950s. Massive industrial complexes that would stick out easily for intelligence agencies to pick up. The thought that a couple of pieces of metal under a rosebush in some scientists yard in Bagdad the other day, the thought that that was somehow proof of anything is ridiculous. It takes thousands of those in a huge factory, a factory so large that it would need to have a power plant next door to power it up or when they turn it on that quarter of Iraq would probably have a brownout. It is that sort of undertaking. To suggest that they had something like this going on in a cave is ridiculous to anyone who knows anything at all about nuclear weapons.

And al Qa'ida, I'm sounding like a broken record, I'll say it again. In my three years at ONA I never saw any hard evidence of any active cooperation between Iraq and al Qa'ida. The presence of al Qa'ida in

north eastern Iraq which was cited by Colin Powell in the Security Council on 5 February was grossly misleading cos that was an area of Iraq outside of Saddam's control. The evidence of a couple of al Qa'ida hanging around in Bagdad is probably no worse than the fact that there's probably a couple of al Qa'ida sympathisers hanging around in Melbourne. Might even be one here. It's a worldwide terrorist organisation. At worst all it proved was there was at worst some sort of tolerance of their presence.

OK. So what do I think will be found? I risk some of the good calls I made right now by telling you what I think will be found. I think what will be found will be the evidence of a disjointed and contained WMD program specifically chemical and biological programs. It will be evidence in the form of literally some bits and pieces. Some testimonies from scientists who will for various reasons describe the nature of the program and what happened to it. There might even be a few old pre 1992 or 1991 shells of mustard gas. And that will be packaged up very impressively. It will perhaps be described as a dossier as the vindication for the decision to go to war. And my point is that whatever is found will in no way satisfy John Howard's criteria of a mammoth or massive arsenal of weapons of mass destruction.

Of course people ask me all the time now about what is politicisation of intelligence and what happens, you know how does it happen. The Niger story is an interesting story because it is such a clear cut case of where three governments decided to dishonestly tell a story. More often though, intelligence is politicised in much more subtle ways. For the want of deleting a word "could" you can suddenly transform the threat. For the want of adding a word like "massive" when standing in the House of Representatives, you completely transform the threat. It's that subtle. It's very important to understand that there were very big intelligence gaps on Iraq. So the intelligence agencies invariably were providing very, very qualified assessments and they were painting a reasonably ambiguous picture which was nothing like the totally unambiguous picture which was being presented in dossiers in Washington, London or Canberra. It was often very subtle. As I say you've just got to drop a word like "could" or "might" or drop a phrase like "uncorroborated evidence suggests". You know drop that out of 500 words and you have completely re-engineered your enemy. And it was often that subtle.

Of course, I have maintained all along that the Australian government's preoccupation with WMD was particularly misleading because in parallel with the reporting on Iraq the Office of National Assessments was also providing intelligence reporting on the United States of America and was communicating to the government very clearly that there were a broad range of strategic and domestic drivers behind the war in Washington. And when you understand that our government knew WMD wasn't the main game it makes their insistence or their preoccupation with WMD-I think it takes it from being a misunderstanding to being more than that, to being dishonest the way it was being sold to us.

Now (I'd better watch the time here or I'll get myself in strife) I'd like to head off the first question I'm probably going to be asked about - well you know isn't it a good thing that Saddam's gone wherever he's gone? Look, I want to make it quite clear I'm no friend of Saddam Hussein. He is a horrid man and Iraq will one day be a better place for his passing. I agree with that. But I feel so strongly that the end should never be allowed to justify the means. Otherwise we become no better than the regimes that we seek to remove. Because some things we've got to hold dear in this country and one of them is honesty. And in some ways this issue isn't about Iraq any more it's about honesty and the fact that our government has a name now as a habitual liar. I'll go that far and to say. And it's water off a ducks back. We don't notice it any more. A couple of days Minister Ruddock said it wasn't his voice on that tape. Then the next day he said well it was his voice on that tape. A few weeks ago we were told that the Vietnamese boat hadn't made the immigration zone. A day or so later oh well it did actually make the immigration zone. Each and every one of them should be a scandal cos each and every time we're being lied to. And I think that's the big issue for Australia now about the quality of our governance. Of course people are going to ask me well if his WMD program was disjointed and contained then why didn't he come clean with the UN? Well look I don't know the answer to that. And I suppose one day we'll find out. But I could speculate a number of reasons why he might have. For example the Iraqi regime, they like other administrations was an habitual liar. That it was an affront to their sovereignty to ask them to totally disarm. That they would lose face by being seen to have been disarmed by foreigners. And whilst I'm no apologist for Saddam, I want to make that very clear, but let's put yourself in his shoes. His disarmament is been demanded when on every land and sea border he has an adversary. Have a think about the map of the Middle East. He's

got NATO member and enemy Turkey to his north, archenemy with WMD Iran to the north east, the Persian Gulf full of US warships down there. He's then got Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan all strong US allies, adversaries and all backed by the US including US bases around basically his southern borders. He's got archenemy with WMD Israel across the other side of Jordan. And he's got enemy from time to time with WMD Syria to his north west. But yet we're demanding he totally disarm. Now whether or not we agree or disagree with him being disarmed put yourself in his shoes. Look at the world through the Iraqi's shoes. Was that reasonable? You can see why they might have wanted to keep their neighbours at least and the international community, thinking of keeping leverage, you can see why he might have wanted to have kept them guessing. And of course if he did have this disjointed and contained program which I still believe, then that's another reason why he'd want to at least conceal that break out capability. I was told 20 minutes. Can I have five more minutes? Thank you. I've written down here a string of reasons why I think the world is a more dangerous place. And they are to use the Prime Minister's words self evident. So I'll virtually just read them out. We can maybe discuss them with questions.

I feel strongly that we now have to endure an increased risk of terrorism because we along with the US and UK and others has fuelled that big bundle of reasons why people would resort to terrorism against the west and against countries including Australia. And these are smart people. These are terrorists who take years to plan things. So the backlash from Iraq it wasn't going to be three months ago. It might not be today. It might not be tomorrow. It might not be next year. It might be so far in the distance that we won't even link it with Iraq. But there will be another big terrorist attack eventually somewhere in the world. And it could involve Australian interests. And it will be a tragedy but it could well be connected in at least a subtle way to this fuelling of concern amongst a large group of people concerned about our behaviour.

I think there's an increased likelihood now of WMD proliferation because this US adventurism is persuading countries like North Korea and Iran that the only way to deter US aggression is to have weapons of mass destruction specifically nuclear weapons. And of course it's not helped by the hypocrisy of the US that at a time they are saying to other countries they can't have weapons of mass destruction the US is itself determined to develop a new generation of battlefield nuclear weapons. I mean the hypocrisy of this is staggering. I mean I don't think Iran or North Korea should have nuclear weapons but I can't blame them for pursuing them. And I can understand why they would pursue them.

I think the Middle East will remain destabilised for the foreseeable future. I do not agree that the death of the two sons and eventually Saddam will suddenly bring peace to Iraq. I think that completely misses the point. I believe that the ongoing guerrilla war in Iraq will continue so long as the US has such a high presence, a large presence so long as the Iraqis don't have genuine self rule and so long as the circumstances of the average Iraqi is so dire. I think this is very much a rebellion against the army of occupation now. And I don't think the death of Saddam, whilst there'll be great fanfare, I don't think that will solve the problem.

I think that some decision makers have been emboldened by what they think is their success. I mean people like Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz. I think they've been emboldened by this.

I think we've encouraged or at least in the eyes of some people legitimised the use of pre-emptive force. I mean who can blame Indonesia now crossing the border to PNG to have a go at OPN camp. Who can blame India having a go at Pakistan the next time they have a problem in Kashmir. Who can blame North Korea firing off a missile because they think you know they are under threat.

I think we've harmed multilateralism and the role of the UN. I'm going to say something which is probably controversial. I think history will be kind to the UN over Iraq. The fact that they couldn't reach a decision on going to war for reasons which have since found to be discredited perhaps suggests that the UN works better than we realised. The fact they couldn't agree and couldn't authorise an unjust war. Well that sounds to me like a winner for the UN Security Council not a problem for the UN Security Council. Having said that I'm the first to agree it needs to be re-engineered and democratised and so on. But let's face it as far from perfect as the UN is it's still the best thing we've got and I still think it's better than having one super power calling the shots. And I think we should be spending more time worrying about improving the UN Security Council and I don't think mean by establishing a third tier like John Howard suggests which all that does is just entrench the five World War II victors having a veto power which I think misses the point.

And my final point is I think the world is a more dangerous place now because of the way of the credibility of the US has been diminished. And by the way our government's credibility has been diminished. Whether you like America or not the fact is they are the world superpower and there is an important leadership role for them to take and it's important that we all trust them and can believe them and are prepared to support them when they need help. But I think it's going to be so much harder now next time around for the UN to get a coalition of the willing together. And similarly, I'm not a big fan of John Howard but I am a fan of strong government and strong government relies on our leaders having credibility because how else can they make the tough decisions and how else can they wage this war on terror amongst other challenges. So, I think we've got a problem in Australia that we're less likely to believe our government the next time around.

OK I've gone way over time. I'll hand over to Ian.

IH: You're not quite off the hook yet, Andrew. Andrew has agreed to take questions and I'm sure there's a lot of pretty provocative and thought provoking stuff in there and there'll be quite a few questions around the floor. Could I ask you please when you ask your question to identify yourself and if appropriate what organisation you represent.

Q: Just wondering if you think David Kelly really committed suicide or whether

AW: I don't think it's useful to speculate about whether it was suicide or foul play. I think the responsible thing - I sound like a politician now - I think the responsible thing is to wait til the findings are in. I must admit I was in Washington at the time and I was rung by someone in London and I was shocked. All sorts of things ran through my head. Whatever happened to him it's a tragedy and I don't really want to talk too much about it. Until we know. But as someone who fronted that foreign affairs committee and was given a roasting maybe I'm a bit more thick-skinned than him. I mean I can really feel for him you know, really, really feel for him or his family I should say.

Q: The Israel Palestine problem, what part as far as your knowledge of the background to this has played a part in the problems in Iraq?

AW: Yes, that's a very good question and I think it has played an important part. When I said that WMD wasn't the reason for the war and I said there was a range of strategic and US domestic drivers that were really behind it and I think one of them was genuinely you know I think in fairness to some people in the US administration they did have a genuine desire of settling the Middle East down. Mind you I think there was also amongst the now conservatives, I can call them that, an interest in seeking to safeguard Israel's future as opposed to helping to resolve the Israeli Palestinian dispute. But yeah I'll give credit where credit was due. I think some of the decision makers involved in this have thought that by democratising and removing Saddam it would feed into that. I don't claim to be an expert on the Arab Israeli dispute.

Vic Caruso, SBS: Can you just elaborate on what you said about the ONA having intelligence reports from the US about their build up as to what reasons they were giving for invading Iraq at some stage in the future?

AW: OK. No my point there is that ONA provides assessments to the government on a very broad range of offshore issues and although we don't collect intelligence on our allies we do write assessments about our allies to help inform the government's decision making. So in parallel with reports on Iraq there were also reports going to the governments about what Tony Blair was up to, about what George Bush was up to, you know what was driving the US. And it was being made very clear over a long period of time in a number of reports that there were a broad range of drivers for the war. And it was made very, very clear that WMD was only one aspect of that and wasn't necessarily the most important aspect. And as I said earlier this was a very, very important point which I think people need to pay attention to because it makes

the government's statements ring a bit hollow when we now understand that the government knew that it wasn't the main issue.

Q: What were the other issues?

AW: Oh well I mean you'd all appreciate as well as me a very, very broad range of issues. I mean just talking US domestic issues for a start the administration had really painted themselves into a corner. They had done so well in the US mid term elections in late 2002 on the back of basically of a promise of dealing with Iraq. So the administrations credibility was on the line. They had to act sooner or later. There was also, and I'll group this as a domestic issue, an underlying sense of unfinished business in the US since 1991. An underlying dislike for Iraq in the US which you've seen played in the US media. As far as US strategic drivers we could probably rattle off between us a hundred and between us we could probably come up with all different orders for what they were but there was no doubt-oh sorry as far as domestic there's also this rise of the so-called you know neo-cons and so on.

As far as strategic drivers not in any particular order but everything from the US safeguarding its global ascendancy, stamping it's authority on the Middle East, seeking to safeguard Israel, back to that previous question, access to strategic oil reserves, removing the US centre of gravity from Saudi Arabia across to the country with the second most amount of oil and so. And we could debate the list til dinner tonight. The main point here is that our government was well aware that the US was motivated by a very broad range of things and not just weapons of mass destruction. That's the key point. Because it makes the pre-occupation with weapons of mass destruction dishonest rather than just a misunderstanding of the problem.

Q: Why did the UN never request a cease-fire in this illegal war? You just talked upon the role of the UN in the affair. You said history would look fondly at what the UN did but why did they never request a cease fire after the war started?

AW: I don't know the answer to that. That's a tough question. And I suppose prompted by your question I'd better qualify what I said about the UN too. I mean the UN clearly stumbled and there is clearly a need for the UN to be fixed and for it to be democratised. My point about history being kind to the UN - I was really talking specifically about the vote. The fact that the Security Council would not agree on a new resolution backing a war, I think, was more of a win than a loss for the Security Council because the fact is that they couldn't agree on a war which we've now found out was unjustified in my opinion. You know I think that actually is a positive thing. And if I could just elaborate on what I said. You know I had a go at the Prime Minister just a minute ago about, you know ,he floated this idea about this third tier of members. And what struck me about that wasn't that he was seeking to bring in new members into a new tier, he was seeking to entrench the existing upper tier and seeking to entrench the right of veto for the five countries that happened to win World War II which including his friends in the US which struck me as an extraordinary proposition.

Lo Pin, a correspondent from Hong Kong magazine, the only international Chinese News Weekly: America has double standard and Australia followed America but on the other hand I think John Howard really presents the interest of the Australian people so as a journalist can you give us some your advice we should loyal to the social conscience or we should to protect Australia's interests?

AW: OK. One of my criticisms of Prime Minister Howard, one of my main criticisms is that he seems prepared to support the US at any cost. And he seems already to have gone a step beyond the already position of strong support within his party. And I think there's a number of reasons for why John Howard has gone that far and I'll sort of come back to it in a minute. I think he feels that he's a player on the world stage. You know he was in Washington on September 11 and he looked out his window, he saw the smoke rise from the Pentagon. You know he's been on Air Force One. He's a player. He's a big man. He feels that he's part of these historic events. And he's also spent a lot of time with George Bush whose a

very personable fellow who one on one he wins you over. And I think these are all sorts of various reasons why John Howard has acted the way he's acted. And in fairness to John Howard I mean he's a proud Australian and he's doing what he thinks is the right thing for Australian security. It just happens to be not what I agree with. As far as my views on the Alliance relationship my personal view is that Australia should adopt a much more independent position within an alliance framework. That ultimately Australia's foreign policy should be driven by Australia's national interest and not tied so closely to the national interests of our chief ally. And I think that's an achievable position to move to. And in fact I think if in fact we weren't taken for granted by the US in some ways it would be a more valuable alliance relationship by the US if we weren't taken for granted. Has that answered your question?

LP: Very much.

Michael Smith, Press Club Committee: You've given us your assessment of Al Qa'ida links with Iraq which you say are wafer thin. Can you give us your assessment of Al Qa'ida links with Saudi Arabia. There's a hypothesis emerging amongst some American commentators that Iraq was created as a target to deflect attention away from Saudi Arabia which is a critical relationship with the United States geographically. And if they'd chased Osama so hard and the roads led to Saudi Arabia that would be a very difficult problem for the United States so they had to create Iraq as the target, as the diversion, particularly in the light of court documents by lawyers acting for victims of 9/11 who have nominated I think 150 Saudi organisations as financiers of Al Qa'ida and terrorism. Can you comment on your assessment of Al Qa'ida's links to Saudi Arabia in recent times.

AW: Yes, good question and it's obviously interesting that the US has refused to declassify the part of the 9/11 report specifically about Saudi. Look its no secret that Al Qa'ida is closely connected with a number of people in Saudi Arabia. And of course you have Bin Laden's origins in Saudi Arabia. I talked about the strategic reasons for the war and I think one of them is a desire, a recognition in the US that they need to move their centre of gravity out of Saudi Arabia and into anywhere else because it's a bit of a noose around their neck. And I think that was one of considerations as to why they went to war in Iraq. Ah, I'll leave it at that.

Andrew Rule, Melbourne Press Club: I'd just like to get up close and personal. What has been the fallout for you personally over blowing the whistle and the second part of the question is I guess what are you know doing for a living? Are you being punished for what you did? And what will happen to Andrew Wilkie over the next year or two?

AW: Well, thank you for your interest. It has been very challenging for me. There have been times when everyone of my skills has been tested to the limit. But I'm surviving very well, I think. I have been kept busy virtually full time for four and a half months with the aftermath of my resignation. With the exception of about four little articles I've written for newspapers I've done nothing for money. So I'm busily burning savings. So at the end feel free to throw money not clap. But I feel more committed to this now than when I started. I have no misgivings whatsoever even if the war had gone wonderfully. And even if they had found huge arsenals of weapons of mass destruction. I would still have no misgivings. Because I felt so strongly before the war that it was wrong. It was the wrong thing to do. No matter what the outcome of the war. I'm not sure about the future. I haven't had too much of a chance to think too much about it. But I'm hoping to sort of disentangle myself from the issue a little.

Q: Have you been smeared?

AW: Yes, the government has - I don't want to go into too much detail. I don't want to sound like a winger. And in fact, I have generally let people make their own decision about whether or not I'm talking about.

(..... the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister. They sent a submission to the UK foreign Affairs committee to try and discredit me. There's been a couple of ugly incidents but I won't talk about that in any detail. Water off a duck's back. When I say let the accuracy of what I said speak for itself, I'll remind you of what I said on 11th March. On 11th March on *The 7.30 Report* my key points were, and I can remember them very clearly, that a war would not be the most sensible and ethical way to resolve the Iraq issue because Iraq didn't pose a serious enough security threat to justify a war; that too many things could go wrong and that it was dumb policy because there were options short of war yet to be exhausted. And I teased out that first point and I said that based on the intelligence and the assessments I saw that I believe that the Iraqi conventional military was weak and no threat to anyone; that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program was at best or worst depending on your point of view disjointed and contained were the words I used. I stand by them still and that there was no evidence of active cooperation with Al Qa'ida. So as far as I'm concerned the government can say whatever they want about me but I think what I said on 11th March is looking a bit better than what they said before the war.

Russell Skelton, The Age : During the opening weeks of the war I was actually in Kurdistan, Northern Iraq and during the course of that I interviewed a lot of young Iraqi defectors who came across the line and I also went to a number of forward positions which the Iraqi's had abandoned. And the defectors everyone of them had the same sort of story that they had been fully equipped in chemical weapon warfare. They had suits. They did drills often twice a week getting their suits on quickly and preparing themselves. And in the forward positions we went into we found detailed pictures and descriptions of how to inoculate yourself in the case of a chemical weapons attack and suits and various equipment. And on closer questioning of these defectors they said they never had the weaponry. It was never supplied to them but they had prepared for it. And they said that the more trusted and more secure units would supply them with it in the event of a conflict. And they'd have these mobile units that would come out and give them the shells or whatever if that was going to happen. So I must admit I came away with a very strong feeling that these troops had certainly been readied for some sort of chemical warfare and had been prepared for it and clearly they've not found anything in the light of war and I was just wonder what construction you'd put on this.

AW: Yeah, that's an interesting point you make. I've never said they didn't have weapons and when I said that I'd judged their WMD program to be disjointed and contained included in that assessment was my belief that they may well have probably had some very, very limited probably chemical, maybe biological, but more likely chemical capability. A very limited capability. And in fact, when I wrote the assessment for ONA in December on all the things that could go wrong in Iraq one of them was the use of weapons of mass destruction. So I would not be surprised if something is still found; sign of a limited and disjointed program. I think there's probably still a few things to find or scientists who might say there was a bit and it was destroyed. But the fact that an army carries this gear around with them doesn't mean they have those weapons. I mean the Australian soldiers carry around respirators as well. And remember Iraq had archenemy Iran which it had already fought an eight year war which had also involved the use of weapons of mass destruction and which still has weapons of mass destruction you know on the main border to the north east or the east. Syria which has weapons of mass destruction, certainly chemical maybe biological off to the north west. Israel as well. So there's an army that is training to defend itself when it has three key enemies all with weapons of mass destruction. So the fact that they have this gear in itself may just mean they might be prepared to fight any number of their enemies. So I don't think that was ever in itself proof of anything. Does that answer the question?

RS: Yes, not very convincingly?

AW: Well, you tell me what are you proposing? Are you proposing that they did have a vast arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and that somehow it's just disappeared?

RS: No I wasn't suggesting that at all. I mean clearly in the war between Iraq and Iran it was Iraq that used the chemical weapons as I understand it not Iran. And it just struck me that if you're doing daily drills in this stuff it's one thing to prepare for it and have your troops equipped for it but to have them being drilled in it regularly during a war and there's absolutely no prospect of the allies using these sort of weapons it still beggars the question why are they doing this? And also the troops themselves that I spoke to, the defectors, they had a full expectation that they would be called on to use it. You know I accept it might have been small quantities. It might have been strategically used. The whole situation up there changed very dramatically in Northern Iraq because a lot of the principle units that were defending the oil centres were pulled back down to Bagdad and maybe there was a plan there to use it and it just all fell apart in the chaos of war.

AW: You make a very good point. And all I can say is - I make the two points that I think they may well have had some limited capability which would help to explain it. But they were training to defend against a number of countries some of which have chemical and biological or certainly chemical weapons. I'd probably add two more points that who knows what they were told about the coalition. I mean they might have been fed any sort of nonsense about what the coalition would or wouldn't use or might use. And the other point was the issue of the value in Iraq keeping people guessing that they had a capability. Remember that point I talked about during my diatribe. Yeah now that may not be convincing because let's face it there are an awful lot of question marks still to be worked out which hopefully we'll get the answers to cos there's an awful lot of things that still don't make sense. But one thing that does make sense to me is that if they had a massive arsenal of weapons of mass destruction which they'd developed for their defence well it hasn't been found and whatever will be found now will not be a massive arsenal of weapons. That's about the only thing that's unambiguous at this stage and it just happens to be half the argument for the war which has unravelled.

Q: Yes, I just wanted to ask whether your misgivings about the reason we went for war were they widely felt throughout the security organisations the others just chose to keep it to themselves?

AW: People I think expect intelligence agencies to be terribly conservative. But I felt, I believed that the views amongst the intelligence agencies probably reflected the views in the broader community. Everything from strong support for through to real serious misgivings. But it wasn't a split in the intelligence community. It's just that it's that sort of issue and some people including at ONA had real, real concerns about it. But they were good enough civil servants to separate their personal concerns from their private life and I wasn't able to do that. And I felt just that bit extra strongly about it. Of course I approached this from a slightly different angle to all of my peers. Because I'm an ex military officer I understand war fighting probably better than them. I'd worked on WMD and terrorism so I understood that a bit better because of my transnational work. I'd worked on humanitarian stuff. I'd done the humanitarian assessment so I was the chap who'd actually got to work out all the things that could go wrong. And because I'd worked on people smuggling I think I had a different approach to human intelligence. People smuggling to Australia is characterised by appalling human intelligence. It really is a hard subject to work. Some of the garbage that you get is terrible. So I'm just brainstorming now. Maybe I approached human intelligence in particular with a much more critical eye. That might help to explain why I did what I did and they didn't.

Tony Parkinson, The Age: This might sound a bit old fashioned but I always understood the constitution of this country was that elected political leaders were to make the big judgement calls on issues of war and peace. I'm sure you would have been taught that at Duntroon as well. Your position seems to be now, and you've just explained what your motives were to some extant but public servants when they disagree with a political outcome or they've lost the argument on a policy judgment it then falls to them to be able to go into the public arena and argue that case - step outside the process and argue that case. I think your former counterparts at the CRA have an expression for that and they call it punching above your pay grade. Have you ever had to consider that basic issue of principle in the lead up to the decision you made?

AW: It was one of the things I considered. That as a good civil servant it would have been completely inappropriate in the eyes of many people to have resigned and gone public. I'm not defending myself. I suppose I'm just seeking to explain it. I just felt so strongly about the war being wrong and I felt so sure of my judgments based on both the intelligence and the assessments. I just felt absolutely confident. When I stood there on the 11 March and I said amongst other things their WMD program was disjointed and contained and it was being overplayed and it was unjustified war I felt absolutely sure in my judgements. And although I laboured over the decision for many, many, many days I suppose the decision started weeks before I did it - somewhere without me realising it. Although I really laboured over it when I finally made my decision I felt absolutely confident that this war was so wrong and the government dishonesty so great that me as a human being acting, to do what I thought was the right thing to do was much more important than my code of conduct as an ONA employee or as a civil servant. And I don't regret it one bit and I'd do it all again. And whilst I don't encourage any people in the public service to do what I did because it's hard work at some point issues are bigger than your loyalty to your boss or loyalty to your employer or loyalty to your government. I mean my loyalty is to my country and ah you know I despise this government. But I love my country. I'm really waffling now but do you know where I'm coming from? It's a very personal thing to try and explain.

IH: We only have time for one more.

Anne-Marie Green, SBS: You say that you wouldn't change your decision you would do the same thing again but you also stated earlier that the Australian public are used to being lied to by their government. But it seems to me that the corollary of that is that the Australian public actually don't care. Surely you must be disheartened by the fact that the government got away with it no matter what stand you took no matter what came out of post war inquiries; they got away with it.

AW: Yeah, that does worry me. Mind you I never kidded myself that I was going to stop a war. You know I never kidded myself that I was going to bring down a government. It does worry me that people seem to become desensitised to dishonesty. It worries me a great deal. But I'm a bit more of an optimist than many people. I think there is a real underlying angst in this country about the government dishonesty. And you people are far more expert in politics of this country than me but I just have a sense that for the want of a strong political opposition that angst could be tapped and exploited and the government would be under real, real pressure. I don't want to agree.. I hope it's not right. I don't want to agree that people they've got low mortgages. They're happy. They've got a job and they don't care. I think that's short-changing Australians. I think Australians do care. I think there is this underlying angst even if they don't know it.

IH: OK just one more.

Rob Masters, Rob Masters and Associates: This morning the US declared Australia as the venue for future terrorism. Alexander Downer said that this meant that it was a launching pad and not a site. What do you interpret the subtleties of that to mean?

AW: Not all of what Alexander Downer says makes perfect sense to me. The government says some strange things about terrorism. It says that there is no increased threat of terrorism as a result of the Iraq war and it was about the same time they were putting extra barricades around Parliament House, increasing counter terrorism spending and saying don't go to the dawn service at Gallipoli in the same week that they said there was no increased risk of terrorism. I think they're being a little dishonest from time to time. If I could just offer a real quick observation about the threat of terrorism. I said I think there was an increased risk of attack on Australian interests. I'll just flesh that out. A couple more sentences. I think its most likely Australian interests overseas. And it's most likely conventional attack because very importantly and this is what the government knows. This is what they are told by the intelligence agencies

that although the risk of WMD terrorism is increasing it's still very, very low. That whole issue has been played up terribly including in relation to Iraq.

IH: OK ladies and gentlemen, Andrew's being generous with his time if you could just show your appreciation.(audience claps) I'm sure, as you said Andrew, there are people in our audience today who come from your point of view and also who are quite strongly opposed to your point of view but we appreciate the forthrightness with which you put your position today. I certainly suspect we haven't heard the end of this issue and I certainly suspect we haven't heard the end of Andrew Wilkie. Whatever follows with you goes today our best wishes and we'll follow your future with interest. We have a couple of little keepsakes for you. I'm not sure everyone can see this but it's a mounted whistle and the engraving reads - are your eyes better than mine?

AW: Yeah. "In case of scandal, break glass. Melbourne Press Club July 03"

IH: So the whistle goes with our best wishes and I'm sorry that we can't really meet your wish to throw bundles of 100 notes at you as you leave today but can I suggest this vintage issue of Melbourne Press Club wine, the well rounded red which I've personally road tested. I know if the going ever gets really tough it gives you temporary relief. Andrew thank you very much.

AW: It's my pleasure and thank you for your interest in my story.