A coalition still willing to deceive

That we marched to a bloody war on the basis of a fiction doesn’t faze the three amigos.

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The first casualty of war, as everyone knows, is the truth. What’s equally depressing, though, is that despite the release of the long-awaited Chilcot report last week – a chronicle of Britain’s involvement in the Iraq War – it may also be the last.

In the wake of the excoriating 6000-page investigation, former British prime minister Tony Blair emphatically rejected Chilcot’s conclusion that the decision to invade Iraq was wrong, insisting – against all reason, possibly – that the world is “better and safer” as a result.

His denials are echoed by former US president George W. Bush and our own former PM John Howard – who together made up the three amigos of that deadly trinity, the Coalition of the Willing. As it turns out, they were just a little too willing.

Chilcot makes it only too clear Blair drew some fairly reckless, possibly fanciful, conclusions from MI6 intelligence material. The same drama was played out here in February 2003, when Howard delivered his febrile assessment on Iraq to the community: Saddam Hussein had an “arsenal”; a “stockpile”; “a massive program for developing offensive biological weapons – one of the largest and most advanced in the world”.

But advice from Australian intelligence agencies at the time was that, with the exception of limited chemical agent stockpiles, Iraq had no chemical or biological weapons production, no nuclear weapons, and little prospect of obtaining fissile material. Indeed, the depiction Howard offered to the Australian people was so odious some former public servants are still contesting it.

Chilcot’s verdict, in many respects equally damning of Howard, is that the case for war was deliberately exaggerated, the severity of the threat was inflated, the consequences of invasion were underated, and the preparations “wholly inadequate”. In a nutshell, both militarily and politically, it was a train wreck.

None of these revelations, though, have put an end to the enduring refusal of our former PM to accept culpability, despite some fairly clear lessons we could learn from a conflict that – according to one major study – inflicted gross civilian casualties, “reinvigorated radical Islamist militants in the region, set back women’s rights, and weakened an already precarious healthcare system”.

Isn’t it worth pondering the process that catapulted Australia into a six-year, $6 billion engagement that was undoubtedly precipitous and possibly illegal? Because let’s not forget, the lawfulness of this entire venture rested – some would say precariously – on the assumption that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. The extent to which authorities doubted the existence of such weapons, and concealed or played down their uncertainty, was in all likelihood a breach of international law and without doubt a betrayal of the public trust.

Sentiments of senior antipodean figures, such as Jim Molan, former chief of operations in Iraq, don’t do much to dispel our distrust. It is disturbing how unconcerned he seems to be by conclusions the weapons of mass destruction were a collective delusion. Those who were sceptical about the existence of such weapons, according to Molan, “had never dealt with intelligence” and “had no real grounds to make that decision”.

Aside from the inconvenient fact that they were ultimately correct, this astonishing revelation suggests the burden of proof rests with those who questioned the intelligence, rather than those who furnished it – to say nothing of those who seized on it with alacrity, and burnedish it, to make the case for war.

The whole issue of WMD is now something Howard would prefer not to dwell on. If no such “arsenal” – no “stockpiles”, no “massive” or “advanced” capability – was ever found, then Howard is content to just point to the fact that Saddam intended to restart the weapons program. You’ll be sorely disappointed if you were hoping for remorse – the best he can muster on emotional spectrum of soul searching is embarrassment.

“Yes, it was subsequently discovered that there were no stockpiles,” he says, “but... it has to be remembered that the intelligence advised of both the UK and the US, and... our own intelligence agencies, was that there were stockpiles.”

We all now know that this is, if not an outright lie, then at least a deliberate misrepresentation. According to the former secretary to the parliamentary intelligence committee, “None of [Howard’s] arguments were supported by the intelligence presented to it by its own agencies”.

So perhaps Chilcot is only telling us what we already suspected. From this vantage point, though, the most painful thing is not the realisation that we went to war based on a fiction, but that the architects of that devastating conflict are still refusing to surrender it.

While bereaved families in Britain are now contemplating legal action, it seems unlikely the same pressure will be brought to bear on John Howard. It’s not about blame, though, in the end. Our facing former leader may reject the lessons we could learn from this ruin, but that doesn’t mean the rest of us have to.

As former head of Australia’s defence department Paul Barratt points to the “fragility” of our decision-making, including flaws that still exist in Australia’s policy process, it’s important to remember this introspection – this brutal reckoning – as is much about looking forward as it is looking back, and making sure we don’t repeat the mistakes of the past.

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