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## Legal gag on Bush-Blair war row (updated)

By: Guardian, Richard Norton-Taylor/John Plunkett on: 23.11.2005 [17:47 ] (280 reads)



### Legal gag on Bush-Blair war row

Richard Norton-Taylor  
Wednesday November 23, 2005  
The Guardian

### Memo warning 'attack on press freedom'

John Plunkett  
Wednesday November 23, 2005

[Link to the original Mirror story:](#)

[http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/topstories/tm\\_objectid=16397937%26method=full%26siteid=94762-name\\_page.html](http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/topstories/tm_objectid=16397937%26method=full%26siteid=94762-name_page.html)

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The attorney general last night threatened newspapers with the Official Secrets Act if they revealed the contents of a document allegedly relating to a dispute between Tony Blair and George Bush over the conduct of military operations in Iraq.

It is believed to be the first time the Blair government has threatened newspapers in this way. Though it has obtained court injunctions against newspapers, the government has never prosecuted editors for publishing the contents of leaked documents, including highly sensitive ones about the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

The attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, last night referred editors to newspaper reports yesterday that described the contents of a memo purporting to be at the centre of charges against two men under the secrets act.

Under the front-page headline "Bush plot to bomb his ally", the Daily Mirror reported that the US president last year planned to attack the Arabic television station al-Jazeera, which has its headquarters in Doha, the capital of Qatar, where US and British bombers were based.

Richard Wallace, editor of the Daily Mirror, said last night: "We made No 10 fully aware of the intention to publish and were given 'no comment' officially or unofficially. Suddenly 24 hours later we are threatened under section 5 of the secrets act".

Under section 5 it is an offence to have come into the possession of government information, or a document from a crown servant, if that person discloses it without lawful authority. The prosecution has to prove the disclosure was damaging.

The Mirror said the memo turned up in May last year at the constituency office of the former Labour MP for Northampton South, Tony Clarke. Last week, Leo O'Connor, a former researcher for Mr Clarke, was charged with receiving a document under section 5 of the act. David Keogh, a former Foreign Office official seconded to the Cabinet Office, was charged last week with making a "damaging disclosure of a document relating to international relations". Mr Keogh, 49, is accused of sending the document to Mr O'Connor, 42, between April 16 and May 28 2004.

Mr Clarke said yesterday that Mr O'Connor "did the right thing" by drawing the

document to his attention. Mr Clarke, an anti-war MP who lost his seat at the last election, returned the document to the government. "As well as an MP, I am a special constable," he said.

Both men were released on police bail last Thursday to appear at Bow Street magistrates court on November 29. When they were charged, newspapers reported that the memo contained a transcript of a discussion between Mr Blair and Mr Bush.

The conversation was understood to have taken place during a meeting in the US. It is believed to reveal that Mr Blair disagreed with Mr Bush about aspects of the Iraq war. There was widespread comment at the time that the British government was angry about US military tactics there, particularly in the city of Falluja.

Charges under the secrets act have to have the consent of the attorney-general. His intervention yesterday suggests that the prosecution plans to ask the judge to hold part, if not all of the trial, in camera, with the public and press excluded.

[link](#)

### **Memo warning 'attack on press freedom'**

National Union of Journalists today accused the government of a "double attack on the freedom of the press and freedom of information" after it issued a reminder to editors about the provisions of the Official Secrets Act.

The attorney general threatened newspapers with the act and the Contempt of Court Act in the context of an allegedly leaked memo, relating to a dispute between Tony Blair and George Bush over the conduct of military operations in Iraq.

This intervention by the attorney general followed the publication of a front page story in the Daily Mirror yesterday under the headline "Bush plot to bomb his ally", in which the paper claimed the memo revealed that the US president last year planned to attack the Qatar headquarters of Arabic news broadcaster al-Jazeera.

"This is a heavy-handed attempt to shut the stable door after the horse has bolted. It is a double attack on the freedom of the press and freedom of information," said the NUJ secretary, Jeremy Dear.

"These sort of attempts to stifle uncomfortable revelations printed in a newspaper, which is only carrying out its proper duty to inform the British public, does the government of what is supposed to be a democracy no credit whatsoever.

"What we need in this country is free and open debate and a proper political dialogue over important issues of this sort, not a knee-jerk panic reaction."

The attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, warned that publication of further details from the document would be a breach under section five of the Official Secrets Act.

In its news story on the attorney general's warning today, the Daily Mirror said it had "essentially agreed to comply".

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6 comments

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**what "should" happen...**

by Mike-Malaysia on 23.11.2005 [13:01 ]

in a 'healthy society' by anybodies standards, is that the papers say "We've got information of governmental crininal intent. Right lads, fuck bLiar, lets publish immediately" - What will happen is the papers will lie down quietly at their masters feet, while Bush gets away with yet more criminal acts.

**Next time**

by DevilsAdvocate on 23.11.2005 [15:20 ]

they'd do better to just cut out another layer of censorship in the UK and go straight to a sympathetic web site, outside the UK where goldsmith cannot strut. I hope they kept copies.... if they're going to be charged anyway, might as well be hung as a sheep as a lamb. Go on, fellas, send it to this lot or whatreallyhappened.com. Not sure about reense after his bird flu hysteria.... David Icke may publish but I think you have to pay for his site now. Like MM says, if we had a healthy society that valued freedom of speech the papers would be on it now. Imagine not being able to print anything that might embarrass an mp, someone who's wages you (Brits) pay. "The plumbers just wrecked your house, but you aren't allowed to tell anyone in case it embarrasses hom, you still have to pay and you have to use him for the next three years". Ok...

**The update gives a little hope...**

by stopwar on 23.11.2005 [17:57 ]

although I agree the press should be doing all they can to get the story out to the public.

A good word for The Mirror, however, for taking the original risk. Non-UK readers may be interested to know that it was The Mirror that published images of British troops abusing Iraqis - and the editor, Piers Morgan, was subsequently forced to resign. Encouraging, therefore, that the new Mirror editor was still prepared to take a risk.

**UPDATE: 'Probe urged into Bush 'bomb plot''**

by jouna on 23.11.2005 [18:35 ]

ARTICLE (in full):

"Doha - The Arab satellite channel Al-Jazeera wants the White House and Downing Street to challenge a British newspaper report that US President George Bush had planned to bomb the Qatar-based station.

We sincerely urge both the White House and Downing Street to challenge the Daily Mirror report," the Qatar-based network said yesterday.

The British tabloid, citing a Downing Street memo marked "Top Secret", reported yesterday that British Prime Minister Tony Blair had talked Bush out of launching a military strike on the station.

"Before making any conclusions, Al-Jazeera needs to be sure regarding the memo and would hope for a confirmation from Downing Street as soon as possible," it said.

A Downing Street spokesperson said: "We have got nothing to say about this story. We don't comment on leaked documents." - Sapa-AFP"

LINK: [www.thestar.co.za/index.php?fSectionId=132&fArticleId=3006372](http://www.thestar.co.za/index.php?fSectionId=132&fArticleId=3006372)

BTW: Yesterday I wrote to Al-Jazeera about probing this issue. I'm happy to see they have done it so soon :)

**UPDATE: 'Al-Jazeera seeks answers over 'bombing' memo''**

by jouna on 23.11.2005 [18:41 ]

LINK: [www.iraqwar.mirror-world.ru/article/71107](http://www.iraqwar.mirror-world.ru/article/71107) (it's from Guardian, not the same as given by me above).

**In a poll just taken**

by picard-fortune-500 on 23.11.2005 [19:42 ]

70 % of Americans believe bush actually wanted to bomb al Jazeera in Qatar. 30 % did not.

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Health Ministry, north of  
Baghdad

Nov 13: Guard of

Min	Max
27082	30525



принимает  
WebMoney



Nov 04: 1-3 by roadside

bomb, Dawra, Baghdad

Nov 04: 6-9 in attack on  
checkpoint, Buhriz