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Weapons cover-up revealed

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Ignored ... weapons expert and diplomat, Dr John Gee.

Photo: *Andrew Taylor*

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Marian Wilkinson

August 31, 2006

Page 1 of 2 | [Single page](#)

THE Foreign Affairs Minister, Alexander Downer, issued instructions to suppress a damning letter about the hunt for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq after the war, a former senior diplomat says.

Dr John Gee, an expert on chemical weapons, worked with the US-led weapons hunter, the Iraq Survey Group, after the war and wrote the critical six-page letter when he decided to resign in March 2004. In it he warned the Federal Government the hunt was, "fundamentally flawed" and there was a "reluctance on the part of many here and in Washington to face the facts" that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction.

Dr Gee recorded in an email soon after that "Downer has issued instructions it [my letter] is not to be distributed to anyone". He wrote to a colleague in the Iraq Survey Group that a senior official in the Office of National Assessments, the Prime Minister's intelligence advisory agency, had told him about Mr Downer's instructions.

In another email, Dr Gee said the head of the Defence Department, Ric Smith, told him the department did not receive a copy of the letter even though Dr Gee was working in Iraq under contract to it. Dr Gee said senior defence officials told him the Department of Foreign Affairs "had not passed the letter on to Defence".

Last night, a spokesman for Mr Downer said the minister "did not recall" receiving Dr Gee's letter but said he would check. But he described as "a conspiracy theory" material showing that the letter had not been given to the head of the Defence Department. "I have heard a lot of conspiracy theories over the years, but I have not heard that one before."

However, documents given to the *Herald*, including Dr Gee's resignation letter and his emails to another senior weapons inspector, Rod Barton, reveal serious efforts to contain his findings.

Mr Downer has previously admitted that he was briefed personally by Dr Gee on the expert's return from Iraq. But Mr Downer has never revealed the contents of that briefing. From the emails, it appears Mr Downer received the damning findings months before he and the Prime Minister, John Howard, accepted that no weapons of mass destruction would be found in Iraq.

One month after his briefing with Dr Gee, Mr Downer met the US head of the Iraq Survey Group, Dr Charles Duelfer. At their press conference, Mr Downer insisted the weapons hunt in Iraq "was still a work in progress" and he could not draw conclusions.

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- [Page 1](#) [2](#)
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