

Blair and Bush Forge a New, Special Relationship

By Ian Williams (July 27, 2003)

Maybe the relationship is more special than we cynics have given credit. Events in Britain seem to be seriously affecting American politics. Americans are promiscuous with their applause. Broadway audiences clap when curtains open, when the set changes, and when the star comes on stage. To give him his due, Tony Blair did refer to the somewhat different reception he could expect back home, when he performed for George W. Bush at the joint session of Congress. One wonders whether the champion of the Third Way noticed that he had fewer allies in the Democratic benches than among the Republicans.

When Congress applauded Winston Churchill, he performed his British Bulldog act, and when Margaret Thatcher came, she did good imitations of another gender of dog entirely. In contrast, as Congresspersons repeatedly stood up and applauded Tony Blair, one was forced to ask, not whether he has now totally mutated into Bush's poodle, but just how many hoops he is prepared to jump through, and indeed whether he is prepared to go the whole hog and play dead for his new master. He certainly seems to be doing so, politically.

To be fair, while Blair conceded to Bush on all the major issues, he has had some minor successes with the president. His insistence on a continuing and expanding role for the United Nations, and for some reconciliation with the Europeans has helped the sane wing in the administration. Bush himself shows signs of perennial puzzlement about how much importance other people give the United Nations—but that means he may be equally perplexed with the anti-UN monomania of Under Secretary of State John Bolton and other Jesse Helms protégés—so he has been prepared to seize the pragmatic opportunities that Blair has pointed out to him. Equally, while Bush seems to have told Palestinian Prime Minister Abbas that God was responsible for telling him to work on the Road Map, British diplomats tend to suggest that Tony Blair was the Lord's messenger in this case. So it is perhaps fitting that Blair should appear to be setting himself up for martyrdom for the president.

Unforgiving Electorates

The Prime Minister's insistence that British intelligence had independent sources for the allegations of Iraqi attempts to get uranium is looking more and more like a desperate attempt to cover the president's rear in the face of increasing Democrat demands for details about how the famous 16 words in the State of Union of the Union address about African uranium appeared. Although both Bush and Blair tried to brush off the issue as a mere technicality in face of

the moral triumph of overthrowing Saddam Hussein, that does not seem to be the way it is going down with the electorates on either side of the pond. To give him his due, not even Tony Blair believed any of the White House assertions of an Iraqi link to September 11, but polls showed that many Americans were quite prepared to believe that they existed and that it justified the war on Iraq. However, as the congressional Democrats are at last showing, while Americans may accept thin excuses for a successful and popular war, they are much less forgiving about being suckered into an unpopular and unsuccessful occupation.

In contrast, for the British the trigger for war was always whether or not Saddam Hussein was defying UN resolutions to disarm. British perceptions of American incompetence are entirely justified perceptions, since most of what is happening in Iraq was not only predictable, but predicted. The message is that Tony Blair is risking the lives of British troops, and the reputation of the country, by acting as minion of an unbalanced Superpower. The continuing failure of American inspectors to find any weapons suggests that at the very least Blair was mistaken in the excuses he used to get Britain in the war. But the uranium issue takes it farther and implies that he was deliberately misleading the British public. Indeed, now there is growing suspicion that he is maintaining his defense of unnamed British intelligence sources simply to give Bush cover.

In effect, Blair has put his own credibility on the line to defend a man who has considerable difficulty recognizing reality in any form we can recognize. (Reportedly, the President told Kofi Annan on his July 14th visit to the White House, that the invasion was because Saddam refused to allow in the inspectors, which is not quite how the rest of the world remembers it.)

Blair, Bush and the BBC

Faced with the incontrovertible fact that the weapons threatened in the government's justifications for war have



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not been found, and that the sources for the allegations were manifestly “dodgy” as the British would say, the government’s media managers set the dogs on the BBC on the very minor issue of at what stage and by whom the reports were “sexed up.” As a piece of aggressive spin it almost worked, even if it has now, of course, spectacularly misfired.

In the course of this assault, they were prepared to throw Dr. David Kelly to the wolves, in this case a House Commons committee where Blair loyalists acted as vulpinely as their wild cousins. As we know, the treatment upset him so much, that he is now dead, presumably because of suicide. Ironically, the government was hounding the BBC and its journalist for use of an unnamed source in the Ministry of Defense, while maintaining that President Bush was right to rely on second-hand reports from totally unidentified British intelligence sources, about which there is increasing dubiety.

How “Special” is the Special Relationship?

In the wake of Kelly’s death, the defense minister Geoffrey Hoon is looking precariously poised to resign, Tony Blair’s reputation has sunk to its lowest point ever—and the issue of the missing weaponry is guaranteed to stay in the headlines for weeks to come as the inquiry into Kelly’s death proceeds. It is a heavy price to pay to bail out a typical Bush mis-speaking. So what’s in it for Blair? His coming to Washington was a real test of just how special the relationship is. He did not ask for money. All he asked for, in return for putting his political career at risk to support Bush, was a minor concession about the British Guantanamo Bay detainees, facing military tribunals.

Even the British government, let alone public opinion, regards their continuing incarceration in Guantanamo Bay as both against international law and unjust, so much so that Blair could not even ask for the British prisoners to be extradited

to Britain for trial, since British judges would almost certainly throw the cases out. So Blair was reduced to asking for the military tribunals to be upgraded to internationally accepted legal standards for the two prisoners—indeed even up to the rapidly slackening standards that U.S. citizens could expect. And all he got from the President was a promise that British and American officials would talk about it. Indeed since then he has compounded his error by buying into Bush’s upending of the principle of presumed innocence by in effect agreeing that these are “bad men.” Blair told the British press that they could not be extradited to Britain because the courts would let them loose and they could resume their terrorist careers. Politically, Blair’s justification for his close ties with Bush has been that they gave him a hand on the steering wheel. More and more it looks to his voters as if he had boarded a runaway train—without a steering wheel, and with no hand on the brake.

If he could not get serious concessions on the prisoners, that congressional Gold Medal of honor is going to look more and more like a pretty collar for a pet poodle. Alexander Pope once penned a couplet for a dog collar that would almost fit. “I am his Highness’ dog at Kew/ Pray tell me sir, Whose dog are you?” The question is superfluous in this case, but one thing is certain, to the British people he looks like no bulldog. For Bush, having elevated his ally Blair to America’s closest bemedalled ally, the prime minister’s vicissitudes now ensure continued American media coverage, which in turn keeps the spotlight on Bush’s exaggerated warnings to fuel the war on Iraq, paving the way to the messy and vote-losing occupation. Bush and Blair may go up in electoral smoke together in the next year, loyal unto this last.

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