

Why is Tony Blair backing Clinton's war policy in the Persian Gulf?

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The visit by British Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair to Washington confirms his role as President Clinton's main international ally.

Outside the US, Clinton's plans to launch military strikes against Iraq have been beset by opposition from all quarters. In contrast, Blair insists that the United Kingdom stands ready to back up any US-led military operations.

Britain has launched an international diplomatic effort to build support for another war in the Persian Gulf. Following Russian President Boris Yeltsin's warning that Clinton could provoke world war, and statements of opposition to US policy from France, Blair sought to silence the dissenting voices, placing urgent phone calls to both Yeltsin and French President Chirac. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook was dispatched to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to win support in the Middle East.

Aware of the dangers of international isolation, the British Foreign Office has taken responsibility for drafting a resolution to the United Nations Security Council designed to send "a united and strong signal to Iraq of the international community's determination to enforce its will."

A campaign has been launched to win public backing for any British military action alongside the US. According to senior UK government members, the British and US governments have set a timetable of between two and three weeks to influence public opinion. To this end, the Foreign Office has released details of what it claims is "Saddam's arsenal of terror," based on black propaganda provided by the Security Service MI6.

Foreign Secretary Cook claimed that Iraq had the capacity to produce enough chemical weapons to "remove human life from the planet." Another example

of the facile character of this disinformation campaign was Blair's remark that Hussein "is a nasty dictator, sitting on an awful lot of nasty stuff."

In explaining Britain's subservience to US foreign policy, the media on both sides of the Atlantic cite the "special relationship" between the two countries. No explanation is offered as to what this means.

On America's part, the value of this relationship is obvious. Britain offers its services as an economic, military and political ally in Europe, in NATO and in the United Nations Security Council. Without Britain's support, American action in the gulf would be even more blatantly unilateral.

A US official recently commented that if Security Council members such as Russia and China sought to block military action, Washington "had enough support from various influential quarters to deal with Saddam." Blair's support has also been of great value to Clinton in his attempt to survive the sex scandals swirling around his presidency.

Britain benefits from this relationship in several ways. Ever since the formation of the European Economic Community, Britain has sought to play the role of America's continental ally—so much so that former French President Charles DeGaulle opposed British entry into the EEC for years and succeeded in delaying it until 1971.

Like Thatcher before him, Blair continues to rely on American backing as an economic and political counterweight to Britain's main European rivals, Germany and France. Britain also has substantial investments in the US market, which remains its largest single investment location. American corporations in turn invest heavily in Britain because it provides a cheap labor platform for the European market.

Finally, Blair hopes to piggyback growing American

economic influence in the gulf.

On the political front, Blair has borrowed Clinton's agenda lock, stock and barrel. In his campaign to ditch Labour's old reformist policies and refashion the party as "New Labour" he has sought to emulate Clinton in combining progressive-sounding rhetoric with a drive to eliminate basic social provisions.

Following a discussion on the gulf crisis, Blair and Clinton are to hold a summit meeting with their top advisers on the role of "center-left governments," and an economic "third-way" between conservative free market economics and liberal social reformism. Among those taking part on Britain's side will be the head of Blair's policy unit, David Milliband; millionaire economist Gavyn Davies of the US investment bank Goldman and Sachs; the head of the London School of Economics, Anthony Giddens; Home Secretary Jack Straw and two other ministers.

Milliband and other Blair advisers such as Peter Mandelson and Philip Gould have a long relationship with the Clinton political machine. The Democrats and New Labour helped each other out during their respective election campaigns. Commenting on this, the February 5 edition of the *Guardian* noted that, if anything, Blair was politically to the right of Clinton and that "there is absolutely no equivalent or countervailing European expertise or instinct."

In discussing Britain's position, the US media has focused entirely on Blair's unqualified support for war against Iraq. But this does not accurately reflect the political mood of Britain's ruling circles, where growing opposition is emerging to a new gulf war.

Several Labour Party MPs have warned of the dangers of "gunboat diplomacy." In a letter to the *Guardian* on February 2, Tony Benn wrote: "The so-called Gulf Coalition has now fractured, leaving us on our own." Tam Dalyell said in the Commons that preventative wars directed against the future military potential of a state could be illegal within international law.

These concerns echo the thinking within substantial sections of the British ruling class. Some voices within the military establishment are warning that Britain is preparing for war without having defined either its military or policy objectives. Sir Peter de la Billiere, commander of the gulf forces in 1990, said the strategy of aerial bombardment does not work, and questioned

whether either country had the commitment to launch a ground assault. Conservative Party opposition leader William Hague made the same point in order to qualify his support for the government's line.

The most open opposition yet came from Britain's leading business newspaper, the *Financial Times*. In its February 5 editorial, the *Financial Times* warned that military strikes against suspected Iraqi weapons sites could not be carried out "without causing extensive civilian casualties." It cautioned, "In the rest of the world, military action would clearly be unpopular. Although aimed at strengthening the UN's authority, the action would be perceived as unilateral. The US and UK, rather than Mr. Saddam, would find themselves isolated."

There is no popular support among working people for a renewed war. Blair has been forced to launch his PR campaign in support of air strikes because weeks of jingoist propaganda in the press and on television have failed to convince most people that this war is justified. Eight years on from the gulf war there is a growing awareness that Iraq is a country crippled by US-inspired sanctions. Highly publicized scandals beset the previous Tory government over its role in supplying arms to Iraq, and there have been several protests by military victims of gulf war syndrome.

Such factors, combined with suspicions over Clinton's real reasons for going to war, have created a cynical attitude toward Labour's claim to be fighting "the greatest threat to world peace since Hitler."



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