

US-British attack on Iraq

Blair is Clinton's sole international ally once again

Chris Marsden
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In the early 1980s a poster was produced by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. It pastiched the film 'Gone with the Wind', casting US President Ronald Reagan in the role of Rhett Butler and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as Scarlet O'Hara. Thatcher was cradled in Reagan's arms against a background of burning buildings. The caption read, 'She promised to love him until the end of the world. He promised to organise it.'

The poster proved extremely popular due to its clever depiction of what was dubbed the 'special relationship' between the two right-wing governments in the USA and Britain. But that alliance pales before the veritable love affair between President Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Since coming to power, Blair supported Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky affair and the US bombing of the Sudan and Afghanistan in August and worked closely with Clinton to secure the Northern Ireland agreement.

Once again, Britain is alone amongst the major imperialist powers in lending unequivocal support to the US war against Iraq. Britain has supplied Tornado aircraft to take part in the bombing of Baghdad and other Iraqi locations. As an expression of his gratitude, Clinton gave Blair the dubious honour of being the first to announce the bombing raids on Wednesday night. Blair's speech outside Number 10 was an uncritical regurgitation of the US government's justification for launching its military offensive. 'Following the Butler Report [on Iraq's supposed non-compliance with UNSCOM weapons inspectors], after more than a year of obstruction and a catalogue of obstruction, we have no option but to act,' he declared. 'There is no realistic alternative to military force.'

This support is vital for the Clinton administration.

Without it, their action in the Gulf would have been nakedly exposed as an action solely in the interests of US imperialism. With a few exceptions, such as Canada and Australia, international reaction to the bombing of Baghdad has been hostile. In Europe it has only been supported by two other governments, Germany and Spain, while France, Italy and Sweden have openly condemned the assault. Aside from Britain, the other permanent members of the UN Security Council--France, Russia and China--have opposed the action and questioned the role played by UNSCOM and the legitimacy of the Butler report. Russia has withdrawn its ambassadors to the US and Britain in protest, the first time this has happened since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

There was no discussion in parliament prior to Britain dispatching its warplanes. It was not until Thursday night that Blair went through the motions of holding a parliamentary debate. Speaking to a largely supportive House, Blair began by defending the US-British attack. He specifically rejected suggestions that it was motivated by a desire to prevent Clinton facing impeachment. Had Clinton acted differently, this would have been a 'dereliction of his duty', he claimed. In response to the prompting of Conservative leader, William Hague, he declared, 'It is a broad objective of our policy to remove Saddam and to do all we can to achieve that.'

The government's position was supported by the Conservative Opposition and the Liberal Democrats, but was opposed by a minority of Labour MPs and the Scottish National Party. Addressing Blair from the Conservative benches as a protest, Labour MP for Glasgow Kelvin, George Galloway, said, 'You twice mentioned the words diminish and degrade. I wonder if you thought, as I did at lunchtime, as the bleeding women and children were carried into hospitals that those who

were diminished and degraded were not the Iraqis, but us--diminished and degraded by being reduced to being a tail on this verminous and mangy desert fox.' He described the action as an Anglo-American 'crusade'. Several Labour members jeered Galloway as he spoke.

The long-time leader of the Labour Party's left faction, Tony Benn, condemned the military action as 'a flagrant breach of Article 46 of the Charter of the United Nations'. Tam Dalyell said the attack was 'nauseating'. Dennis Canavan said, 'Why should the lives of British services personnel be put at risk and innocent men, women and children in Iraq be sacrificed in a desperate attempt to save Clinton's skin?'

Earlier, Galloway claimed that more backbenchers opposed the present operation than the 28 who voted against military action and just less than 50 who abstained when it was last debated in February this year. However, Blair was not even prepared to allow opposition to be registered. When Benn, and around a dozen Labour MPs, attempted to force a vote, the government declined to put up tellers so no vote could be taken. Ministers jeered and catcalled after Canavan denounced Blair for cowardice.

There are real material foundations for the 'special relationship' between Britain and the US. Though Britain is very much the junior partner, it still benefits from substantial investments in the American economy and is the favoured location for US corporations seeking access to the European market. In Europe and elsewhere around the world, the alliance enables Britain to 'punch above its weight'. Like Thatcher before him, Blair continues to rely on America as an economic and political counterweight to Britain's main European rivals. He said as much in a speech earlier this week on European Monetary Union. To orient towards one or the other was, he insisted, a 'false choice'. By acting as America's mouthpiece in Europe, successive British governments have sought to strengthen their hand against Germany in particular, while using this as a lever to build alliances with other countries who fear German domination of the Continent.

In the Middle East itself, powerful geo-political interests are fuelling the American war drive. So too with Britain. The control of the world's oil reserves focuses on the Middle East and Central Asia's Caspian Sea region. In this competition for hegemony over vast natural resources, Britain has formed a strategic alliance with the US. The Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC), for example, is an oil consortium made up of British Petroleum and four US firms--Amoco, Unocal, Exxon and Pennzoil--that is in direct competition with French,

Japanese, Russian and Chinese firms.

Finally, Britain accrues substantial military advantage from its alliance with the US, vis-à-vis access to military hardware, including nuclear weaponry as well as intelligence and satellite data.

Nevertheless, Blair's unthinking support for the US and Clinton raises political dangers for the British ruling class. Thatcher's strategy was already beginning to unravel at the end of the 1980s. Lack of a clear orientation towards Europe, under conditions where the world was rapidly fracturing into competing trade blocs, was one of the main factors that led to her downfall and later contributed to the shipwreck of the Tory party itself. Blair promised big business to end the Tories' equivocation over entry into the European Monetary Union and place Britain 'at the heart of Europe'. Yet once again his actions are alienating his potential European allies, France in particular.

The media, including the liberal *Guardian* and *Independent* newspapers, are more or less supportive of Blair's stance (or critical from a right-wing standpoint), but popular reaction to the US/British bombing has been largely hostile. On the day of the parliamentary debate, 500 people demonstrated outside Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence in a candlelit vigil. Protesters daubed government buildings with slogans painted in fake blood and several were arrested. The letters pages of the major dailies, the BBC's web site and radio talk shows have been inundated with protests. In the next days, anti-war protests have been called to demonstrate a public opposition to the Blair government that has hitherto been lacking.

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