

Blair-Bush meeting highlights growing rift between US and Europe

Julie Hyland**28 February 2001**

British Prime Minister Tony Blair is the first European leader to meet US President George W. Bush. But last weekend's Camp David meeting, which Blair had hoped would provide him with some foreign and domestic kudos, only served to highlight the gaping holes in his government's international strategy.

The meeting, following a short official stopover in Canada, had been eagerly anticipated by Blair. Ever since the Republicans stole the US election last November, the Labour leader has sought to ingratiate himself with the new administration. Brushing aside overwhelming evidence of electoral fraud, Blair was the first European leader to congratulate Bush on becoming president and lobbied for more than two months for the face-to-face talks.

Blair aides said the prime minister—a close friend of former US President Bill Clinton—had been keen to prove that the “special relationship” between the US and Britain remained strong, despite the change in administration. The British prime minister prides himself on his ability to work across “the ideological divide” and takes positive pleasure in his lack of political principles. He boasts that his flexibility has enabled the Labour government to concentrate on its main objective—introducing the social and economic policies demanded by big businesses, while drawing in corporate bosses and opposition Conservative Party and Liberal Democrat members to help.

With a general election predicted within the next two months, Blair hoped that establishing a friendly rapport with Bush would answer Conservative accusations that political differences between the two leaders would weaken the transatlantic alliance. Britain's participation in US-led air strikes against Iraq on February 16 was at least partially aimed at disproving such claims. During his audience with the president, Blair avoided any potentially sensitive subjects and went out of his way to portray the UK as America's firmest and most loyal ally.

In turn, Bush flattered Blair's ego—although the manner in which he did so was more like that of a master rewarding his well-behaved poodle. Twice during their joint press conference on Saturday Bush stepped in to reply for the prime minister when Blair was questioned on such contentious subjects as the proposed US National Missile Defence system. When asked what common ground the two leaders shared, Bush volunteered that both used the same brand of toothpaste, whilst Blair banally responded that they both loved their wives and children.

Despite their best efforts, however, strains were visible. During the press conference, the prime minister described Britain as a

“bridge” between Europe and America. Blair stressed that the “special relationship” depended not on personalities but shared interests. The formulations are not new. Following the Second World War, with the advent of the Cold War, the UK cast itself in the role of America's principal ally in Europe.

This has been vital for Britain, enabling it to retain a degree of independence and international standing, despite its loss of empire and economic and industrial decline. Furthermore it could utilise the US as a counterweight to its main European rivals Germany and France. It is particularly crucial now, after the launch of the euro, which Britain has so far refused to join, since the British ruling class has been unable to resolve its deep internal political divisions over UK adoption of the European single currency. Faced with strident efforts by France and Germany to consolidate the European Union (EU) as a trade bloc to rival the US, the UK is increasingly in danger of being left on the fringes of continental developments.

Blair hopes that relations with the US—particularly on military issues—will maintain the UK's global profile and provide it with some much-needed political weight in Europe. This would be of benefit to the US, Blair claimed during his visit, because Britain could function far better as its ally if it was “listened to and has power and influence in Europe”. Another calculation by the government is that continued US support could prove instrumental in dampening differences within the UK over its efforts to orient towards Europe.

The problem, however, is that Blair's “bridge” strategy attempts to straddle a divide that is becoming ever wider. In the past years, the US and EU have clashed on a wide range of issues—from trade disputes to divisions over international policy in relationship to Iraq and the Balkans. In a comment published in advance of the Blair/Bush meeting, the *Washington Post* wrote, “In the absence of the common threat of the Soviet Union to bind them together, the United States and Europe are often taking diverging roads in trade, environmental and social policy”.

The Bush administration has already signalled a renewed aggressiveness in US foreign policy that will not be restrained by efforts to maintain a consensus with its allies. This month's US-led air strike on Baghdad was intended as much as a warning to its critics in Europe as to Saddam Hussein; Washington will act unilaterally if necessary to defend American interests.

The US administration's increasingly hardline stance against Europe was also expressed in the fact that Blair came a poor third

in Bush's initial meetings with international leaders—after Mexico and Canada—and his audience was restricted to less than 24 hours.

Whilst Blair attempted to act as an “honest broker”, US representatives made clear it was America that was making the running. Speaking on BBC Radio Four, Richard Perle, deputy Defense Secretary in the Reagan administration, derided the idea that the US required a “bridge” to Europe. In a veiled warning to the UK, Perle said, “We want friends, we want allies, we are not looking for a bridge. The notion that the UK will somehow represent the US to others is really anathema. It's quite an absurd concept.”

The official response of the Bush administration was more circumspect, but reinforced the same message. Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser, said, “I don't think that the president sees Prime Minister Blair as some sort of intermediary with the European allies...”

Blair had hoped to play a role in brokering an agreement between the US and Europe over the National Missile Defense (NMD) system. The NMD shield is supposed to protect the US from any incoming missiles, fired by so-called “rogue states”, by intercepting them before they reach American soil. It has been condemned by Russia and China for breaching the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty and threatening a renewed international arms race. Several European powers say in addition that it undermines the integrity of NATO.

In an interview with the US magazine *Forbes* prior to his visit, Blair had opined: “This [NMD] is definitely in the box marked 'handle with care' on all sides. It is a very sensitive issue.... My own judgement is that, provided we handle it with care, there is a way through, which meets America's objectives and other people's concerns.”

In practice, by broadening the terms of the debate to include the issue of weapons proliferation and arms reductions, Blair hoped to dilute or at least distract attention from European opposition to NMD. The prime minister also hoped that since the NMD programme relies on several US bases in Britain for its effectiveness this would lend him weight when he urged Bush to take a more conciliatory stance. But Washington has made it clear that it will proceed with NMD regardless of international opposition. In a briefing given on Saturday evening after the prime minister had left the US, Bush's spokesman Ari Fleischer spelt out that irrespective of the “discussion process” between the US and other countries the US would not compromise on the missile shield.

The same belligerent stance was apparent on the issue of the proposed European Rapid Reaction Force (RRF). Leading Republicans have made plain their opposition to the creation of a European army, which they regard as a challenge to the supremacy of an American-led NATO. The US has sought to ensure that NATO countries such as Turkey, that are not members of the EU, are included in the military planning for RRF to undermine its independence, but the EU has refused.

Blair was at pains to assure the Republicans that the new force did not represent any threat to US military supremacy. The RRF was merely an “additional string” to NATO's bow, the prime minister reassured the president.

However, this is not true. France in particular has been insistent that the EU must have independent control over the 60,000-strong force. According to reports, a series of annexes to the EU's Nice treaty, drawn up last year and outlining RRF structures, state that NATO must act “in full respect of the autonomy of EU decision-making” and that “the entire chain of command must remain under the political control and strategic direction of the EU throughout the operation”. It also states, “Relations between the EU and NATO will reflect the fact that each organisation will be dealing with each other on an equal footing.”

Blair's pitch to Bush was that UK membership of the new force would ensure that it is not able to develop along the lines envisaged by France. Bush's measured response—obviously prepared at the highest levels of the administration and the Pentagon—emphasised that the US would not accept anything else. Blair has “assured me that the European defence [force] would in no way undermine NATO”, the president stressed. Blair had “also assured me that there would be a joint command, that the planning would take place within NATO, and that should all NATO not wish to go on a mission, that would then serve as a catalyst for the defence forces moving on their own”, Bush stressed. In other words the US administration would tolerate the European defence force only so long as it was subordinate to US dictates.

Blair's approach brought condemnation from all quarters. In Britain the opposition Conservatives accused the prime minister of misleading the US. European politicians questioned his presumption for claiming to speak on their behalf. Referring to Blair's speech in the Canadian parliament, in which he said that Britain could have “the best of both worlds” serving the US and EU, Elmer Brock, German chairman of the European parliament's foreign affairs committee, said this was not possible, “You must be a member of a camp in order to have credibility with the other side.”

The fact that political, economic and military affairs concerning the US and Europe are now discussed in terms of camps and taking sides indicates a definite souring of relations between the two. Under conditions in which the two continents were pulling away from one another, the *Financial Times* noted, “Mr Blair's desire to continue to play the traditional British role of bridge between America and Europe looks increasingly hopeless. As a senior official in the Clinton administration puts it: 'The ground on which Blair is standing is getting narrower and narrower by the day'”.



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