US Vice President Cheney's tour gets off to rocky start

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Vice President Dick Cheney began his ongoing diplomatic tour by promising to "solicit the views of important friends and allies", but his role is more akin to that of a mafia enforcer. The purpose of his visit to nine Arab regimes, plus Turkey and Israel, is to whip them into line behind America's planned war against Iraq.

The man widely regarded as the real power behind the Bush presidency has been forced to undertake his arduous trip overseas because of mounting international opposition to a renewed military offensive against Iraq.

The Arab regimes, the European powers and Russia have all made statements opposing a new war in the Middle East. Indeed, the issue has become the focus for broader concerns regarding the bellicose militarism and unilateralist stance of the Bush administration.

Coinciding with Cheney's arrival in London, Bush was delivering his speech to mark six-months since the September 11 terror attacks. His blunt message to the European and Arab rulers was that "inaction is not an option" and this was the message Cheney has been sent to deliver.

He began his tour with a trip to Britain, the only European country he intends to visit, because he assumed that Prime Minister Blair could be relied on to make supportive noises regarding America's plans to resume the bombing of Baghdad. Blair would not likely question the US assertion that Saddam Hussein represented a real and growing threat to world peace because of his possession of what are constantly referred to as "weapons of mass destruction". Cheney was also rumoured to have asked Britain to commit 25,000 troops to a possible invasion force.

In the end, Blair did insist, "There is a threat from Saddam Hussein and the weapons of mass destruction that he has acquired. It is not in doubt at all." But beyond this hackneyed rhetoric Blair could not go, due to the sharp divisions within Britain over his government's uncritical support for the Bush administration. Instead Blair simply asserted, "The threat will have to be addressed", while Cheney promised that any widening of the war that might involve British forces "would be done only in the closest possible consultation-coordination."

Opposition to a renewed war against Iraq is widespread in Britain. Over 70 Labour MPs are publicly at odds with Number 10 including several big hitters such as International Development Secretary Claire Short and former foreign secretary and current leader of the House of Commons, Robin Cook. Short has hinted that she might resign if Blair supported a mass strike against Baghdad, telling an interviewer, "We need to deal with the problem of Saddam Hussein—we don't need to inflict further suffering on the people of Iraq."

Some 71 backbenchers, mostly Labour and including several former ministers, have backed a motion expressing "deep unease" over a possible US-led military campaign. Another motion drafted by Scottish Nationalist MP Angus Robertson and signed by six MPs states that action against Iraq can only be "morally justified" with UN support. Additional to this, Liberal Democrats leader Charles Kennedy has called for EU action to revive the peace process while former Conservative UK foreign secretary Lord Douglas Hurd has warned that the US will not get Arab support for a military strike on Iraq while they "see Israel trying to kill really two or three innocent Palestinians for every innocent Israeli."

Tensions were heightened following the leaking last weekend of the US Nuclear Posture Review. This identified seven countries for which the Bush administration had to develop contingency plans for mounting a nuclear strike—including China, Russia, North Korea and, of most immediate concern, Iraq and Iran.

Delivering a letter to Prime Minister Blair's residence opposing a military strike against Iraq, Labour MP Alice Mahon said of the US review, "The lunatics have taken over the White House. This report must be ringing alarms throughout NATO." Other MPs were equally forthright. Donald Anderson, Labour chairman of the Commons foreign affairs select committee, warned, "I think there are reckless elements in the Pentagon who are on a roll because

of Afghanistan. I would hope part of the task of our Government is to influence those who take a contrary view."

Former minister Glenda Jackson said it would be "immoral" to go to war without incontrovertible evidence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Alan Simpson MP said Blair's leadership was being questioned at Westminster. MP Martin Salter said, "It is just about the Republican right wing in America trying to finish off the job that the first George Bush failed to do. This is to avenge an American audience... I would not want to see Britain isolated from the rest of the world over an action that is unwise and unsupportable."

Labour's David Chaytor argued that an attack on Iraq could be "Vietnam, mark two... I just think it is untenable for the British government to be the only supporter of the US in this situation. Certainly there is a serious threat that the Labour Party would be split down the middle if the government pushed ahead with its support for the US."

Outside of parliament, criticism of the government's stance by significant sections of the mass media was no less harsh. The pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* said of the leaked Nuclear Posture Review, "President Bush, whose people suffered so terribly in the atrocities of September 11, is actively thinking of using nuclear weapons against seven other nations. The consequences of that are so appalling that it is hard to believe any leader could seriously contemplate it. ... It would be lunacy to attack Iraq at the moment, madness for Britain to back an American assault and complete insanity to make any large-scale commitment of our troops." The paper ran its front-page story on Cheney's trip under the banner headline, "An American Warwolf in London".

The *Independent* newspaper noted that, "Britain's participation in an offensive against Saddam is the absolute bare minimum if Washington is to pretend that a 'coalition' exists". It urged Blair to reflect, "as he shakes the hand of the man who many believe is the real power in the US administration, on whether his tactic of uncritical support for America's war on the 'axis of evil' really is the best way to persuade the US away from its unilateralist instincts".

The *Guardian* ran an op-ed piece by Madeleine Bunting, which stated baldly, "Six months after September 11, it is no longer Islamist terror we are afraid of but the US nuclear hitlist." It described US policy as characterised by "determined vengefulness and unbridled opportunism: 'Hey, had an enemy pre-September 11? Now's your chance to nuke them.'"

Complaining that "America is indifferent to international criticism", she asked, "So what can you do about it? Not much. It is impotence that charges this debate with a particular anguish. However much we rant and rail,

American power is an immovable reality. Two freshly minted US statistics strike that point home: GDP per person is 54 percent more than in Europe, and the US spends $28,000 for every member of its armed forces on military R&D compared with Europe's $7,000. US economic and military supremacy is secure for at least a generation. So how does any country position itself in the Manichean worldview of Republican America, of good versus evil?"

Aside from the diplomatic formulations of Cheney, the fears being articulated by much of the British political establishment that the US cannot be reined in are well-founded. Bush's defence adviser Richard Pearle was scathing in his own criticism of dissenting voices in Europe and made clear that the US would proceed unilaterally with its war-drive if it had to. He told the BBC, "I am certainly disappointed with a number of our friends in Europe who pay very close attention to threats to their security, but when the threats are to American security, they are nowhere to be found."

On Britain and the internal revolt in the Labour Party, Pearle added, "I don't know that Tony Blair is in a position to protect us from Saddam Hussein. I don't know that anyone is in a position to do that and certainly not the left wing of the Labour Party. No nation can allow its self-defence to be determined by the preferences of others, no matter how friendly, no matter how well meaning... The US is the target and the US has to take that seriously, whether others agree or not."

Cheney has so far met with public rebuffs by the Arab rulers. Following his discussions in Jordan, King Abdullah issued a statement warning, "A strike on Iraq will be disastrous for Iraq and the region as a whole and will threaten the security and stability of the Middle East." He hoped instead for "a solution to all outstanding problems with Iraq through dialogue and peaceful means."

Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria have all publicly opposed a strike on Iraq, while Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit called the threat of a US attack on Iraq a "nightmare".