

British establishment divided over US war against Iraq

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Unease is growing over possible British involvement in a renewed US war against Iraq. But as the ranks of former military, diplomatic and political advisers critical of a potential military strike swell, it is clear that there is not a shred of principle in their opposition. It is motivated purely by political expediency and concern for Britain's own imperial interests.

On August 21, Lord Wright of Richmond, who headed the diplomatic service during the 1991 Gulf War, became the latest establishment figure to speak out. In an interview with the Radio 4 *Today* programme Wright warned Prime Minister Tony Blair of the "absolutely devastating" implications of another attack on Iraq and urged him to be "cautious" in signing up to a US strike.

Wright made plain that it was not opposition to a military attack on Iraq as such that motivated his criticisms, but fear that without broad international support a US strike could destabilise the Middle East, and drag Britain into a quagmire.

A "massive diplomatic effort" had been undertaken by the US and the UK during the 1991 Persian Gulf War to build an international coalition of support for military action, Wright said. On this occasion, in contrast, "it is becoming increasingly clear that there is a strong body of opinion here, both in Parliament and more widely, that an attack against Iraq would be a costly mistake". "I believe it is absolutely vital that the Americans acquire the support of a much larger constituency. If they don't, I believe they could be in serious trouble."

Blair has insisted that his support for US military action is in line with the two countries' "special relationship" as well as Britain's own national interests. Based upon its role as loyal ally to the US, its international standing is strengthened and it can then punch above its weight in the international arena.

So far, Blair's position is the dominant one within ruling circles. Britain's main business journal, *The Economist*, August 10, dismissed charges that Blair was acting as Bush's "poodle", stating that the prime minister's solidarity with the US "is based on national interest". Britain's foreign policy aims are contingent upon "American power", "the EU, whatever its pretensions, is no substitute", it wrote.

Moreover, "Britain gets a more attentive hearing in the White House than does any other power ... because it is consistently willing to commit highly capable (though, it must be said, too often ill-equipped) forces to violent action". Under conditions in which Bush needs all the allies he can get, this was of great political value, the journal continued before intoning rather pathetically, "influence, even at the margins, is preferable to the alternatives: impotent confrontation or passive acceptance of the world's wickedness."

Others, including those usually supportive of US policy, are not so impressed by the idea of Britain as an impotent poodle, albeit one with a rather fierce bark. They fear that the Bush administration's unilateralist stance, recklessness and bellicosity will blow up in its face.

They are only too aware that in place of the international coalition assembled during the Gulf War, German Chancellor Gerard Schroeder now speaks about US "adventures" whilst Russian President Putin is putting the finishing touches to negotiations with Iraq on a \$40 billion export deal. The Middle East, already rocked by the bloody conflict between Ariel Sharon's right wing government in Israel and the Palestinians, is a tinder box which a US strike on Iraq could ignite.

A section of Blair's critics argue that this does not necessarily mean abandoning plans for war, but that more emphasis should be placed on manufacturing a pretext for military action through which to build political support. The danger otherwise is that Britain could be left isolated as an ill-thought out US military intervention backfires.

In a letter to his constituency, John Gummer, the former Conservative cabinet minister, distanced himself from his party's otherwise slavish support for a military attack by arguing for such an approach: "The invasion of Iraq can only be justified if it is shown incontrovertibly that Saddam has weapons of mass destruction, that he has the means to deliver them, and that he has the intention to use them", he wrote. "We must not connive in an enterprise that could set the Middle East alight."

Several other British ministers and officials are said to have expressed "grave reservations" that the US has not considered how a renewed attack on Iraq may "contaminate" other crisis areas in the world. They are especially alarmed at Bush's demand for a regime change in Baghdad—not because of its patently undemocratic and neo-colonialist underpinnings, but because the US has not identified a suitable replacement for Saddam Hussein.

Such issues are particularly vexing the military. Former British Chief of Defence Staff, Field Marshal Lord Bramall, said that an invasion of Iraq would be akin to pouring "petrol" on the flames, whilst Sir Michael Quinlan, former top civil servant at the Ministry of Defence, said a war under these circumstances "is not necessary, not prudent, and not right." General Sir Michael Rose, the former commander of the SAS, complained of going to war without "anything like enough debate about the moral justification or military practicality of doing so".

Senior defence sources in Britain are said to have complained that although the US expects Britain to sign up automatically to any military intervention, they have no say over the nature of that intervention and the country's specific contribution.

“We’ve effectively been kept in the dark, and until someone tells us what the plan is, we cannot begin to work out what our involvement is going to be,” one defence source was quoted as saying.

Similar concerns prompted the call by Dennis Healy, former Labour Chancellor and Secretary of State for Defence, last week that Blair should not support a strike on Iraq.

Healy made clear that the lack of “any exit strategy” was the main reason for his call on Blair not to support an attack on Iraq. The US “has failed to produce an alternative to Saddam Hussein who would command the support of the Iraqi people—and, indeed, of the rest of the Muslim world. Thus a successful attack would probably lead to the disintegration of Iraq as a state, provoking a civil war between Kurds, Sunnis and Shias. This could have a dangerous effect on Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, all of which may be pressed to offer the US bases for an attack on Iraq.”

Not the least of the other considerations facing the government is the political consequences of its getting embroiled in a hugely unpopular war at home. According to an opinion poll commissioned by the *Daily Telegraph*, more than two-thirds of British voters believe that a potential attack on Iraq has not been justified, posing the danger that Labour “will suffer a potentially catastrophic loss of support if Britain joins American military action against Iraq”.

It is partially to placate such opposition that Blair has asked Attorney General Lord Goldsmith to draw up a legal opinion on whether or not United Nations (UN) security council approval would be necessary to authorise a strike. At the same time, whilst agreeing with Bush that the “world would be a better place without Saddam”, Blair has claimed that the method of his removal is still “open to consultation.”

Nonetheless it is clear that Britain is on war alert. In a direct copy of the role played by Blair during the US-led attack on Afghanistan, the British government is also to submit the outcome of supposed intelligence findings into possible links between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda group. An initial dossier, compiled by the intelligence services earlier this year, was reportedly shelved because it failed to make a convincing case.

Despite Blair proceeding full steam ahead, criticisms within Labour’s own ranks have been muted. Besides the usual line up of anti-war campaigners, such as Tam Dalyell, and 160 MPs signing a motion expressing concern at any “overhasty” action, the most outspoken statements have been made by former ministers who could be said to have the least to lose.

These statements are also indicative of another element of the opposition to Blair, which is the degree to which it is motivated by differences over international policy—namely opposition to the US, from the standpoint of cementing alliances with the European Union.

Thus, whilst assuring the public that the prime minister would not commit British forces to a war unless “public opinion has been prepared to support it”, former cabinet minister Peter Mandelson also complained about the “mixed messages” emanating from Washington. In a reference to divisions within the Bush administration, Mandelson said that the “different emphases” coming from the State Department and the Pentagon were undermining support for war against Iraq. The US “cannot be surprised that Europe and the world is reacting in a confused way when the message we are getting from the administration is not clear,” he complained.

In a comment for the right wing *Spectator* magazine, senior Labour MP Gerald Kaufman attacked Bush as “the most intellectually backward American President of my lifetime”, and said that the

president’s advisers’, “bellicosity is exceeded only by their political, military and diplomatic illiteracy.”

Former Foreign Office Minister Tony Lloyd complained, “It isn’t good enough in the modern world to say trust the White House because they are Americans.” Referring to comments by Condoleezza Rice, US National Security Adviser, Lloyd said they were reminiscent of “the kind of rhetoric we sometimes do hear from fairly tin pot regimes around the world where the agenda isn’t to convince the outside world but to make sure the public at home believe the regime.”

He added: “We do need an America that is prepared to work with its allies. And America actually is the one that is out of step at the moment.”

Despite press reports that ministers such as Gordon Brown, Clare Short and Robin Cook are wary of war—and even that Cook is preparing to lead opposition to Blair in the event of British forces being committed—none have made any public statement. Cook is reported to have said he will only make his position clear in cabinet and “nowhere else”, whilst Kaufman has said he will vote with the government.

None have any record of principled opposition to the neo-colonialist adventures undertaken by Britain and its allies in the last decade. As shadow foreign secretary in 1990, Kaufman played a key role in signing Labour up to support the first Gulf War and backed the military action in the Balkans and Afghanistan—as did Cook and Brown. And whilst Short protested the 1991 attack on Iraq, she has remained in the cabinet throughout the almost continuous bombing of the country, as well as numerous other wars.

The attempt to build up the political popularity of a Brown-Short-Cook opposition has more to do with internal party divisions rather than any concern for the fate of the Iraqi masses. Amongst that section of the Labour Party who have argued for the government to take a more anti-US stance as part of repositioning Britain within Europe, the blood of Iraqi civilians is a fair price to be paid for changing party line and possibly, party leaders—an unpopular war giving them the possibility to move against Blair.

Hence the coded warnings now being issued to Blair to learn from history, and one notable event in particular: the fall out of the Suez Crisis in 1956 when Britain’s ambitions in the Middle East were cut short by the US. That debacle led to the collapse of Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden, and his replacement by his chancellor, Harold Macmillan.



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