

Blair's press conference: lies and self-delusion

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Prime Minister Tony Blair's monthly press conference, held Tuesday, March 25, was a distasteful spectacle.

For months a sycophantic British media has attempted to excuse the government's support for a US-led war against Iraq, in defiance of popular opposition, with reference to the prime minister's sincerely held beliefs. Whereas President George W. Bush may be an arrogant bully and an idiot, motivated by naked American self-interest, most media pundits have insisted that Blair is animated by the highest moral and ethical standards—which even his opponents are supposed to take on good faith.

Tuesday's display again confirmed that the British prime minister is just as much at ease with lies, distortions and self-delusion as his US counterpart. If he is sincere in anything it is in his determination to aggressively assert the interests of British imperialism against those of the poor and oppressed masses of the world.

Blair addressed his first press conference of this war as the political representative of a ruling class with a long and brutal history of colonial oppression against Iraq—until it was finally chased out in 1958—and as the premier ally of the Bush administration. If he sought to shroud the revival of British colonialism in the guise of its “civilising mission”, he was simply continuing another well-worn tradition—one no less venal and fraudulent for the passage of time.

“Iraq used to be one of the most sophisticated countries in the whole of the Middle East ... now Baghdad and other cities have actually become like Third World countries,” he said. Under Saddam Hussein's rule, much of the population has been reduced to conditions of virtual starvation, with some 60 percent of the Iraqi people currently dependent on the government for food aid. The “mortality rates for under fives in Baghdad is higher than in Mozambique” and “around nearly one million children died because of malnutrition and because of leukaemia,” he continued.

Consequently, “The most important humanitarian priority is to restore the operations of the Oil for Food

Program,” Blair pronounced.

Blair could present this tissue of lies and half-truths without fear of contradiction from the massed ranks of the British press, who are well aware that the conditions he outlined are the direct result of the military and economic actions undertaken by the US, the UK and the United Nations.

The UN's own studies have shown that Iraq's descent from being one of the wealthiest countries in the Middle East, with a relatively developed system of welfare and high standards of literacy and skills, to one of the more impoverished is the direct result of sanctions.

From the first Gulf war in 1991, through 12 years of UN sanctions, to the present-day offensive involving tons of bombs and missiles and hundreds of thousands of occupying troops, the US, with British backing, has sought to destroy a civilisation and bring the Iraqi people to their knees so as to seize the country's resources and establish America's domination over the Middle East. Moreover, as journalist John Pilger has pointed out, as of July 2002 the US, again with British backing, has blocked \$5.4 billion worth of humanitarian supplies to Iraq—despite it being approved by the UN and paid for by Iraq. Denis Halliday, former coordinator of the “oil for food” program who resigned in protest at the embargo, described its effects as “nothing less than genocide”.

Blair's references to the growing incidence of cancer in Iraq are equally cynical, as this is directly attributable to the tons of depleted uranium-tipped shells and missiles unleashed on Iraq's towns and cities during the last Gulf war.

Given that the US/UK coalition is continuing to pound Iraq with the same type of munitions, only in even greater quantities, it can be expected that the rates of such terrible and often fatal diseases will skyrocket.

Blair's claim that restoring humanitarian aid is a “priority” of the US/UK forces is no less of a gross falsification. Not only is the US/UK military offensive wholly responsible for stopping food and medical supplies reaching much of the population, it has made a dire

situation even worse. Once it became clear that the US intended to press ahead with its war plans regardless of international opinion, humanitarian aid agencies were forced to withdraw from the country.

Not only have food and medical supplies been halted, but in the city of Basra, for example, most of the 600,000 population have been without water and electricity for almost one week due to the bombing.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has warned of an impending humanitarian disaster, and has called on the US/UK forces to urgently begin dispatching food supplies. But the US and the UK insist that these can only be resumed once they have obtained their military objectives.

It should be noted that in the \$76 billion (£50 billion) war budget presented by Bush to US Congress, just \$1.7 billion is targeted for reconstruction and \$500 million for humanitarian aid.

It is hardly surprising that the US/UK invasion has not been greeted by masses of cheering people in the streets, as Blair and others had claimed would be the case, but with determined resistance and popular hostility. Even the highly censored dispatches coming from Iraq have been forced to mention widespread resistance to the “coalition of the willing”, including reports that thousands of Iraqi exiles—outraged at seeing their country overrun once again by imperialist forces—are returning home to fight the American and British aggressors.

One journalist was moved to ask Blair whether there was the “real danger that ... many Iraqis regard western forces as invaders and occupiers.”

Blair dismissed the very idea. People were simply too afraid of the regime to do anything at the moment, he said. Until the “Iraqi people know for sure that the regime that they despise is on the way out, they will hold back,” he maintained.

Blair’s contention is that the main reason why the invasion has not provoked a popular uprising against Saddam is that many Iraqis feel let down by refusal of the western powers to support their attempted uprising against Hussein in 1991 following the last Gulf war. Even if this were the case, such reticence would be hardly surprising, and Blair makes no attempt to account for why this stand was taken at the time and why anyone should trust the US and Britain now. But most importantly, he cannot even conceive of legitimate issues of national sovereignty and self-determination motivating popular resistance to imperialist invasion. Yet even as he spoke, crowds of thousands filled Baghdad’s central market square, waving

their fists and denouncing the American and British forces.

Tellingly, Blair pointed to Umm Qasr, “where British troops are now patrolling the streets”, as a sign of Britain “making it clear to people that we are there to help them, and we are there genuinely to liberate their country.”

In the topsy-turvy world of official war propaganda, the sight of armed soldiers patrolling the streets at the behest of an aggressive foreign power is meant to reassure the Iraqi people of Britain’s good intent.

Blair’s specious logic will ultimately be used to provide the justification for horrific atrocities. For if, as he asserts, opposition to Hussein equals de facto support for the US and Britain then, conversely, anyone who opposes the invasion supports Hussein.

This absurd bit of logical reductionism is everywhere applied to international opponents of the US/UK war policy, whether it is the French or German governments or the millions of protestors around the world.

In the case of Iraq, then, any resistance must by definition come from agents of Saddam Hussein. And consequently any action taken to eliminate them is a legitimate and justified war measure.

Such claims will be used to sanction the wanton bombing of civilian areas, as well as the murderous actions of special operations forces and others on the ground. The designation of Basra’s capture as a “military objective” and the open targeting of civilian infrastructure such as television broadcasting stations show that this is already under way.



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