British government encourages anti-French hysteria over Iraq

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The Bush administration's announcement of a countdown to war against Iraq, in defiance of international law, has seen the British government and the media launch a vitriolic attack on France.

In the topsy turvey world of Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Labour government, it is not the US that is guilty of issuing ultimatums by insisting on its right to unilaterally wage a war of aggression. According to the British government, such measures are necessary to preserve the "authority" of the United Nations. Rather it is France that is acting aggressively and "wrecking" the UN by refusing to jump on board Bush's military juggernaught and support a second resolution authorising action.

Following the US decision not to place a second resolution before the UN Security Council—effectively beginning the countdown to war—the *Times* newspaper complained, "France's action will leave lasting bitterness in America, weaken the United Nations, divide the European Union, wreck the transatlantic alliance and signal the possible end of NATO as a useful political and military body.

"It will encourage dictators around the world, from Pyongyang to Harare, to believe that they can defy UN resolutions, oppress their people and get away with it, safe in the knowledge that France will take a self-indulgent and unprincipled stand, at least as long as [President Jacques] Chirac is in the Elysée."

Borrowing from the American tabloid press, Britain's media have taken to denouncing UN objectors—France, Germany and Russia—as the "axis of weasels".

Rupert Murdoch's populist tabloid, the *Sun*, has nicknamed Chirac "The Worm". France's actions had caused the European Union to be split, weakened NATO and sent the UN into "disarray" it went on, warning, "The French will pay a heavy price for their cynical manipulation".

Such statements ignore the fact that it was the US, the UK and Spain that were isolated within the UN. Despite threats and cajoling, the Bush administration was unable to convince the majority of countries on the Security Council who do not possess the power of veto. It was Blair's hope until the very last minute to win a majority vote in favour of war, so that he could then say that France was to blame for putting its interests above those of the UN. In the event this was impossible as France's position had the majority. But the Labour government is not one to let the truth stand in the way of a propaganda offensive.

The media's vulgar and provocative language against France has been openly encouraged by the government. Immediately following the UN Security Council meeting, British ambassador, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, scornfully attacked the "one country" that "ensured that the Security Council could not act."

"President Chirac's unequivocal announcement last Monday that France would veto a second resolution containing this or any ultimatum 'whatever the circumstances' inevitably created a sense of paralysis into our negotiations. I deeply regret that France has put the Security Council consensus beyond reach," he said.

Speaking in parliament, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said, "It was my belief up to about a week ago that we were close to achieving the consensus which we sought on the further resolution," but that has been ruined by French threats to wield a veto.

Blair went even further. Without any sense of shame, he accused France of triggering war against Iraq. "The threatened French veto" had destroyed consensus on the UN, he said. "If the international community had stayed rock solid in its determination and unity around

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resolution 1441, Saddam could finally have been disarmed without a shot being fired."

Such claims are aimed at covering over the venal and criminal character of the Blair government's policies. The British government knows that the claims that Iraq possesses "weapons of mass destruction" and constitutes a grave threat to the security of the US and Britain are a fraud. It knows also that the Bush administration had long set its mind on war and was determined to this end, regardless of world opinion and in open violation of international law.

The real aims of Bush's war drive is to carve out a strategic stranglehold over Iraq's oil and gas reserves and establish American hegemony within the Middle East as part of its drive to consolidate a unipolar world.

The UK government was anxious to prove itself as America's most loyal ally in this venture, helping to establish an international veneer for the Bush administration's aims. Blair's calculation was that the projected political and economic rewards of such a role would help shore up Britain's position on the international arena. Not only would it convince the US that Britain was a valuable and trustworthy ally—able to deliver support from within Europe—it would also demonstrate to its European rivals, especially France and Germany, that it was still a force to be reckoned with.

The prime minister's calculations appeared sound until the weekend of February 15/16 when some 15 million people across the world took to the streets to denounce the US/UK war plans—some two million in London alone.

The scale of the protest exposed the rift between the government and the mass of the population and underscored Blair's domestic political isolation. The prime minister made clear he would proceed in defiance of the public will, but the extent of popular opposition meant that he placed enormous stress on securing a second UN resolution backing war—in the hope of providing a veneer of international legitimacy to what was essentially a US initiative.

The British government had worked tirelessly to hammer together some kind of wording for the Security Council that would enable Bush to get his war, without being seen to explicitly sanction it.

In the end it was the US that ultimately vetoed British efforts. With the Blair government indicating to other UN members that it would be prepared to support an extension of weapons inspections in return for a deadline for military action, the Bush administration decided that Labour's concerns for its political survival were cutting across its own plans. In a calculated rebuff, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld last week let it be known that the US was prepared to go it alone, should Britain prove incapable of participating in a military campaign due to internal political divisions.

Rumsfeld's comment had their required effect. Hence the UK government's forlorn efforts at politicking gave way to firing off verbal missives across the channel, so as to whip up anti-French hysteria as a cover for its undemocratic and deeply unpopular war.

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