

Bush and Blair hold crisis summit

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US President Bush and British Minister Blair came together this week for a hastily convened summit at Camp David to discuss war plans that have gone badly awry and to patch up widening disagreements over the political framework for postwar Iraq.

Appearing at a joint press conference on Thursday, the two leaders tried to put the best possible face on what is threatening to become a military debacle. None of the rosy predictions of a week ago had been fulfilled. Instead of cheering crowds, allied troops met determined resistance. The Iraqi army has not deserted en masse and the Hussein regime remains intact.

All Blair and Bush could do was reiterate the increasingly hollow assertion that the Iraqi masses were being held in check by brutality and fear. The main battles for control of the cities are yet to begin and the fighting so far has for the most part involved poorly armed Iraqi irregulars. Yet, according to Bush: "We're now engaging the dictator's most hardened and most desperate units." Blair somewhat pathetically appealed for the media to recognise "the progress that has already been made."

The prospect of a protracted, bloody and possibly inconclusive war is exacerbating tensions in Washington and London. Responding to a question about the likely length of the war, a visibly irritated Bush declared, "However long it takes. That's the answer to your question, and that's what you got to know. This isn't a matter of time table, it's a matter of victory. And the Iraqi people have got know [sic] that, see."

Bush's annoyance reflects disagreements over the US war strategy. The *Financial Times* reported: "Insiders who have spoken to senior Pentagon officials said there was growing anger directed at Donald Rumsfeld, defence secretary, who, the officials say, dismissed their efforts to include heavier ground forces in the field before an invasion." Asked for a comment, Rumsfeld brushed aside the suggestion, declaring that the generals had all been "deeply involved" and had "approved" the plans.

Not so easily dismissed were the remarks of Lieutenant General William Wallace, who candidly admitted to the *Washington Post* on Thursday: "The enemy we're fighting is different from the one we'd war-gamed against." He expressed shock at the willingness of irregular fighters to engage in suicidal attacks on US heavy armour. "The attacks we're seeing are bizarre—technical vehicles [pickups] with .50 calibre and every kind of weapon charging tanks and Bradleys [armoured vehicles]."

While repeating the Pentagon line that these irregulars were "forced to fight," Wallace acknowledged indirectly that the US military faces a hostile population. Referring to a barrage of fire that brought down and damaged Apache helicopter gunships outside Baghdad, he said: "We're dealing with a country in which

everybody has a weapon, and when they fire them all in the air at the same time, it's tough."

As the *Washington Post* noted, Wallace, who is currently the senior US ground commander in Iraq, was expressing "what senior officers in Iraq have been saying privately for several days." Iraqi resistance has not crumbled under the weight of a devastating bombing campaign and the generals now have to prepare for protracted urban warfare to seize and hold the major population centres. As one senior officer ominously commented: "If you're really serious about that, you have to do it the Israeli way, with tanks and bulldozers."

The surest indication that the US confronts a deteriorating military situation is the announcement that up to 120,000 US troop reinforcements are to be dispatched as soon as possible to Iraq. The soldiers, who were originally intended as an occupying force following the fall of the Hussein regime, are now required for active combat. It will take weeks, if not months, before all troops are in place. Blair is also to ask the British cabinet for approval to send another 5,000 troops to Iraq to free British forces currently laying siege to Basra for the campaign against Baghdad.

While they presented a united front on the conduct of the war, Bush and Blair could not disguise the fact that significant differences remain over the administration of postwar Iraq.

The disagreements centre on the role of the United Nations. Sections of the Bush administration, which regard the UN as an outmoded relic of the Cold War period, want to dispense with it altogether. Publicly, however, the White House acknowledges the UN could play a useful role in legitimising a US-run administration in Baghdad and providing humanitarian relief.

But Secretary of State Colin Powell bluntly spelled out the limits of any UN involvement in Iraq. After acknowledging the "great utility" of a UN role, Powell ruled out UN supervision of a postwar administration. "We didn't take on this huge burden with our coalition partners not to be able to have significant, dominating control over how it unfolds in the future," he said.

Blair is pushing for a more central role for the UN, but failed to make any significant headway at Camp David beyond what had been agreed at the previous summit in the Azores. He blandly declared to the media that "the position is exactly as the president and I set out in the Azores, namely, that we will work with the UN, our allies and partners and bilateral donors." Asked for particulars, Blair simply avoided the issue, saying that "huge numbers of details" remain to be discussed.

Blair is under sharp pressure at home to ensure that Washington does not monopolise power in Baghdad. An editorial in the London-based *Financial Times* entitled "UN Should Take Over

Postwar Iraq” hinted at the underlying concerns in sections of the British establishment. Noting, “there is not much to suggest the president and the prime minister are singing from the same hymn-sheet,” the newspaper appealed for a compromise that would mend the rifts between the US and Europe and provide opportunities for all in postwar Iraq.

The editorial warned that “a full-on occupation would add immeasurably to the tide of anti-Americanism coursing through the Arab and Islamic world” and heighten the danger of terrorist attack. The imprimatur of the UN was necessary, it argued, to ensure “some chance of making an overall success of an enterprise now lacking in legitimacy.” The editorial added: “A unilateral US occupation, which despite Washington’s protestations would be widely seen as imperialism, would have none.”

So far, the only agreement reached in the UN Security Council is a limited measure to re-start the UN “food-for-oil” program under the auspices of Secretary General Kofi Annan for a period of 45 days. Even this resolution met with opposition from Russia and Syria who, along with France and Germany, are opposed to any UN resolution that provides post facto approval to Washington’s unilateral invasion of Iraq. A compromise brokered by Germany included a reference to the “duty” of the “occupying powers” under international treaties to provide humanitarian aid.

The willingness of France and Germany to sign off on the food-for-oil program comes amid other signs that Berlin and Paris want to reach an accommodation with Washington. Germany and France also backed the US in opposing moves by the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva to call a special session “to consider the effects of the war on the Iraqi people and their humanitarian situation.”

In another signal, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin made conciliatory gestures in a Thursday speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. “We do not oppose the use of force,” he insisted. “We are only warning against the risks of pre-emptive strikes as a doctrine.” He then appealed for reconciliation, declaring: “These times of great changes call for a renewed close, trusting relationship with the United States.”

A major motive behind the manoeuvring over the role of the UN is the sordid business of divvying up the spoils of war. Not only France and Germany, but Washington’s closest ally, Britain, has been shocked at the speed with which Washington has begun to parcel out highly profitable contracts for postwar reconstruction in Iraq to American companies.

The most glaring example has been the decision to award the contract for putting out the oilfield fires to Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR), a subsidiary of Halliburton, the Texas oil company closely associated with US Vice President Dick Cheney. The announcement gave a healthy 54-cent boost to the company’s shares. Another contract worth \$900 million for rebuilding Iraq’s roads, electricity and infrastructure is about to be awarded and a string of other projects are being processed by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

An article entitled “Battle rages over spoils of war” in today’s *Australian Financial Review* commented: “The choice of KBR has opened a steam valve of fury in Europe, with accusations

of cronyism and suspicion that the US intends to commandeer the best of the lucrative reconstruction projects for itself.” The cost of rebuilding Iraq is estimated at anywhere between \$25 billion and \$100 billion, much of which will be paid for out of Iraq’s income from oil.

UK Trade and Industry Secretary Patricia Hewitt told BBC Radio that, while Britain was not involved in the war for “commercial gain,” a “level playing field” was needed to ensure that British companies were able to compete with American rivals for contracts. She said it was “essential” that authority for reconstruction be handed over to a new civilian government backed by the UN.

Under the current arrangements, US corporations automatically have the inside track. USAID guidelines state that American companies must have priority in the letting of any government contracts. Moreover, all firms are required to have a security clearance—a further major obstacle to any company outside the US successfully tendering. If reconstruction were put in the hands of the UN, European and other firms would have a better chance of bidding.

Blair’s push for a major UN role in postwar Iraq is not conditioned only by this obscene scramble for war booty. He is attempting to maintain a precarious balancing act and provide “a bridge” between the United States and Europe. His appeal for UN involvement in reconstruction is aimed at mending the deep rifts that were exposed in the UN Security Council debates over the war. The fact that Blair reached no agreement at Camp David over the UN has only strengthened the hand of his critics, who argue that Britain’s interests lie in Europe.

Roy Denham, for instance, former European commissioner to Washington, commented in the *International Herald Tribune*: “Tony Blair’s dreamland policy has collapsed around his ears... The myth of British influence in Washington stands exposed as never before. But British influence in Europe is even less... Britain could make a substantial difference to the policy of an independent Europe. On the policies of the United States, it would have all the impact of a cream puff on the Manhattan pavement.”



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