

US bullies New Zealand prime minister into apologising over war comments

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New Zealand Labour Prime Minister, Helen Clark, has been bullied into extending a demeaning formal apology to the Bush administration for disparaging comments she made over the conduct of the war in Iraq. The incident underlines the turn by the White House to gangster-style methods in every corner of the world and its repudiation of even the most basic norms of diplomatic protocol.

The threats against Clark follow similar conduct by the US ambassadors to Australia and Canada, as well as the vitriol hurled by the Bush administration at the French government for opposing the invasion of Iraq. In March, the US ambassador to Canada rebuked the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien for not joining the invasion saying Americans were “upset” it had stood aside from the “coalition of the willing.” He suggested Ottawa had left Washington in the lurch at a time of great peril and broke with diplomatic procedure to support the right-wing premier of Alberta. In February, the US ambassador to Australia made an unprecedented public intervention into the affairs of the opposition Labour Party in order to silence a minority of MPs who had denounced and ridiculed Bush in parliament.

Clark’s offending statements came after she declared in March that New Zealand would not contribute personnel, without a UN mandate, to any post-war US-organised “peace-keeping” force in Iraq. In what was essentially an off-the-cuff comment at the end of her press conference, she went on to express some frustration over the US conduct of the war. The war did not appear to be going to plan, she declared, with the US command clearly having expected less Iraqi resistance. Clark then asserted the war might not have happened at all if Democrat candidate Al Gore had been elected president.

On April 1, the US embassy in Wellington, responding in particular to the comment about Gore, issued a statement describing Clark’s comments as “regrettable”. The statement, couched in unusual diplomatic language

and released without prior warning to the New Zealand government, constituted a serious diplomatic rebuke, since it would have required the approval of senior officials of the State Department in Washington. Clark initially tried to brush it off, describing her observations as nothing more than a statement of the “bleeding obvious”.

Matters, however, did not rest there. Within days, Clark’s comments were taken up by the US National Security Council (NSC). According to a report in the *Dominion Post*, the NSC specifically demanded a “please explain” from the New Zealand government. Clark’s office confirmed that New Zealand embassy officials in Washington had been required to meet with NSC officials over her comments. At the same time, the US Ambassador to New Zealand, Charles Swindells, held a meeting with Foreign Affairs officials in Wellington.

US diplomatic representatives pursued the matter vigorously, indicating through official channels that Clark’s dismissal of her comments as a minor matter was inadequate. In what was regarded as a second rebuke, further talks with New Zealand officials were demanded. Foreign Affairs officials strenuously denied they had been formally “summoned”—regarded far more seriously than “seeking clarification”—but formal contact at the level of face-to-face “discussions” between officials of the two countries went ahead at US insistence.

Clark reacted with anger to media claims that New Zealand had been “ticked off” for her remarks, saying she “would not tolerate” such interference. However, the issue hit the spotlight in Washington just as diplomatic efforts to have New Zealand’s case for a free trade deal considered were coming before Congress. Nineteen influential Republicans, including Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, had recently signed a letter encouraging Bush to start negotiations on a trade deal for New Zealand. In support, the letter cited New Zealand’s “major

contribution to the campaign against terrorism”—a reference to the government’s commitment of SAS troops to Afghanistan and a naval frigate to the Gulf of Oman.

According to the *New Zealand Herald*, Clark’s comments put the trade deal—estimated to be worth \$NZ1 billion—into the “firing line”. The paper’s well-connected deputy editor, Fran O’Sullivan, wrote that New Zealand’s trade negotiators in Washington were left in no doubt that they were responsible for arranging a retraction.

An influential group of US and New Zealand businessmen was recruited to apply the required pressure. These included billionaire Julian Robertson, a Republican with New Zealand property interests, Craig Heatley, millionaire founder of Sky TV in New Zealand and a close friend of ambassador Swindells, who wrote a *Sunday Star Times* column to attest the support of key local business leaders for the war, and Stephen Tindall, owner of The Warehouse retail chain and a key member of the government’s Growth and Innovation Advisory Board, who personally telephoned Clark to express the “angst” of NZ business.

Clark rapidly got the message. At a press conference on April 7, she acknowledged that “offence had been taken” from her comments, though “no offence was intended”. Her apology, she said, had been conveyed to the US administration. Clark, “for the record” added: “I have met President Bush several times. I find him as an individual an engaging and likeable person and it is not my intention to offend him in any way”. She went on to make a belated protest that the US embassy in Wellington had been “out of line” for issuing a public rebuke without first seeking clarification. But the embassy promptly rejected the complaint out of hand, insisting the affair had been handled in an “appropriate” manner and refusing further comment.

Clark later said the affair caused her “great distress” because she was endeavouring to ensure “this relationship [with the US] stays strong despite this difference of opinion over the war.” Pressed in parliament to disclose the text of her apology, Clark revealed she had simply instructed Foreign Affairs officials to frame the message in any way they considered appropriate. She refused to divulge details, leaving it to Foreign Affairs Minister Phil Goff to confirm she had “specifically requested” the apology be conveyed directly to Bush.

Clark’s attempt to project a slightly critical attitude to the invasion of Iraq was dictated by the perceived need within New Zealand ruling circles to sustain a careful

balancing act between its “old friends” in the US and Australia on the one hand, and Europe on the other. But this latest diplomatic rebuke demonstrates that the US will brook no “difference of opinion” on the war, much less any foreign policy “independence” on the part of its trading partners. On a visit to the White House 12 months earlier, Clark won the plaudits of editorial writers and business after Colin Powell described the Labour government as “very, very, very good friends” with the Bush administration, following its commitment of troops to Afghanistan.

On this occasion, however, she was admonished by the *Herald* for her “unnecessary” insult to Bush. The newspaper felt obliged to remind her there “is no point in taunting a nation that wields such dominating economic influence”. Her “correct course”, was to remain silent. The government’s stated position of wanting a UN mandate in Iraq, while showing willingness to play a part in Iraq’s “reconstruction” was well understood internationally. There was no need, the *Herald* continued, for New Zealand to “join the conflict”. Clark would need to urgently set about “rebuilding bridges”.

With the fall of Baghdad, Labour is looking to do just this. Last week, Foreign Affairs Minister Phil Goff welcomed the Iraqi defeat, saying few would be “sad to see Saddam’s regime end”. Clark predicted that a “stable” Middle East would be “good for a meat-producing nation like New Zealand” and the government announced it would be sending to Iraq a team of 20 Defence Force personnel to assist with clearing landmines, setting up medical programmes and rebuilding sanitation services.



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