

Blair addresses US Congress: ovations fail to dispel storm clouds of crisis

Chris Marsden
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In hindsight it may be somewhat obvious to point out that Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair was speaking from a position of extraordinary political weakness when he addressed the representatives of both houses of the US Congress on July 17. The very survival of his government has been thrown into question by the apparent suicide of David Kelly, the man the government accused of leaking adverse reports to the BBC on its intelligence dossiers on Iraq, and who was subsequently hounded to the point where he died from slashed wrists on the day Blair was due to address Congress. Blair was traveling to Tokyo after leaving the US when Kelly's disappearance was first reported.

But even at the time there was an air of unreality, a stage-managed quality to the proceedings that was epitomised by the 18 standing ovations that greeted Blair's remarks.

The proceedings represented a concerted effort to lend Blair the mantle of a distinguished world statesman, whose authority, in turn, vindicated the US war against Iraq. But the reason he was such a welcome guest for the Republicans and the Democrats alike is because they—like Blair himself—face mounting domestic and international criticism for having failed to find any evidence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which was the main justification used to go to war against Iraq. The crisis over the missing WMD has been intensified by the deteriorating post-war situation, with American troops being killed virtually every day by Iraqi forces resisting the occupation of their country.

Even Blair felt obliged to note the contrast between the rapturous applause he was given by Congress and his standing with voters at home. The prime minister made a nervous joke to this effect, which was greeted with yet another standing ovation.

The Bush administration was looking to Blair to make a robust and unapologetic defence of the Iraq war, and he did not disappoint them. A Republican speechwriter could have drafted large tracts of his address, as it took the form of a eulogy to the might of US imperialism and the necessity for it to mount military interventions, not just in Iraq, but in many other countries around the world.

The single most notable passage was forced on Blair because of the failure to find any evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. It exposed the precariousness of his position and that of the Bush administration.

In a somewhat oblique manner, he said of the alleged Iraqi WMD, "Let us say one thing. If we are wrong, we will have destroyed a threat that, at its least, is responsible for inhuman carnage and suffering. That is something I am confident history will forgive."

This is an extraordinary statement, for Blair took Britain into the war—a pre-emptive attack on a country that had not attacked the

UK—despite the overwhelming opposition of the British people. He did so entirely on the basis of the claim that Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction made him an immediate threat to world peace. Now, having failed to find any evidence of such a threat, he argues that this does not matter. The war is justified purely by having resulted in the overthrow of a repressive regime.

This is, first of all, a tacit admission that he lied to the British people, as did Bush to the people of America. It is, moreover, a sweeping repudiation of the principles of international law, which rule out military intervention not sanctioned by the United Nations, except in cases of self-defense. Under existing international law, a war waged for the purpose of removing a regime deemed by the attacking parties to be repressive is defined as an illegal war of aggression.

Blair was well aware that the pre-emptive invasion of Iraq was illegal. For weeks he had argued that the Bush administration had to seek the endorsement of the United Nations before going to war. In the end, the US and Britain failed to win the UN's sanction, but even then Blair stressed that the war was being waged under the authority of existing UN resolutions that Iraq had allegedly flouted, in order to conceal its weapons stockpiles and programs.

Now, Blair has been forced to all but abandon efforts to justify the war on the grounds that Iraqi WMD made the regime in Baghdad a menace to world peace. In its place he invokes the right of US imperialism to decide when a regime is beyond the pale, and crush it.

"Regime change" is now the justification for war, with all that this implies for the future plans of the hawks in the White House. To underline the significance of this shift, Blair described the Iraq war as "another act" to be followed by "many further struggles" that will be "set upon this stage." He specifically singled out Iran, Syria and North Korea—all countries targeted by Washington.

Blair made clear that Britain could be relied on to support other US wars of conquest—all in the name of "freedom", "our beliefs", "democracy", "human rights", "the rule of law" and "liberty." Even Abraham Lincoln was name-checked by Blair to hammer home his message that the defense of liberty meant accepting the legitimacy of the so-called war against terrorism.

He promised that Britain would be an unceasing voice in Europe, seeking to convince the Continent's major powers that they must accept the undisputed hegemony of US imperialism.

"There is no more dangerous theory in international politics today than that we need to balance the power of America with other competitor powers, different poles around which nations gather," he insisted. "Such a theory made sense in nineteenth century Europe. It was perforce the position in the Cold War. Today it is an anachronism to be discarded like traditional theories of security."

To impose this view Britain would lead the 12 former Stalinist states of Eastern Europe set to join the European Union (EU) as a bloc. In an implicit challenge to “Old Europe,” i.e., Germany and France, Blair said the new EU members would transform Europe because: “They believe in the transatlantic alliance. They support economic reform. They want a Europe of nations, not a super-state.” He continued: “They are our allies. And yours. So don’t give up on Europe. Work with it.”

Perhaps the most politically revealing parts of Blair’s speech comprised his efforts to justify why, “There never has been a time when the power of America was so necessary; or so misunderstood.” Here he descended into passages that can be described as the political equivalent of paranoia.

Blair opened his remarks by painting a scenario in which the industrialised capitalist world was an island of peace and prosperity, with no foreseeable threat of war between the world’s powerful nations, “Because we all have too much to lose.” This idyllic world was all the more serene, “Because even those powers like Russia, China or India can see the horizon of future wealth clearly and know they are on a steady road toward it.”

To call this description fantastical is, if anything, to give it more credence than it deserves. Blair appears oblivious to the fact that millions of US and British citizens have been thrust into economic crisis and view the tax cuts for the rich and attacks on welfare provisions of Bush and Blair with hostility. In both countries the concentration of wealth and the scale of social inequality have risen to levels unseen for nearly a century. These are societies rife with contradictions, in which, moreover, the political systems have come to rest on ever more narrow social foundations—to the point of becoming virtually dysfunctional.

To argue, moreover, that countries such as India and Russia see prosperity around the corner—when they have suffered an unprecedented social decline—is delusional.

Blair’s claim that relations between the major powers are so intertwined that the possibility of war is excluded is another delusion. Much of his speech was given over to an appeal to the US not to allow its relations with Europe to deteriorate further than they already have.

The flip side of his glowing depiction of economic and social relations in the “civilised” world was his portrayal of the rest of the world as a breeding ground for terrorism, and his argument that this external “virus” was the central threat to world peace and prosperity.

There was something distinctly apocalyptic about his depiction of the situation in “another part of the globe” where “there is shadow and darkness where not all the world is free, where many millions suffer under brutal dictatorship; where a third of our planet lives in a poverty beyond anything even the poorest in our societies can imagine; and where a fanatical strain of religious extremism has arisen, that is a mutation of the true and peaceful faith of Islam, and because in the combination of these afflictions, a new and deadly virus has emerged.”

He described Islamic fundamentalist terrorism as a “virus” that could be combated only by the world’s “freedom-loving” nations accepting that, “Our new world rests on order.” He continued: “The danger is disorder, and in today’s world it now spreads like contagion. Terrorists and the states that support them don’t have large armies or precision weapons. They don’t need them. The weapon is chaos.”

For all the attempts to project an appearance of strength and political fortitude—and despite Blair’s belief that US imperialism is supreme and unchallengeable—the world view he expounded of a twilight

struggle between order and chaos is fraught with a sense of panic and disorientation. It is a siege mentality.

It reflects the outlook of a privileged elite that feels itself under threat from the broad masses below at whose expense it has piled up its colossal riches. Besieged on all sides by enemies he dares not name, Blair identifies a single scapegoat—the “virus” of terrorism—as the external threat to the brave new world whose sun is America and whose moon, he hopes, will be Britain.

It is difficult to identify the dividing line between propaganda and self-delusion. Does Blair seriously believe what he says, or is he saying what he wants others to believe? Can it be that a man educated in one of Britain’s top schools and benefiting from the advice of a government machine steeped in decades of colonial experience can seriously argue that the generations-old, complex and protracted problems besetting “Kashmir, the Middle East, Chechnya, Indonesia, Africa” can simply be attributed—as Blair did in his US speech—to the “virus” of terrorism?

Nor is it possible to rule the world merely by force of arms, as the growing crisis in Iraq has confirmed.

The fact that the US and Britain are led by politicians who rely on such absurd conceptions has an objective significance beyond the subjective motives of Mr. Blair. He, like Bush, cannot tell the truth because his policies are determined by forces hostile to the interests of the great mass of the world’s people, including the working classes of America and Britain. He cannot justify the war by arguing that it has enabled Washington to seize control of one of the world’s richest sources of oil and opens up the possibility of establishing US hegemony over the entire Middle East. Instead, he relies on whipping up fear and panic amongst the more politically disoriented over the terrorist threat.

But the big lie is not a sustainable basis for government. Sooner or later events expose lies and find liars out, as Blair is already finding to his cost. At one point he made an ill-advised attempt to put himself in the shoes of an American worker. He imagined that “in some small corner of this vast country in Nevada or Idaho, these places I’ve never been but always wanted to go, there’s a guy getting on with his life, perfectly happily, minding his own business, saying to you the political leaders of this nation: why me? Why us? Why America? And the only answer is: because destiny put you in this place in history, in this moment in time and the task is yours to do.”

He may believe that most otherwise contented Americans are ready to be convinced that predatory wars of conquest by the Bush administration are a legitimate response to the threat of terrorism. But the opposite is closer to the truth. Growing numbers in the US, Britain and throughout the world are questioning why the war against Iraq was fought.

They will not be convinced otherwise by Blair’s performance on Capitol Hill. He may have hoped that the endorsement of Congress would help silence his critics and vindicate his support for the occupation of Baghdad. But it has only confirmed his role as a “yes man” for the most right-wing government in US history and a warmonger in his own right.



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