

## “Meet the people”—Bush and Blair style

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One million pounds spent and 1,300 police officers invading a village of 5,000 residents—all so that US President George W. Bush and his host, Prime Minister Tony Blair, could fake a “meet the people” photo opportunity.

Bush’s helicopter visit to Blair’s Sedgefield constituency in northeast England was billed as an occasion for the president to wind down and enjoy a pub lunch at the local Dun and Cow Inn, followed by a soccer match at the local sports academy.

In the event, the modest lunch of fish, chips and mushy peas turned out to be one of the most expensive meals in history, and the 70 or so carefully vetted guests were about the only “commoners” Bush met during his state visit to Britain.

Bush left Buckingham Palace on Friday morning for Sedgefield under the protection of two gunship helicopters. The evening before his arrival a virtual ring of steel was placed around the village and nearby Trimdon, where Blair has his constituency home—a four-bedroom Victorian house named Myrobella.

The unfortunate people of Sedgefield were placed under restrictions akin to a siege. The *Times* newspaper described “surreal scenes” the night before the visit, as hundreds of police officers and secret service agents arrived to close roads, impose a ban on parking in the village and insist that shopkeepers remove net curtains and blinds to help with surveillance.

Many local people were angry when they were threatened with their cars being towed away if they were not moved by 8 p.m., complaining that there was nowhere else to park. A spokeswoman for Durham Constabulary said in reply, “A lot of people are going to be put out by this but, unfortunately, there is nothing that we can do.”

The centre of the village was closed off behind metal barriers, but around 500 antiwar protesters had already gathered on the village green opposite the Dun and

Cow. Banners were held aloft reading, “Bin Blair” and “Bush: World’s No. 1 terrorist.”

The air of unreality surrounding Bush’s visit was given the unwitting assistance of the First Lady, Laura Bush, in her only reported comment to the media. She told reporters that she and her husband were nonplussed by the tens of thousands of London protesters who demonstrated on Thursday against the war, adding, “I don’t think the protests are near as large as everyone was predicting before we got there. We’ve seen plenty of American flags, we’ve seen plenty of people who were waving to us—many, many more people, in fact, than we’ve seen protesters.”

This may, in fact be true, since the 150,000-200,000 protesters were not allowed anywhere near the first couple, who were holed up alternately in Buckingham Palace and Ten Downing Street and walled off from the teaming humanity around them by thousands of police and Secret Service agents. Police have now admitted to 110,000 in attendance at the antiwar and anti-Bush/Blair demonstration, but organisers claim 200,000. The *Guardian* newspaper, a loyal friend of Blair, admitted that “it was difficult to argue that they [the protest organizers] were wrong.”

The fact that the next day a ratio of one police officer for every resident was considered necessary so that Bush could venture out onto the streets is due not so much to fear of terrorist reprisals as to the widely and deeply-felt popular hostility to the US president. His relationship to the general population has begun to resemble that of an absolutist despot to his vassals. There is no possibility any longer of unpoliced contact between the rulers and the ruled—for fear that the illusion of support for their policies so carefully cultivated by the media will be exposed as a lie.

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