

Blair: Scrap international law vs. aggressive war

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On March 5, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair addressed a meeting in his Sedgefield constituency in a renewed effort to justify his decision to support the United States-led war against Iraq.

Blair called for a fundamental revision of international law that would not only provide retroactive legitimacy to the unprovoked war of aggression against Iraq, but would also pave the way for further military interventions by Britain and its US ally.

The prime minister reiterated his now familiar sophistries in support of war, in response to the increasing criticism of the failure of the occupation forces to find Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and opposition demands that he publish the attorney general's legal advice on which he is supposed to have decided war was legitimate.

As usual his stance was a mixture of outright lies, evasions and, above all, scaremongering. Blair repeatedly raised the twin threat posed by Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and the potential or actual acquisition of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons by what he called "dictatorial states".

The Iraq war had been necessary because of what he insisted was a "real and existential" global threat. He was forced to acknowledge that Iraq was not "an imminent threat to Britain", but insisted that it could have *become* a threat in future. Because of the threat posed by terrorism and WMD proliferation, Britain could not have allowed Saddam Hussein to breach United Nations' resolutions without sending the wrong signal to similar regimes the world over.

He cited a January 2003 press conference, in which he had told reporters, "My fear is that we wake up one day and we find ... that one of these dictatorial states has used weapons of mass destruction—and Iraq has done so in the past—and we get sucked into a conflict, with all the devastation that would cause".

Regarding his antiwar critics, he argued, "The characterisation of the threat is where the difference lies.... It was defined not by Iraq but by September 11th. September 11th did not create the threat Saddam posed. But it altered crucially the balance of risk as to whether to deal with it or simply carry on, however imperfectly, trying to contain it."

According to Blair's new doctrine, therefore, post-September 11 a "fear" of a threat (felt by himself or President George W. Bush)—whether or not it has any foundation in truth—justifies an assault on another country that has itself never indicated any intention to attack the UK.

This is how crudely he argued for his own version of the doctrine of "pre-emptive war" that has been elaborated by the Bush administration in the US. But Blair is fully aware that the US doctrine he now wishes to promulgate is in direct violation of existing international law—and that by definition the war against Iraq was illegal and he and President George W. Bush are in effect war criminals. So he chose to seize the bull by the horns and call for a fundamental revision of international law to be made.

Blair framed this call in the form of an appeal to his erstwhile critics within Britain's liberal establishment, appealing to them to resume their past support both for his government and for imperialist military

intervention—as had previously been the case in the war conducted against Serbian Kosovo.

He was at pains to express his warm feelings to his nominal opponents:

"I have never disrespected those who disagreed with the decision ... there was a core of sensible people who faced with this decision would have gone the other way, for sensible reasons. Their argument is one I understand totally. It is that Iraq posed no direct, immediate threat to Britain; and that Iraq's WMD, even on our own case, was not serious enough to warrant war, certainly without a specific UN resolution mandating military action. And they argue: Saddam could, in any event, be contained."

After this bit of ego-stroking, Blair asked his former friends to take a look into the inner workings of the great leader's mind. In the process he makes clear that the September 11 atrocities were not the real reason for his "doctrine of international community" as the proposed new basis of both international law and politics, but only provided an excuse to put it into practice.

"Let me attempt an explanation of how my own thinking, as a political leader, has evolved during these past few years," said Blair. "Already, before September 11th the world's view of the justification of military action had been changing. The only clear case in international relations for armed intervention had been self-defence, response to aggression. But the notion of intervening on humanitarian grounds had been gaining currency. I set this out, following the Kosovo war, in a speech in Chicago in 1999, where I called for a doctrine of international community, where in certain clear circumstances, we do intervene, even though we are not directly threatened. I said this was not just to correct injustice, but also because in an increasingly interdependent world, our self-interest was allied to the interests of others; and seldom did conflict in one region of the world not contaminate another."

This hypocritical invocation of "humanitarian" grounds for military intervention alongside more direct assertions of the right to take action for reasons of "self-interest" is a key feature of Blair's "doctrine of international community".

He continued, "So, for me, before September 11th, I was already reaching for a different philosophy in international relations from a traditional one that has held sway since the treaty of Westphalia in 1648; namely that a country's internal affairs are for it and you don't interfere unless it threatens you, or breaches a treaty, or triggers an obligation of alliance. I did not consider Iraq fitted into this philosophy, though I could see the horrible injustice done to its people by Saddam."

He then reiterated a version of his twin-threats thesis—"Islamic extremism and terrorism" and the attempts by "unstable and repressive" states to build or acquire WMDs, insisting that this necessitates the abrogation of all concepts of national sovereignty and legally governed relations between states.

September 11 "galvanised me", he continued, as it was "a declaration of war by religious fanatics" that were "prepared to bring about

Armageddon”.

It does not trouble Blair to explain how precisely the ragtag forces of Al Qaeda would succeed in bringing about Armageddon (which is what Blair presumably is referring to when he speaks of an “existential” threat) even if it wanted to. But his intention is merely to frighten the already fearful, rather than present a rational argument.

Moreover, given that there is no connection whatsoever between Saddam Hussein and Islamic fundamentalism and that Iraq had never presented any threat to either Britain or the US, Blair again had to resort to an amalgam of unfounded assertions. He continues, supposedly as if by extension, “Here were states whose leadership cared for no-one but themselves; were often cruel and tyrannical towards their own people; and who saw WMD as a means of defending themselves against any attempt external or internal to remove them and who, in their chaotic and corrupt state, were in any event porous and irresponsible with neither the will nor capability to prevent terrorists who also hated the West, from exploiting their chaos and corruption.”

There is something almost deranged in Blair’s ramblings. He speaks for a ruling elite that has lost all sense of restraint and perspective, or at least one that would like others to lose their heads so that they can be dragooned behind an explosion of naked military aggression.

According to the Blair doctrine, military might—and specifically the might of US imperialism and its British stooge—is the essential answer to every threat to global stability. Anything that hinders the effective utilisation of this global force for order must be done away with.

Some passages of Blair’s speech are truly chilling. After September 11, 2002, “The global threat to our security was clear. So was our duty: to act to eliminate it. First we dealt with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, removing the Taliban that succoured them. But then we had to confront the states with WMD. We had to take a stand.”

And to those who pointed out that Iraq had no WMDs, Blair answers, “This is not a time to err on the side of caution; not a time to weigh the risks to an infinite balance”.

Shakespeare put it better: “Cry ‘havoc!’ and let slip the dogs of war.”

Resorting once again to humanitarian rhetoric, he makes a last appeal for international law to be changed:

“It may well be that under international law as presently constituted, a regime can systematically brutalise and oppress its people and there is nothing anyone can do, when dialogue, diplomacy and even sanctions fail, unless it comes within the definition of a humanitarian catastrophe (though the 300,000 remains in mass graves already found in Iraq might be thought by some to be something of a catastrophe). This may be the law, but should it be?”

His final statement is the most absurd, and yet sinister. He told his audience, “That is the struggle which engages us. It is a new type of war. It will rest on intelligence to a greater degree than ever before. It demands a different attitude to our own interests. It forces us to act even when so many comforts seem unaffected, and the threat so far off, *if not illusory*.” (Emphasis added)

Sometimes one reads something and you are forced to do a double take. This is one such occasion. Blair is asking for carte blanche to declare war on the basis of a purely imagined threat. Big Brother would have been proud.

Blair repeatedly argues that his “doctrine of international community” is intended to spread the values of democracy, economic progress and stability in a struggle against terrorists and tyrants. He even cites the United Nations and its Universal Declaration on Human Rights as “a fine document” that can be the template by which to judge those to be targeted. But this is a very thin veneer.

The April 24, 1999 speech at the Economic Club in Chicago which he cites as the first elaboration of his doctrine of international community was similarly couched in humanitarian language, though then the rallying

cry to justify launching war against Serbia was a call to oppose “ethnic cleansing, systematic rape, mass murder” in Kosovo. However, then as now, the rights of the “international community” to intervene boil down to the right of the US to do so, and then by extension, Britain and the other European imperialist powers. As the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out at the time [See: Blair outlines his vision of the new military world order, 29 April 1999]

“Shrouding himself in rhetoric about the threat from ‘dangerous and ruthless men’ like Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, Blair called for NATO to impose order on the world under the auspices of the US—‘by far the strongest state’. This new version of the ‘Pax Americana’ meant that ‘non-interference’, long ‘considered an important principle of international order ... must be qualified’. The imperialist powers would instead lay down the rules determining when intervention should take place. This must also allow room for the European powers to match the US ‘with our own efforts. That is the basis for the recent initiative I took with President Chirac of France to improve Europe’s own defence capabilities.’”

We warned, “Blair’s speech was, as usual, little more than an attempt to codify changes that have already taken place and give them a democratic and humanitarian gloss. The economic and political imperatives he enumerates are shaping both US foreign policy and that of the other European powers.... Far from leading to the creation of Blair’s anodyne ‘international community’, however, the drive by US and European imperialism to refashion the world in their own interests inaugurates a period of global militarism and brutality, the likes of which have not been witnessed for over 50 years.”

This warning was prescient, and since then millions have awoken to the dangers presented by the renewed drive for global conquest that is being led by Washington.

The humanitarian mask donned by Blair was utterly unconvincing to most people when it came to Iraq. The second Gulf War was so manifestly motivated by the desire to establish US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East that Blair found himself both politically discredited and hated by millions.

But this does not mean that his appeal for a new world order based on the sole principle that might makes right will fall on deaf ears. After all, he is not speaking to the mass of antiwar demonstrators who took to the streets to express their outrage over the bombing of Iraq, but to those within the establishment and the media whose differences with him are of a purely tactical character.

This is the layer who supported imperialist intervention in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan, but who feared that the attack on Iraq might undermine the interests of British imperialism by destabilising the Middle East and tying Britain too closely to Washington, at the risk of alienating the European powers.

Amongst these elements, there are those who will readily grasp the hand of friendship extended by Blair. The *Guardian* newspaper plays an important political role as the semi-official voice of the liberal bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. Throughout the Iraq war, pro and antiwar sentiment could find expression, as the paper’s editors attempted to convince dissident voices to continue to back Blair despite their reservations on Iraq.

In response to Blair’s Sedgefield speech, the *Guardian* fawned on his every word. The paper’s March 6 leader demanded of its readers, “It has been a long time since Tony Blair made a more thoughtful or more coherent speech about the war on terror than the one he gave in Sedgefield yesterday. Read it. Discuss it. It is important.... It is a speech worthy of its subject, and it deserves the respectful attention of all who take politics seriously. At a time when politics is widely felt to be so disreputable, that is no small achievement. It deserves an appropriately respectful and thoughtful response that goes beyond attitudinising.”

Its only voice of caution was that his liberal apologia for imperialism was perhaps made less convincing by his alliance with the most right wing and aggressively militarist regime in US history. The *Guardian* complained, “Mr Blair advanced some very radical ideas yesterday about the future of global security and international law. But he did so within the context of Labour’s internationalist philosophy in which global institutions play an essential role and in which human rights, whether in Africa or Palestine, are indivisible. Mr Bush does not think that way. Yet it is he who is the leader of the world’s only military superpower. Mr Blair can propose multinational responses to global problems all he likes, but as long as Mr Bush is president, America will only dispose unilateralist responses that it perceives to be in the particular interests of the US. This was one of the key problems about the events of 12 months ago.”

Aside from this caveat, the *Guardian* agreed wholeheartedly with Blair’s claim that we face “the gravest of all threats to global security” and his raising “questions about the best means that the world can adopt to protect itself against the threat from devastating weapons in fanatical hands”.

Blair “was, and is, wrong” about Iraq, the paper opined, “But the threat from terrorism is utterly real. Our nation, like others, is in danger from it. Mr Blair’s sombre statement of what is at stake calls for both thought and action.”

Things could not be clearer. We disagreed slightly on Iraq, proclaims the *Guardian*, but when it comes to future military ventures that do not sacrifice British interests to those of the US, then we will be with you all the way.



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