

Bush's European visit: opposition from the people and prostration by their leaders

Chris Marsden
29 June 2004

From the moment President George W. Bush's entourage touched down at Shannon Airport on June 25 to attend a United States-European Union summit, the Irish government was forced to impose virtual martial law conditions.

In what was the largest security operation in Irish history, Dromoland Castle in County Clare was transformed into a military fort surrounded by more than 6,000 troops and heavy armour, keeping thousands of protesters at bay.

Bush, his wife Laura, Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, were driven away in an armoured Cadillac, while snipers manned the roofs of airport buildings and helicopters circulated overhead.

Around 700 armed US Secret Service personnel guarded Bush, having been given permission by the Irish government of Bertie Ahern to open fire if they believed they or the president was at risk.

The police and army sealed off all routes to both Shannon Airport and Dromoland Castle grounds. Four naval ships patrolled the Shannon River and its estuary. Specialist decontamination units and bomb disposal teams were deployed. Local people were forced to carry passes in order to gain access to their homes and workplaces.

Scorpion tanks were deployed, leading peace campaigner and former tank squadron commander Edward Horgan to complain, "Those tanks are completely inappropriate for crowd control. They can only kill people. They have only been used once for crowd control in the world, I believe, and that was in Indonesia, where they killed hundreds of people in the province of Aceh."

In total, around 18 kilometres (11 miles) of roads around Dromoland were closed off until Bush's departure on the afternoon of June 26—a mere 18 hours.

Police with water cannon were also on standby.

On the other side of the barricades and police and army cordons were the protesters, who had travelled overnight from all over Ireland. That evening, between 30,000 and 40,000 people had protested in the capital, Dublin. And smaller demonstrations had been held in Sligo, Tralee,

Waterford and Galway.

On leaving Ireland for the NATO summit in Ankara, Turkey, Bush's public reception was equally hostile. He was driven from the Esenboga airport in an armoured car to the Hilton hotel, with hundreds of police and paramilitary police lining the 34-kilometre (21-mile) route.

His arrival was preceded by a series of protests and bomb blasts, including one on Thursday, June 24, that injured three people outside the Hilton hotel. A blast on an Istanbul bus killed four people and injured 14.

On Saturday, June 26, Turkish police fired tear gas as more than 150 left-wing demonstrators hurled rocks and used sticks to try to break down a police barricade during a protest ahead of Bush's arrival.

The same day, four officers were injured in clashes between around 5,000 anti-US protesters and Turkish riot police. Police blocked off dozens of roads in the centre of Ankara, and residents were forced to remove parked cars.

The contrast between the hostility expressed by Europe's people towards Bush over Iraq and the albeit qualified support he was offered by the European Union leaders could not be starker.

At the Dromoland summit, Bush had won the EU's backing for NATO to train the security forces of the US puppet regime in Iraq. This was crucial for Bush, in that 19 of the EU's 25 members are also members of NATO, which Bush is asking to take on a military role in Iraq.

The US and the EU issued a joint statement agreeing to back Iraq's request for NATO military help, to support the training of Iraqi security forces, and to reduce Iraq's international debt, estimated to be \$120 billion. Opposition led by France and Germany prevented agreement on support for a NATO military role on the ground in Iraq, but France and Germany both agreed to train troops.

The EU went on to lend support to White House efforts to stoke up tensions with Iran, with the EU expressing concern over Iran's nuclear programme and insisting that Tehran must be in full compliance with its international obligations not to create nuclear weapons.

The US and the EU also agreed to share data and otherwise cooperate in combating terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. They also signed an agreement to make the EU's planned satellite navigation system, Galileo, compatible with the existing US Global Positioning System (GPS).

The only indication of criticism came in a veiled form. Failing to mention either the US army or Abu Ghraib prison, the Dromoland summit's final communiqué merely declared, "We stress the need for full respect of the Geneva Conventions."

At a news conference by Bush, Ahern and Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, one reporter asked the obvious question of why Bush was so unpopular in Europe.

Bush was clearly angry and responded to the question with contempt. He replied, "I must confess that the first polls I worry about are those that are going to take place in early November this year [the presidential elections]."

In a reference to the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US troops, he continued, "Listen, I care about the image of our country...." adding, "as far as my own personal standing goes, my job is to do my job."

"I'm going to set a vision, I'm going to lead, and we'll just let the chips fall where they may."

Bush declared that the differences between the US and the European leaders over the Iraq war were over, and that they shared "a common interest and a common goal to help the Iraqi people."

He said that Ahern had questioned him about the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and US treatment of prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay, as had President Mary McAleese of Ireland.

Referring to Abu Ghraib, he said, "I told them both I was sick with what happened inside that prison. The actions of those troops did not reflect what we think. And it did harm."

Ahern's response was to speed to the defence of a clearly rattled Bush. In the most dismissive terms imaginable, he told reporters, "These things, unfortunately, happened. We wish they didn't, but they do. And that's important."

Bush was thus able to leave Ireland with a justifiable sense of satisfaction. He will also have been pleased by the confirmation of Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Manuel Durao Barroso as the new President of the European Commission.

Barroso was agreed upon after Britain blocked the preferred candidate of France and Germany, Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, who had angered the UK and the US by organising a mini-summit with Germany and France on European defence that was aimed at opposing the Iraq war.

Barroso, an admirer of the economic policies of Margaret

Thatcher, supported Britain and the US over Iraq and hosted the pre-war summit in the Azores islands between Bush, Blair and the now-deposed Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar.

However, claims that US and European differences are outdated are wishful thinking on Bush's part. Bush did not get everything he wanted from the EU. France and Germany have maintained their refusal to send troops to Iraq, and even his more loyal European allies who have sent troops are insisting on a US exit strategy. No country wants to stake its own future on the ever-deteriorating situation in Iraq. Therefore, the offer of training Iraqi troops is the compromise that was forced on the US.

So too was the agreement on making the EU's planned Galileo system compatible with the US GPS, ending a transatlantic dispute. The proposal for an independent European system had been opposed by the Pentagon because it feared the frequency structure being demanded by Brussels could have prevented US commanders from degrading navigation data in the theatre of war to all but their own forces, as is possible at present.

But the change in technical parameters will allow either side to effectively jam the other's signal in a small area, such as a battlefield, without shutting down the entire system. Not only is the Galileo system, which has won Chinese backing, to go ahead, but the deal gives the EU power to sabotage the US system should it choose to do so.

One reason why the Bush administration chose to move the date forward for the supposed transfer of sovereignty in Iraq to yesterday, June 28—two days ahead of schedule—is so that he and Blair can strengthen their hand against dissenting voices from Paris and Berlin by claiming that Iraqi self-rule is now a reality that must be given full support by Europe and the other NATO powers.

The EU's acquiescence in Dromoland will only have encouraged the US to press on with its plans. Moreover, whatever their tactical disagreements, the Bush administration can at least be confident that none of the European powers are prepared to contemplate the prospect of a US defeat in Iraq.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact