

Bush and Blair pledge to continue Middle East aggression

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The display of mutual backslapping between Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George W. Bush at their joint press conference in Washington on November 12 was a sickening spectacle.

It took place as the Iraqi city of Fallujah was being put to the sword by the US military. Hospitals, schools and apartments were laid waste, as thousands of people held captive in their homes for days without electricity and water tried to protect themselves from the carnage around them.

That the meeting between Blair and Bush was a summit of war criminals was a matter of indifference to the British media. The sole concern of the editorial offices of Fleet Street was what quid pro quo Blair could extract in return for his unswerving support for Bush on the occasion of their first meeting since the US president's re-election.

Britain's ruling elite fondly hoped that it would be pay back time at last for its costly support for the war against Iraq, which had been vital in lending legitimacy to what otherwise would have been seen as a unilateral act of aggression by Washington.

This was a serious political consideration. Having secured a second term in office, Bush had boasted of having "political capital" to spend. Blair, however, who faces a general election some time in the next six months, is in danger of using all his up.

The redeployment of British troops from Basra to Baghdad in order to free up US marines for the onslaught on Fallujah has hardened political opposition to the war in Britain, and raised the possibility that UK forces are being sucked into a quagmire. Opinion polls show that Iraq will be a major factor in the general election, under conditions in which three-fifths of the population is opposed to British involvement.

Critics therefore complained that whilst Blair's visit to Washington—the first by a head of state since the November 2 election—confirmed the "special relationship" between the two leaders, there had been precious few signs so far that it was one that fulfilled Britain's interests.

Sir Stephen Wall, Blair's former senior adviser on Europe, had described transatlantic relations as rather one-way. And writing in the *Guardian*, former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said it was time to question whether the "special relationship" was really a "national delusion".

Faced with such criticisms, the prime minister must provide tangible proof of the benefits, his friends advised. Perhaps the president could spell out that the US does have a credible exit plan from Iraq, or make some encouraging noises on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Such hopes were dashed. If anything the Washington talks confirmed US Secretary of State Colin Powell's assertion that a second Bush term would be an "aggressive" one; and Blair was ready to collaborate in whatever crimes are cooked up in Washington.

Far from outlining an exit strategy from Iraq, the two leaders spoke only of a deepening military offensive—with Blair promising to stay in Iraq to the bitter end rather than Bush raising the possibility of departure.

Defending the slaughter in Fallujah, Bush warned the world to expect more of the same. As the January elections draw near, "the desperation of the killers will grow and the violence could escalate," he said—a signal that the type of "collective punishment" being inflicted in Fallujah would be extended to other towns and cities if the Iraqi people do not end their opposition to the colonial takeover of their country. The head of Iraq's puppet regime, President Alawi, has already declared his intention to open a "second front" in Mosul.

Blair's promise that he would urge Washington to place greater emphasis on seeking a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—as part of a supposed Middle East peace process—also translated into his compliance with Washington's scheming against the Palestinian masses.

Bush made abundantly clear that he intends to exploit the crisis created by the death of Yasser Arafat, which he referred to as "a new opportunity to make progress toward a lasting peace", to install a stooge leadership in the Palestinian Authority.

"I intend to use the next four years to spend the capital of the United States," on the creation of a Palestinian state, Bush said. "Soon Palestinians will choose a new president," he continued. "This is the first step in creating lasting, democratic political institutions through which a free Palestinian people will elect local and national leaders.

"We're committed to the success of these elections and we stand ready to help."

In other words, the US will support the creation of a Palestinian state providing it has the leadership Washington wants—one that is ready to suppress Palestinian resistance on Israel's behalf. As in Iraq, this is the real measure of "democracy".

The entire onus was placed on the readiness of the Palestinian people to accede to US-Israeli diktats. "We'll hold their feet to the fire to make sure that democracy prevails," Bush threatened.

He looked forward to "working with the Palestinian leadership that is committed to fighting terror and committed to the cause of democratic reform." And if the new leadership toed the line and made clear that it was ready to suppress the intifada, then Bush would extract some money from "the international community", i.e. from somewhere other than the US, "to help revive the Palestinian economy, to build up the Palestinian security institutions to fight terror ..."

Dodging a question on whether he would push for a freeze on Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Bush made clear that even the paltry provisions for a Palestinian state contained in the "Road Map" drawn up between the US, Europe, Russia and the United Nations have been un-ceremonially dumped. In its stead, Bush now advances the plan drawn up by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for a "disengagement" from the Gaza Strip combined with a major land grab on the West Bank, as official US policy.

Even his timetable of four years and five stages towards the creation of a Palestinian state breaks the Road Map's previous timetable of 2005. But in reality nothing will be given if the Palestinians fail to elect the leadership Washington wants in the next 60 days. And even then any future Palestinian state will be a ghetto whose borders will be entirely determined by Israeli fiat.

Blair seamlessly adopted Bush's line as his own. He too stressed that "we need to make sure that the political, the economic and the security infrastructure of that state is shaped and helped to come into being."

And to this end, Blair promised, "We will mobilise international opinion and the international community in order to do that."

This is in fact the service Blair offers to Bush, whether with regards to Palestine or Iraq—to paint every proscription handed down by Washington in progressive colours, in the hope that it may be made more palatable.

But this is for propaganda purposes only. Blair is unflinching in his support for unrestrained US militarism. He stressed that in his vision for the world there could be no long-term stability without democracy, but his respect for the latter did not mean there would be no "interference in the world states".

Nor did it mean bowing to popular demands at home for the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq. "We have to complete our mission in Iraq, make sure that Iraq is a stable and a democratic country," he said at the press conference. Later, in

an interview on ABC's "Nightline" he insisted, "I've made it clear all the way through that I'm not going to give up on this or back down on it."

In his strident defence of the prime minister against charges that he was America's poodle, Bush explained, "He's a big thinker. He's got a clear vision. And when times get tough, he doesn't wilt. You know, when the criticism starts to come his way—I suspect that might be happening on occasion—he stands for what he believes in."

What Bush means is that the prime minister can be relied on to back Washington in the face of both domestic opposition and from within Europe.

Bush said that he intended to "visit Europe as soon as possible after my inauguration" in order to "deepen our transatlantic ties with the nations of Europe".

His real purpose will be to whip the European countries into uncomplaining acceptance of the hegemonic rule of the US on the world arena. Those who fall short must be isolated and threatened. Bush has yet to return Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero's congratulatory phone call (Zapatero withdrew Spanish troops from Iraq soon after he was elected in May last year). Instead the White House has reportedly invited the opposition Popular Party leader Jose Aznar, the man Zapatero replaced, for talks.

Blair's support in Europe is important to Bush, who views France and Germany with barely restrained hostility. Without Blair, Bush believes he would be left over-reliant on lesser powers such as Italy, with overtly right-wing governments, alongside the former Stalinist states of Eastern Europe.

Keeping Britain on board gives the US an alliance with one of Europe's major military powers and a tame social democrat that will give a left-sounding sermon on the absolute necessity of European subordination to America.

And, whatever their complaints at being shortchanged by Washington, there is no significant opposition within ruling layers to Blair's line that seriously contemplates a bloc with other European powers as an alternative to the "special relationship".

That is why the British bourgeoisie is being told not to expect too much in return for their sacrifices. As one senior government source explained, "Bush does need Blair: they're not totally indifferent to worldwide unpopularity, and they do know strong allies are at a premium.

"But it would be a mistake for us to think that by offering support you get automatic pay back. You have got to make [what you want] in America's interests."



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