Britain: Blair sets out ideological justification for new wars of aggression

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Prime Minister Tony Blair's March 21 speech in London marking the third anniversary of the Iraq war coincided with President George W. Bush's Washington press conference making clear that the occupation of Iraq will continue for years and threatening military attacks against any country deemed an obstacle to US interests.

As at the time of the invasion, Blair's task today is to contrive a pseudo-moral justification for the illegal policy of preemptive war, which the prime minister euphemistically termed "active intervention."

However, he does so under conditions in which the catastrophe wrought by the invasion of Iraq has stripped both his government and the White House of any political legitimacy in the eyes of tens of millions of people across the world. Thus, despite appearing before a friendly audience at the Foreign Policy Centre—a pro-New Labour think tank—the prime minister appeared harried and edgy, and his remarks bellicose and defensive by turns.

Three years on, the "majority view of a large part of Western opinion" was that the war should never have taken place, Blair said. He went on to acknowledge that "the precarious nature of Iraq today and . . . those who have died" had made the doctrine of "active intervention" the object of "scorn."

Many had also concluded that "George Bush is as much if not more of a threat to world peace than Osama bin Laden," Blair continued, "and what is happening in Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else in the Middle East is an entirely understandable consequence of US/UK imperialism or worse, of just plain stupidity."

This admission is itself a damning self-indictment of his policy. That so many hold these views is not difficult to explain. All of Blair's justifications for the war have been exposed as lies. There was no connection between Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 attacks on New York, and Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction.

More than 100,000 Iraqis have been killed, and rather than being greeted as "liberators," the US and Britain have been confronted with a popular insurgency, which they are seeking to extinguish through a combination of military action against entire towns and cities, and the deliberate cultivation of sectarian and ethnic conflict.

Once again, Blair made clear his indifference to domestic and international popular opinion and his determination to continue his political and military alliance with Washington. Rather than make any accounting for the disastrous results of his previous actions, he sought to set out a new ideological pretext for further military adventures aimed at "regime change," whilst denouncing his critics as apologists for global terrorism.

Blair presaged this section of his speech by praising the Koran and attributing to it a historically progressive character in an earlier era. But he went on to claim that what was at stake was not a clash "of civilisations" but rather a "clash about civilisation"—i.e., that his opponents should be regarded as barbarians and enemies of civilised values.

He complained that ministers had been warned against using the term "Islamic extremist" because it might cause offence. Given that the government has made repeated reference to Islamic extremism, and has justified all its encroachments on civil liberties on the basis of combating this threat, Blair's claim is nonsensical.

But the implied criticism of an overzealous "political correctness" was of a piece with the prime minister's adoption of a slightly more sophisticated version of the reactionary anti-Muslim campaign being waged by the right wing across Europe. This reached its high point with the publication of cartoons denigrating the prophet Mohammed that were justified on the grounds of free speech.

Blair echoed those who profess that Islam has fallen behind the advanced Western world due to the impact of

the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. His invocations of an ideological crusade were backed up by reference to his own Christian faith and his desire to safeguard "our way of life."

It was not simply a question of defeating terrorism, Blair said, but defeating the "global ideology" that lay behind it, which had become "embedded now in the culture of many nations and capable of eruption at any time."

This ideology had to be taken on by "telling them their attitude to America is absurd; their concept of governance pre-feudal; their positions on women and other faiths, reactionary and regressive."

The attempt to dress imperialist militarism in the mantle of progress is Blair's particular ideological contribution to Washington's war effort. The social base of the Blair government constitutes a privileged section of the upper-middle class that prides itself on combining a healthy respect for the benefits of "free market" capitalism with progressive views, particularly on questions relating to gender and sexual preference. Like the authors of the cartoon provocation and their supposedly liberal apologists, Blair seeks to exploit the position of Islam on women, homosexuality, etc. in order to portray it as incompatible with "Western" values.

What is the reality behind his claim to be waging an "ideological" struggle in defence of civilisation? It is his lining up with the world's strongest military power to inflict death and destruction on defenceless peoples in order to seize control of their country and its resources.

It is sanctioning the building of concentration camps such as at Guantánamo Bay, where anyone deemed an opponent of the West can be imprisoned without trial. It is an apologia for the sadistic treatment of detainees, sanctioned by the highest echelons of government and the state.

The tradition that Blair stands in is not that of the Enlightenment, but the pious rhetoric of the "white man's burden" that was used to justify the creation of the British Empire during the nineteenth century.

Blair's proclamation that Islamic extremism is "embedded now in the culture of many nations" constitutes a license to terrorise, intimidate and even wage war in many of the nations of the Middle East and Africa. Just as with Iraq, this will be justified as a great civilising mission to safeguard world peace and liberate the native population through regime change. Whatever forces offer their services as a proxy government for the Western powers, regardless of their true political character, will be proclaimed as representatives of moderate Islam.

Worse crimes are to follow. Blair placed his speech in the context of those on British foreign policy which he gave in Chicago in 1999 and Washington in 2003. It should be noted that both of these were made with the immediate purpose of legitimising the wars against Yugoslavia and Iraq.

Similarly, in his remarks this week Blair accused Tehran of meddling "furiously in the stability of Iraq" and of supporting terrorist attacks in the Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Beslan. "True," he said, "the conventional view is that, for example, Iran is hostile to Al Qaeda and therefore would never support its activities." But, he alleged, such divisions between Sunni and Shia Muslims count for nothing as "fundamentally, for this ideology [i.e., extreme Islam], we are the enemy."

There is a remarkable similarity between such spurious arguments linking Iran and Al Qaeda to the earlier claims that the secular Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein was involved in 9/11. The similarities do not end there. At one point in his speech Blair responded to those who have pointed out that Iraq was not a threat to world peace by citing the "fourteen UN resolutions" repeatedly invoked by Washington and London in the run-up to the invasion to provide themselves with a fig leaf of legality.

A letter leaked to the *Times* this week reveals that the Blair government is engaged in a surreptitious campaign to create a similar paper trail to provide a pretext for war against Iran. The *Times* reports that a March 16 confidential note by John Sawers, a leading British diplomat, addressed to his counterparts in France, Germany and the US urges a united offensive to secure "a United Nations resolution that would open the way for punitive sanctions and even the use of force if Iran were to refuse to halt its controversial nuclear programme."

Sawers sets out British proposals for upgrading the case against Iran so as "to bind Russia and China into agreeing to further measures that will be taken by the Security Council should the Iranians fail to engage positively... We would not, at this stage, want to be explicit about what would be involved then."