

Bush's Iraq "surge" met with despair in Britain

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President George W. Bush's announcement that the United States is committing an additional 21,500 troops in order to escalate the war in Iraq has thrown Britain's establishment into political turmoil.

The reaction of much of the media to the announcement was open despair. Though the decision had been trailed for weeks, this did not lessen its impact and the recognition of just how bad the situation now faced by Britain has become.

It was left to Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett to lend mealy-mouthed support to Bush's speech, a mark of the gravity of the crisis that has been provoked. Prime Minister Tony Blair spoke only briefly to a local television station in southwest England, a platform so obscure that it was picked up by only a handful of media sources. He described Bush's policy as "sensible."

Britain's ruling circles viewed the defeats suffered by the Republicans in November's elections as the writing on the wall. They demonstrated that the massive opposition to the Iraq war and occupation in Britain was shared by the majority of the American people and showed that it was not only a question of facing a military debacle in Iraq, but a political debacle at home. As the repeated references to Iraq as a new Vietnam demonstrated, there was a broad recognition that the war was creating a dangerous schism between the ruling elite and working people.

There was near universal support for a change in strategy, with hopes centred on the Iraq Study Group. This was advanced as a call for finding a diplomatic solution through negotiations with Iran and Syria and renewed efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Republican and Democratic bipartisanship, Britain hoped, would be matched by a renewed multilateral approach on the world arena.

Domestically, the government had been forced to pledge the withdrawal of up to 3,000 British troops over the next months from southern Iraq. Now, in addition, Blair was urged to use whatever influence he had with Bush to press for the Baker-Hamilton proposals.

When Blair instead once again lined up behind Bush, who all but dismissed the ISG report and stated that his policy

would be determined by the Pentagon, the sense of dismay was palpable.

Over the next weeks, the media produced extensive analysis of the report by the American Enterprise Institute, on whose provisions Bush's "surge" policy is largely based, replete with numerous warnings of disaster.

The response of the *Financial Times*, Britain's leading business journal, to the adoption of this dreaded scenario was bitterly hostile. Its editorial of January 11 stated, "George W. Bush's new direction in Iraq is certainly not a strategy for victory, whatever that word, which is used ever more desperately by the US president, now means....

"Right now, Mr. Bush has the support of no more than one in four Americans for this so-called surge of an extra 20,000 or so troops. Very soon, as the already indecipherable ethnic and sectarian patchwork of Iraq is pulled further and even more bloodily to pieces, he will have none."

For its part, the *Guardian*, the house organ of British liberalism, appeared paralysed. Nothing could now be done, other than to hope for a change of government that cannot take place for at least a year. Referring to Bush and Blair, its editorial stated, "Both men are on their way out. By stringing the war along without admitting defeat, it will become the business of another British prime minister and another American president to end it."

Some commentators hoped that the US decision would not suck Britain deeper into the Iraqi quagmire. Writing in the *Daily Mirror*, Paul Routledge proclaimed, "At last Blair fails to follow US precedent." He referred to Beckett's claim that Britain was "not in the same position" in Basra as that faced by the Americans in Baghdad and that there would be no increase in troop numbers. Others demanded that the planned troop withdrawals go ahead.

However, Beckett gave no such assurances. Rather, she said that any reductions in troop strength would be conditional on the situation on the ground.

Such a caveat largely precludes any possibility of a troop withdrawal. The claim that the situation in Basra can be insulated from that in Baghdad is patent nonsense. The

initial aim of the US operation is to work alongside the Shia-dominated Iraqi government forces in what amounts to an ethnic cleansing of Sunnis in Baghdad. But Washington has made clear that, in the medium term, the political survival of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki depends upon his readiness to take on the Shia militias on which his government relies, particularly the Mahdi army of Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

This will, of necessity, escalate the conflict in Basra and its environs.

BBC “Newsnight” presenter Jeremy Paxman pressed Defence Secretary Des Browne on this very question, asking him what contingency plans existed for an uprising in the Shia-dominated south following the US offensive in Baghdad. Browne had no answer to give.

In addition, Britain’s own plans for withdrawal demand a stepping up of military hostilities. British troops are currently involved in “Operation Sinbad,” with the stated aim of clearing out sectarianism and corruption in the Iraqi police and security services. Its most high-profile action was the Christmas Day attack on the headquarters of the Serious Crimes Unit in Basra, which destroyed the building and led to the deaths of seven policemen.

The justification for this assault—which was protested by the Iraqi authorities—was that the Serious Crimes Unit had been taken over by Islamic militias. This declaration is extraordinary. British and US policy, including Bush’s “surge,” is supposedly to lay the basis for “Iraqisation”—the transfer of police and military functions to the Iraqi regime. Yet they admit that the very forces this strategy depends upon, including the Maliki government itself, have been largely co-opted by or are in thrall to rival militias.

More fundamentally, Bush’s military “surge” cannot and will not be confined to Baghdad, or even to Iraq. His speech was in large part framed as a direct threat to Iran and Syria, which were blamed for fuelling the insurgency. Within hours, US forces raided the Iranian consulate in northern Iraq, seizing five of its diplomats. And, as the US dispatched a second aircraft carrier to the Gulf to menace Tehran, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee that Iran and Syria had “chosen to align themselves with the forces of extremism,” and would be dealt with accordingly.

Far from being able to elaborate an independent “exit strategy,” Britain is riding the coattails of the US into the firestorm of a regional war. And the media and political establishment know this very well.

The *Financial Times* editorial continued, “this policy will not succeed in fixing an Iraq traumatised by tyranny and war and then broken by invasion and occupation. But it may end with the US ‘surging’ into Iran—and taking the Middle East to a new level of mayhem that will spill into nearby regions

and western capitals.”

Simon Tisdall wrote in the *Guardian* that Bush’s statement “marked the opening of a new, far more aggressive phase which could extend the conflict into Iranian territory for the first time since the 2003 invasion.” And a *Guardian* editorial stated, “From Iran’s point of view, the US presence in the region is rapidly becoming more aggressive.”

This is precisely the scenario suggested by Blair’s keynote speech on defence policy delivered before an audience of academics and military commanders in Plymouth on Friday. In it, he insisted that there could be no retreat from a policy of British military engagement in every corner of the globe.

If Britain’s “reach, effect and influence” were not to be “qualitatively reduced,” he insisted, it would require “Armed forces that are prepared to engage in this difficult, tough, challenging campaign, to be warfighters as well as peacekeepers; for a British foreign policy that keeps our American alliance strong and is prepared to project hard as well as soft power; and for us as a nation to be as willing to fight terrorism and pay the cost of that fight wherever it may be....”

For the military, the price meant accepting that “conflict and therefore casualty may be part of what they are called upon to face,” while “the public...need to be prepared for the long as well as the short campaign,” including the necessary “increased expenditure on equipment, personnel and the conditions of our Armed Force.”

Blair’s declaration in support of continued bloodshed in Iraq and further wars of intervention throughout the world is at the same time a declaration of war against working people. It is they who will be “called upon to face” the sacrifice of their own lives, or those of their sons and daughters. And it is they whose living standards and democratic rights will be slashed in order to further the cause of Britain’s imperial ambitions.



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