Blair Shouldn't Count on Being Bush's 'Bestest Friend'

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Simon Henderson (/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

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The gap between London and Washington on foreign policy is widening. Crevasses have often opened or closed in the past -- or have had to be perilously bridged. But the issue of the post-Saddam Hussein Middle East -- or even achieving this nirvana -- now looks dangerously like causing a major collapse.

On Tuesday, Tony Blair spoke about the need to broaden the foreign policy agenda to include the Middle East peace process, global warming and world poverty. Given the primary audience -- Britain's ambassadorial corps -- it would have been hard for President Bush's advisers to write off the speech as Mr. Blair keeping the Parliamentary Labour Party happy. The news yesterday that Britain thinks war against Iraq should be delayed for several months probably induced apoplexy in the Oval Office.

The optimistic interpretation of Mr. Blair's foreign policy antics -- for it is he, rather than Jack Straw, who is the de facto Foreign Secretary -- is that the Prime Minister does the work that George W. Bush prefers to avoid. Inviting Syria's Bashar al-Assad, to London; taking his holiday in Egypt; attempting to organise an Arafat-endorsed Middle East peace meeting in London, all increase the pile of IOUs in Washington, according to this theory.

While this might be the case in the U.S. State Department under Colin Powell, it doesn't appear to extend to the Pentagon and the White House. And American foreign policy is made by Mr. Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, the Defence Secretary, and the national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, rather than by Gen. Powell.

There is no doubt that Mr. Blair's prestige in America is high, a legacy of Britain's early and public support after the terror attacks on New York City and Washington of September 11, 2001. But there is also a growing sense of frustration within the Bush Administration at Mr. Blair's political diversions. Far from respect for a Blair "grand strategy", there is a feeling, mirroring sceptics in the British political scene, that the Prime Minister's vision extends only to the end of next week.

Like Mr. Blair, Mr. Bush is a religious man with a strong sense of morality. But the President sees very little grey between good and evil. While Mr. Blair seeks the importance of international legitimacy for all actions, Mr. Bush believes that America's second-tier rivals -- Russia, France and China -- are determined to use the UN to reduce his power. And Mr. Bush sees the issues of terror and crack-pot dictators with nuclear arsenals as being a challenge to

American, indeed world, resolve, rather than a pretext for endless legal nit-picking.

Instead of ambiguity, Mr. Blair appears to use fog. A senior Foreign Office official, passing through Bosnia last March, attended the farewell dinner for a British general being posted home. "What's your next job?" the general was asked. "Getting ready for Iraq," the surprised official was told. It was the first that the mandarins of King Charles Street had heard of it.

A British military role against Saddam is useful because it makes American efforts "multilateral" but is certainly not crucial in military terms, and perhaps not diplomatically either. Apart from pre-empting a North Korean-type problem, the Bush Administration wants to break the trouble-making qualities of the other hangovers from the Cold War -- Syria and Libya -- as well as reducing the reliance on Saudi Arabian oil.

The duplicity of the Saudis before September 11, when princes were paying off Osama bin Laden, has irrevocably changed Mr. Bush's view of the kingdom. There are signs that the smaller Arab states, particularly in the Gulf, will welcome such changes -- hence their co-operation with American military preparations. Iran is another plum. For this prize, Washington is content with the spectating option -- waiting for the theocratic regime to fall.

The reports of Britain's preference for a delayed war make it a toss-up whether tensions between London and Washington will blow up over Saddam or over Israel/Palestine. Washington thinks the road to sorting out the latter problem runs through Baghdad.

Yasser Arafat's descent into historical irrelevancy will be hastened in the new post-Saddam Middle East. London's view, however, is that Israel is the problem, particularly the prime minister, Ariel Sharon, and his foreign minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

When Netanyahu passed through London in December and had lunch with Jack Straw, the Israeli minister pointed out that Mr. Arafat had rejected the Clinton peace proposal of 97 per cent of what Israel occupied in 1967 in a war prompted by threats of annihilation. Mr. Straw responded by saying three per cent was the size of London in proportion to Britain, or the size of the heart in proportion to the body.

Republican Washington -- as well as, probably, a majority of Israelis -- does not see it that way. To these groups, it was simply grotesque that the two suicide bombers who blew themselves up in central Tel Aviv on Sunday night were linked to Mr. Arafat's Fatah organisation -- and that Mr. Straw was then angered by Israel's refusal to allow Mr. Arafat's nominees to attend a peace meeting in London.

Mr. Blair is reported to be annoyed with his Foreign Secretary's latest pronouncements on Iraq, but on Israel/Palestine the two men appear to be in step. A close associate of the Prime Minister recently wondered out loud why Mr. Bush would not bang heads together on the Middle East -- meaning the heads of Mr. Sharon and Mr. Arafat.

Mr. Bush is probably neutral on Mr. Blair's meeting yesterday with Amnon Mitzna, the "nice man, but" leader of the Israeli Labour party. Although a senior administration official this week gnomically commented, "We have no better allies than the UK", it will be interesting to watch what Mr. Bush does.

Perhaps he will offer a reminder that Mr. Blair is not his "bestest friend". After two Blair visits to America after September 11, Mr. Bush made a point of meeting Iain Duncan Smith, the Conservative leader, in the White House. ❖

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