

Mounting concerns in Britain over US war drive

By Chris Marsden
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Mounting concern is being voiced within Britain's media and sections of the political establishment at the extent and possible consequences of American war aims, in the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington.

With Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair taking the lead, there was an initial rush by European governments to support President Bush and endorse any retaliatory action Washington saw fit to undertake. Mixed in with the shock and horror, was a fear that although the US was the first target, London, Berlin and Paris could be next. Britain in particular has spent the past decade functioning as America's staunchest political and military ally in order to further its own efforts to dominate strategic regions such as the Middle East and the Balkans.

Blair immediately began parroting the statements coming from Washington, and without a trace of equivocation promised Britain's support for what President Bush proclaimed was the "first war of the 21st century". He won the backing of the right wing media, led by Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper and the pro-Conservative *Daily Telegraph*. Some within the liberal intelligentsia also came forward to argue that opposition to the US was now a luxury that could no longer be afforded. *Guardian* columnist Hugo Young wrote on September 13, "Europe, especially the Europe of the left, has been deeply confused about what it wants America to be and do. For three decades, the left was the chief critic of American power and influence. France led the charge against the hegemon, and she wasn't alone... No more, I think, will that siren song be heard. There must be less rivalry and no confusion."

At a special session of parliament convened last Friday, Blair had no difficulty in winning approval for his stance, given the efforts of the Conservative Party to paint themselves as more consistently pro-American and militaristic than Labour. In his first speech as Tory leader, Iain Duncan Smith pledged his party's full support for any British involvement in Washington's "war against terrorism".

Despite this apparent political unanimity, however, the government is facing increasing criticism for having endangered British strategic interests by handing Bush a blank cheque. Several politicians and commentators have warned that the terrible scale of America's planned response could destabilise the Middle East and generate oppositional sentiment

amongst broad masses of the world's population.

During the parliamentary debate Friday, Labour MP George Galloway said millions of people in Arab and Muslim countries believe the West is guilty of "monumental double standards", warning, "If you launch a devastating attack upon a Muslim country, killing thousands, you will make 10,000 bin Ladens rise up."

Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman Menzies Campbell warned of the dangers of the West being seen to mete out "rich man's justice," and pressed for a "proportionate response" based on sound intelligence and consistent with the principles of international law.

Veteran Labour left Dennis Skinner insisted, "There's a world of difference between standing shoulder to shoulder with the American people and the fight for justice than hanging on to the coat tails of an American President, whose first act when those fire fighters were standing 10 feet tall amongst the rubble in the World Trade Centre, was to scurry off to his bunker."

Blair's International Development Secretary, Clare Short, subsequently urged caution in any military action against Afghanistan, stressing that military strikes must not further inflame the situation.

Amongst the major newspapers, the *Financial Times*, the *Independent* and the *Mirror* have all urged caution, with the *Independent* writing, "even in the face of such grievous provocation...restraint... has to be the watchword".

A September 14 editorial in the *Guardian* was most explicit in detailing why it questioned the wisdom of lending uncritical support to the Bush administration. The paper insisted that Bush first "define the threat he would eradicate and the scope of the measures he might employ. The options in the shadowy world he is about to enter range from a full-scale, Gulf war-style mobilisation against Afghanistan to aerial attacks and Special Forces incursions. In prospect too, perhaps, is a return to Reagan era covert operations, snatch squads, secret funds, state subversion, and even political assassination. And as far as can be ascertained now, such activity may not be confined to crushing Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network. This uncontained American campaign potentially leads to the very gates of Damascus, to Tehran and even more likely, to Saddam Hussein's Baghdad."

Most striking is the *Guardian's* warning that the US is demanding the unconditional subordination of the European powers to its dictates: "In seeking to forge a global, US-led coalition to prosecute an all-out war on terrorism, Mr Bush and his officials are saying, in effect, that there are no neutrals any more."

"This paramount, 'monumental struggle' demands unswerving commitment from allies, friends and the non-aligned alike. In foreshadowing an open-ended military and diplomatic offensive, Secretary of State Colin Powell plainly expects unquestioning cooperation from all countries, great and small. This blunt message to all and sundry is: now we cut the crap. You are either for us or against us. We are going to win. Back us—or you, too, will lose."

The *Guardian* warns the Labour government, which it supports, "These propositions demand urgent scrutiny—for despite Mr Bush's initial caution, here is the looming, daunting prospect of superpower unleashed, of Prometheus unbound. And America's friends must think hard and fast about what they are getting into."

The stand taken by the similarly pro-Labour *Mirror* group is significant because it makes no attempt to hide its contempt for Bush and the Republicans, expressing a belief that their right wing political agenda is a threat to global stability.

The *Mirror's* full-page editorial September 17 states that Bush's demand for retribution "would be the action of a despot, not the leader of a great democracy and the Western world."

The editorial goes on to note, "Shortly before Mr Bush was elected President in dubious circumstances, *The Mirror* ran a shock issue revealing that, as Governor of Texas, he had sent more than 150 people to the executioner's chair. They included some who were clearly innocent and others with the mental age of young children. We wrote then: 'If Bush wins the increasingly farcical race to be President, he will take charge of the largest military power in history. Do we really want a man like him making snap decisions on whether to drop bombs or go to war? Do we really like the idea of his finger on the big trigger?'"

"Today that question haunts the world. For today George W Bush's finger is on the big trigger. And he gives every impression of wanting to squeeze it without a clue about who he is pointing the weapon at."

The *Mirror* editorial concludes, "This is the moment in history when George W Bush must break with his crude, rabble-rousing past. If he does not, he could plunge his country and the world into something far worse than was seen in Manhattan on September 11."

Blair's allies in the Murdoch press recognize the precariousness of his position, especially given the opposition to the US war-drive from leading European politicians such as French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. The *Times* notes: "Two years ago Mr Blair was trying to push President Clinton further

over committing ground troops. Now, while Mr Blair is offering total support in public to President Bush, he is privately seeking to be more of a restraining influence. This is not about whether tough action should be taken, but how to do so without jeopardising international support for the long-term campaign against terrorists and their sponsors." The *Times* article concludes, "Mr Blair... has little patience for those on the left who argue that America is partly to blame. But he not only knows the limitations of his influence, but also the fragility of the current high support for his approach."

The Sunday Telegraph anticipates the growth of opposition to war amongst broader layers of the population and expresses concern that this could merge with the type of anti-capitalist sentiment evinced in the recent anti-globalisation protests. A redbaiting article by American journalist Anne Applebaum notes various criticisms of US foreign policy in the British media. She calls this, "the first few skirmishes in the ideological battle which is still to come" and compares this to the Cold War, adding, "Just as there was opposition to British participation in the Cold War, so too will there be opposition to British participation in the war against terrorism. It isn't hard to see where it will come from... the anti-globalist critique of American cultural imperialism, international capitalism, and the hypocrisy of bourgeois democracy does sound, at times, startlingly like what comes out of the mouths of bin Laden and his ilk. When Mr Blair attempts to rally the British people for action against Afghanistan or Iraq, expect the anti-globalists, along with their friends in the press and on the Labour backbenches, to demonstrate in the way that they do at anti-world-trade gatherings-violently."

Applebaum's lumping together of anti-globalisation protestors with Islamic fundamentalists, her false equation of opposition to imperialism, capitalism and war with violence, is aimed at legitimising a government clampdown on all forms of political dissent.

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