

# Bush and Blair: Blood brothers

**By James Cusick**

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**I**n difficult times politicians tend to dump convention and tradition. That Tony Blair did not reach for the telephone and offer congratulations to Senator John Kerry on his recent triumph in becoming the Democrat's man to challenge George W Bush for the United States presidency later this year, is therefore no surprise. Equally there should be no surprise that the Prime Minister and his senior advisers have quietly informed key Labour Party personnel that they should keep out of the US presidential campaign. Well advanced plans for senior Labour figures to begin holding a series of talks with Kerry's close advisers were also quickly killed off.

Blair isn't just choosing his American friends carefully these days. The horrors in Madrid last week – and the misjudged attempts by the ruling right-wing government to influence the general election by deliberately misinforming the Spanish electorate in the hope of securing another term in office – helped put the Socialist party, led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, in power. Where Kerry got nothing, Zapatero at least got something. A call to the new Spanish prime minister from Blair was made, but was said to be a gesture of courtesy rather than one charged with goodwill towards a fellow left-leaning European politician.

Zapatero is merely another part of Blair's post-war *annus horribilis*: a year where Iraq and the aftermath of war dominated the political agenda in Britain. The war was, and is, still seen as Blair's war. He asked his party, parliament and the country to trust him. And trust was conditionally given, but that has since evaporated. Blair admitted as much in a speech in Sedgefield earlier this month. Having lost the contest on trust, he now wanted the post-war agenda to at least shift to his judgement on how he dealt with Saddam.

Blair painted a new post-war anniversary portrait of himself as a leader who understood the dangers democratic states now faced, as against those leaders who did not understand the wisdom of confronting such "mortal dangers". Blair's solution is to reform the United Nations and to extend the concept of the right's international community. In the period between September 11 and the beginning of the Iraq war, Blair's international status as a statesman would have added due gravitas to the problems he described in Sedgefield. Now,

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having sidestepped the UN, sided with Bush, dragged - rather than led - his party over the past 12 months, and watched (and seemingly accepted) the UK's dwindling influence in Europe, Blair is no longer in a position of authority to dictate what the rest of the world should look like.

A year ago Blair was a different statesman. A year ago at the Azores summit there were no hypothesised dangers, there was only certainty and the action that would follow from that certainty. The summit pressed the 'GO' button for the coalition's war on Iraq. Blair stood erect and defiant alongside George Bush and José María Aznar, then Spanish prime minister. Seven months later, during the Columbus Day celebrations in Spain, Downing Street learned what would happen if Aznar fell. Zapatero sat down when the US flag passed him. He told those around him: "It's not my flag."

On the anniversary of the start of the Iraq war, with the UK general election maybe only a year or so away, and with the US presidential election this November, the popular perception of Blair is that he has become a prime minister tied to too many flags. He knows that to win a third term he will have to overcome the idea that three flags now fly outside Downing Street – the Union flag, the Stars and Stripes and the red and blue "elephant" of Bush's Republican Party.

The anti-war, anti-US Zapatero carries no such baggage. In office for barely hours he distanced himself from Washington and threatened to pull Spanish forces from Iraq by July unless the United Nations were in control by then.

If that was the first indication that the coalition would mark this first anniversary of war by fragmenting, more was to follow. Last Thursday in Rome, the Italian European affairs minister, Rocco Buttiglione, told the *Il Messaggero* newspaper: "The war may have been a mistake. What is certain is that it wasn't the best thing to do."

Italy currently has 3000 troops in Iraq. And, like Aznar, the Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi is one of the strongest European proponents of the US-led war. Buttiglione is one of Berlusconi's coalition partners in the Italian government and now clearly feels that his silence on what the war in Iraq achieved is no longer politically advantageous to his Christian Democrat Party. He added: "Terrorism cannot be defeated only by the force of arms and if we give the impression that weapons play the dominant role, we will only stir up feelings among the Arabs against us." Arab democracy will not, according to Buttiglione, "be born through the force of arms or because we have defeated Saddam."

The anniversary of the Iraq invasion is thus being marked - even by former supporters - as the time to discuss the merits of leaving. But where Buttiglione can talk of it all as "a mistake", Bush in an election year and equally Blair with his own ballot-box test just round the corner do not have the luxury of saying: "We got it so wrong." Kerry's early campaign

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focus is clearly to highlight the mistake, to claim Bush “mised” America. Kerry, a Vietnam war hero, needs to persuade the electorate that even as the world’s only superpower, it can’t survive alone and that the US’s military power alone (plus some key allies’) won’t win the battle against terrorism.

Kerry’s other trump card is to paint Bush as the president who wasted the international sympathy that flowed towards the US after 9/11 but which has vanished in the last 12 months. Bush believes his resolve over Iraq will mean payback at the November election: “We showed the dictator and a watching world that we mean what we say.” Iran falling into line and Libya handing over its nuclear programme are Bush’s “hard evidence” for getting it right. Bush’s vice-president, Dick Cheney, speaking last week, managed to link John Kerry and the Madrid bombings into one neat simplistic package. The bombs in Madrid “were a reminder that there are evil people in the world”. As for Kerry, Cheney said he was just too worried about law enforcement rather than military action.

“He [Kerry] has embraced the strategy of the 1990s which holds that when we are attacked, we ought to round up those directly responsible, put them on trial and call it a day.” Cheney’s get-them-before-they-get-us philosophy is just a crude summary of Blair’s “international community” which need new laws for new tough times ahead. Nevertheless, just in case Kerry’s liberal message manages to resonate loudly, Bush’s advisers have switched to “negative” campaigning far earlier than any pundits had believed was possible. The reasoning? Bush’s team believe they are already in deep trouble.

The pugilistic Bush is probably up for a fight and the record of his father – who succeeded in destroying Democratic presidential contender Mike Dukakis before a vote was cast – will only encourage the strategy of creating Kerry as the flip-flop liberal victim with no backbone against Bush’s image as the one-time “compassionate conservative” who found the guts to take on Saddam.

“My administration,” said Bush recently, “has a positive vision for winning the war on terrorism and for extending peace and freedom throughout our world.” The key to that “vision” being believable is for the agreement signed in November last year to be an unquestionable success. It set out a timetable that will formally transfer power back to an interim Iraqi administration on June 30, with elections taking place by the end of January 2005 (although many in the Foreign Office believe this election date is unlikely to be met). During his state visit to London, Bush highlighted the importance of June 30. The US would then be in Iraq “by invitation” and what the war will have left, said the President, is a “free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East”. For Bush and Blair that will be portrayed as an era-defining event that will (as Bush believes) kick-start “the global democratic revolution”.

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That the new Spanish government has already refused to buy into that US-led utopian vision is not surprising given the horrors of the Madrid bombing. And with the US military death toll – approaching 600 soldiers – still steadily rising, neither is it a given that the US electorate will buy it either, however well wrapped during the election campaign. Tony Blair - having lost the argument over WMD – now needs an Iraq, a better “democratic” Iraq, that is being run by the Iraqis themselves.

This weekend’s anniversary of the invasion will barely be celebrated by Blair simply because there is nothing to celebrate, nothing to sell, yet. The continuing question mark over the war’s legality, alongside the Madrid bombing – which highlighted that none of the coalition governments can point to the world being a safer place – means the outcome of this June 10’s European elections has become a significant hurdle for Blair. Labour officials are already downgrading its outcome, pointing to a likely low turn-out and a probable drop in Labour MEPs. But if Labour suffer badly in the overall percentage vote, Blair’s position as leader will, yet again, be under serious threat. A Blair loyalist MP said: “Tony has never been a liability only an asset. He is a crisis leader – and if a crisis visits in June he’ll deal with it.”

June 30 however is different. Between now and then there will be almost frantic efforts to get the UN formally re-involved, re-engaged with Iraq. The reason? Both Blair and Bush now need the UN again, a year after they pushed aside Hans Blix and the UN inspection teams and simply ignored the majority decision of the Security Council. According to one Foreign Office adviser: “The UN would complete the circle, almost legitimise the entire process for Downing Street. It could leave the Prime Minister effectively saying he carried out what the UN should have. He has said this before, and his critics have rounded on him. But with Saddam gone, democratic elections on the horizon and the UN back inside the Iraqi equation; that is vindication, is it not? That is not failure?”

But what will the definition of Iraqi control be? Will the Iraqi people and a new government be in control of how their oil money is distributed? Will they be in control of which firms will be employed to carry out reconstruction work - contracts that have so far gone to US companies (many of them with links to the Bush administration) which stand to achieve massive profits from the \$87 billion up for grabs? For Bush these matters are academic. The decision for US voters in November, might – as Bill Clinton has warned – be down to a “gut check”. According to Clinton’s analysis, people in dangerous times prefer a leader who is strong and wrong, rather than one who is weak and right. For Blair however “strong and wrong” might not be enough. Strong and right is what Blair sold himself as. Anything less and the party will begin looking elsewhere for a leader (if they aren’t doing so already).

A recent poll carried out by YouGov for Sky News found that 75% believed that as a result

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of Britain's role in the Iraq war, the UK had been left more vulnerable. A terror attack on Britain – as was the case in Spain – would therefore inevitably be linked to Blair's decision to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the US. The political fallout for Blair points to a scenario far different from the events in Spain. There would be no cover-up, nor a need for one. The main opposition party, the Conservatives, backed the war. If al-Qaeda struck, Blair would have to mount a defence that centred on his continuing belief that global terrorism had to be confronted and that Britain had no choice.

The question mark on the first anniversary of the invasion would be whether or not Blair marched too close behind Bush and prosecuted a war that was unnecessary and possibly illegal and, in so doing, let the real enemy, al-Qaeda, go unchecked for too long. The hope in Downing Street is that such a question remains theoretical. Nobody wants it to be tested by the reality of terror that the government now knows is no longer if, but when.