

The conversation with Blair that taught me why he's standing by Bush

The President's summit with the Prime Minister will set the West's strategy in the Middle East. Here, **Irwin Stelzer** offers an insider's account of the state of the two men's alliance

Whether Tony Blair decides to oblige the braying Brownites and step down at the next party conference, or hang in there until the 2007 Labour party gathering, doesn't much matter when it comes to appraising the much-mocked Blair-Bush relationship. In relatively short order, both men will have reached the end of their careers in electoral politics, bringing to a close an amazing relationship between your Prime Minister and my President. And one that is badly misunderstood.

Not by chance. Pundits and pols on your side of the ocean have a stake in proving that Tony Blair is George Bush's poodle, and their counterparts on my side find it useful to depict Bush as so inarticulate and, er, dumb, that he needs Blair to flit over to America to explain US foreign policy. So it's not-very-bright Bush and not-very-powerful Blair locked in an embrace of necessity.

Good fun, but wrong. I remember sitting with the PM on the lawn of a deserted No. 10 on a beautiful summer Sunday afternoon, sipping a Diet Coke, the same drink I was offered years ago in the humbler setting of the office Blair occupied when still an obscure opposition politician, quizzing me on the effect on employment of his proposed minimum-wage law.

The afternoon's topic: Britain's place in the world. Blair may lurch from policy to policy when it comes to crime, education and other domestic issues, but when it comes to foreign policy he has a very definite view of where he wants to take Britain. Start with a view he shares with the President. The foreign-policy establishments of both countries are somewhere between useless and harmful to their nations' interests.

Blair knows that the Foreign Office is irremediably pro-Arab and anti-Israel — 'Remember where the oil is, old boy, remember the atrocities those Jews committed to drive us out of Palestine, and remember all the money the Saudis and others spend and invest in Britain.' Bush knows that his State Department — espe-

cially in the days of Colin Powell and at least until he parachuted in Condoleezza Rice — prefers any deal to no deal when there is a crisis, is unnerved by any threat to the status quo, and found Saudi Arabia's smooth Prince Bandar more congenial than the rougher-hewn Ariel Sharon.

So both men rely on their own judgments and instincts when it comes to carving out a role for their countries in an increasingly fractious world. The striped-pants brigade can tut-tut, but no matter.



Back to No. 10 on that great English afternoon. No strawberries and cream, but unlimited Diet Cokes. As requested, I laid out the economic arguments for and against deeper involvement with the EU, and suggested that the economic data show that even the extreme case — withdrawal from the Union — would not hurt the UK economy and might even enable it to grow faster.

Blair's reply reminded me of the time I argued to Margaret Thatcher that she was costing the Treasury a small — well, not so small — fortune by underpricing shares in British Gas. 'This has nothing to do with economics,' was the reply (I paraphrase). 'This is about politics. We need to have more shareholders than union members, and I want the original purchasers [remember the 'Sids'?] to do so well that they become shareholders in other companies.'

In a similar vein Blair argued that the EU is not about economics — something

Gordon Brown doesn't quite understand, was the unspoken subtext — but about the position of Britain in the world. Britain can be a world power only if it does two things — engage the EU so completely that it is accepted as a true European, and grapple itself to America with hoops of steel (that's my theft of Shakespeare, not Blair's).

The first task is made difficult by Britain's failure to adopt the euro; the second by the not-so-latent anti-Americanism on the Left of the Labour party, and on the snob-Right of the Tory party. Blair has consistently sought to overcome those obstacles so that Britain might become the bridge between Europe and America; a role that Blair is certain is the only alternative to marginalisation. Andrew Rawnsley in last week's *Observer* catalogued Britain's assets: a permanent seat on the Security Council, an independent nuclear deterrent, the fifth largest economy in the world, a powerful financial centre in London, and seats on the IMF and the World Bank boards. Add easy access to the White House, and Britain becomes a world power, fighting above its weight, as the saying goes.

Blair has always believed that his differences with a very conservative President do not change the fact that he and Bush have world views as similar as those of Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. That team knew that the biggest threat to world peace and to the West was Soviet Russia, and they knew it had to be defeated rather than merely contained. The status quo, they agreed, was unacceptable, no matter what their foreign-policy officials advised. They were right.

Blair and Bush hold similar views. The Prime Minister played guide dog rather than poodle in 1999, when Bush's principal foreign-policy concern was still how to share the water of the Rio Grande with his state's Mexican neighbour. In his now famous Chicago speech the Prime Minister made the case for intervention in the affairs of sovereign states if they were behaving badly, and cited Iraq as one state warranting such attention. He went on to argue that spreading democracy is the surest way to create a civilised and peaceful world order. Bush later signed on to those propositions, adding the wrinkle of creating

coalitions of the willing when the UN proved unable or unwilling to act.

Which brings us to the Middle East. The idea that Blair got nothing in return for his support of Bush's Iraq policy may sell books by former ambassadors, but it has a serious defect: it can't explain the appearance of the Middle East 'road map to peace'. Any Washington insider will tell you that Bush quite sensibly wanted no part of any such intervention in the contorted politics of the Middle East. But Blair insisted, on two grounds: it was the right thing to do, always a compelling reason for him to take a position, and he needed a road map to appease those in his party who have persuaded themselves that terror attacks from New York to Bali to Madrid to the London Tube are somehow an outgrowth of the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians.

Blair needed some tangible proof that his American comrade-in-arms truly shared his goal of making the two-state solution a reality. The all-powerful American President gave in to his supposed poodle, and modified American policy to suit the wishes and needs of the British Prime Minister. Score one for the value of the special relationship to the UK, and for the reciprocity and trust on which the Blair-Bush relationship is built. The PM has said more than once that he can trust 'George' to do exactly what he promises, and the President says he knows that when the chips are down he can count on Tony.

The healthy state of the Blair-Bush relationship is reflected in more than crisis management. The Bush team worried about the problems a British foreign minister faced when he depended for office on an electorate with a heavy Muslim component — something Secretary of State Rice noticed on her visit to Jack Straw's constituency. Straw is now custodian at the House of Commons. Blair pleaded with Bush for help in taming the anti-Americans, and privately asked, 'Please have him send

me Condi Rice.' Powell was too busy defending his home turf from a Rumsfeld invasion to spend much time abroad, and the neoconservative hard men who passed through London, strewing interviews and speeches in their path, did more harm than good. Bush eventually obliged, and Condi Rice proceeded to make Blair's life easier at home and in Europe without giving an inch on the substance of American policy. Neither man acted solely to satisfy his partner, but each gave at least some weight to the needs of the other when retooling his foreign-policy apparatus.

Of course, a sort of special relationship prevailed when Bill Clinton sat in the Oval Office. But it was of a different sort, more talking shop, except when Blair finally prevailed on the reluctant president to move against genocide in the Balkans. Blair enjoyed and still enjoys his talk-fests with Bill Clinton, and says he regards the former president as the most effective political operator he has ever seen. And Cherie Booth finds Hillary Rodham a more congenial dinner partner than she does Laura Bush — two Left-leaning lawyers naturally have more in common than one such professional and a librarian whose happiest hours are spent teaching children to want to learn to read, and supporting her husband.

But talk is talk, and action is action. 'George is quick to get to the heart of a problem, make up his mind about what to do, and then do it,' is how Blair summarises their frequent video conferences. For Bush's part, he regards the Prime Minister as a stand-up guy whom he would want at his back in a bar-room brawl. Texas talk, and not to be taken literally, since it has been a long while since the President could be found in a bar-room, or a brawl therein.

But there is brawl now being fought in the Middle East. Both the President and the Prime Minister see the current hostilities as a battle in the ongoing war with Islamic jihadists, a war the West must win if it is to preserve its way of life. Neither man

blames the Israelis for the death of civilians unfortunate enough to be acting as involuntary human shields for Hezbollah weapons caches, bomb-making factories and rocket-launchers. Blair has a harder political task than does Bush: some of his own ministers, joined by a William Hague who once knew better, are pressing him to support an immediate ceasefire, rather than stick with Bush in holding out for a more durable solution — never mind that the same made-in-Iran missiles that are killing Israelis in Haifa are killing British soldiers in Basra.

For more than one reason, the Prime Minister will side with the President. In part he will be holding to his position that 'the price of influence is that we do not leave the US to face the tricky issues alone'. In part he will be reacting to his greatest fear: an America defeated in its efforts to spread democracy, and given a bloody nose in the process, will retreat, sulk in its tent, leaving the world leaderless and at the mercy of Islamic fanatics. 'The thing I fear,' he told some reporters, 'is not American unilateralism; it is actually American isolationism . . .'. And in part Blair will do what he does when he is at his best — do what he believes is right.

Tony Blair may be no Winston Churchill, just as George W. Bush is no Franklin D. Roosevelt. He may not even be a Margaret Thatcher, and Bush no Ronald Reagan. But the current occupants of the offices once held by those great statesmen are both convinced that they know what is right, and are prepared to suffer such slings and arrows as their opponents may aim at them in order to bring some semblance of order and decency to a world in which those commodities are not in oversupply. We asked no more of their distinguished predecessors.

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The Blairs

Michael Heath



The Understudy

John Prescott being made ready for his appearance replacing the P.M. in the House of Commons