

Obama wants more than words from Brown

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If you have any doubt that the British people are interested in our 44th President, consider this: BSkyB has sent its star political reporter to America to cover the first 100 days of the Barack Obama presidency. Not unreasonable: Obama is not only a more interesting person than almost any British politician, but his foreign policy positions will have a major impact on the ability of the West to cope with the myriad problems it confronts.

Whether it is speeding economic recovery, reducing greenhouse gases, foiling plots of Islamic terrorists, preventing Afghanistan from once again becoming home to terrorist training camps, securing energy supplies from the Middle East and Russia, keeping international trade unencumbered by protectionist measures, or bringing whatever passes for peace to Israel and the Palestinians, or... well, you can add your own items. The point is that America continues to carry the burden of world leadership. As several British politicians put it, nothing much can be accomplished without the leadership and co-operation of the United States.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown told Parliament last week: "Relations between Britain and

America will strengthen over the years." Perhaps. Certainly, the removal of George W Bush from the scene will help. The unpopular 43rd is gone, and the wildly popular 44th prowls the corridors of the White House.

Much of what Obama will do, and immediately, will enhance his standing in Britain. He will close Guantánamo – well, after finding a home for a few hundred detainees who might be dangerous actors. And he will speed up troop withdrawals from Iraq – well, not at the pace he prefers, if he accepts the advice of his generals. And he will step up efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and reverse America's hostility to the job-destroying Kyoto climate change agreement.

But that is no guarantee that Brown's forecast of better US-UK relations will prove accurate. There is a rather significant impediment at the Foreign Office – the Foreign Secretary. Americans who have dealt with David Miliband confirm what many British journalists have long known. The Foreign Secretary is arrogant, given to lecturing veteran American diplomats on policies and regions of which he has only the most superficial knowledge. One would like to be a fly on the wall when Miliband



The US is seeking greater commitment to Afghanistan and Israel, says
Irwin Stelzer

lectures Secretary of State Hillary Clinton about some subject on which she has spent decades accumulating expertise.

Then there is Gordon Brown's new hostility to Israel. In Parliament last week he called for a ceasefire in Gaza, but did not include in the conditions a cessation of Hamas rocket attacks on Israel. This follows Miliband's efforts to force Israel to label products originating in the West Bank so that they cannot be exported to the EU. There is a guessing game in America as to the extent to which Obama will press Israel to compromise its

security by making further concessions to Hamas, which, along with its Iranian paymasters, is pledged to the destruction of the Jewish state. But if he keeps his campaign promise, and if Clinton heads off the Arabists in the State Department, Britain and America will be on separate tracks in the Middle East.

Perhaps most important is Afghanistan. Obama will have difficulty persuading his Left in Congress to support and fund his plan to deploy 30,000 more troops to fight the Taliban and assorted terrorist groups. He will want help from Britain. Words won't do. Troops matter. Following Brown's abandonment of his American allies in Basra, there is a growing feeling here, especially in the Pentagon, that Britain can't be relied on. If Brown thinks he can turn down Obama's request for more troops – indeed, if the Europeans go forward with their plan to do just that – and have the new President merely shrug and move on to Brown's next agenda item, he should have a rethink.

This will all play out beyond the glare of the klieg lights. Britain's man in Washington, Ambassador Sir Nigel Sheinwald, might even persuade the Obama team to grant Brown the much-sought after first European leader's visit to the White House to greet the

new President. And Brown might be persuaded not to duplicate the rude behaviour he displayed on first visiting President Bush, when he kept his distance in order to please the Labour Left.

Under those circumstances there will be many things that the Anglo-American alliance can accomplish. Britain and America can join forces to try to persuade China and India to sign measures to reduce carbon emissions. We can combine our efforts to reduce poverty and slaughter in Africa. We can increase the substantial cooperation between our security services. We can combine our efforts to persuade the world that the values our countries cherish and have fought for together still matter.

Each country can still pursue its own interests where those interests diverge. But if the divergence takes the form of leaving America on its own in military trouble-spots, other areas of agreement will inevitably be infected by the resulting acrimony. The new President told our enemies yesterday: "You cannot outlast us. We will defeat you." It would be a pity if Brown doesn't sign Britain up for this long battle.

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