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Bush Does London

by
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In the late 19th century German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck brusquely remarked that the Balkans, always a rough neighborhood, “were not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier.” Every national leader grapples with difficult decisions as to the best application of limited resources to unlimited foreign ambitions. So how many Western lives is Iraq worth? In the grand scheme of what passes for strategic thinking inside the Bush administration, a few hundred—even a few thousand—sacrificed servicemen are a trifle compared to the ecstasies of toppling Saddam, seizing control of Iraqi energy and rigging the Middle East game board to favor Israeli right wing zealots.

The looming threat for Bush and Blair today is not al-Qaeda marauders but the fact that their own citizenries do not value gains and losses in the same way as elites do. That is why policy makers conceal the seamy purposes of their actions, or coat them in sticky moral rhetoric. What irks Bush today is

that he never before was forced to face a genuinely difficult choice. Instead of displaying shrewd guidance, he resorted after 9/11 to crowd-pleasing jingoistic gestures, which are not working anymore. Bush followed to the letter a megalomaniacal program devised in the ultra-right think tank, Project for a New American Century, to achieve “full spectrum dominance” for generations to come.

The PNAC scheme anticipated that in the wake of a Pearl Harbor style attack, which Al-Qaeda so obligingly provided, that frightened Americans would pony up recruits and money for a perpetual Orwellian military campaigns against any imagined foe. However, the American public is awakening to the cold fact that they were deceived as to the motives for a bloody and costly occupation. The British public, with a broader range of political sources available, was always way ahead of the media-manipulated Americans. In London Thursday afternoon, while Bush was curtsying to a perfectly

polite Queen, several hundred thousand marchers assembled in Trafalgar Square for the largest working day demonstration in British history. (Police estimated over 100,000 while organizers claimed 350 thousand; splitting the difference is usually close to the truth.) Stressing the anti-Bush, rather than Anti-American, sentiment animating the massive protest, Vietnam Veteran and anti-war activist Ron Kovic, whose gripping life story was told in Oliver Stone's 1989 movie *Born on The Fourth of July*, was wheeled out to assure the multitudes that "you are the ones who really care about my country" and that "millions of Americans are standing with you today." The tiresome charge of anti-Americanism always figures as a convenient mantra for pro-war commentators anxious to discredit the case against the invasion and the occupation. Kovic counted down as a huge garish Bush stature - resembling a wrinkled

Oscar statuette with a tiny mandolin in its hands (supposedly a missile) – was ceremonially toppled below Nelson's column. Jeremy Corbyn, a rebel Labor MP, told the crowd that Blair was as much a target as Bush. Both had to go. Yet the Trafalgar protesters taunted men who probably heard and heeded nothing of what they had to say. A speaker impishly claimed "We have [Bush] under house arrest in Buckingham palace," which would be true had Bush shown an inclination to depart from his highly protective schedule. Bush was whisked from one posh spot to another in a gleaming black bulletproof limo. Another speaker delightedly informed the Trafalgar crowd that Bush's planned stop at a village Church the next day was cancelled because the bulletproof car was too damned heavy to cross a local bridge. So the whole stage-managed spectacle of Bush's state visit conjured Vietnam war days when the only public venues Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon could visit without fear of vehement protests were military academies and Christian fundamentalist colleges (in effect, American madrassas). Bush saw what he chose to see, and, if that pattern continues, it will be his downfall. Leaders are elected to face reality, not be shielded from it.

When a Machiavellian investment of blood and treasure becomes distressingly disproportionate to what one hopes to gain, the best thing is to fold your cards, cut and run, or seek, in the notorious Nixon phrase "peace with honor." The true believers in Bush's administration (Wolfowitz, Perle, Bolton, Cheney and others) won't concede their original plans of conquest easily but there are signs that Bush is prowling around for a palatable

compromise to extract US troops. The solution is somehow to install an administration of local dignitaries who covertly will do Yank bidding. But the independent images such a governing body needs to be credible may really put it beyond American control. Still, the spectre of bloody body bags is haunting Bush. The phony tale that the Pentagon dreamed up about the “rescue of Jessica Lynch” is exposed as an embarrassment. The ballyhooed economic recovery under way in the US is generating far fewer jobs than expected. Bush has cause to be nervous.

The London visit was a boon to the anti-war/occupation movement, but Bush (and to some extent, Blair) can rely on favorable depictions in a self-censoring pseudo-patriotic press - for what is patriotic about a media that relay lies without any challenge ? Television reports even in Britain downplayed the Trafalgar rally. The preferred media images are those crafted to show Blair and Bush side by side standing tall--with Britain treated thrillingly as a major power, if only as a matter of courtesy. Yet Bush is grateful for the legitimacy that Tony Blair’s approval conferred on the Iraq war, which is not to say the U.S. would not have gone to war anyway. The American military reportedly were puzzled at the time about what to do with what they viewed as surplus British forces. (And anyone who believes the tales of British soldiers’ superior manners in Iraq really ought to have a chat with a Catholic in Northern Ireland sometime.)

America, once a colony itself, drove out the British in 1783 (with indispensable French aid) and established a republic. In the 20th century the British desperately sought American aid in two world wars. America helped, but in a cunning way that suited its own geopolitical interests. US diplomats behaved as ruthlessly as the British would if positions had been reversed. Presidents Woodrow Wilson and, later, Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew very well the USA stood to be the chief beneficiary of the demise of the teetering European Empires.

After the Second World War Churchill, leader of a worn-out nation, reluctantly requested in his famous speech at Fulton, Missouri that the USA assume leadership of the so-called free world. Since then British played the faithful side-kick role, even if forever chafing at it or grumbling about it.

Margaret Thatcher showed undeniable spirit when she denounced the U.S. invasion of tiny Grenada despite Ronald Reagan helping her in the Falklands

conflict. (The British upper crust never ever lost the consoling conceit that they are intellectually superior to their rough-hewn American cousins.) Labour Party prime minister Harold Wilson supported Americans during the Vietnam War, but withheld the British regiment that LBJ badly wanted in Vietnam to justify that ghastly venture. Wilson declined the obsequious role that Blair has filled with alacrity since 9/11.

Blair misled the parliament and public, and harassed the press to support every whim of an incorrigibly unilateralist American administration. Blair, who justified himself as a moderating influence on Bush, got nothing visible in exchange for his dogged support. Can public protests gain concessions that Blair was unable or unwilling to gain? Hard-pressed politicians always pretend to ignore mass popular protests. In part, they hope to discourage dissenters by making them feel futile, but in private they usually take heed of strong public feelings. Bush desperately wants to be reelected, and not repeat his father's ignominious end as a one-term president. Bush may yet find a formula in Iraq to satisfy his own fanatical acolytes while at the same time extricating the U.S. sufficiently from harm's way to reassure voters. But don't bet on it.

Does this royal visit matter in the U.S. as a selling point in an election year? Do Americans really care if the British legitimize Bush? One suspects that the kudos Bush hoped to gain from the visit are overrated. And he certainly learned nothing during his London trek. The dreadful Istanbul bombing, instead of stirring reappraisal of the ill-thought Iraq invasion, was an occasion for the same sad refrain of pursuing wicked terrorists relentlessly, no matter how many more terrorist recruits are generated in doing so. The official British visit, in fact, was redolent of haughty privilege, of snooty distance from the unsightly masses. The only genuine surprise was that the Bush and Blair entourages weren't toting snuff boxes and wearing powdered wigs.