

Blair's Judgment Call

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By any standards, the Prime Minister's defence of his Iraq policy, made in Sedgefield on Friday, was a remarkable performance. It was remarkable for its candour. It was remarkable for its intellectual depth. It was remarkable for its generosity towards those unlikely to be persuaded by it. As the anniversary of the invasion approaches, it was remarkable as a pre-emptive defence of a deeply contested pre-emptive war. George Bush would never have made such a speech. Only Tony Blair could. It demonstrates once again that, in the Bush-Blair alliance, the superior moral, intellectual and political capacities reside in London, not in Washington.

But though the speech was remarkable, was it persuasive? Only in part.

It certainly removed some of the arguments now being trotted out by the Bush Administration as justifications for the war. Tony Blair made clear on Friday that Hussein's brutality towards his own people 'could not be and was not our justification for the war.' He also made clear that ideally he would have created 'an international coalition blessed by the UN' to deal with Saddam, as with the Taliban: but that he could not. Listen to George Bush these days, and you'd think that the US and UK headed a broad coalition as they invaded. Tony Blair is now on record as recognizing that things were otherwise: that it was the failure to recreate the anti-Taliban coalition that then took him to 'the point of decision'. Could he risk not invading Iraq? He decided that he could not.

On Friday his defence of that difficult judgment call rested on three linked claims. The first was that even before the horrendous events of 9/11, Iraq constituted a real (though not imminent) threat of a unique kind. The second is that, because of 9/11, the balance of risk in the UN policy towards Iraq adopted after the first Gulf War – of simply containing rather than removing that threat – had significantly and adversely shifted. The third is that in any case, by March 2003, Iraq was in breach of UN Resolution 1441, such that 'we went to war to enforce compliance with UN resolutions'. All this, in the context of a world now facing a new and growing 'global threat to our security' – Al Qaida – that it is in the interest and duty of the UK to eliminate. 'Containment will not work in the face of the global threat that confronts us', the PM told his audience on Friday. We live in a new, insecure and interdependent world, he argued, to which the old rules of international law are increasingly inappropriate.

So is this defence adequate? In part it is. Overall it is not. Overall, it raises more questions than it answers.

It is clearly true that 9/11 created a different and dangerous world in which to make foreign policy. It is also true that interdependence now makes both possible and necessary collective action by the international community to prevent genuine humanitarian hardships. On grounds shared by Tony Blair and his critics, the intervention in Kosovo was legitimate. The intervention in Afghanistan was necessary: but, say what he may, the invasion of Iraq was not.

For nowhere in the Sedgefield defence did the Prime Minister establish the link between Al-Qaida and the Iraq of Saddam Hussein. He never explained and justified the choice of Iraq as

the next target in the war on terrorism. Yet this is the critical issue. We did, after all, invade Iraq. The PM talked only of the potential of such a link, and of the build up of WMD in 'unstable and repressive states'. Yet the states he then described – North Korea, Malaysia, the Near East and Africa – ran way past Iraq. Remarkably, Tony Blair actually confirmed on Friday that, even before the invasion, he knew of the sale of nuclear secrets by the head of the Pakistani nuclear program. Nuclear secrets being sold right next door to Afghanistan, from within a political elite with known Taliban sympathies! And yet we invaded Iraq! So the question remains. Why Iraq? Why not Pakistan?

Why the rush to war? If the UK was merely implementing existing UN resolutions, as the PM now claims, and so by implication did not require a new mandate for the invasion, why did we work so hard to get a second UN resolution? Why did we not let Hans Blix complete his mission? To do so would only have emboldened Hussein, the PM told us on Friday. But would it? Would the extra 3 months that Blix requested have so significantly transformed the Iraqi dictator's stance as to make it too dangerous to wait? 90 days? Surely not; and if the US and UK were in a credibility hole by then, who and what had put them there? Not Saddam Hussein, but the rhetoric and intransigence of Bush and Blair themselves.

The Prime Minister concedes that the threat posed by Iraq was difficult to assess. He judged one way. He concedes that others could judge the other; and he wants closure. He is aware that he is unlikely to get it, and he should not. For the still unresolved and absolutely central issue here is not the ease of the judgment call but its quality. On Iraq, Tony Blair simply got it wrong. He led the UK into an unnecessary war, one that has cost lives and will cost more yet. Errors of that magnitude ought to produce resignations, not ruminations. What we need to hear now from the Prime Minister is not why UK troops are still in Iraq but why he is still in No. 10.