

The 'Blair Democrats'

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Turn on the television this week, or open a newspaper, and it was hard to avoid the news from New Hampshire. Democratic candidates seeking their party's nomination for the Presidency dominated the airwaves; and if New Hampshire is now fading, South Carolina is not. The sub-text of all this attention was, and is, always the same: which result, this week and next, will most threaten George W. Bush's hold on the White House come November? The strong showing of John Kerry and John Edwards has persuaded the New York Times' Thomas Friedman that the answer to that question could be a 'Blair Democrat'. The message from Iowa and New Hampshire is apparently that ordinary party members, determined to find someone who can win for them in November, are increasingly turning to candidates who voted for the invasion of Iraq and support a strong security stance against terrorism, and yet remain critical of the Bush Administration's management of the invasion's aftermath. They are turning to candidates, that is, who are the American equivalent of Tony Blair.

Yet if that is so, then the last 7 days have been ones of deep political irony. For as the Blair Democrats surged forward in Iowa and New Hampshire, a political world away in London Tony Blair himself was engaged in a desperate battle simply to stay in office at all. That battle was little reported in the US media, but its outcome has immense electoral implications for the Democrats even so. For it was a battle with its own and quite different sub-text: should Tony Blair have taken the UK to war in Iraq? Blair was George Bush's great ally in that war. So if things had begun to unravel for him in London this week, how much longer could it have been before they began to unravel in Washington too?

As New Hampshire Democrats voted on Tuesday, and largely unnoticed by them, Blair faced two parliamentary crises in succession, either one of which could have dislodged him. On Tuesday he faced a parliamentary rebellion of unprecedented proportions over proposals on the funding of university education. On Wednesday he faced the publication of the Hutton Inquiry into the death of the former UN weapons inspector and whistle-blower Dr. David Kelly. As late as last weekend, rebel backbench MPs were claiming they could defeat him on Tuesday by as much as 21 votes. As late as last weekend too, over 60% of the UK population polled believed that Blair should resign if Hutton censored him for his part in the events leading to Dr. Kelly's death. No wonder the Prime Minister told the London Observer last Sunday that he knew his job was on the line.

Nor were his erstwhile allies in Washington helping him much. When David Kay resigned last week as the head of the Iraq Survey Group, declaring his view that Saddam Hussein had not possessed WMD when the US and UK invaded, one senior White House official after another backtracked on the certainty of their previous claim that he had indeed possessed such weapons. Yet saving face in this way, they inadvertently dug a deeper and deeper pit for Tony Blair: for one of the Hutton Inquiry's key concerns was whether the Prime Minister had exaggerated intelligence reports on the existence of such weapons in the run up to the war. The BBC had reported that the UK Government had 'sexed up' those intelligence reports. David Kelly had been their source. He was now dead, and Tony Blair was on trial.

So how did Blair do? Progressively better as the week went on. He literally scrapped by on Tuesday, his normal majority of 161 down to a mere 5. Overnight he seemed weakened and discredited: a push from Hutton and he could be on the way out. Then on Wednesday the Hutton Report entirely vindicated his role in the Kelly affair, and totally silenced his leadership critics.

So things did not unravel for Tony Blair this week as once they had seemed they might – though the absence of WMD in Iraq may rattle him yet. That time-bomb is ticking still under Blair and Bush alike. But unless it blows, Blair is safe: and so long as he is, the Presidential campaign here will be fought out with George Bush's great ally still firmly in power in London. The Bush team will not have to explain why their man should be returned to office when his great ally has been ejected from it. In that sense, though politics went well for Blair Democrats in New England this week, ironically they went much less well for them in England proper.