

## **The Bushwhacking of New Labour: Why Tony Blair went to war.**

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*One by one these days, in Washington and London alike, the wheels are coming off the case for the invasion of Iraq. In fact they are now coming off with increasing speed. George Bush once told us that the Iraqi regime was seeking uranium in Niger; Colin Powell once told us that Saddam Hussein had links to al Qaeda; and Tony Blair once told us that the Iraqi dictator could mobilize some of his WMD in 45 minutes if pushed. They don't tell us any of that any more. And after the head of the Iraq Survey Group publicly doubted that Saddam Hussein had any weapons of mass destruction when we invaded, Bush and Blair haven't even been able, with any credibility at least, to use their 'wait and see, we will find them' defense. We have waited. We have seen. Apparently WMD are not to be found.*

*Of course, it remains true, as they continually tell us, that our safety is threatened by international terrorism, that we live in new and dangerous times. But it is not true that invading Iraq made that threat any less, or those dangers go away. On the contrary, there is every justification for the counter view: that invading Iraq in this unilateral way was exactly the wrong response to the sets of concerns released by the attack on the World Trade Center and the growing evidence of the internally repressive nature of the Iraqi regime. There is every justification for the counter-argument that the unilateral invasion of Iraq has made the world a significantly more dangerous place.*

*For if winning the war on terrorism was the real goal of US and UK policy, then unilaterally invading Iraq actually made winning that war harder. If reducing the proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction was the real aim of the military action, invading Iraq took the action away from the main sources of this new danger. If reducing the threat posed by radical Islam to US and UK homeland security was the aim, no policy could have been invented that was less likely to succeed in the long term than that of using western troops to depose an Arab dictator.*

*So why did Blair do it, if doing it made so little sense? The truth is that he was bushwhacked.*

*After 9/11, Blair was determined to create a proximity to Bush that mirrored the closeness he had enjoyed earlier with Clinton – to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with the Americans as he put it – in the fight on terrorism. He ended up caught in the logic of that closeness. He cast himself in the Churchill mode, played the world statesman at the centre of the global struggle, and paid the price of hubris.*

*As the rush to war built up in Washington a year ago, Blair found himself the victim of his own prior statements. In April 2002 he signed on publicly to the 'axis of evil' analysis that singled out Iraq as the next target in the anti-terrorist war. He then spent the rest of 2002 arguing loudly that the Iraqi regime was too dangerous to be left in place, and that the international community must act to contain or remove it. A year ago, Blair then reached the moment he had long tried to postpone: the moment at which the Iraqi regime was still in existence but the multilateral coalition to remove it was not. How then to jump? Had the status of the regime been changed by the absence of an international will to see it go? No, of course not. Was the regime too*

*dangerous to leave in place? Blair was endlessly on record as saying so. The case for unilateral action won, as it were, by default. Blair did not want to act without UN backing, but he couldn't get that backing; and he had argued himself into a corner in which inaction against the regime was no longer a possibility.*

*The UK went to war against Iraq alongside the US because its Prime Minister had attempted to recreate the anti-Taliban coalition against a different enemy – Saddam Hussein – and had failed. Tony Blair took the UK to war because by then his public statements had locked him into a confrontation with Iraq from which he could not escape without cost. He could not escape without loss of face. He could not escape without bolstering the self-confidence of the Iraqi regime that both he and Bush claimed was so dangerous. He could not escape without imperiling the 'special relationship' with the US to which, after 9/11, he had given unique priority.*

*In that sense, the UK went to war in a comedy of errors, locked into a sequence of events that its prime minister had worked so hard to avoid. Comedies of errors of this kind can be avoided in the future, of course, by the early adoption of prime ministerial verbal restraint. They can be avoided, if and to the degree that, whenever next the US singles out a rogue state, No. 10 is more cautious in its opening response to the US initiative. But similar 'comedies' (really tragedies of course) will occur nonetheless, unless UK prime ministers also break sharply with the 'unique UK world role' arrogance inherited from the years of Empire: the very arrogance indeed that led Tony Blair to put the UK on that US-specified path in the first place. The best way to avoid 'accidents' of the Iraqi war kind happening again, that is, is to make a sharp break with the mind set that generated this one.*