

The Strain of Being Right

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The strain is obviously getting to Tony Blair. Physically as well as politically he is no longer the man he was. And that is not entirely surprising, for of late he has been experiencing increasing difficulty in squaring the circle of his Iraq policy. That was a policy that he chose to launch as quintessentially a ‘third way’ war: the first, indeed, of the new century. It was a war with a moral purpose, he told us: but not one – he was adamant on this when challenged by mass peace demonstrations last February – that was triggered by moral outrage alone. It was a war and a policy whose timing and necessity turned critically for him on Saddam Hussein’s possession and potential use of WMD; and in public Blair remained (and remains) adamant – he told a Committee of the UK Parliament this as late as July – that those weapons would soon be found. But WMD have not been found. Nor is their discovery impending: and the evidence is mounting that this shortfall was foreshadowed in much of the intelligence data available in London and in Washington before the war began. So why did Tony Blair go to war alongside George Bush, when the evidence was so precarious and the political risks were so robust?

In part it would appear that Blair went to war as the consequence of his own hubris and rhetoric. He trapped himself, and the UK, in a policy package from which escape was impossible without cost. As long ago as April 2002 he began to play wide receiver to the Bush quarterback: arguing that Saddam Hussein was too dangerous to be left alone, and that an Afghan-style multilateral coalition was needed to bring him into line. But the coalition failed to materialize, and yet the specification of danger remained in place. Boxed into a logic from which he could break only by retreat – so running the risk of emboldening the very dictator he had demonized – Blair in the end had to cross the Rubicon. He had talked himself into a corner; and went to war because there was no way of avoiding it without losing face.

But the bigger question is why did he allow himself to be so trapped in the first place? After all, the bushwhacking of New Labor in this fashion involved a sharp break with the multilateralist policies of his first Foreign Secretary – the very man whose resignation from Blair’s cabinet on the eve of war signaled the depth of opposition to Blair’s policy within the governing Labor party. Blair allowed himself to be so trapped because he is, in foreign policy terms at least, more Old Labor than New. When all the rhetoric about ‘newness’ and ‘third ways’ has been set aside, Tony Blair is as Atlanticist and as imperialist in his instincts as was Ernest Bevin before him. Pride and over-confidence may well explain how Blair conducted foreign policy in the run up to the invasion of Iraq: but they do not explain why he chose to put that pride at the service of a Republican President. To find why that was his choice, you have to see the degree to which, even in New Labor circles, old British ambitions to be a world power remain as strong – and as ridiculous – as ever.

¹ Quoted in *The New York Times*, March 26 2009