

"UNCONDITIONAL BACKING FOR US POLICIES"

- Harold Wilson annoyed Lyndon Johnson intensely by resisting very strong pressure to commit British troops to the invasion of Vietnam. But he still had to make public declarations of support for US policy, some literally dictated to him by Johnson himself. (One of the reasons he dug his heels in on the main issue was that he knew he could never get a British troop commitment past the annual Labour Party conference, not the toothless tiger then that it is now).
- Thatcher was miffed that the Reaganites had invaded Grenada, a member of the Commonwealth, without asking permission first - but did nothing.

British supporters of the special relationship try to present it as a fact of life. If pushed, they reach for the line that it means Britain can act as "a restraining influence", as in Macmillan's claim that Britain would be Greece to America's Rome. Blair has used this argument when it suited him, but seemed to abandon it when he claimed that, rather than trying to restrain Bush from invading Iraq, on the contrary he had encouraged him. This may sound like the fantasy of a poodle that, straining at the lead, imagines it's taking its master for a walk in the park. But it's all of a piece with the longstanding desire of the British political class to pose as a major player on the world stage.

What does it look like from the other side of the Atlantic? Well, for a start, it's unlikely that Washington insiders ever talk about "the special relationship", except in tones of wry amusement. After all, the USA as the world dominant power has special relationships with plenty of other client states. As the Suez crisis showed, US support for Britain cannot be automatic. And after the Falklands war, in which US support was possibly crucial to the final outcome, overseers of the Latin American branch of the US imperium must have been shaking their heads as the British victory toppled their client, General Galtieri.

On the other hand world leadership can be a lonely business. The USA prefers to go to war in alliance with other countries, even a motley crew like the recent "coalition of the willing". It makes for better public relations. And Blair's role in offering the support of an apparently independent country for the invasion of Iraq certainly helped to sell it to the American people.

If Chomsky and Curtis are right about the Soviet "threat" being used as a pretext for exploitation and aggression in the South, then we wouldn't expect the collapse of the Soviet Union to have had much of an impact on the special relationship. Nor did it. So, for example, many US bases remain in the UK, including the top-secret Menwith Hill spy base near Harrogate. And, as we know only too well, military co-operation in the Middle East continued, with murderous results. But there had to be a new pretext.

Western civilisation couldn't plausibly be defended against the commies any more. As we enter the era of resource wars and in particular the struggle for control of Middle Eastern oil, it turns out that, when we bomb and invade the Middle East again, we are defending our way of life against Islamic terrorism, even by extension Islam itself. There's some truth in this insofar as, let's

face it, there are many people in the Islamic world with personal reasons to want retribution – or at the very least a sincere apology and proper compensation - for the uncounted tens of thousands of their people who have been killed by aerial bombardments by the RAF and the USAAF. (These attacks incidentally predate the special relationship. "Bomber" Harris, later responsible for the terror bombing of German cities, was dropping bombs on Iraqi villages back in the 1930s).

But this pretext for aggression requires a good deal more hypocrisy and special pleading than the communist threat did. After all, no-one could accuse US leaders of being communists or of harbouring them. So, when they do it to us, it's terrorism. And that's true: 9/11 and 7/7 were terrible crimes. But, when we do it to them, well, that's different. It's collateral damage -regrettable, naturally – but, you know, stuff happens. Indeed it does.



Blair and Bush cosy up

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that, with the replacement of the Cold War with the War on Terror, the special relationship has moved into new, more dangerous territory. Following 9/11 the US government seized the opportunity to swing decisively to the right. And it was just at this point that Blair took the fateful decision to commit Britain to *unconditional* backing for US policies in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and in the Middle East generally.

Maybe he should have been asking himself just where all this might lead. And whether it was wise for Britain to have a special relationship, or any kind of relationship, with a country that hardly counts as a functioning democracy any longer, which grants itself the right to "intervene" anywhere in the world as it sees fit, and which refuses to be bound by the Geneva Conventions when it does so. This is no longer the isolationist democratic USA of Roosevelt and the New Deal. There's a word that describes a political system that places military power at the disposal of big business and treats human rights with contempt. But it's pointless descending to mere name-calling. Let's just say that in 2006 the special relationship will be sixty five years old. It's a good time to pension it off.

Recommended reading:

Mark Curtis: *The Great Deception*, Pluto 1998.

Paul Rogers: *Losing Control*, Pluto 2000.

David Gee: *US Military & Intelligence Bases in Britain*, Free from QPSW, Friends House, Euston Rd, London NW1 2BJ.