

A costly and inexplicable friendship

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TODAY (Thursday) is Day Three of George Bush's state visit to Britain. As the first state visit (i.e. on the invitation of Buckingham Palace) by a US president since Woodrow Wilson's way back in 1918, it promises all manner of excellent photo ops for Bush.

A banquet given by the Queen in his honour, talks with Tony Blair (very popular back home in the US), meetings with the families of British soldiers killed in Iraq and with Blair's Sedgfield constituents. These pictures will be used to impress the American voters in next year's presidential election, and thereby (he hopes) secure Bush's return to the Oval Office. For Prime Minister Tony Blair, however, the visit could hardly be less welcome.

The invitation for George Bush to visit Britain was issued seventeen months ago. At that time war planning was suffused with confident expectations of a favourable outcome, and a state visit seemed an excellent way to celebrate Anglo-American success. Today, seven months after the official end of the war, the confidence and optimism has all but disappeared. The Anglo-American adventure is going horribly wrong. As the prognosis from Iraq grows daily more grim, so the war's unpopularity becomes more entrenched in the British public psyche. George Bush's state visit, with its inevitable focus on Iraq, stirs up public feeling on the issue just as Blair would wish it for-

Bush-derived costs and setbacks for the British prime minister.

The international cost came as soon as Britain allied itself securely with pro-war Washington. Its European partners, France and Germany, as firmly put themselves in the anti-war camp. The subsequent rift between Britain and Continental Europe will not easily be healed. On the wider international arena, London effectively alienated the Muslim world and many other countries which opposed action in Iraq. Its support of Washington's decision to bypass the United Nations further eroded its standing in the comity of nations.

British participation in 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' has been both expensive and bloody. Tens of millions of pounds that could have been spent improving health and education provisions in the UK, have instead been used to wage what many

Critics point too to the negligible scraps the poodle is thrown by his American masters. Despite loyal service, Blair has secured very few concessions from Washington. British prisoners in Guantanamo Bay still face military tribunals and possibly death sentence; US steel tariffs remain in place; the Middle East peace plan remains stuck on first base — no, George Bush is not generous with his rewards.

All of which makes for considerable stress and pressure on the Prime Minister. Few people were surprised when he was rushed into emergency recently with an abnormal heart rhythm.

Reading through this record of setbacks, the overwhelming question that springs to mind is 'Why?' Why put up with so much grief, both at home and abroad, from the opposition and his own party? Why jeopardize his political future over support for a war and a policy that are increasing-

ly being exposed as wrong? Why do so much for a country that gives him only verbal praise in return? Why does Tony Blair stand so doggedly by George W. Bush?

Blair would — indeed does — argue that it is not George Bush he is supporting, but the cause that Bush espouses: fighting against terrorism and extremism, promoting freedom and democracy. This argument might have sounded credible in the run-up to war. But now that the war is (officially at least) long over, and it is clear there were no WMD in Iraq; terrorism is flourishing; and America seems poised to cut and run, leaving chaos rather than democratic government in its wake — it is a hollow plea. Wherever one looks, the

Even those who still trust Tony Blair and believe he acted with sincerity, question the extent to which he has put Britain in the US camp. 'Bush's poodle' is the term commonly used to describe Blair's relationship with the American president — hardly a flattering comparison. The *Sunday Telegraph's* take-on on the Bush visit was typically scathing: 'Mr Bush swaggers into town to check on his favourite poodle —