

gotten.

The ludicrous security measures surrounding the Bush visit are not helping Blair's cause. London has seen an unprecedented security operation, with all police leave cancelled and some 14,000 police officers on duty. Despite this, several hundred American Secret Service agents have come over especially to guard 'Potus' [code name for the president of the United States]. Armed, they expected the home secretary to give them diplomatic immunity in case they shot one of the many anti-Bush/war protestors (he refused).

Washington had even asked for all demonstrations to be banned (a further sign of post-9/11 prioritization of 'security' over democracy), and for parts of the London Underground to be closed down. Thanks to London's 'red' Mayor Ken Livingstone those calls were rejected, but huge exclusion zones in central London restrict the route protestors can take. The overall intent remains to keep them as far from the American president as possible.

Bush will capitalize on his London trip when he goes for reelection in November 2004. But Blair's advisers will be wondering how many potential votes are being lost by public annoyance at the Bush security measures. The British people are not keen to host Mr Bush anyway, and even less so when it means massive inconvenience to themselves. As the *Mail* on Sunday put it: '(H)ow do you create (the) nigh-perfect text-book example of how to get up the nose of as many people as possible without really trying?.... You invite Mr Bush over for a state visit.'

Given this not unpredictable negative reaction, there were numerous calls for the visit to be called off. But not from Tony Blair, who made a defiant (many would say unbelievable) statement to the Commons last Monday: 'I believe this is exactly the right time for him to come.' Blair's staunch defence of George Bush was typical: both of his steadfast support for Bush, and of the price he personally has paid for that support. For criticism over the state visit is just the latest in a long series of

aka Tony Blair'

see as an illegal and unwarranted war in Iraq. As for body bags, the British toll from Iraq is already over fifty mark. Dead soldiers' families have been among the most vocal critics of Bush and his visit.

The political cost came early: prominent resignations, including that of Robin Cook, Leader of the Commons and former Foreign Secretary, and Clare Short, International Development Secretary. Labour backbenchers and party activists, fuming at the government's policies, are openly critical of the war. Both the prime minister's and Labour's poll ratings have slumped, confirmed by the party's recent shock by-election defeat. It is only because of the manifest unelectability of the opposition Tory party that Labour is not in danger of losing the next election, but it will return to power with a much reduced majority.

Having said that, the worst political trouble could be yet to come. The Hutton Inquiry into the death of government scientist Dr David Kelly will deliver its findings in January. Should Lord Hutton conclude that the government's treatment of Kelly pushed him to kill himself or, more damaging, that the government lied about the WMD justification for war, it will be in serious trouble. The failure to unearth a single WMD in Iraq has already raised huge questions about the intelligence that led to war, and about the credibility and reliability of the prime minister. Many are asking if he can be trusted? — a question which, if answered mostly in the negative, could prove politically fatal for Blair.

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 — aka Tony Blair.'

old pro-war arguments are disproved by reality.

The other argument the prime minister keeps alluding to is realpolitik. 'America is the world's sole superpower: British interests lie in joining with that superpower, not in defying it. Again, this argument could hold water in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, but not in the build-up to war (when many other countries defied the US), and certainly not today. British interests can never lie in following the US on a course that leads to disaster.

Other commentators also provide political explanations for Blair sticking with Bush — not global realpolitik, but the simple politics of staying in power. They argue that Blair has become so closely associated with the war on terrorism, with US assertions that Saddam had WMD, and with the war in Iraq, that to turn his back now would be an admission of fault and failure. 'Fault' in his judgment and decisions; 'failure' in his policies. It is a very rare politician who can make those kinds of admissions and survive in power.

These are the only rational explanations for Mr Blair's behaviour. Beyond them, there is 'conviction politics'. Tony Blair genuinely believes — despite all evidence to the contrary — that the threat posed by Saddam Hussein was so great that he had to be removed by force. While this explanation reflects well on the prime minister's sense of honour, it says little about his judgment.

Which brings us back to the poodle theory: the British prime minister does indeed jump, sit and bark when George Bush tells him to. So enthralled/in awe is he of the American president that his response to all US requests is a subservient 'yes'. This devotion to Washington takes precedence over all other considerations: political, international, financial, personal.

One day Tony Blair will wake up and realize precisely what his friendship with George Bush has cost him. The danger (for him) is that this happens after he has been replaced as party leader by Gordon Brown, or the Labour has been voted out of office. By then it will be too late.