

Europe
23/2/04

An axis sans sense

The News

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Iraq is the issue that won't go away. The seductive Blairite argument that it is time to move on, that picking over Blair's justifications for the war only benefits the Tories and that the government should turn to the domestic agenda that really concerns the voters, is the reverse of the truth. Further inspection of Andrew Gilligan's journalistic ethics and Alastair Campbell's relations with John Scarlett would certainly be a waste of time, but the real questions raised by the Iraq war and its aftermath go to the heart of Britain's place in the global political economy. We desperately need a searching national debate on them.

With every passing day it becomes harder to believe that Blair's stated reasons for going to war with Iraq were the real ones. Unless we assume that he is hopelessly credulous, it is inconceivable that he would have gone to war on the basis of necessarily fragmentary, inevitably inconclusive intelligence reports, which the UN inspectors were already subjecting to a reality check. He must surely have known that the odds on Saddam being in any meaningful sense a threat to this country were very low; and that the allegation that the secular nationalists of Iraq were somehow in cahoots with the Islamist fundamentalists of al-Qaeda flew in the face of all the evidence.

I think he was telling the truth when he said he didn't know that the 45 minutes claim in the notorious September 2002 dossier referred only to battlefield weapons. He didn't know because he didn't need to know. He was bent on going to war in any case, for reasons which had nothing to do with Saddam's armoury. He believed it was essential for Britain to fight alongside the Americans in a war they were manifestly determined to launch — both because Britain had at

all costs to maintain her special relationship with the world's only superpower, and because it was in the interests of the whole world to ensure that the humiliated, febrile and slightly paranoid post-9/11 America was not driven even further into unilateralism, as she would be if she fought and defeated Iraq with no help from anyone else.

I was not convinced by these arguments before the war, and I am still less convinced by them now. But they are neither contemptible nor irrational. They had nothing to do with the state of Saddam's arsenal — or, for that matter, with the alleged threat of global terrorism — but they were none the worse for that. They reflected a steely realpolitik, more reminiscent of Bismarck or Richelieu than of Gladstone or Woodrow Wilson. Blair being Blair, he felt bound to dress them up in increasingly dodgy moralistic rhetoric; and like the brilliant actor he is, he gradually came to live the part of global saviour which he had allotted himself. That is why his credibility is so badly damaged now. But that is a side issue, of interest only to amateur psychologists. The question that matters is why Blair saw British interests in the way he did, and what that tells us about New Labour's geopolitics.

The first point to notice is that, as so often, New Labour is not new at all. The assumption that Britain's special relationship with the US is bound to be the axis around which her geopolitical posture turns is, by now, hardwired into the mind set of the British establishment. Its roots go back a long way. The American revolutionaries who founded the United States thought they were creating a new nation, embodying a new identity. The British saw them as rebellious children, fleeing the parental nest. Even when they had accomplished their revolution, the Americans were not seen as foreigners. For most of the 19th century, they were rather badly

brought up country cousins. In the Second World War they became a big, strong, though slightly resentful, elder brother who would save us from the sadistic bully across the Channel.

Then came Suez — the defining moment in our post-war history. Eisenhower was understandably enraged by the Anglo-French attack on Egypt and forced us to call it off. The French drew the conclusion that they could not trust the Americans ever again; we concluded that we must never again allow ourselves to be parted from them on an important issue. That has been the governing axiom of British foreign policy under every prime minister since 1956, with the sole exception of Edward Heath. The strength of Atlanticism has varied from PM to PM. Despite enormous pressure from Washington, Wilson refused to send British troops to Vietnam. Thatcher was so firm in her Atlanticist faith that (Grenada apart) she sometimes seemed more royalist than the king — more pro-American than the Americans. Blair has been a second Thatcher rather than a second Wilson. But these are details. What matters is that seven out of the eight British prime ministers since the fall of Anthony Eden have been cut from the same cloth.

The trouble is that the cloth is getting threadbare. During the Cold War, when international relations were structured by the rivalry of two superpowers, and when the US was the ultimate guarantor of the security and independence of Western Europe, Britain's inveterate Atlanticism had something to be said for it. It meant that we had a hotline to the guardian angel on whom all our European neighbours depended. (It was not as hot as we thought, but that too is a detail.) The collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the communist bloc have transformed that familiar landscape. Europe no longer needs a guardian angel. There is nothing

to guard against. Our rulers do their best to make our flesh creep with talk of the menace of international terrorism. But the famous war against terrorism — an intellectual absurdity since terrorism is not an entity but a technique — is in no sense a replay of the cold war. Osama Bin Laden is not a new Stalin, or even a new Brezhnev. The threat he presents is real, but Europe does not need America's nuclear umbrella to counter it.

In the baffling and often alarming new world in which we live, the real threat to Europe is quite different. At this moment, the US is the world's only superpower, the hegemon of a new global order, shaped by US interests and dominated by the singular US version of capitalism. But unless we are to assume that history really has come to an end, American hegemony will sooner or later evaporate just as Britain's did. New superpowers will arise to challenge America's supremacy, just as imperial Germany and the US itself were challenging Britain's by the end of the 19th century. China is already some way along that road, and India will not be far behind. Much more frightening than the threat of international terrorism is the spectre of a divided and politically incoherent Europe, incapable of safeguarding the interests of her people in a world dominated by the US, China and India. Though Blair hates the very idea, that spectre can be kept at bay only if Europe becomes an alternative pole of power in an increasingly multipolar world. He is now rowing back to Europe, and thank heavens for that. The real question raised by the aftermath of the Iraq war is whether he will row hard and fast enough.

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The Guardian, February 21, 2004**