

**20: In The Line Of Fire;
Britain is nervous about U.S. plans to strike Iraq. But Tony Blair,
on the eve of a summit with President Bush, is gearing up to sell
the idea to the British public**

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**J.F.O. McAllister/London, With reporting by John F. Dickerson/with
Bush and Charles P. Wallace/Berlin**

Afghanistan was a good war for Tony Blair: a chance to shine on the world stage and remind voters at home, who have been crabbing about still-rotten hospitals and trains, of his decisiveness and capacity to lead. Now the task of standing shoulder to shoulder with George W. Bush risks turning Blair into a contortionist. As Bush marches with apparent enthusiasm toward a war with Iraq, the British public is grabbing Blair by the ankles and saying, "Slow down." A new MORI poll for TIME shows a sharp drop in public approval of Blair's handling of the response to Sept. 11, from 71% in November to 52% now. Only 34% of Britons think their government would be right to join the Americans in stepping up military action against Iraq; 56% think it would be wrong.

These are not the only signs to disturb the equanimity of those who work at 10 Downing St. Columnists are trumpeting their scorn for Blair as Bush's "lapdog" and for sacrificing Britain's standing in Europe. The TIME/MORI poll shows that while 52% of Britons think their government gives the U.S. about the right amount of support on international issues, 40% say it's too supportive. One hundred thirty-five M.P.s have put their names on a motion "that this House is aware of the deep unease among honourable Members on all sides of the House at the prospect that Her Majesty's Government might support United States military action against Iraq." Among them is a Labour former junior defense minister and other backbenchers beyond the usual clutch of antiwar activists. The negative mood is washing back on the government's Afghan policy too, evident in the agitation that greeted the announcement last week that 1,700 more Marines were being committed to the fight against al-Qaeda and Taliban forces.

Next week the Prime Minister flies to Texas for several days of talks at Bush's 650-hectare ranch in Crawford. Many sessions are expected to be one-on-one, including a dust-stirring tour lasting several hours. What to do about Saddam Hussein is the overwhelming topic. British and American officials wave off any thought that war is imminent. A Bush aide calls Crawford a "blue sky" meeting, that is, one for thinking big, a British official agrees that "this isn't a planning summit, it's an ideas summit."

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Blair aides think a lot of the guff they're taking from critics stems from the misguided view, similar to what obtained after Sept. 11, that Bush is about to start a war half-cocked. He doesn't want to, and he can't. Fall or winter is the earliest all the troops, weapons and intelligence assets could be organized for a land campaign, officials say--let alone a coherent replacement regime to which defectors could be attracted. But the carefully orchestrated images of transatlantic solidarity being planned for the summit belie a huge asymmetry in the two leaders' freedom to maneuver. In mid-March, Americans gave their President a 75% approval rating, according to a TIME/CNN poll, and 70% said the U.S. should use military force to remove Saddam Hussein. Not only does Bush command the huge forces of the globe's only super-power, but Americans have given him a blank check to use them. Blair has now committed some 6,000 troops to Afghanistan, an important political marker before the summit. He nevertheless remains a junior partner whose public is a drag anchor.

Yet Blair is determined to keep up with the leader of the free world--and convinced he can pull it off. Call it the Great Pivot. Blair is about to start a major p.r. campaign. He aims to turn his public--and, he hopes, skeptics in Europe and the Middle East too--from focusing on the defeat of al-Qaeda to an entirely different threat not directly linked to Sept. 11: Saddam's programs to build chemical, biological and especially nuclear weapons.

The first salvo in this war for hearts and minds will come before Blair's plane takes off for Texas, when the British government will issue a detailed **dossier** about Saddam's secret weapons programs. A draft is now circulating in Whitehall. There is internal debate about how much secret intelligence to divulge, but the document will emphasize how persistently Saddam has tried to obtain weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), nuclear bombs in particular. "It's very good," says one official who has seen it.

It had better be. It will be a daunting task to shift public opinion, in Britain and elsewhere, to agree that Saddam's pursuit of WMDs justifies war in the near future. After all, ask critics, hasn't he been seeking them for two decades? Why should we fight now? Is it just a desire by George Bush to finish what his daddy failed to, and by Blair to bear any burden necessary to snuggle with Uncle Sam? If Saddam does get these weapons, won't he be deterred from using them by fear of retaliation that would annihilate his country? Officials think they have serious answers to all those questions, but that people are now too somnolent to pay attention--"They have stopped thinking about it for some time," says one British official.

So how does Blair propose to rouse them from their sleepwalking? First, he will train his rhetorical cannon on Iraq's persistence as a lawbreaker. According to London, Baghdad is already in

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violation of at least 23 U.N. Security Council resolutions, including nine on WMDs. Blair will also focus on how big and long-standing Iraq's secret WMD program has been. European officials say Saddam has biological and chemical warheads that could be placed on missiles within weeks, if they're not ready now. More ominously, he has been boosting nuclear procurement, and has mastered the 150-km missiles he is permitted to test--raising the prospect of secret longer-range rockets. "We haven't changed our paradigm to account for the real threats we now face," says a Blair adviser. "The fact is, we've been too lackadaisical about WMDs for too long." Finally, the Prime Minister will point to the benefits to the Middle East if Iraq were under more benign leadership, including an end to sanctions that hurt Iraqi civilians and less incentive for Iran to counter Iraq with WMDs of its own. One Labour official predicts that once Blair is through with this sales pitch, public support for action to curb Iraq's WMDs will climb toward 70%.

But since Saddam has been relatively well-behaved lately, why contemplate war? Because "the only clock ticking is Saddam's capabilities," says a senior Bush aide--and it makes no sense to wait until its alarm goes off. Another factor is that al-Qaeda, according to intelligence seized in Afghanistan, is trying to procure nukes too. The British government discounts all claims of any Iraqi connection with al-Qaeda over Sept. 11, and it's unlikely that Saddam would ever subcontract delivery of WMDs to any outside group. Nevertheless, Sept. 11 may have alerted him to the attractions of unorthodox attacks. In fact, Blair has been stressing the dangers of WMD proliferation for years. "This is our moment of maximum opportunity," says an adviser, "when the U.S. has woken up from its isolationist dream. It's better to take action now before they go back to sleep." Given Bush's image in Europe as a wild Texan, it's interesting that Downing St. thinks itself lucky to catch the wave of his ambition to subdue Saddam.

The polished, left-leaning Blair and the rough-hewn, conservative Bush are an odd couple, but the chemistry in their relationship "is just as good as with Clinton," says one Whitehall official. A senior Bush aide agrees. "Blair's not a Eurowimp. He's not ponderous, hand-wringing and he doesn't lecture. He gets to the bottom line and that's Bush's cup of tea." The President recently wrote Blair a note saying, "I like your style." They use each other as sounding boards, they chew things over, and they disagree--though Downing St. is exceedingly disciplined about not leaking details. Nevertheless, that Vice President Cheney finally waded into the Middle East peace process last week looks from London like a vindication of Blair's long-standing advice. Bush's 50% foreign aid hike over three years is also something Blair, who called in September for a fight against the poverty that breeds extremism, also backs. "The great thing about the United States is that it always does the right thing in the end," deadpans one Blair adviser. "It's too bad that it sometimes takes until the end."

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There will be much to test the Bush-Blair bond in coming months. If it comes to war, Saddam could be deposed quickly as optimists suggest; or he could rain WMDs on Israel or stash his tanks in the cities, daring Bush to bomb civilians. Meanwhile, a struggle looms over the role of the U.N. For many countries, another U.N. resolution will be needed for them to back an attack on Iraq. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder says he "can't imagine" helping otherwise. If only to build public awareness of Saddam's recalcitrance, Blair backs a campaign to reinsert U.N. weapons inspectors kicked out in 1998. But unless they get free access to anywhere they want to go, Washington will almost certainly veto the deal as a dangerous sop--Eurowimps be damned. "The way to win international acceptance is to win," a senior White House aide says bluntly. "That's called diplomacy: winning."

That kind of take-no-prisoners approach is classic Bush: possibly effective in changing the political weather, certainly disturbing. Blair can accommodate himself to it. But his more emollient approach, winning hearts and minds through old-fashioned forms of persuasion, will also be crucial to building a coalition willing to act against Saddam's most dangerous weapons. --With reporting by John F. Dickerson/with Bush and Charles P. Wallace/Berlin

BOX STORY:

BRITISH PUBLIC OPINION

A SLIGHT CASE OF SHOULDER PAIN

After Sept. 11 Tony Blair instantly placed the U.K. "shoulder to shoulder" with the U.S. in fighting terrorism, a stance that proved popular. But as George W. Bush contemplates war on Iraq, public support is leaking away.

SUPPORT FOR GEORGE W. BUSH AND TONY BLAIR

Q. Do you approve or disapprove of the way U.S. President George W. Bush is handling the American response to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11?

	Approve	Disapprove
Sept. 14 2001	72	10
Oct. 9	70	19
Nov. 22-27	66	24
March 15-17 2002	50	37

Q. Do you approve or disapprove of the way British Prime Minister Tony Blair is handling the British response to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11?

	Approve	Disapprove
Sept. 14 2001	83	9
Oct. 9	72	21

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