FEATURE

Blair to Bush on Day After 9/11: "Co-opt" Sympathy for the U.S. to Support Military Action

Declassified communications from the U.K. to the U.S. show the depth of Blair's commitment to toppling Saddam Hussein.

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Protesters in Britain demand the former Prime Minister be held for his actions before and during the Iraq War. (Chris J. Ratcliffe / Getty Images)

"The report should lay to rest allegations of bad faith, lies or deceit." So said former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in a July 6 statement in response to the release of the long-awaited Chilcot

Report—a 2.6 million-word examination, based on dozens of interviews and hundreds of classified documents, of the UK's decision to join the Iraq War.

"I did not mislead this country. I made the decision in good faith on the information I had at the time," Blair insisted.

Blair is right that the report has, in one way, vindicated him: It should put to rest the long-held view that Blair conspired to pull his country into a reckless war with intelligence he knew to be false—he appears to have truly believed that Saddam Hussein had WMDs.

He is wrong, however, to insist the report exonerates him completely. An examination of dozens of declassified letters, memos, notes and papers released along with the report demonstrate that despite the popular image of a scheming Bush taking Blair along for the ride, Blair and his government were just as eager to manipulate the world to achieve their desired goal: the removal of Hussein from power.

The documents also give a first-hand look at the more cautious Blair government's gradual loss of control over events as the Bush administration pushed them into a full-scale invasion of Iraq—international approval be damned.

September 12, 2001

A note Blair sent to Bush one day after the September 11 attacks set the tone for everything to come, immediately adopting the viewpoint that many neoconservatives like Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz would also take: that of terrorism as a unique and unprecedented menace—and an excuse for pursuing other geopolitical goals.

"We need to construct an agenda that puts onto a new footing action against this new evil," he wrote to Bush on September 12, 2001. He would reiterate this in a note to Bush two years later. "The more I reflect on it, the more [terrorism], together with WMD, constitutes an entirely new phenomenon of threat."

Along with identifying the terrorist groups involved, Blair insisted in the September 12 letter that the U.K. and United States "need to review urgently the laws that in a democratic society they abuse." This would impact domestic laws and international agreements, he acknowledged, but "for years, the West has pussyfooted around with these issues. These groups don't play by liberal rules and we can't either."

"Some of this will require action that some will baulk at," he wrote. "But we are better to act now and explain and justify our actions than let the day be put off until some further, perhaps even worse catastrophe occurs." [Emphasis in original]

It's hard not to see in these tough-talking words a preview of some of the most ugly and shameful episodes of the course subsequently taken by Blair and Bush, from the blunder of the Iraq War and the desecration of civil liberties at home to the use of torture, black sites and rendition.

Blair went on to suggest that the sorrow engendered by September 11 should be leveraged in support of this goal.

"It is now that the world is in a state of shock; now that it feels maximum sympathy for the US; now that it can be co-opted most easily," he wrote. "Locking in the international community sooner rather than later is therefore critical."

Co-opting the world

As the documents show, this was more or less the course Blair set himself on in the months and years to come: attempting to gradually push—or "co-opt," in his words— the international community toward supporting U.S.-U.K. military action first against Afghanistan and then against "terrorism in all its forms," as he put it in one letter—including Hussein's Iraq.

In that letter to Bush, dated one month after the World Trade Center attacks, on October 11, 2001, Blair appears to respond to the Bush administration's early rumblings about going to war in Iraq.

"There is a real willingness in the Middle East to get Saddam out but a total opposition to mixing this up with the current [Afghanistan] operation," Blair wrote. "I have no doubt we need to deal with Saddam. But if we hit Iraq now, we would lose the Arab world, Russia, probably half the EU."

However, Blair assured Bush that Hussein would not be taken off the agenda.

"I am sure we can devise a strategy for Saddam deliverable at a later date," he wrote. "We just don't need it debated too freely in public until we know what exactly we want to do; and how we can do it."

Nine months before he now infamously told Bush, "I am with you, whatever," this appears to be the earliest signal sent by Blair that the two men were irreversibly bound together on the same, ultimately doomed course: removing Saddam Hussein from power. But Blair, mindful of public opinion at home and (more so than Bush) sensitive to the reaction of the international community, needed to find the right strategy to finesse the U.K.'s entry to war.

How do you solve a problem like Saddam?

Blair's eventual strategy appeared to have been influenced by communications from his advisers,

who were uneasily eyeing the movements of a Bush administration set on war.

As early as November 15, 2001, Blair's Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell sent him a memo warning that following success (as it was then viewed) in Afghanistan, the U.S. Right would push to bomb Iraq and Somalia. Blair could suggest, he advised, that the Bush administration's success be leveraged to achieve its aims more subtly, such as by backing Iraq's internal opposition and pressuring Syria and Iran to crack down on terrorists "with the unstated threat that [they] risk becoming the next target for military action if they do not co-operate."

Should the U.S. pursue military action, wrote one U.K. official on December 3, "That would confront us with an unwelcome dilemma: support unlawful and widely unpopular action or distance ourselves from a key US policy."

On November 30, Blair told the *Guardian* that he would need "incontrovertible evidence" of Iraqi complicity in the World Trade Center attacks before he could endorse a campaign on Baghdad.

A note from Powell to Blair, filed between November 30 and December 3, further developed the government's strategy, laying out a plan to, among other objectives, end support for terrorism and effect the "removal of Saddam by a new, more moderate regime." This goal was private: "If asked," Powell wrote, "say regime change would be desirable, but not our formal objective for the moment."

As a tool to get international support, Powell suggested making a demand of Hussein he was unlikely to meet: the return of UN weapons inspectors.

At this point, UN weapons inspectors had not been in Iraq for three years. The inspections regime had originally been set up following the first Gulf War by the UN, which had called for the elimination of Iraq's WMDs. Between 1991 and 1998, UN inspectors found and destroyed hundreds of tons of biological and chemical weapons, before being banished by Hussein, who had always chafed under the inspection regime.

Now, both the United States and the U.K. suspected Hussein of secretly holding WMDs, which he denied. Both nations, the documents make clear, saw weapons inspection as a means to an end—as Powell's November 15 memo put it, "our over-riding objective is the removal of Saddam, not the insertion of arms inspectors."

As outlined by Powell in his November 30-December 3 note, the plan would be to threaten unspecified "action" if Hussein did not cooperate with the inspections. A military plan consisting of a Western-backed coup would then be put into place.

But if Hussein "does allow in the inspectors," Powell wrote, the U.K. would "need to find a new demand to justify military action."

Don't 'frighten the horses'

The strategies put forward in these internal Blair administration communications—avoiding all-out military involvement, encouraging and supporting a coup or uprising by opposition groups and using weapons inspectors to justify moving against Saddam—would soon pop up in Blair's communications with Bush.

As the Chilcot Report revealed, Blair had spoken to Bush over the phone on December 3, telling him "it would be excellent to get rid of Saddam. But there needed to be a clever strategy for doing this."

A day later, Blair appeared to outline just such a "clever strategy."

In a note for Bush dated December 4, 2001, Blair acknowledged that Iraq's "WMD capability" made it a threat, as the Bush administration was at this point publicly arguing.

"But any link to 11 September and AQ is at best very tenuous," he warned; "and at present international opinion would be reluctant, outside the US/UK, to support immediate military action though, for sure, people want to be rid of Saddam.

"So we need a strategy for regime change that builds over time," Blair explained.

What Blair proposed was to subtly poke at Saddam with covert action and artful threats in the hope of destabilizing his regime. The two countries would draw attention to his breach of UN resolutions, he explained, while saying "regime change is 'desirable' (though not yet setting it as a military objective)"—almost verbatim what Powell advised Blair in his November 30-December 3 memo.

Blair, like Powell, then proposed demanding that weapons inspectors be allowed back in Iraq, "and without specifying that we will take military action if the demand is not met, we let it be clearly seen that nothing is ruled out."

Blair also proposed leaning on Syria to cut off the flow of oil to Iraq, supporting opposition groups with intelligence and covert operations, and, "when the rebellion finally occurs," providing military air support.

Blair's strategy, he explained, would "build this over time until we get to the point where military action could be taken if necessary," but wouldn't "frighten the horses" in the form of Russia, the EU and Arab states, whom they needed for support.

The note is in many ways a microcosm of the two governments' approaches to Iraq. The Bush administration was becoming increasingly eager to invade Iraq without first securing either proof that Hussein had WMDs or authorization from the UN—which would make the war illegal under international law. Blair was not opposed to toppling Saddam; in fact he was all for it. But he was

concerned (correctly, it turned out) that doing so unilaterally, hastily and, most importantly, illegally would backfire on the two nations, or even make it impossible for Blair to secure popular and parliamentary support for any action. As he told Bush in a later note: "[Public] opinion in the US is quite simply on a different planet from opinion here, in Europe or in the Arab world."

Setting the stage

The strategy outlined by Blair to Bush remained more or less constant over the next year and a half, and his government turned to the problem of obtaining international support while hiding its true objective: overthrowing Hussein.

At the same time, the U.K. government's hopes for a less heavy-handed approach to regime change suffered serious blows. The UK Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) and the Cabinet Office 'Options Paper' each concluded by March 2002 that a large-scale ground invasion was the only way to topple Hussein, according to the Chilcot Report. On July 4, the JIC decided that "only massive military force" would get the job done.

Blair's foreign policy advisor David Manning sent him a memo in February 2002 suggesting that weapons inspections might goad Saddam into making an error that could be used as an opening to launch military action. Manning noted that granting UN inspectors extra time to do their job would "give Saddam 4 more weeks to make a mistake," if he reacted badly to UN demands and gave the image of non-compliance.

Jack Straw, then Home Secretary (a cabinet position responsible for everything from immigration to national security), also saw the inspectors as a means, not an end. In one memo dated March 25, 2002, Straw wrote that "unfettered readmission of weapons inspectors is essential, in terms of public explanation, and in terms of legal sanction for any subsequent military action."

He went on to write that while regime change could not legally be used as the goal of military action, that didn't mean it was off the table. Instead, the United States and UK could simply make it "part of the strategy by which we have to achieve our ends—that of the elimination of Iraq's WMD capacity."

In public, and in the face of criticism from antiwar advocates, Blair struck a more cautionary note. "We will proceed as we did after September 11, in a calm, measured, sensible, firm way," he said on April 7. "If necessary," he continued, "the action should be military, and again, if necessary and justified, it should involve regime change."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here," he assured reporters a day later. "We are still in the position of identifying the problem and laying down conditions for Saddam." "No decisions have been taken," he insisted two days after that, as he would well into July.

On September 6, 2002, Manning related to Blair how he had told Condolezza Rice that the draft United Nations Security Council Resolution the United States would put forward on WMDs and weapons inspections "must not be a transparent device to justify military action," and must not "be easily dismissed as a transparent pretext for immediate military action." Days later, in a memo sent exactly one year after September 11, he outlined how an "intrusive inspection regime" would be "an indispensible part of the strategy" to move to regime change.

"Saddam would either refuse to let the inspectors back, or he wouldn't let them in but almost certainly obstruct their operations," he wrote. "We should then be in a very strong position to insist on action."

As Manning made clear, gaining support from the UN was entirely a matter of optics. "If and when it became clear that Saddam had yet again violated the will of the UN and the international community, there was a real chance that we could build wide support for further action," while Washington moving unilaterally would turn the international community against them. "Securing wide support would be a great prize, one that you believed was in reach," he wrote. "We must not throw away the opportunity."

Yet subsequent events began to hinder this plan. Contrary to predictions, Hussein neither refused to allow inspectors to come in nor obstructed their work. On September 16, Iraq allowed them to return unconditionally to the country. On November 8, the UN passed a resolution put forward by the U.K. and the United States requiring Hussein to reinstate weapons inspectors. Hussein accepted. Over the next few months, the inspectors would fail to find what they termed a "smoking gun" that would justify war.

From here on, the debate between the U.K. and the Bush administration was around getting a second UN resolution, one that explicitly authorized the use of force. With Saddam complying with inspections, and inspectors not finding anything, the U.K. would need such a resolution to make any military action legal. It would also be important for winning public opinion.

In January 3, 2003, Straw cautioned Blair that "going to war without a publicly convincing trigger"—meaning evidence of WMDs—"and without a second [UN Security Council Resolution]" would hurt Bush politically and "be acutely difficult for us." In another, later memo, Straw noted that "getting Parliamentary approval for UK military action will be difficult if there is no second [UN] resolution."

Blair himself made a similar point to Bush. In an undated note, he explained that taking the UN out of the equation meant losing the high ground. "We have invested huge capital in [the UN route] and it has given everyone … a big comfort blanket," he explained. "Take it away and this is about US power, naked and in their face."

An impatient ally

Unfortunately for Blair and his staff, the enthusiasm for either a less overt form of regime change or one with international and UN support was not shared by the Bush administration. This was likely the opposite of what Blair expected, having been told by Manning in March 2002 that, based on Manning's conversations with Condolezza Rice, Bush strongly valued Blair's advice. "Bush wants to hear your views on Iraq before taking decisions," Manning wrote. "This gives you real influence."

UK officials complained often about the United States' eagerness for war and disregarding of legal niceties. In a handwritten letter to Blair in October 2002, Jack Straw (now holding the post of Foreign Secretary) talked about the "dangerous arguments" within the Bush administration. "You asked me ... if [Colin] Powell was 'winning'," reads the letter. "He's fighting for [a UN approach] certainly, and I think he should win in the end. But you—TB—are critical in this." He warned that "the non-UN approach being pushed by Cheney et al would be a catastrophe."

In a September 10, 2002 memo, David Manning related to Blair that Condolezza Rice thought giving weapons inspectors more time "risked running well into next year before we could clear the decks for military action." Manning had earlier advocated buying time, suggesting it would increase the chances of Hussein making a mistake. Rice's take suggests the degree to which the Bush administration saw the UN inspections as merely a formality.

Still, U.K. officials were hopeful the Bush administration would see the light. A day later, after a meeting with Rice, Manning was keeping his "fingers crossed" that Bush would look for UN backing. A month after that, Manning was celebrating that Rice seemed to be open to deposing Saddam through a coup, rather than direct military action. "Perhaps, even in the White House, there is now a faint sense of disquiet about what a military campaign against Iraq, and its subsequent occupation, would involve," he wrote.

But it wasn't to be. Two months later, in December, Manning told Blair that "Condi made no effort to hide the fact that the Administration would now be looking to build the case for early military action against Saddam (probably mid/late February as we suspected). ... Condi's impatience for action was much more obvious than her commitment to sustain international backing."

Rushing to an ill-planned war

To British eyes, the Bush administration's rush to war had deeper consequences. In July 2002, Straw complained there was "no strategic concept for the military plan and, in particular, no thought apparently given to 'day after' scenarios." (Even so, Straw noted that the U.K. will "want to support them" if the United States went to war in Iraq).

Five months later, not much had changed "The Americans are in a hurry; perhaps too much of one," Manning wrote to Blair on January 3, 2003. "This colors their approach to [the UN's inspections regime] and makes them impatient. But it may also be affecting their approach to military planning." As an example, he gave Turkey's decision to deny U.S. forces transit through its borders.

While a couple of months before the administration had claimed this was critical to its success, they now said it was merely "optional".

There were also "big political and military assumptions" involved in the U.S. strategy, Manning wrote. "Too much looks like hurried improvisations, half thought out strategy, with fingers crossed that Saddam will collapse in short order when the Marines go in." Bush was "in danger of being driven by his own tempo of military build-up," along with his insistence that military action be ready by February 15, 2003.

Also in January 2003, Blair sent Bush two different notes pointing out that no post-Saddam plan had been worked out—only two months before the war began, and one month before Bush's original goal of a February strike. (And still, as late as February, Blair told the press: "We do not want war. No one wants war.")

In February of that year, Blair's Secretary of State Clare Short warned him that U.S. plans for humanitarian assistance "rely on naïve assumptions that there will be no major problems and that conflict will be swift." A month later, 15 days before the start of the war, she reiterated this, warning that "the US and the international humanitarian community are not properly prepared to deal with the immediate humanitarian issues," and that it was making "over-optimistic assumptions about the level of UN and NGO cooperation" it would receive.

The concern about a lack of planning turned out to be justified. As Paul Bremer, who led the occupation, has acknowledged in the wake of the Chilcot Report, the UK-U.S. coalition had less than half of the necessary number of post-invasion troops on the ground. This helped create the resulting chaos, according to Bremer, which included widespread looting of Iraq's priceless cultural treasures.

Eyes on the prize

Ultimately, despite the U.K.'s insistence on not moving unilaterally—and despite accurately gauging the consequences of doing so—Blair took the U.K. into Iraq without UN approval and with most of the Western world lined up against him. Despite his initial "clever strategy," he found it difficult to "co-opt" sympathetic countries and secure their support for an unpopular war.

Blair's anger at the international community for this perceived betrayal comes out in the documents. Those against the war were "those always opposed and the usual anti-American lobby," he wrote in August 2002.

"I find it repellent that people can take to the streets even now to protest at what is happening in Iraq, whose people we are trying to help escape dictatorship," he wrote to Bush in 2004; "but not a single banner or placard proclaims what is happening in North Korea."

"The problem is that a ludicrous and distorted view of the U.S. is clouding the enormous attraction of the fundamental goal," he griped on March 26, 2003, six days into the war, citing one mystery European leader who compared Donald Rumsfeld to Osama bin Laden and another who said it would be deplorable to see the U.S. system of government in Arab countries. And this wasn't limited to Europe, he wrote. "We have to ask how, when we put real pressure on Mexico and Chile, they didn't come along," as well as Russia and Turkey. Blair chalked it up to anti-Americanism; he didn't consider the fact that if most of global opinion was standing against his war, it may have been a warning sign to turn back.

By this point, however, Blair appeared to have drunk deeply from the neocon Kool-Aid. He compared global opposition to the Iraq War to the paralysis of European countries in the 1930s, hesitant to stand up to Hitler. In the same March 2003 memo, he wrote what were practically excerpts of Bush's own speeches. "More freedom in the world means more security … The terrorists and rogue states … come together in hatred of our values … They don't hate the US by accident. They hate it for what it stands for. …

"Our fundamental goal is to spread our values of freedom, democracy, tolerance and the rule of law," he continued, ironically, given the war's ultimate avoidance of legal sanction; "but we need a broad-based agenda capable of unifying the world, to get it. That's why, though Iraq's WMD is the immediate justification for action, ridding Iraq of Saddam is the real prize."

In less than two years, Blair's perspective had morphed from believing that Hussein had to be taken out in response to the threat of terrorism and WMDs to seeing WMDs as the pretext for the more important goal of taking Hussein out. And as the March 2003 memo made clear, by this point the purpose of removing Hussein was not just to guarantee global security—it was part of a larger vision of remaking the global order.

"Acting stupidly"

The trove of declassified documents released along with the Chilcot Report show that Tony Blair was far from merely George Bush's "poodle," as he has long been viewed. In fact, such a conclusion lets Blair off the hook.

Instead, as his September 12, 2001 memo to Bush shows, he was a leader who instantly embraced and even advanced the core premises of the war on terror, perhaps even earlier than Bush. And as his subsequent scheming to depose Hussein demonstrates, he was intimately involved in laying the plans that would culminate in the disastrous war in Iraq while misleading the public about his true intentions.

Unfortunately for Blair, as he soon found out, enabling the Bush administration's worst tendencies ultimately backfired on him and his government. Bush did not share Blair's hopes for international

consensus, and the declassified documents paint the image of a man watching events over which he believed he had mastery slowly spiral out of his control.

He and Bush, both blinded by their post-9/11 zeal to defeat what they viewed as an epochal evil, headed down a path that has ultimately led to the destabilization of not just one region, but what appears to be much of the world. Perhaps the words Blair himself reserved for reluctant European powers sum it up best: "Rational people are behaving very stupidly."

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