

Tony Blair Transformed

By Norman Gelb

NOT since Winston Churchill during World War II has a British prime minister risen so high in the firmament of world leaders as Tony Blair. And not since William E. Gladstone governed over a century ago has a leader here injected such heartfelt emotion into proclamations on morality and human suffering.

Blair does not simply want the plague of terrorism eradicated from the world. Nor does he merely want “the children of Abraham”—Christians, Muslims and Jews—to reconcile. He has seized the moment to try to expand the campaign against the violence of Islamic extremists into a worldwide struggle against genocide, human rights abuse, disease, hunger, global warming, drug trafficking, and money laundering. He has sought to extract from the horror of September 11 a new sense of unity, purpose and direction in the international community. He envisions addressing such unresolved problems as “the state of Africa,” which he calls “a scar on the conscience of the world,” and has taken the lead in promoting a greater convergence of Western and Russian policies.

In sketching a picture of the many possibilities for lasting good that could emerge from “the shadow of this evil,” Blair has not shied away from the cold military decisions required to root out the terrorist threat. While contributions by France, Germany and other antiterrorist coalition members remained unclear, British submarines joined United States forces in firing the first missiles on suspected terrorist bases in Afghanistan. That was Blair’s personal decision. He was determined to demonstrate that the U.S. does not stand alone in this struggle—and to pressure other Western nations to do the same. Thus British aircraft were involved from the beginning, too, as were British Special Ground Forces units. Government spokesmen have made no attempt to relieve public apprehension by downplaying the military effort and its potential length.

To be sure, Blair is not without critics here. The *London Times* has warned him to “resist the temptation of the running sermon.” One senior political figure is said to have mocked his stirring address on the conflict at the annual conference of the Labor Party as “the inaugural speech of the President of the World.” A public opinion poll found that 37 per cent

of the British think the Prime Minister has “gone over the top with all his talk about saving the world.”

Whatever cheers or sneers Blair inspires, his is a clear case of “Cometh the hour, cometh the man.” Previously, he was an often derided if politically secure figure, having trouble getting the trains to run on time and hospitals to function properly. He has been transformed by his response to 9/11 and other terrorist challenges into an articulate, vigorous, much admired expounder on all things good and proper, as well as a statesman of the first rank.

In the process he has redefined the U.S.-British special relationship. The quotation marks have been dropped from that timeworn phrase (once banned by the Foreign Office as hackneyed and misleading). When George W. Bush was elected President, it was thought that the bond between London and Washington, visibly strengthened by the warm personal friendship between Blair and Bill Clinton, would be weakened. As a former British Ambassador to Washington put it, the rapport between the Amer-

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icans and the British "is like a longstanding extramarital affair. It arises entirely from natural affection." Far from cooling, though, the relationship has been deepened by Blair's remarkably close association with Bush in building and sustaining the international antiterrorist coalition.

WHITEHALL has no problem with the war's basic strategy being determined by the U.S., given its having been the terrorists' prime target and its superior military hardware. Meanwhile, Blair has also supported the U.S. on virtually every other front, going beyond the requirements of friendship or even parallel national interests.

Early on the PM established a high profile in the Muslim world in order to stress repeatedly that the battle is against terrorism, not Islam. He gave an uncompromising interview to the pan-Arab Al Jazeera television station, warning its viewers that Osama bin Laden was as much a threat to them as to the West. He has traveled to Pakistan, the Gulf states and other countries to convince their leaders that the battle against Al Qaeda and the Taliban is just. His ultimate visit to Riyadh, to lock Saudi leaders who at first rebuffed him into the coalition, underscored his willingness to go the extra mile.

In addition, Blair sent Foreign Secretary Jack Straw to Iran, a country that still regards the United States as "the great Satan," to press the virtues of the antiterrorist undertaking. And in what may have been a planned prelude to a subsequently aborted major U.S. initiative in the Middle East, Blair himself received Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasir Arafat in London on October 15 in a bid to formulate the basis of a new Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. Although the wisdom of both those moves has been questioned in the U.S., the *Wall Street Journal* was not far off the mark when it called Blair "America's chief foreign ambassador." Similarly, Bush's praise for Blair as "America's truest friend" may have irked the Canadians, evoked snide comments from the French and in-

censed anti-American British Leftists, but it was accurate in a way no one could have anticipated.

Not that there aren't any policy differences between London and Washington. The British, for example, have so far displayed little interest in extending the war to Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Officials in London reject suggestions of significant disagreements between Blair and Bush, however, despite the President's warning that if Iraq did not allow the return of United Nations inspectors to certify that it is not producing chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, it would be "held accountable."

Where disputes about objectives, strategy and tactics exist, the same officials say, they are with hard-liners in the American Administration. In fact, Blair has been using his enhanced stature in the U.S. to try to move American foreign policy toward the moderate positions of Secretary of State Colin L. Powell.

What we have been witnessing is the emergence of a new Tony Blair from the spotty chrysalis of the old. His speeches since the crisis erupted have been the product of his own mind and hand, not of the spin doctors who had served him so poorly. They reflect his deep moral and religious feelings, a sharp global perspective he never before appeared to possess, and a genuine talent for vivid imagery: "The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us reorder this world around us."

It will be interesting to see how far the global reordering went when the pieces actually settle. But more immediately there is the matter of the profound effect the ongoing threat of terrorism is having in Blair's backyard. Expressions of concern by civil liberties activists notwith-

standing, the government is taking steps to suspend rights laws so that it can intern suspected terrorists and their supporters.

Emergency legislation that would, among many other things, make it an offense for Britons to withhold information about terrorist operations, has passed the House of Commons and is expected to be approved by the House of Lords before Christmas. Security concerns prompted Home Secretary David Blunkett to advocate an unprecedented system of personal identification cards for all, but that didn't fly. What did was Blunkett's suggestion that incitement to religious hatred should be outlawed. Interestingly, it aroused strong opposition from comedians, who fear the ban could be too loosely interpreted. In supporting them, the *London Times* declared, "Freedom to laugh in these bleak days is not negotiable; it's essential."



TONY BLAIR

NEVERTHELESS, Britain has long been a haven for Islamic extremists. Some have been indicted and even convicted *in absentia* for terrorist activities in their home countries. They have included nationals of Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, Turkey, India, Russia, and Sri Lanka. Many have not only received generous government welfare and legal support, but have been protected by British civil rights laws and the sometimes incomprehensible obstacles to their extradition provided by the judicial system. The government had to go to the Court of Appeal to overrule a lower court's judgment that it could not detain asylum seekers while their applications to remain in the country were being considered.

Several foreign governments have complained bitterly in the past about fugitives operating freely on British soil. Some have been linked to the mosque in the Finsbury Park section of London, led by Muslim cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri, an outspoken defender of terror attacks. He is wanted by the Yemeni authorities for involvement in a bombing plot there.

The British-based al-Muhajiroun organization, said to have recruited young local Muslims for the Taliban, is led by the Syrian-born Sheik Omar Bakri Muhammad. He has been denied British citizenship, but has escaped deportation because no country has been willing to accept him. Sheik Abu Mahmoud Qatada, a London resident for the past eight years, was convicted of terrorist offenses *in absentia* by a Jordanian court. Suspected of being part of the bin Laden web, he has now had his financial assets frozen. His is one of 35 British accounts that have been blocked at Washington's request.

Indian officials claim to have evi-

dence that young British Muslims have been recruited to join a terrorist group opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir. Egypt has been vainly demanding the extradition of a London Islamic activist alleged to have taken part in the slaughter of 58 foreign tourists at Luxor in 1997. Indeed, not for nothing has the British capital become known to French antiterrorist officers as Londonistan. Some extremists here have gone so far as to declare on television that British forces are legitimate targets for attack in the light of their participation in the war against the Taliban.

THE ACCELERATING legal moves against terror suspects here, and Blair's prominence in the war against Islamic violence, have heightened tensions among Britain's 2 million Muslims. Most are of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin. Particularly where recent arrivals dominate (Muslim immigration has increased by 30 per cent since 1992), the tendency to rigidly adhere to their old culture has created a variety of social problems. The Muslim ghettos that have sprung up in Bradford, Oldham and other British cities, for instance, are plagued by joblessness, educational shortcomings and poor housing. This has reinforced their alienation from and hostility toward the indigenous population. Just before September 11, a six-hour rampage by Muslim youths in Bradford left storefronts and cars destroyed and several people injured.

For some time community leaders have been concerned about the development of dangerous districts for whites in Muslim sections of British cities. In these areas imams at local mosques, serving mostly poor immigrants, actively promote segregation. Longtime white residents, who constitute an increasingly shrinking minority, feel isolated and menaced.

Turf wars have also broken out between Pakistani and Bangladeshi youth gangs, compounding the anxiety and animosity of others. Hostility between Muslim immigrants and Britons from India, who settled here earlier and are more

thoroughly integrated, has further aggravated the situation.

So has the fact that Muslims who abhor terrorism find themselves lumped together in the public mind with those who defend Al Qaeda. A police presence is now maintained on days of worship at mosques, because several have been vandalized since September 11. Women wearing Muslim head shawls and garments have been verbally abused and even assaulted in the street, as have men assumed to be Muslims.

Blair has condemned such acts and invited British Muslim leaders to 10 Downing Street to assure them that the war against the Taliban is not directed at Islam. These leaders have mildly acknowledged the horror of the attacks in the U.S., but none of them has declared any approval of a worldwide campaign against terrorism. The imam of the central mosque in the city of Birmingham, which has one of this country's largest Muslim communities, says Blair has failed to convince Muslims here that the war is not against them.

In more serious respects, the Prime Minister has not been as impressive at home as abroad either. Re-elected by a landslide last May, he promised to dedicate his second term to restoring confidence in Britain's struggling National Health Service, dismally performing public transportation system and flawed state schools. But the actions of his relevant ministers (and the small armies of civil servants they command), have had little impact.

The novelist John Le Carré protests, "Blair was elected to save the country from decay, not from Osama Bin Laden. The Britain he is leading to war is a monument to 60 years of administrative incompetence."

Of course, the book on the Prime Minister is certainly not closed. Perhaps he will yet feel challenged to personally employ on the home front the courage and determination that has sent his star soaring in the world arena. As British pundit Godfrey Smith writes, "Some men are born great; Blair wasn't. Some achieve greatness, but that's not Blair's way. Some have greatness thrust upon them. We'll see."

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