
Blair Gets No Bone From Bush

"Bush's poodle" needed something to boost his popularity at home, but didn't get it in Washington on the Mideast.

It was not unexpected that Great Britain's Tony Blair would be the first head of government to visit George Bush after his re-election as President. While ol' Tony hung together with George through thick-and-thin during the run-up to, and the immediate follow-up of, Bush's Iraq debacle, he is paying a price for his role as George Bush's "poodle," an epithet given him by the not-so-adoring British media. Although he has been able to hang on to his post by the skin of his teeth, he was in need of whatever help he could get from Bush in order to shore up his tenuous standing with an increasingly enraged British populace.

In the aftermath of the U.S. Presidential election, Blair himself has been making some noises about holding an international conference on Mideast Peace as a means of reviving the momentum toward peace negotiations. There have also been rumors since the election, and what then seemed to be the pending death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (a man whom Bush wished to eliminate from any peace talks), that Bush might be considering appointing a Mideast envoy. If Blair thought that he would come out of the meeting with the President with any concrete commitments in that area, he was sorely disappointed.

Certainly, President Bush extended all manner of praise to his primary "weapons-bearer" in the Iraq War debacle. He fended off one brazen British correspondent's comments about Blair's being characterized as Bush's "poodle," a comment which seemed to make Bush bristle more

than Blair. Bush called the Prime Minister "a strong, capable man" and "a big thinker."

The President was not, however, prepared to appoint a Mideast envoy, nor was he eager to engage in an international conference on the issue. "I'm for conferences as long as conferences produce something," Bush said.

While Bush indicated that there might be some progress if Palestinian elections were held, he demanded that the Palestinians also take steps to institute the type of "democracy" consistent with his "Greater Middle East" boondoggle. What that actually would require from the Palestinians is far from clear. After all, Yasser Arafat was the democratically elected President of the Palestinian Authority, and the Bush Administration absolutely refused to deal with him.

What if the Palestinians, in a democratic process, chose a leader who was not entirely to the liking of the U.S. President? asked one reporter. Just wouldn't happen, the President claimed, but if it did, there would be consequences. "The Palestinians may decide to elect a real strong personality, but we'll hold their feet to the fire to make sure that democracy prevails," Bush said. As the dust settles over the bombed-out ruins of what is left of Fallujah, such words are ominous.

Bush has promised to travel to Europe to help repair the tattered relations with the European nations, and also to discuss the Middle East. But Bush's words provided little solace to the embattled Prime Minister. "If you want to be helped, here's what we're

willing to do," Bush directed his comments to the Palestinian leaders. "If you choose not to be helped, if you decide you don't want a free, democratic society, there's nothing we can do. If you think you can have peace without democracy again, I think you'll find that I will be extremely doubtful that it will ever happen."

Given that peace negotiations generally involve two parties, what is the U.S. President prepared to do to bring Israel's Prime Minister to the table? When asked at the joint press conference with Blair if he wanted a freeze on Israeli settlements in the West Bank, President Bush simply chose to ignore the question.

What was otherwise being demanded of the Palestinians was indicated by a senior Administration official, briefing reporters Nov. 12, on the President's meeting with Blair. "Well, the road map, which we have endorsed again today and which has been endorsed by the international community time after time, requires the dismantling of terrorist groups," the official said, "and certainly the ones you mention [Islamic Jihad and Hamas] are terrorist groups. Palestinians will have to make a choice about whether they are going to fight these terrorist groups and put them out of business and turn the struggle, as Mahmoud Abbas said in Aqaba during the summit there, turn this into a political struggle."

Given the recent attempt on the life of Palestinian President-designate Mahmoud Abbas, this somewhat ham-handed U.S. position will exacerbate rivalries among Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza, a situation that Prime Minister Sharon may not find terribly unsettling. But the neo-conservatives in the Bush camp have never really understood the complexities of dictates imposed from the outside on a popular insurgency.