

[Back](#)

### British involvement: An anomaly?

Perhaps the biggest myth of 'Iraq War II: Operation Freedom' relates to Tony Blair and the role being played by the United Kingdom. It is the myth of the well-meaning English gentleman at work, says TABISH KHAIR.

AFP



**Iraq ... what was Blair up to?**

THIS myth goes back to at least the Afghanistan war when a senior British gentleman interviewed on TV had given the following reply to the question whether Britain should be marching into Afghanistan with the Americans: Yes, he had said, because the Americans don't know what they are doing. The humorous implication was that Britain was there as the more experienced and humane partner.

This implication has acquired other shades in recent weeks. I have often come across well-informed Europeans expressing either surprise at the British involvement or segregating Blair from Bush. An astute and highly experienced Danish editor recently wrote an essay basically claiming that while Bush was not to be trusted, Blair is on to another (more civilised and humanitarian) ball game altogether. Even those who are against Blair seem to be surprised at the British involvement and see it as an anomaly. This is what Julian Barnes has to say in an otherwise-brilliant article in *The Guardian* ("This war was not worth a child's finger", April 11, 2003): "In the past three weeks, I've had emails from friends in different parts of the world. Almost without fail, they have expressed incredulity at our prime minister's position. 'We can understand Bush, we see exactly where he's coming from, we aren't surprised by his gross limitations and gross ambitions. But what is your Blair up to? He seems a civilised, intelligent man. What does he think he's doing? And what on earth does he think he's getting

out of it?' Oil? Reconstruction contracts? Hardly. As for what he thinks he's doing: it seems, I explain, to be a mixture of deluded idealism (finding a moral case for war where neither the Anglican bishops nor the Pope — moral experts he might acknowledge — can see one) and deluded pragmatism: he really does believe the military conquest of Iraq will reduce the likelihood of terrorism."

Barnes is not making excuses for Blair. He is, like many others, genuinely bewildered. And this bewilderment owes to the fact that Barnes and others have been misguided by the popular media regarding British foreign policy. Blair's and the U.K.'s involvement in this war is not an anomaly or due to misguided idealism or deluded pragmatism: it is the logical result of British foreign policy in general and British foreign policy on Iraq and West Asia in particular.

The truth is very different from what is being suggested in the popular media in the West.

As Mark Curtis documented in **The Great Deception: Anglo-American Power and the World Order** (1998), Anglo-American power perceptions in the global arena have been remarkably similar and consistent at least from the 1920s onwards. These perceptions have been oriented towards the protection and expansion of a global order conducive to British and American (Northern in general) economic interests. The only main change here has been that while in the 1920s, Britain was arguably the dominant partner globally, from the 1940s onwards various British governments have agreed to accept junior partnership status under United States aegis. In the colonial half of the 20th Century, the U.S. generally supported the continuing control of colonial territories by European powers (of which the greatest was Britain); today, the U.K. generally supports the control of post-colonial economies by superior American military power.

Anglo-American collaboration goes back many decades: it includes the coup in Iran in 1953, organised jointly by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British MI6. This coup, which brought the tyrannical regime of the Shah to power and finally led to an Islamic reaction against the Shah, was organised explicitly in response to the nationalisation of British-controlled oil industry by the soon-to-be-toppled Iranian government. All through the Cold War, British governments explicitly or implicitly backed U.S. interventions or operations all over the world: in Guatemala in 1954, Cuba in 1959, the Dominican Republic in 1965, Vietnam, Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua and Cambodia. Britain was the only major country to support the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama. There seem to have been only two occasions when the invasion or manipulation of a state by the U.S. was not strongly supported by the U.K., or vice-versa.

Actually, Curtis points out that "the pattern of post-war U.S. military intervention in Latin America... was begun by Britain. A long-forgotten British intervention occurred in British Guiana (now Guyana) in 1953, when Britain overthrew the democratically elected government of Cheddi Jagan", who threatened nationalisation of the country's foreign-controlled economic resources. Curtis goes on to note that "Britain was, and remains, especially active in the Middle East", where once again the policy has been to cement Anglo-American dominance and prevent national control of the oil industry.

Force or the threat of force is seen in many British and American governmental documents as a legitimate option in this regard. History, too, backs this interpretation: the invasion of Egypt in 1956, British involvement in Oman from the 1950s to the 1980s (sustaining a regime so stupidly repressive that it banned football and the wearing of glasses in 1970), etc. Keeping this background in mind, it is only "natural" for Britain to be America's closest sidekick in the current Iraq War.

Again, it has to be recalled that Britain was the country that first envisaged an invasion of Iraq when the Baathist regime came to power in 1958 and threatened the nationalisation of various

economic resources. Britain, writes Curtis with reference to recently declassified governmental files, was worried about the spread of anti-colonial nationalism following the 1958 revolution in Iraq, which overthrew a very pro-British monarch, and seriously considered invading Iraq from Jordan around the time. There is also evidence that the alleged threats to the Jordanian regime in 1958 and the Kuwaiti regime in 1961 were deliberately fabricated by British planners to serve as excuses for intervention.

Of course, we know by now that crying wolf does finally lead to the appearance of a wolf — even if, in this case, it was as toothless in international terms as the Saddam Hussein regime. And what happened with the invasion of Kuwait by a brutal dictator who had been, until then, pampered and allowed to bomb Iranians and Kurds, is (I hope) too recent to have to be recalled. Britain was the U.S.'s staunchest ally in "Iraq War I: Desert Storm" too. So, please, do not tell me that Blair and the U.K. are there in this war by a mistake. It might feel nice to believe so if you are a decent British or European citizen, but all of 20th Century history indicates otherwise, as does the economics of globalisation and global war-making in recent years. As a matter of fact, in some ways this war was first dreamt up by British *planners* way back in 1958.

*Tabish Khair is an Indian scholar based in Denmark. His second novel will be published by Picador (London) in 2004.*

© Copyright 2000 - 2009 The Hindu