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# Policy Brief

## S U M M A R Y

The vital U.S. relationship with Britain is much more fragile than many Americans think. Thanks to the Bush administration policy on a range of issues, hostility to the United States among the British public is higher than it has been since the Vietnam War. Only the personal commitment and moral courage of Tony Blair made British participation in the Iraq War possible—and the result has been seriously to endanger his leadership at home. Above all, Americans must understand that the strategy of this British government, and of the British foreign policy establishment in general, is to avoid having to make a definitive choice between Britain's alliance with the United States and its place in the European Union. If Washington forces Britain to choose between the two, it may not choose the United States, and a collapse of the relationship with Britain would leave the United States without a single major Western ally. The consequences for U.S. power and influence in the world would be nothing short of disastrous. ■

## The Hinge to Europe: Don't Make Britain Choose Between the U.S. and the E.U.

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The U.S. alliance with Britain is important in itself, and it is also the hinge on which a great deal else hangs. This includes the ability of the United States to present itself as a leader of other countries that willingly follow its lead, rather than a hegemon or a unilateral actor. If not even one other major country supports a given U.S. policy, then the ability of America's enemies to portray the United States as bullying and tyrannizing the world will be greatly enhanced.

Whether the United States tries to act through stable alliances, or tries to put together ad hoc "coalitions of the willing," Britain will play a key part in U.S. plans. Above all, Britain is essential to any U.S. hope of working together with European countries, whether en bloc or separately.

From the point of view of U.S. interests, therefore, it is vital that the close alliance with Britain be preserved. And thanks to the stand taken by Tony Blair on Iraq, a majority of Americans probably think that it is indeed in very good shape. It is not. As a result of his stand, Blair's premiership, and control over his own party, are under mounting attack at home.

To understand both Britain's stand over Iraq and the dangers to the British-American relationship, Americans need to recognize two things about Blair's policies. Firstly, while Tony Blair attaches immense importance to the British-American alliance, he did not take Britain into Iraq simply out of blind loyalty to that alliance, let alone to some vision of an "Anglosphere" dominating the world. Blair saw both British principles and British interests as deeply engaged in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. He or his successor may not feel that this is the case in some future conflict.

Moreover, Blair also has a strong commitment to seeking multilateral solutions to the world's problems when possible—something that distinguishes him radically from powerful sections of the Bush administration. Blair is at one with the U.S. administration on the struggle against al Qaeda and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, on a range of other specific issues, from the Kyoto Treaty to the contours of a final settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, Blair holds views that differ largely or even completely from those



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of the Bush administration and are much closer to those of France and Germany. These positions are shared by a large majority of the British establishment, political classes, journalists, and intelligentsia. They and the British electorate will therefore require a coherent and acceptable moral and policy argument in support of future military actions. Unless the Bush administration modifies some of its existing policies, it will not be able to provide this.

Secondly, the British decision to fight alongside the U.S. in Iraq was to a considerable extent due to Blair's own character and views, and was deeply unpopular among large sections of the British population and in Blair's own party. For this reason too, Washington should not assume that Britain can be automatically relied on to follow the U.S. into another such war—unless in the meantime the U.S. has done a lot more to advance British interests and soothe British pride. Without such preparation, a major new American military operation could in fact spell the end of the “special relationship,” with serious consequences for U.S. interests. This will be especially true if attacks in Iraq continue, and the perception grows in Britain that Blair has embroiled the U.K. in a kind of low-level Middle Eastern Vietnam, damaging British interests in the Middle East and increasing Britain's exposure to terrorism. Blair's popularity in Britain has already suffered very badly from accusations that he deliberately exaggerated the threat from Iraq as part of his campaign to persuade parliament to support the war.

### **Don't Make Britain Choose**

The old American Cold War relationship with Europe is dead; but the U.S. still requires good relations with Europe or at least significant parts of it—if only to avoid horribly damaging trade wars, maintain important bases in Europe, and help ward off any threat of European economic sanctions against Israel. It is therefore important to the U.S. not only that Britain continue its alliance with America, but also that Britain continue to be strongly engaged in Europe. So Britain

must not be driven to choose between the U.S. and Europe: for even if it chose the United States, by losing its influence in Europe Britain would also lose much of its usefulness to Washington. In other words, however annoying British attempts to constrain U.S. policies may be to some officials of the Bush administration, these efforts are the inevitable product of a British geopolitical position which in general serves the interests of the United States.

In terms of military force, Britain is not of course essential to U.S. efforts, but it is more useful than any other state. In the war with Iraq, only Britain contributed really significant numbers of troops to the American war effort, and it was above all the presence of Britain that gave the U.S. side at least some appearance of a genuine coalition or alliance, rather than a U.S. war supported by a few insignificant auxiliaries. Britain contributed some 42,000 troops to the war. The next largest contributor, Australia, sent a bare 2,000. The rest were of purely symbolic importance.

British troops are playing a highly important role in the postwar stabilization of Iraq, as they did previously in Afghanistan when they led the international peacekeeping force in Kabul in the first half of 2002. In the area of intelligence—critical to the “war against terrorism”—Britain derives great benefits from its “special relationship” with the U.S., but also makes a fairly useful contribution of its own, both in terms of human and signals intelligence.

Above all, the U.S. ability to lease British bases is important to American military strategy, especially since September 11, 2001. Thus the radar station at Fylingdales in Yorkshire is a significant part of this administration's plans for a system of national missile defense; during both the Afghan and Iraq Wars, air-bases in Britain were used by U.S. bombers and refueling aircraft; and the U.S.-leased base on the British-owned island of Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean, was critical to waging both these wars.

Diplomatically and politically, Britain's importance obviously varies very greatly in

different parts of the world. In the Middle East and especially the small Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Britain retains considerable influence as a trading partner, source of military and other expertise, and favored second home of the local elites. On the international stage as a whole, Britain still has an importance that exceeds its size. In the United Nations Security Council, it was British support for the U.S. that produced a 3:2 split among the permanent members of the Council, rather than the much more embarrassing picture of a Council united in opposition to U.S. plans.

### **Britain in Europe**

But it is above all in Europe that Britain is of critical importance to the United States. Whether the U.S. tries to rebuild its relationship with the European Union as a whole, or by contrast to establish close relationships with certain European countries while ignoring others, Britain will be crucial to this effort.

In the run-up to the Iraq War, a number of member states of the European Union supported the U.S. position, including Spain, Italy and the Netherlands, as well as Britain. In all these countries, however, opinion polls showed large majorities of the population as opposed to war: no less than 85 percent of Italians and 93 percent of Spaniards who were surveyed. In Britain too, a majority of some 67 percent opposed war without UN approval and without UN-backed evidence of WMD. Faced with these figures, of the other E.U. members, only the Spanish government continued to give active and vocal support throughout the war. The others, like Silvio Berlusconi's government in Italy, did not join the public critics of the U.S. operation, but became notably reticent about giving it strong public support.

In fact to judge by opinion polls across the great majority of European countries, there can be little doubt that the position taken by the French and German governments concerning the Iraq War reflected the majority opinion of Europeans. This was even true in most of Central and Eastern Europe, in coun-

tries whose governments expressed strong support for the American position. According to Gallup, 82 percent of Hungarians and 67 percent of Czechs opposed war. In consequence, it seems probable that without the strong support provided by the British government, the U.S. administration might have found itself with no West European support at all for war with Iraq, and greatly reduced support in Eastern Europe.

This is not only because East European governments would have found it more difficult to ignore their public opinions, but because without Britain as an ally, the East Europeans would have faced a much starker choice between siding with the U.S. and siding with the E.U. They will face this dilemma again if the U.S. falls out again with France and Germany, and Britain sides with the latter.

European and British criticisms of the war became muted in the immediate aftermath of Baghdad's fall. But in the weeks since, hostility has been growing again due to the U.S. and British failure thus far to find the promised weapons of mass destruction, and growing evidence of the unpopularity of the allied occupation. The failure to find WMD has been particularly damaging to Blair, who has faced strongly hostile media criticism and a parliamentary investigation into charges that he deceived Parliament and the electorate.

In consequence, while European governments that opposed the war have sought pragmatically to restore good working relations with the U.S., there has been no general swing of public opinion in Western Europe in favor of the U.S. or of U.S. strategy in the Middle East and the "war against terrorism." The failure to find WMD will make Europeans even more skeptical (incorrectly) of claims made against Iran. Another open breach over some issue in future remains entirely possible.

The choice between Europe and America is one that the East Europeans are desperately anxious to avoid. For while they may have strong emotional ties to the United States and considerable historical aversion to West

European (and especially German) hegemony, the fact of the matter is that economically and geographically, they are much more closely tied to the E.U. than they are to the U.S. Without Britain to help the East Europeans, Germany and France would find it much easier to put pressure on them in a variety of ways.

Moves in this direction will be much more difficult as long as Britain remains both a close American ally and a key member of the E.U. It is therefore very much in the interest of the U.S. that Britain should be able to go on balancing its key relationships in this way, as most British subjects strongly desire to do. Unfortunately, however, as the Iraq War demonstrated, there is a risk that American policies will create such a gulf between the U.S. and the leading states of Western Europe that Britain would no longer be able to balance between them. At the same time, U.S. policies could so alienate British

public opinion that Britain would in fact tip into the anti-American camp.

### **Threats to the U.S.-British Alliance**

The United States and Britain are linked by deep bonds of language and culture. In the course of the twentieth century, the U.S. twice belatedly helped save Britain in wars, and also helped guarantee British security during the Cold War. On the other hand, as long as the British Empire survived, strong elements of geopolitical competition between the U.S. and Britain also existed, and Presidents Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower all contributed to the liquidation of that empire. As a result, even in the traditional British establishment there are figures who harbor a certain residual bitterness toward America. This emerges whenever Britain is asked to make serious sacrifices for the sake of the United States, and above all, whenever British independence is seen to be compromised

**Excerpt from an essay by Sir Rodric Braithwaite, former British ambassador to Moscow and chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, published in *Prospect* magazine, May 2003, [www.prospect-magazine.co.uk](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk).**

The concentration on the special relationship in matters of foreign affairs and defence has distorted British policy for many years. And in the run-up to the Iraq war, our determined and blind adherence to the US line has undermined our other interests—in the proper functioning of the UN, in the Nato alliance, and in our relationships with our partners in Europe. It also damages our standing in the Muslim world, and makes us more, not less, vulnerable to terrorism. Most galling of all, it has reduced our freedom of manoeuvre to the point that we are now widely seen as incapable of having a mind of our own...

We need not and should not provoke a confrontation. But a junior partner who is taken for granted is a junior partner with no influence. In dealing with the Americans we need to follow the basic principle of negotiation: you must always make it clear that you will, if necessary, walk away from the table. That is something that British prime ministers, submariners, and codebreakers have been loath to contemplate. But Turkey has shown the way. Barely a month after Turkey had refused America permission to cross its territory, Colin Powell was back in Ankara mending fences. If the Turks can do it, so can we.

by adherence to America. This concern was displayed for example in an essay for the *Financial Times* by the popular conservative historian Niall Ferguson, entitled “The Special Relationship: What’s Really in it for Britain?”; and in a much sharper form by a senior retired British diplomat and intelligence chief, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, in the magazine *Prospect* (see box).

By far the greatest hostility to the American alliance has always come from the Left wing of British politics—now reflected

the administration’s foreign and security policy, which deeply offends the traditional attachment of the liberal Left to international institutions and international cooperation, and its overt hostility to environmental protection, which offends an important new political trend.

Perhaps even more damaging to the British-American relationship however is the domestic personality of the Bush administration. For this has given a new prominence to forces that are alien not just to the British

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in part by the Liberal Democrats, who as a result of Tony Blair’s policies have to some extent changed places with New Labour to become the party of the moderate Left. On the Left, hostility to American “imperialist” strategies has always been fed by hostility to the U.S. economic model.

During the 1990s, anti-Americanism on the British Left declined considerably, in part because the Left itself went into steep decline thanks to the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and of socialist ideology. This also reflected the success of Tony Blair and his colleagues in transforming the Labour Party into New Labour: jettisoning its radical agenda, and adopting a centrist platform. This brought the leadership of the British Labour Party rather close to the governing ideas of the Clinton administration.

The Bush administration is a very different matter, and aspects of this administration’s policies are more dangerous to the British-American relationship than anything since the Second World War. This is obviously true of the nationalist character of much of

Left, but to dominant British social and cultural values. This is true across a range of social, economic, and legal policies, but it is most striking in the area of political religion. Of course, religious belief influences the actions of individual British politicians including Tony Blair; but fundamentalist religion as an organized political force simply does not exist in Britain—except for radical Islam. Indeed members of the old British religious establishment, led by the Archbishop of Canterbury, were among the most passionate critics of the Iraq War. In this, as in attitudes to gun ownership, the death penalty, the decriminalization of “soft drugs,” and issues of public health and welfare, Britain is much closer to its West European neighbors than it is to the United States. These factors counterbalance to some extent the strong hostility felt by many British (and especially English) citizens to the idea of Britain becoming submerged in some form of European federation.

In consequence, not only the liberal Left but a large majority of British educated society looks on the Christian Right in America

with incomprehension often tinged with horror. This is especially so when it comes to the beliefs of the Christian Right concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and their commitment to Israel's right to occupy the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

### **Differences Over the Middle East**

A gulf between British and U.S. positions on this conflict, and official British criticism of U.S. support for Israel, existed even under the most pro-American of all British premiers, Margaret Thatcher. For a great many years, however, British-American differences on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could exist without serious damage to the relationship as a whole, because this issue was peripheral to the core

British officials—has little faith that this will in fact lead to a just and stable peace.

Should the U.S. once again need British help in the Middle East, failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is likely to have a very bad effect. This being so, if the U.S. administration values the continuation of the British-American “special relationship,” and yet feels unable to put pressure on Israel, it should move with caution elsewhere in the region. This is particularly the case because as noted, even Tony Blair is unlikely to view U.S. military action against other Muslim states in the same light as he viewed war with Iraq.

Blair and his predecessors throughout the 1990s had always sided with the U.S. in treating Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a pariah and in

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concerns of the alliance—especially of course the threat from Soviet Communism. Unfortunately, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the U.S. response, have brought U.S. strategies toward the Muslim world to the center both of American policy in general and of the alliance with Britain.

U.S. support for Israel, when unmatched by real pressure to withdraw settlements and return to borders based on those of 1967, increases British fears that in helping the U.S. in the Middle East, Britain is committing itself to strategies and goals over which it has no control. As a simple matter of pride, it is also of course deeply galling to the British to see the wishes of the Israeli government continually favored over those of Britain. Despite the Bush administration's increased commitment to the “Road Map for Peace” since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, most of British opinion—including, in private, many

placing Iraq under both economic and military pressure. By contrast, when it comes to another member of President Bush's “axis of evil,” Iran, Blair has also devoted considerable effort to improving relations. This stance does not exclude strong British pressure to end nuclear programs and support for terrorism; but it would make British support for actual military action much more difficult. This is also true because of fears of retaliation against British troops in Iraq by local Shia groups backed by Tehran.

### **U.S. Strategy Toward Europe: Divide and Conquer?**

The other key area where the maintenance of the British-American alliance requires that the U.S. act with caution is in the temptation to retaliate against France and Germany for their opposition to the Iraq War, as also in any U.S. attempts to drive a permanent wedge

between “old” and “new” Europe, to use Donald Rumsfeld’s unfortunate phrase. To be sure, Tony Blair undoubtedly feels deep anger at Jacques Chirac in particular for his stance over the Iraq War. Yet he also still appears committed to anchoring Britain more firmly in Europe.

If the Conservative Party ever comes to power again in Britain, then Washington may find a British government ready to join with it in trying either to block the further integration of the European Union, or if necessary to split Europe. Under this Labour government, the desire is different: it is for Britain to lead a group of generally pro-American countries within the E.U., and it is accompanied by a wish not to obstruct or

American. This would be a very grave setback for American interests not only in Britain, but also in Europe, the Middle East, and the world in general.

At present, such an outcome looks unlikely, because the British public’s hostility to the Bush administration is matched by enduring opposition to deeper British integration into the European Union. This hostility to the E.U. reflects a deep concern to preserve British national independence, and the control of the British sovereign people over their country’s fate. But this patriotic sentiment cuts both ways: an alliance with America that seems to be leading to dependence and a diminution of real British sovereignty is also likely sooner or later to provoke

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wreck E.U. institutions, but to make them work more effectively both for Europe and for Britain.

For an American administration to aim at splitting the E.U. would in any case be profoundly chauvinist and short-sighted, since the E.U. is a guarantor of peace and stability on a continent that is of vital economic and strategic importance to the U.S. It would also place the British government under intense strain, and possibly deal the death blow to Tony Blair’s premiership. This would be a savage reward for a man who has shown immense moral and political courage in supporting the U.S., and would be a lesson to future British premiers not to run such risks for the U.S. It could also lead eventually to a split in the Labour Party and the emergence of a Left-Liberal coalition, which would be pro-E.U. and openly anti-

a nationalist reaction in Britain. Indeed, a kind of veiled anti-American nationalism has always been present on the Left.

Britain’s present ambiguous situation may sometimes be irritating for U.S. policymakers, but it is not in fact disadvantageous for a U.S. administration that wishes to retain a strong pro-American voice within the E.U. However, given the delicate balance of British opinion concerning the American and European options, to keep Britain in this role requires that America play its hand with care. It is essential that Washington avoids both an appearance of systematic hostility to the E.U., and giving the impression that it is using Britain as a tool, without reference to British interests, British opinions, or British pride. Treated as a junior partner, Britain is and will remain extremely useful to the U.S.; as an American vassal, it will sooner or later rebel. ■

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ANDERS ÅSLUND AND ANDREW WARNER, “The Enlargement of the European Union: Consequences for the CIS Countries” working paper no. 36 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), 2003.

ROBERT KAGAN, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

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MINXIN PEI, “The Paradoxes of American Nationalism.” *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2003.

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