

Why Britain is going to war *by John Smith*

Why is the British government so determined to join with the US in war on Iraq? Why is Tony Blair joined at the hip to George Bush? These questions are the source of a great deal of perplexity, including among supporters and activists in the Stop the War Coalition – yet how can we know what course of action to follow unless we can find some answers to these questions?

This article attempts to look for clues in two particular areas. First, we shall survey the past century of Britain's entanglement in Iraq. We'll soon see a pattern emerging, and we'll also see, in this historical panorama, the origins of the "special relationship" between Washington and London now being tested to breaking point. Second, we'll look at the economic imperatives which compel Britain to join in Bush's "coalition of the willing". So sit down; make yourself a cup of tea. What you are about to read will make you angry.

Britain and Iraq: A short history of infamy

Britain just can't stop messing in Mesopotamia

At the time of writing, 42,000 British troops are poised on the Kuwaiti desert, alongside 250,000 US troops, awaiting the order to march on Baghdad.

The first time British troops (assisted by a much larger force of Indian soldiers from the white-officered British India Army) fought their way towards Baghdad was in November 1915, twelve months into a bloody campaign to seize "the land between two rivers" from its Turkish rulers.

Britain's imperialists wanted to construct a railroad from Palestine through Mesopotamia to the Gulf, allowing them to move troops between their colonies in Egypt, Asia and Africa to put down rebellions wherever they broke out. They also caught the whiff of oil.

In March 1917, after the death of 22,000 British and 30,000 Indian soldiers, Sir Stanley Maude captured Baghdad. Crucial to this victory was the sympathy of the local population, who believed in Britain's promise of independence: "*Our armies do not come into your cities as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators,*" he announced. However, Britain had already secretly carved up the region with France and Russia in what became known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which was published by



Sikh troops, used as ground forces during Britain's bombing campaign against Kurdish villages in 1920-21.

the Bolsheviks soon after the October 1917 revolution, to the great embarrassment of London and Paris (for its part, Russia's revolutionary government renounced all colonial possessions and claims).

But they don't come thicker-skinned than Winston Churchill, then the Minister of State for the Crown and Colonies, who whipped out his ruler and red pen and drew a line around three *vilayets* or provinces (Mosul, Baghdad, Basra) of the old Ottoman empire and defined the state of Iraq.

The League of Nations (which, like the United Nations now, was a front for impe-

rialist domination over oppressed nations) added its seal of approval – and the Arabs and Kurds who found themselves subject



An RAF Vickers Vernon flying over the River Tigris

Bombing Iraq in the 1920s

"For 10 years the British waged an almost continuous bombing campaign in the oil-rich and mountainous north-east against the Kurdish rebels, to whom they had earlier promised autonomy.

"Some Iraqi villages were destroyed merely because their inhabitants had not paid their taxes. ... When the air force proposed using bombs with delayed action fuses, one senior officer protested that the result would be *"blowing a lot of children to pieces"*. Nevertheless, the RAF went ahead, because delayed-action bombs prevented tribesmen from tending their crops under cover of darkness.

"Churchill was sometimes troubled by the realities of the methods he had supported. During one raid in Iraq, British pilots machine-gunned women and children as they fled from their homes. *"To fire wilfully on women and children taking refuge in a lake is a disgraceful act,"* Churchill protested to the Chief of the Air Staff. *"I am surprised you do not order the officers responsible for it to be tried by court martial."* No action was taken, and this incident was quietly forgotten. ...

"The Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Hugh Trenchard, had great ambitions for his bombers. In a paper written early in 1920, when some politicians feared a revolution in Britain, he suggested that the RAF could even suppress "industrial disturbances or risings" in England itself. Churchill was horrified, and demanded that Trenchard never refer to the proposal again – at least not in writing."

- From The Guardian, 19 January, 1991, by David Omissi, military historian and author of *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919-1939*, Manchester University Press.

to the concocted state of Iraq rose up in rebellion. T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") wrote in the Sunday Times: *'we have killed ten thousand Arabs in this rising this summer. We cannot hope to maintain such an average: it is a poor country, sparsely populated.'*

Further north, the rising of the Kurds – outraged at the betrayal of promises of Kurdish independence – was suppressed by a squadron of RAF bombers, who perpetrated the first aerial bombing of civilians in history.

Churchill selected Arthur Harris, later known as Bomber Harris, in command of the operation. Harris wrote in his diary: *"The Arab and the Kurd now know what real bombing means in casualties and damage. Within 45 minutes a full-size village can be practically wiped out and a third of the inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines."*

Harris achieved this devastating effect by combining large blast-bombs, which ploughed up whole streets, and then sowing thousands of burning phosphorus bombs into the shattered buildings. This is an extreme form of terrorism, a weapon of mass destruction on any reasonable definition. The RAF also scattered metal crow's feet to maim livestock. Publicly available documents indicate that, if chemical weapons outlawed after WW1 were not dropped from aeroplanes, it was only because the means of delivery had yet to be perfected (gas shells were used by ground-based artillery). Churchill strongly advocated the use of chemical weapons: *"I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas,"* he stated. *"I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes"*.

Over the next few decades, aerial bombing – mounted from the Habaniya airbase outside Baghdad – proved an effective support to the military dictatorship through which Britain ruled Iraq, *"massacring Kurds in the north in the 1920s, slaughtering Assyrian Christians around Mosul in 1933 and bombing Baghdad itself in 1936"*.¹

The same combination of blast bombs and incendiaries, and the same combination of Winston Churchill and his personal fist, Arthur Harris, would be used twenty years later to devastate three quarters of Germany's cities. Bomber Command's

WW2 targets were not industries or enemy soldiers, but the civilian population; workers and their families in particular.

The campaign in northern Iraq in the early 1920s provides the golden key which unlocks this secret of the Second World War: Churchill used terror-bombing in Iraqi Kurdistan to suppress a popular in-



Ernest Bevin, imperialist thug, Labour's Foreign Secretary in the post World War 2 government.

'I am not prepared to sacrifice the British Empire because I know that if the British Empire fell...it would mean the standard of living of our constituents would fall considerably'.
(House of Commons, 23 February 1946)

surrection. This was also his motive in Germany: to so traumatise German workers that they would be unable to rise up against Hitler and the capitalist and landlord families who stood behind him and whom Churchill wanted at all costs to preserve in power. The massacre of German civilians was not part of the war against Hitler; it was counter-insurgency. It was to "secure the peace".

Imperialism & the labour movement

British multinational companies made staggering profits from their control over the oil fields of the Middle East. Some of the proceeds were used to subsidise the standard of living of British people, includ-

ing the working class, significantly softening post-war austerity and helping steer organised labour into an ever-deeper alliance with Britain's imperialist ruling families. Ernest Bevin, Labour's Foreign Secretary after the Second World War, acknowledged this reality in a 1947 speech to the House of Commons:

"His Majesty's government must maintain a continuing interest in that area if only because our economic and financial interests in the Middle East are of vast importance ... If these interests were lost to us, the effect on the life of this country would be a considerable reduction in the standard of living ... British interests in the Middle East contributed substantially not only to the interests of the people there, but to the wage packets of the workpeople of this country."

The lion's share of the superprofits, of course, was pocketed by the UK's ruling rich, while a portion was used to buy the passivity of the working class and to further corrupt its upper layers.

Not much was left for the Iraqi people.

Iraq's democratic revolution and its overthrow

On the eve of Iraq's national-democratic revolution of July 14, 1958, which ended direct colonial rule and brought to power the only popular and progressive government the Iraqi people ever had, the conditions of the Iraqi people were unbelievably dreadful. Two per cent of landowners owned around 70% of cultivable land; the peasantry had been converted into sharecroppers, forced to hand over two-thirds of their produce to the often-absentee landlords. Hundreds of thousands of landless peasants had flocked to the cities, settling in giant slums.

One observer described the conditions: *"There is much trachoma and dysentery, but no bilharzia or malaria, because the water is too polluted for snails or mosquitos. The infant mortality is 250 per thousand. A woman has a 50-50 chance of raising a child to the age of ten. There are no social services of any kind. ... On the adjacent dumps, dogs with rabies dig in the sewage. And the slum dwellers package it for resale as garden manure."*ⁱⁱ

Life expectancy was 26 years; the rate of illiteracy was 90%.ⁱⁱⁱ By comparison, Iraqi

life expectancy on the eve of the so-called Gulf War of 1991 was 68 years; twelve years of sanctions and bombs since has, according to UN figures, reduced this to 46 years, on a par with the poorest sub-Saharan African nations today.

In 1958, the masses expressed their rage by lynching the old regime; Sir Stanley Maude's statue was smashed into a thousand pieces. The new government, led by General Abdel Karim Kassem, confirmed its popularity by nationalising part of Britain's oil industry, legalising trade unions, expanding education, and implementing a land reform. Increasingly corrupt and re-

From Iraq to Indochina

On 2 September 1945, national liberation forces led by Ho Chi Minh crowned the defeat of the Japanese military occupation of Vietnam with the declaration of an independent republic. Half a million people in Hanoi demonstrated their joy. Ten days later, British imperialist troops arrived. Instead of resisting, the Vietnamese leadership followed Stalin's orders and welcomed the supposedly 'democratic, anti-fascist' British forces. Immediately upon his arrival, General Gracey, the British commander, ordered the disarming of Vietnamese nationalists, organised a coup d'état, and freed Japanese prisoners of war, using them as a temporary police force until French troops arrived to repossess their former colony.

This was Britain's part of a secret agreement with the French, signed by Labour's foreign minister Ernest Bevin, in which Britain pledged to return Indochina to French colonial rule in exchange for a French withdrawal from Syria and Lebanon.

What a diabolical crime! To secure Britain's Middle East "interests", the Labour government was prepared to deny Vietnam its chance of freedom and condemn its people to thirty years of continuous war and millions of dead!

pressive, it squandered much of this popularity. The Iraqi Communist Party, the biggest in the Middle East, was given ministerial posts in the new government.

The US and UK were alarmed that the overthrow of one pro-western dictatorship could lead to the downfall of others. The US despatched 14,000 marines armed with atomic howitzers to the Lebanon, to help repress a struggle by the Muslim majority

to redraw a French-imposed constitution which gave all power to the Maronite Christian minority. This imperialist intervention condemned Lebanon to decades of civil war and hundreds of thousands of dead.

The US considered sending its Marines on into Iraq "to aid loyal troops to counter-attack" but it was soon admitted, "no-one could be found in Iraq to collaborate with. Everyone was for the revolution".¹⁴ The US was forced into a containment strategy, threatening Iraq with nuclear weapons to deter its army from entering Lebanon on the side of the people.

When Churchill defined Iraq's boundaries 40 years before, he made sure that the most important southern oilfields, and virtually the entire Gulf coastline, were placed in another invented country called Kuwait, whose ruling monarchy had formed a close relationship with British imperialism. In response to an agreement between Kassem and the Kuwaitis to federate their two countries, in 1960 Britain sent troops to force its Kuwaiti subjects back into line. Iraq objected to the United Nations, who refused to take any action. At that time, Kuwait was the world's third-largest oil producing country, with around a quarter of the world's known reserves.

Saddam Hussein made his first appearance on the world stage as a participant in a failed assassination attempt on Kassem in October 1959. He fled to Egypt, where he worked with the CIA, helping to draw up long lists of leftists and intellectuals to be executed once the Kassem regime was overthrown.

The Kassem regime was toppled in a CIA-orchestrated, British-supported coup d'état on 9 February 1963. "It was the CIA's favourite coup. 'We really had the 'ts' crossed on what was happening,' James Critchfield, then head of the CIA in the Middle East, told us. 'We regarded it as a great victory.'... "We came to power on a CIA train," admitted Ali Saleh Saadi, the Ba'ath Party secretary general who was about to institute an unprecedented reign of terror."¹⁵

In what became known as the "elimination campaign", thousands of those who appeared on the CIA's lists were killed in cold blood. An amazing fact! Not only was the Ba'ath dictatorship helped into power by

the CIA, they also helped design its characteristic extreme ruthlessness!

'On the morning of 9 February 1963, his headquarters under repeated aerial attacks, Kasseem surrendered ... he was subjected to a summary trial ... When the time to execute him came, he shouted, 'Long live the people' with a steady voice which betrayed no fear or remorse. He was shot dead without a blindfold.'^{vi}

The forging of the US-UK alliance

In 1956, Britain, France and Israel tried to reverse Egypt's nationalisation of the British-owned Suez Canal by mounting a military invasion of that country. This adventure was opposed by the US, who ensured that it ended in fiasco. This was a defining moment in the decline of the British Empire. It marked the displacement of Britain by the USA as the dominant power in the Middle East/Persian Gulf region.

Suez should be seen together with the earlier usurpation by the US of Britain's dominant position in Iran. In 1951, in its last months, the post-war government of Clement Atlee – touted as the most socialist of Labour Governments for its nationalisation of coal and its introduction of the NHS – responded to Iran's nationalisation of Britain's 100% stake in Iran's oil industry by trying to organise a military coup against the popular nationalist regime of Dr Mossadeq. The coup was blocked by the USA. In August 1963, Britain's secret services played a junior role in the CIA's successful military coup. Mossadeq was imprisoned, thousands of workers and others resisting the coup were shot and beaten to death, and Iran's oil was redivided – 60% to two Rockefeller-owned oil companies, 40% to Britain's BPOC (later BP).

The loss of Iran and of the Suez Canal signified the end of British domination over the Middle East; henceforth it would act as junior partner of the US. But we should not imagine this meant Britain had become any less imperialist, aggressive or parasitic. Quite the contrary! Since the end of the Second World War Britain has launched at least 98 overseas military interventions. Of these, 28 have been in the Middle East.

The 1979 Iranian revolution – a giant blow to US and British imperialism

The modern history of the Gulf region begins with the 1979 Iranian revolution.

Its important oil industry, and its geographical location stretching from the Middle East to the former Soviet Union, were two reasons why the US had turned Iran under the Shah into the biggest military base outside of the US itself. Through Iran and Israel, the US and its junior partner the UK dominated the whole of the Middle East and Persian Gulf.

The 1979 revolution was a pivotal event. The longest general strike in human history, part of a gigantic mobilisation of Iran's workers and peasants, brought the Shah crashing down and dealt US and British imperialism a giant blow from which it is still to recover.

The US would certainly have sent hundreds of thousands of troops to protect the Shah. What stopped them was defeat in Vietnam just 3½ years earlier. Unable to use their own military forces against the Iranian revolution, they were forced to resort to a proxy force: the Iraqi Army.

The hated Shah was toppled on February 12, 1979. A few months later in next-door Iraq, Saddam (then Vice-President) seized complete power, conducted a ruthless purge of the government, and proceeded to ensconce himself in a series of secret meetings with the CIA. It is reasonable to assume that Iran was one of the subjects discussed.

On 22 September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran. But instead of the easy victory promised by the CIA, expected in part because the revolution had executed or put to flight the Iranian army's entire officer class, the Iranian people fought back fiercely. So much so, within two years Iraq was staring defeat in the face. Only the use of huge quantities of chemical weapons against Iranian front-line troops averted catastrophe. The first Gulf war ended in stalemate in 1988, after the death of 1.5 million people.

How ironic, once it was very important to the US and Britain that Saddam did possess weapons of mass destruction, that he should use them against his neighbour,

and that he should be rewarded for doing so!

Anyhow, instead of winning back Iran, the US lost control over Iraq as well. The US had used up Saddam, he was no longer any more value as an ally... but he still had one more vital task to perform. His invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was exactly the pretext the US needed for a war to re-assert its own military power in the region.

There is a lot of evidence to suggest that the US set a trap for Saddam and that he walked right into it. But even the 43-day blitz in 1991 known as the "Gulf War" (a strange war it is which has no battles, and where only one side gets to do any killing) did not result in a firmer US grip over the Middle East. In 1991, the US was still hamstrung by Vietnam, and did not attempt to capture Baghdad or establish a permanent military base in Iraq. This time, the hawks running the Bush administration are determined things will be different.

Crisis in relations with Iran and Iraq was accompanied by lack of US influence in new areas of critical importance: until September 11 and the ensuing invasion of Afghanistan, the US had no military bases anywhere near the central Asian oilfields. US weakness in this region is still a long way from being overcome.

However, where the imperialists have lost most ground is in the hearts and minds of the people. The great masses of ordinary people across the Middle East have learned

to see through the imperialists' trick. They recognise the ruthless self-interest hiding behind their proclamations on democracy, peace and human rights. They hate and despise them all the more for being thought of as stupid enough to be taken in by it all.

The economic distress of our sisters and brothers in the Middle East is intensifying at the same time as the 50-year struggle between the Zionist state and the Palestinian people is moving towards a climax, and amid universal horror and outrage not just at the threat of US invasion of Iraq, but at the whole century of violence and violation that the peoples of the Middle East have endured at the hands of the US and Britain.

The US has paid a heavy price for its political and military alliance with Israel. Throughout this entire period, the irrepressible struggle of the Palestinian people has provided a focus for radicalisation and a source of inspiration to new generations. Why does the US reward Israel's occupation of Palestine but punish Iraq so much for its invasion of Kuwait? This question is helping to radicalise tens of millions of people across the Middle East and beyond. It has turned the Middle East into a different place.

Now we shall turn from our survey of the last century to investigate more closely the economic forces impelling US and Britain to war, and the nature of the partnership between London and Washington.

Part Two:

Economic forces compelling US and Britain to go to war

London - Washington, the real "axis of evil"

Question: what is the name of biggest oil company within the US itself?

Answer: BP (British Petroleum, until 1953 known as the Iraq Petroleum Company, has 40% of its employees in the USA).

Question: the ruling families of which country own two of the three biggest oil companies in the world?

Answer: Britain (BP and Shell; Exxon is the biggest). BP has major interests in Colombia, where US-backed death squads are attempting to annihilate the trade union movement; along with Shell, it has large operations in central Asia. Across the world, Britain's imperialist oil monopolies and other multinationals, banks and bondholders rely on US military power to protect their property and their super-profits.

Question: which country is second only to the USA in the size of its empire of wealth in other peoples' countries?

Answer: ...you've guessed it; Britain. In 2001, Britain's overseas direct investments amounted to \$902,000,000,000, or 14.4% of the world total. This compared to 21.1% owned by US imperialists, 7.9% owned by the French, 7.8% owned by Germans, and 4.6% owned by Japanese. In both 1999 and 2000, at the height of the stock market bubble, Britain was the largest foreign direct investor in the world, contributing around 21% of world FDI outflows, compared with the US and France (13%), and Germany (7%).

What is more, the rate of profit on these overseas investments is much higher than on investments at home: in 2000 Britain's imperialists "earned" £134,000,000,000, or approximately \$200,000,000,000 from its direct investments, equivalent to 71% of the gross profits of British non-financial corporations.

These figures relate to direct investments in land, factories, mines etc. This picture of Britain as a leading imperialist power would be reinforced if we were to also look at the world of banking and finance. Used also as a base by imperialist finance capital from other countries, the City of London remains the most important financial centre in the world.

No wonder the British establishment is split down the middle by the dilemma of whether it should throw in its lot with Europe and adopt the Euro, or whether it should continue to pursue its "special relationship" with the USA! In fact, Blair's decision to join with Bush in the aggression against Iraq means that the debate on the Euro has been settled: Britain will not be joining in the foreseeable future.

The relationship between the US and Britain is indeed special. Each is by far the biggest investor in each other's factories and real estate. In the ten years to 2000, British capitalists invested \$188,300 million in US industries, while their US counterparts invested around \$120,000 million in British firms.^{vii} Britain is the biggest weapons exporter to the USA, accounting for 40% of that country's arms imports. 'BAE sells more these days to the Pentagon than it does to Britain's Ministry of defence,' noted the Economist.^{viii}

Despite their alliance with the US, British capitalists still have to fight their corner: Lord Browne, chief executive of BP, recently intervened in secret discussions about how Iraq is to be carved up by publicly calling on the US to grant a "level playing field" to British oil companies.

US economy stalked by deflation

In the past twenty-four months, the US Federal Reserve has slashed interest rates from 6½% to 1¼%, in a drastic and desperate attempt to avert an economic recession. Yet the interest rates paid by US companies with medium credit rating have hardly declined. And these companies are more numerous – in the past two years many have lost their blue-chip status and with it their access to cheap credit.

What makes the problem immeasurably worse is that US companies are losing their ability to increase prices. From cars to computers to chicken dinners, sale volumes can only be maintained by offering discounts and price cuts. And so, despite the decline in the official interest rate, US corporate debt – similar in size to that owed by all Third World countries – is actually getting more expensive. This is an important sign of the powerful deflationary pressures that have started to assert themselves within the US economy.

As well as slashing interest rates, the US government has ordered huge tax cuts and a big increase in military spending, helping to boost profits of the giant industrial corporations from Ford to Boeing who make the weapons. The aim of this electric-shock therapy has been to revive growth. Without these unprecedented measures, the US would already be in the midst of a devastating wave of bankruptcies and an extremely severe recession.

The Bush administration senses that the US economy is just one recession away from entering a Japanese-style deflationary spiral. As Japan has discovered and Germany is now discovering, from this there is no escape. Five years ago, there was a joke. "What's the difference between Japan and the US/Europe?" The answer was: "Five Years"

This is not just another economic crisis. And neither is the coming war on Iraq just another war against a "rogue state".

How are the two connected? We can put this another way: how is the very nature of the war on Iraq determined by the overall context, of a capitalist world economy on the verge of a global depression?

Oil, the "privileged commodity"

Oil behaves completely differently from all other raw material commodities. Contrast oil with sugar or coffee, with base metals, with cotton or even coal... world market prices for many of these commodities are at thirty-year lows and are well below their costs of production. Even this understates the situation: while the Third World's non-oil export prices have plunged, the price of imports from the rich countries have risen uninterruptedly. The combined effect of falling prices for raw material exports and rising import prices for manufactured imports is known as "unequal exchange", a form of exploitation and inequality intrinsic to imperialism that has shaped today's world of extremes of wealth and poverty. Its direct effect is that Third World raw material producers have, over the past three decades, lost up to 80% of their purchasing power.

Fidel Castro called oil the "privileged commodity". There are two special characteristics of oil that give it this status. Whereas coffee grows at a certain altitude, and sugar cane is produced in countries with similar tropical climate, oil is found in the land and below the oceans; it may be near the surface or it may be under miles of rock; it may be forty below or forty degrees in the shade. To the extent that the world oil price bears any relation to production costs, what matters with oil is its marginal cost of production. As the oil price rises, higher-cost oilfields become profitable and come on stream, increasing supply and reducing upward price pressure until oil finds its natural price, which therefore reflects production costs in the most marginal field. Those with much lower production costs can reap super profits. This is why oil is a source of profits like no other raw material.

Arising in part from the allure of these super profits, the second special feature of oil is that it is not just a commodity, not just

a source of fuel. In a way that isn't true of any other important raw material, control over sources and reserves of oil confers political power. Because of this, oil's world market price bears very little relationship to its costs of production. Access to and control over, oil supplies is an economic imperative, a political imperative and a military imperative. Japan discovered the truth of the last of these in 1940, when the US Navy's sixth fleet blockaded oil shipments to Japan from the Middle East, provoking Pearl Harbour and the entry of the US into WW2.

Iraq, Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are not just the site of 70% of the world's proven oil reserves; it is so easy to extract the oil that production costs are often lower than \$1 per barrel. With oil prices bouncing around \$30 a barrel, profits are astronomical.

Oil companies, banks, arms manufacturers and others from the imperialist countries capture the lion's share of oil profits, another slice is taken by local elites and royal families - yet workers and farmers across the Middle East face high and rising unemployment, declining wages and agricultural prices, collapsing public services, and brutal repression of their democratic rights.

A prime motive for the US/UK drive to war is to recapture from their rivals the biggest slice of Iraqi - and Iranian - oil profits. They resent the free reign that French, Russian and Chinese and other oil companies enjoy in markets largely closed off to them by their own belligerence.

The coming war on Iraq is the sharpest point of friction between the imperialist powers. In going to war on Iraq, the US ruling families are seeking to use military might to advance their economic interests at the expense of their rivals. This is the logic that leads to World War 3.

While Pentagon planners are busy choreographing the coming air-war, top US lawyers are hard at work planning legal challenges to Iraq's current contracts with French, Russian and Chinese companies. International law says that contracts survive changes of government, but the US government's disdain for international law is even more pronounced in the economic arena than elsewhere ...

Some conclusions

Why, then, is Britain going to war?

Along with its nuclear weapons and permanent seat on the UN Security Council, Britain's ability to punch above its weight on the world stage derives from the huge empire of wealth amassed by its ruling families in other peoples' countries, the Middle East in particular.

This is why Blair's alliance with Bush is not slavish, it is not the relationship between a poodle and its master, *it is the mutual self-interest of two imperialist powers that for different reasons need each other.*

The British government has made the realistic calculation that, if it does not accompany the US to war, it will be cut loose by Washington. It knows that the US would show no sentiment in converting Britain from an ally into a rival, and would be quite ruthless in cutting the British Empire down to size. For their part, France and Germany would relish the opportunity to avenge Britain's disruption of their efforts to forge a common European economic and military policy.

So, the short answer to our question is – Britain is going to war because the US is going to war.

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So why is the US going to war? The US rulers have a range of interlinked economic and political motives.

US imperialism is forced to go to war because the deflationary slump that stalks the US economy can only be kept at bay by increasing its share of super-profits. In a stagnant world economy, this means cutting into their rivals' share. War is not an aberration, it results from the normal functioning of capitalism and imperialism.

A successful invasion of Iraq would – so the extremists who dominate the Bush administration Bush believe – deal a demoralising blow to the Palestinians and the oppressed masses of other Arab countries.

Bush and friends are well aware of the peoples' outraged hostility to US support for Israel and preparations for war against Iraq. They know that a growing majority despise them and their corrupt client regimes. The radicalisation of the Arab peo-

ples is forcing the corrupt regimes into conflict with Washington and London, making them less pliant and useful than in the past.

This political radicalisation, in the context of sharply-declining living standards and deepening economic crisis, threatens to provoke revolutions, and the US needs to be ready to intervene. Confidence in the repressive powers of the Arab regimes is draining away. The US rulers have decided that they cannot continue to rule over the Middle East in the old way, through its Israeli garrison and through the servile dictatorships that they have put in power.

Neither can the US empire place too much reliance on its Israel. \$3 billion of annual military aid is enough to preserve Israel's military supremacy over its neighbours; Israel serves as a garrison and an important forward military base for imperialism, however it cannot substitute for a direct imperialist military presence. The US rulers can no longer rely on others to do the job – one reason why the Bush administration has concluded that it must go to war, to carve out a base for the tens or even hundreds of thousands of troops that it intends to permanently station in the region.

“Baghdad or bust” was how one newspaper described US policy. This gormless phrase sums up what's at stake. If the US fails to take and hold Iraq, the world's final empire will receive a terrible blow, one that would threaten to turn its decline into a tail-spin.

The coming war will be the first in a series of wars which the US will wage in a doomed attempt to restore its failing empire.

We mustn't be mesmerised by the military might of the US. US military strength stands in contrast to its economic weakness and fragility.

The US is not trying to impose stability, it is trying to recapture the ground it has lost over the past quarter century. It is trying to use weapons to reverse the course of history. Mission impossible! There are no weapons, which can do this! Their ultimate defeat is certain. What is unknown is how much of the Middle East

and the world they will take with them before they are finally forced to retreat.

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From our examination of Britain's long history of imperialist aggression against Iraq and its exploitation of Iraq's people and natural resources, one outstanding feature emerges: the wealth of Britain's ruling rich, and also *the living standards of their subjects*, depend to a very large extent on Britain's continued ability to suck wealth and profits from the rest of the world. In other words, Britain is a parasitic and decrepit imperialist power *par excellence*, which relies ever more on the protection offered by US military power.

While Suez was a key moment in the decline of the British Empire; in the current crisis, the British Empire is staring into its grave.

If we don't wish to follow the British Empire into its grave, *we must become its gravediggers*. We must break the century-old alliance between labour and capital that has cost the peoples of Iraq, Vietnam, Africa, Ireland, India and other countries so dear, and join with them in building a movement strong enough to disarm the imperialists and confiscate their obscene wealth.

We have reached a fork in the road. Socialism, or barbarism; or, as the Cuban people say, *revolución o muerte* – revolution or death!

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[Contact johnsmith@btinternet.com with any comments or criticisms.]

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- i **Iraq Must Go!** – Charles Glass in *London Review of Books*, 3 October 2002
- ii Doreen Wariner, *Land Reform and Development in the Middle East* (London, 1987), quoted in *From Sumer to Saddam*, by Geoff Simons
- iii See Simons, pp244-252
- iv DF Fleming, *The Cold War and its Origins* 1917-1960, quoted in Simons, op cit
- v **Out of the Ashes – the Resurrection of Saddam Hussein** Patrick & Andrew Cockburn (HarperPerennial, 1999) (pp 74-5)
- vi Said Aburish, *The Brutal Handshake – the West and the Arab Elite* (pp134-43)
- vii Figures on investment flows and other economic data are from UNCTAD's World Development Reports and from the Office of National Statistics, cited in **Labour Aristocracy and Imperialism**, by David Yaffe in **Fight Racism, Fight Imperialism** (see www.rcgfrfi.easynet.co.uk)
- viii 14 September 2002