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Blair and Bush Are Duo Even in Descent

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President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair once bestrode the globe as powerful leaders who spoke boldly of bringing democracy to the Middle East. Now, dragged down by popular discontent over their adventure in Iraq, both have reached the lowest point of their careers.

On May 4, Blair's Labor Party suffered its worst defeats since 1997 in elections for seats on local governing boards, forcing the prime minister to shake up his cabinet amid calls that he step aside soon in favor of Gordon Brown, his expected successor. Bush, with his approval ratings hovering just above 30 percent, has also tried to reinvigorate his sagging popularity by reshuffling top aides.

Blair, desperate to hang on for at least another year, is already viewed as a lame duck -- and Bush also is increasingly seen as one, even though he has nearly three years left in his term.

As the Economist magazine put it earlier this month, the Bush-Blair partnership has become the "axis of feeble."

The two have always been a bit of an odd couple. Bush is a conservative Texan who speaks inelegant English, while Blair is an eloquent speaker who promoted the "third way" of politics with former president Bill Clinton, his transatlantic pal. After their first meeting, when Bush was asked what they had in common, he replied: "We both use Colgate toothpaste."

But Blair always has had a moralistic streak. Clinton, after all, had restrained the more enthusiastic prime minister when he wanted to send ground troops during the conflict over Kosovo. It turned out that Blair's worldview meshed perfectly with the neo-Wilsonian outlook that Bush adopted after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Blair, convinced that it was essential for Britain to align its foreign policy closely with that of the United States, moved quickly to make sure he was in Bush's good graces. Though most European nations opposed Bush's plan for a missile defense system, Blair offered to support it as long as Bush agreed to negotiate a deal with Russia to end the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty -- rather than end it unilaterally, as some administration officials preferred. Bush agreed to Blair's proposal.

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In many ways, the partnership has worked that way: Bush sets the course, with Blair at his side occasionally urging a slight turn of the oar. For instance, Blair persuaded Bush to seek U.N. approval before attacking Iraq, and he intervened at crucial moments to get Bush to devote more attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In Britain, however, Blair's willingness to accommodate Bush made him the subject of ridicule, earning him the sobriquet "Bush's poodle."

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By coincidence or not, the two men held a news conference last night when it was past midnight in London. Indeed, while they still speak frequently by secure videoconference, yesterday's Oval Office visit was their first substantial meeting since September. Blair has also not officially accepted the Congressional Gold Medal that Congress awarded him for support after the Sept. 11 attacks, though he has come to Washington frequently since then.

"One of the reasons Blair is unpopular, even in his own party, is because he has been so close to Bush," said Charles Grant, director of the Center for European Reform in London. He said that in Bush's second term, the administration has worked hard to repair relations with European allies. But he said that while the European foreign policy elite was aware of the change, the general public was not -- and impressions of Bush had hardened.

"The thing public opinion focuses on is Iraq, which is still there," Grant said. The sudden upsurge in violence in Basra, which is controlled by British troops and had been largely quiet until now, has further hurt the prime minister.

Blair, in fact, is among the last of Bush's foreign policy allies still in power, with many ousted by anti-U.S. sentiment.

Peter Riddell, a political writer for the Times of London who wrote a book called "Hug Them Close" on Blair's relationship with Clinton and Bush, said that if Brown replaces Blair, it is unlikely he would suddenly try to distance himself from Bush; that is in part because British leaders have long regarded a close relationship with the United States as critical for Britain. But Grant said that Brown is closer to Labor Party members -- who deeply dislike Bush -- than is Blair, and so Brown would be reluctant to send British troops into any more military campaigns led by Americans.

"Public opinion is quite hostile to this shackling of British foreign policy to the United States," Grant said.

Of course, Iraq may yet turn out to be a success. But neither Bush nor Blair is likely to be in power to enjoy the moment.

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