

# THE U.S. ELECTION — A VIEW FROM LONDON

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his year's U.S. presidential contest, the most closely watched in living memory, is replete with paradoxes for America's European allies.

Tony Blair is George W. Bush's staunchest ally. The British prime minister has never stepped back from his unwavering belief in the righteousness of the Iraq war. For all that their special relationship and the unpopularity of the war have drained his political capital at home, he never speaks of the U.S. president as anything but a trusted friend. Now comes the irony. Mr. Blair needs John Kerry to win the coming presidential election. The French and the Germans may be the public cheerleaders for a Democratic victory in November, but Britain has more to gain from it.

## **An Exceptional Election**

U.S. elections rarely penetrate deep into Europe's consciousness. Once chosen, of course, the occupants of the White House quite quickly make their mark on European opinion. JFK was revered for his youthful ambition. LBJ (unfairly, given his domestic achievements) is remembered only for the Vietnam War,

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FOR BRITAIN, THE OUTCOME IN NOVEMBER CARRIES PROFOUND IMPLICATIONS — BOTH POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC.

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*BY PHILIP STEPHENS*

Richard Nixon for his narrow-eyed notoriety, and Ronald Reagan for his determination to defeat Moscow's evil empire. But these were reputations built after the fact. It is rare for Europeans, of the British or the continental variety, to be fiercely partisan during the campaigns.

The coming November poll is thus something of an exception. It is different because America is different. The status-quo superpower of the 1990s now looks more like a revolutionary hegemon; the architect of the postwar multilateral system has become an unapologetic unilateralist. If they were being honest, Europeans might also admit that the past few years have thrown up an uncomfortable truth, long obscured by the Cold War, about the essentially unequal nature of the transatlantic alliance. The collapse of communism and the emergence of Islamist terrorism have successively underscored the extent of American primacy and downgraded Europe as a focus of Washington's geopolitical interests. In a Europe forced to confront the limitations of its own power, the character and tone of George W. Bush's administration have hardened the sense of estrangement.

Thus the solidarity that followed the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 — who can forget the *Le Monde* front page declaring we were all Americans, or the British

guardsmen playing “The Star Spangled Banner” outside Buckingham Palace? — has given way among most Europeans to fear and anger. Fairly or otherwise, America is much unloved and President Bush bears the brunt of the opprobrium. The question Europeans now ask themselves is whether the American people are set to endorse the policies of a president so widely disliked in the world beyond.

That is as true in Britain as elsewhere. Mr. Blair’s support for the Iraq War and his close relationship with Mr. Bush have dominated the nation’s politics during the past two years. Public anxiety about the march to Baghdad — the nation was about evenly divided when Mr. Blair sent British troops into action — has turned into opposition. The failure to find weapons of mass destruction, allegations about the manipulation of intelligence, the mishandling of postwar reconstruction, and the torture scandals at Abu Ghraib have badly damaged public trust in the prime minister. So, too, has his seemingly unquestioning support for Mr. Bush. The image of Mr. Blair as the president’s poodle has become the favorite of political cartoonists. In his own party, where opposition to the war has been fiercest, Mr. Blair is compared unfavorably with Harold Wilson, the 1960s Labor prime minister who firmly rebuffed LBJ’s call for British military involvement in Vietnam. Mr. Blair’s position as prime minister has remained relatively secure only because the opposition Conservative Party, led by Michael Howard, is a traditional ally of the Republicans and was as firm in its support for regime change in Iraq as was the government.

So the outcome in November carries profound implications for Britain — both political and strategic. On one level, the result could severely test Mr. Blair’s capacity to shake off the damaging domestic political consequences of the war. On another, it could shape decisively the future of the special relationship with Washington that has been the leitmotif of British foreign policy since the Suez debacle of 1956.

### **Kerry’s Strength**

John Kerry’s greatest strength, in Britain as elsewhere in Europe, is that he is not Mr. Bush. The Democratic candidate presents himself as a member of

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the East Coast Atlanticist club with which Europeans have always been comfortable. His background and career are steeped in foreign policy. But, above all — this, at least, is how the conventional wisdom runs — his election as president would mark a clean break with the past, allowing fractured political and personal relationships to be repaired.

My own view is that many on the continent — Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder among them — expect too much of Mr. Kerry’s promises to return America to the path of multilateralism. Once installed in the White House, Mr. Kerry would demand as much as he offered to European leaders; and the defeat of Mr. Bush would rob Paris and Berlin of a convenient excuse for withholding support for the rebuilding of Iraq. But for the time being, hostility toward Mr. Bush tends to swamp such nuanced judgments.

In the short term, the awkwardness of a Democratic victory would be felt by Mr. Blair. As Mr. Bush’s co-conspirator in the invasion of Iraq, defeat for the president could leave the prime minister looking dangerously isolated. Persistent calls from critics within his own party for a change of leadership could well grow louder if the U.S. electorate was seen as having voted for a fresh start. How, some of his more ambitious colleagues would ask, could Mr. Blair leave history behind and build a warm relationship with Mr. Kerry? Might not the new president decide to make a point by inviting Mr. Chirac to the White House ahead of Mr. Blair?

These are all real concerns — heard among Mr. Blair’s aides as well as from his political rivals. But they mask the deeper significance of the election for Britain’s foreign policy. In strategic terms, Britain’s interests lie firmly with a victory for the Democratic contender.

### **A Deeper Significance**

If that seems counter-intuitive, the explanation lies in the likely consequences of Mr. Bush’s re-election. In such an event, Mr. Blair, of course, could expect to remain a privileged guest at the White House. The harsh realities of power revealed by postwar Iraq might also temper Mr. Bush’s unilateralism. But — and this is the critical point

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— it is scarcely possible to imagine that the transatlantic alliance could be rebuilt during a second Bush term. The personal animosities and ideological divisions run too deep to imagine a serious rapprochement between Washington and Paris or Berlin. The best that could be hoped for would be a sullen agreement to disagree.

Politically — and this is another of those paradoxes — a Bush victory might well be more comfortable for France and Germany than a victory by Mr. Kerry. Mr. Chirac and Mr. Schroeder, both weak at home, have profited politically from the rift with Washington. A re-elected Mr. Bush would spare them the difficult questions. By contrast, it would strike at the heart of Mr. Blair's strategic ambition to restore the equilibrium between Britain's twin relationships with its European allies and the U.S.

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For all his closeness to Mr. Bush — and his quarrels over Iraq with Mr. Chirac and Mr. Schroeder — Mr. Blair subscribes to the foreign policy doctrine first enunciated a half-century ago by Conservative Prime Minister Harold MacMillan after Britain's retreat from Suez. That places Britain as a pivotal player — a bridge, in the prime minister's favoured metaphor, between Europe and the U.S. This role, however, depends critically on a healthy transatlantic alliance. If the alliance is broken, as it has been for the past two years, Britain is forced to

choose between America and Europe — and thus is less able to leverage influence on one side of the Atlantic to enhance its influence on the other.

So, if Mr. Blair's heart is with Mr. Bush, his head is with Mr. Kerry. ■

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