

Shoulder to Shoulder

By Robert M. Worcester and Simon Jenkins

During the first few days following September 11, the whole world was glued to its television screens. Hardly an hour went by but that some image of Great Britain was televised worldwide, from Prime Minister Tony Blair's "shoulder to shoulder" speech to American President George W. Bush's "no truer friend" response, from the Guards Band playing the Star Spangled Banner outside Buckingham Palace for the first time in history, to the presence of the Queen and Royal Family at the St. Paul's memorial service. The British establishment was on full parade behind America's sense of loss and desire for retribution.

Was the British establishment speaking for the British people? There is a strong sense of communion between ordinary Britons and Americans, based on a plentitude of family and business ties and increasing tourist contact, and this was seen in the thousands of flowers placed outside the American embassy in Grosvenor Square and the 50,000 or so signatures in the book of condolences.

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But was this just London talking, or all of Britain? And how would Britons talk when shock turned to anger and anger to military response? What would happen when reaction turned to war?

Within a few days the results of opinion polls were published, reporting the British public's response. From the outset there was not only support throughout Britain for the American people and government but also for the specific performances of President Bush and Prime Minister Blair. Although the disapproval ratings for both men appeared to double over the first few weeks of the crisis, from around 10% to around 25%, they remained low. The approval ratings for President Bush in Britain were not as high as those noted in the US by ABC News/*Washington Post*, but they still hovered comfortably around 70% (see Figure 1).

Support was equally high in Britain for the commitment of troops to what was initially defined as a manhunt. This support was unequivocal in polls conducted in the first week by MORI, ICM and Gallup. It remained high after the air war began, with strong majorities



backing the bombing campaign against Afghan targets. Seventy-one percent of Britons said in an October 9 poll that they believed it right to join America in bombing, with two-thirds saying the policy of Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair was helping make the world a safer place.

A MORI poll conducted November 22-27 showed some demographic variations in the levels of British support for the war. Significantly fewer women (61%) than men (77%) supported the use of British troops. According to age group, the lowest support (60%) was found among respondents aged 65 and over, the highest (75%) among those aged 35 to 44. There was little difference by social class, but, geographically, fewer Londoners supported the use of troops (51% in favor, 33% opposed) than respondents in other parts of the country. And across party lines, 59% of Liberal Democrats supported the use of British troops, compared with three-

quarters of Conservative supporters and 72% of Labour supporters.

Elsewhere in Europe, early polls showed markedly lower levels of support for military action. A 30-country Gallup poll indicated three-quarters support in France, while two-thirds of Italians and half of Swedes, Spaniards and Germans were in favor. Opposition was in the majority in Austria, Finland, Greece and Russia.

When respondents were asked specifically if military action should be taken against the “host country” of terrorism, support fell to between 10 and 15% throughout Europe. Strong opposition was registered everywhere, including in Britain, to the bombing of non-military targets.

As for the threat from terrorism generally, 59% of Britons in the October 9 survey accepted that attacks were more likely as a result of British participation in military strikes, with 63% worried that terrorists would retaliate against the UK using chemical and biological weapons. Even so, nearly half of Britons in the poll said they would be prepared to pay more taxes to propagate the war.

How these results should be interpreted by governments is moot. At the end of the first month, the bombing campaign against Afghanistan had reached much the same point it had after a month in Iraq in 1991 and the former Yugoslavia in 1999. These were forms of “phony war,” with air bombardment having led to no certain outcome, but also having imposed no severe costs on the nation doing the bombing. No Western troops had lost their lives. In both these cases it was the apparent imminence of ground action that was to prove crucial, and so it was in Afghanistan.

In the cases of Vietnam, Lebanon and Somalia, ground troops did lose their lives, and the reaction was a marked loss of support back home in the United States. This was less true of the British campaign in the Falkland Islands, however, for which British support began at about two-thirds and rose steadily throughout, except for “wobbles” following the loss of over 1,000 Argentine sailors in the sinking of the *Belgrano*, and the loss of the British ship *Sheffield*. When the war was clearly won, support rose to 89%.

But things are less clear in Afghanistan than they were at the conclusion of the Falklands conflict. If Western troops do take significant losses in the end-game there, the likelihood is of a loss of domestic support. And when democratic governments lose democratic support for overseas military adventures, they tend to lose interest in them.

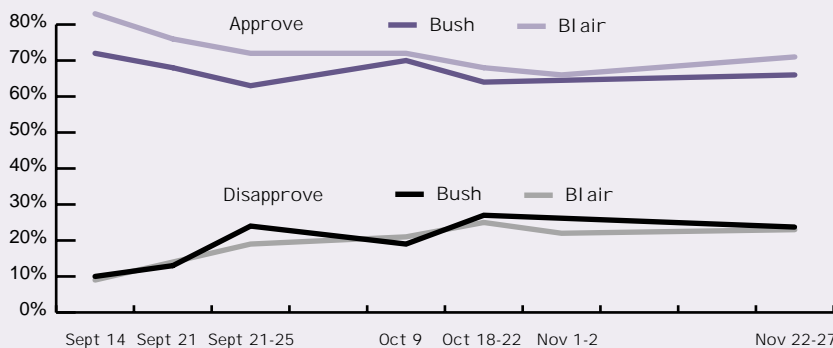
Following the surprisingly easy conquest of most Afghan territory by the Northern Forces, backed up by a comparative handful of Special Forces, Marines and SIS troops, the British public was asked again whether or not the approach of George W. Bush and Tony Blair to the crisis was helping to make the world a safer place. Nearly two people in three (64%) in the November 22-27 poll still agreed, while a quarter (24%) did not—levels almost identical to those registered right after the air war began.

It remains to be seen, however, whether this level of British support for the use of troops will continue, and whether Bush and Blair will remain shoulder to shoulder, if the next phase of the “War on Terrorism” is extended past the death or capture of bin Laden, and beyond Afghanistan.

Figure 1
Bush and Blair Riding High in British Opinion

Questions:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the American response to the terrorist attacks on 11th September?
...of the way Tony Blair is handling the British response...?



Note: Asked of British adults.

Source: Surveys by MORI/News of the World/The Times/ITV/Mail on Sunday, latest that of November 22-27, 2001.