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Gordon Brown's Wrong Move on Iraq

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Retreat is not a word that features prominently in the lexicon of British military history. Over the last 200 years, Great Britain has waged more wars and won more conflicts than any other nation in the world. From the Falkland Islands to Sudan to the North West Frontier, British soldiers have left their mark with a distinguished record of heroism, sacrifice, and bravery. That tradition continues today in Iraq and in Afghanistan, where more than 250 British servicemen have laid down their lives for Queen and Country.

It is a proud history that has earned Britain a reputation as a great warrior nation. It is unclear, though, whether her current political leadership possesses the vision and determination to ensure that she remains a global power that is both willing and able to face the great challenges of our time. The U.K. now spends a pitiful 2.2 percent of its GDP on defense, its lowest level since the 1930s.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown's announcement this week that Britain will reduce her troop strength in Iraq, from 5,500 to just 2,500 by spring 2008, sends all the wrong signals at a time when the U.S. and the U.K. are engaged in a global war against Islamic extremists. Brown's decision represents a spectacular turnaround from his declaration in August ruling out a timetable for the withdrawal of British forces. Sources in the Ministry of Defense are already suggesting that all British soldiers may be removed from the country by the end of next year.

A British withdrawal from Iraq will be interpreted by the West's worst enemies as a display of

weakness and portrayed as a major defeat for Britain. Both Iran and al-Qaeda will claim a huge propaganda victory when the last British soldiers depart the air base in Basra.

There are no compelling military or strategic reasons for a British withdrawal. The security situation in and around Basra remains tense, with Iranian-backed militias continuing to grow in strength, assisted by a corrupt police force heavily infiltrated by Tehran's agents. There is a vital need to maintain security along the Iraq-Iran border, as well as to protect the supply routes that run from Kuwait to Baghdad. If the British withdraw altogether, the United States will have to send several thousand troops to replace them, opening up another major front for U.S. forces to defend.

The momentum for such a move is purely political. With Brown's administration facing a general election in 2008 and up against widespread public opposition to the war, a decision to cut troop numbers in half may be politically expedient but makes no sense in military terms.

The biggest beneficiary of such a move will be the barbaric Iranian regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose poisonous tentacles reach into every element of

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government and society in Basra and the Shiite-dominated south. Iranian arms and money are flowing into the country, and Tehran is directly responsible for the killing of numerous British soldiers who have died in a proxy war waged by the Mullahs and their henchmen against Allied forces.

It is also just six months since the Iranian Revolutionary Guard captured and held 15 British sailors for two weeks in a blatant act of war before releasing them in a staged propaganda exercise before the world's cameras in an act of public humiliation.

Just two decades ago, Iranian saber-rattling would have been met with a ferocious response. Today it is greeted with indifference and more troop cuts by the political mandarins in Downing Street and Whitehall.

On both Iraq and Iran, Prime Minister Brown looks rudderless and held hostage by the polls and the left wing of his own ruling Labour Party. His premiership started off well, with a strong response to the attempted London bombings in June and a statesmanlike meeting with President Bush at Camp David in August. He has since been increasingly outflanked on the world stage by his nearest rival, the charismatic and hyper-energetic French president, Nicolas Sarkozy.

In just a few months, Sarkozy has performed one of the most stunning foreign policy revolutions of modern times. Alongside his eloquent and high profile foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, the new French president has emerged as a key U.S. ally in efforts to halt the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran. While Brown was busy preaching to his followers at the Labour Party Conference in the sleepy seaside town of Bournemouth, Sarkozy was delivering a rousing speech at the U.N. General Assembly in New York, warning the Iranian regime of the consequences of playing with fire.

It is important not to read too much into the near-term geo-strategic implications of the Sarkozy revolution. There is little prospect of a U.S.–French alliance replacing the centrality of the Anglo–American Special Relationship in Washington. At all levels, from intelligence sharing to cultural ties to economic investment, the United States and the United Kingdom are and will remain intricately entwined for the foreseeable future. There is also

scant evidence that the great French public shares Sarkozy's enthusiasm for *les Americains*.

In military terms, France would struggle to compete with British levels of combat experience and force projection. While battle-hardened British forces have been waging major campaigns against insurgents in Iraq and against the Taliban in Afghanistan, French troops have seen military action only in minor colonial conflicts in Africa in recent years. In Afghanistan, the French have barely fired a shot on offense. It is one thing to talk tough when it comes to standing up to tyrants and terrorists, but it is another thing altogether to commit tens of thousands of troops to fight in a major war.

There is, however, no room for complacency in London, and Downing Street should not be encouraging the strategists in Foggy Bottom to think that France, Germany, and a common European Union foreign policy might represent a viable long-term alternative to the Special Relationship.

Brown's signals toward Washington since coming to power have been far from warm and have given the impression that the prime minister is going out of his way to distance himself from the United States. Brown's latest announcement of British cuts in Iraq will reinforce this picture, as well as project an image of weakness at a time when Britain and America are fighting a war on several fronts. It also directly undercuts efforts by the U.S. government to strengthen support for the surge and for the need to maintain a large fighting force in Iraq.

Gordon Brown needs to show strong British leadership on the world stage on issues other than international development and climate change. For all intents and purposes, he is a war leader, whether he likes it or not. The Iranian regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad represents the biggest nation-state threat to international security of this generation. It is a brutal and highly dangerous tyranny that already has British and American blood on its hands and is actively waging war against U.S. and British forces. In the face of this aggression, Brown needs to demonstrate real mettle and determination. By halving troop numbers in Iraq, however, he looks more like Neville Chamberlain than Winston Churchill.

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