

From hero to zero

On the AGENDA



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As war looms Tony Blair is looking worse and worse. In fact he looks a mess. Long gone is the fresh if not exactly cherubic appearance of a man at the height of his powers when he became British prime minister in 1997. It is hard to imagine that he has found himself in this mess, not only just looking like one.

From the most formidably popular leader, who seemed incapable of doing anything wrong the hero has been transformed into the villain, the golden boy into the one least likely to succeed. Today Tony Blair finds himself in uncharted territory, no template to turn to or guide him as events change daily, his future unsure.

From his win-win situation he now faces a zero-sum game. There seems little he can do to salvage this dire state of affairs, but it would be reckless to suggest that things were over, at least not until the fat lady sings; no reference to Clare Short, the international development secretary who called him just that, and threatened to quit the cabinet if there was no second resolution (from the United Nations).

The perceived wisdom, depending to whom you listen, is that if all goes well in Iraq - as in there is a quick successful campaign - Tony Blair will come out smelling of roses and life will go on.

On the other hand, say the opposite camp, he cannot survive under any circumstances. Perceived as being led by the nose by the American president, and walked right into this war like the poodle he is accused of being, Blair will have no choice but to resign.

At this point more than 90% of British public opinion is opposed to war without a specific UN mandate, which seems destined to falter.

Nobody actually knows what the future holds for our PM. He looked haggard,

bored and fed up on the TV show he did on Monday night with women who were anti-war. Even somewhat impenetrable.

Yet despite these unprecedented events there is probably little doubt in the Blair mind that he has made the right decision. Perhaps, it will be seen in the future, as the greatness, of the man, that possibly overstating the case somewhat.

Understanding his genuine belief in the cause which has shackled Britain to this certainly unpopular war is tied to the fact that he is a committed Christian. He believes this course of action is the right thing to do, that he is here for a purpose

and that he has a mission.

Look back to the time he moved Labour away from its traditional socialist base. In 1994, he led a vigorous national campaign which shocked delegates by proposing to re-write Labour's 77-year-old charter stating the party's commitment to state-owned industry.

That he would never succeed in changing this fundamental tenet of the Labour manifesto brought dire predictions of doom and disaster down on his head. But he was convinced it was the only thing that would prove the Labour Party had modernised, and he stayed true to those convictions. And he won overwhelmingly.

It might also be somewhat fanciful to think that he is going to be deposed. The constitution of the party is so heavily in favour of the leader that the only conceivable way he will go is if he resigns.

This is not to minimise the trouble Blair finds himself in because he is indeed in hot water if he goes to war without a resolution. He is damned too if he backs away. So the situation is undeniably serious.

Once again, depending on which school of thought you belong to, the Americans are either furious with Blair for dragging them through the UN. Hence US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's impatient outburst on Tuesday, and therefore he is finished.

Or that the Americans understand his position. Indeed, Condi Rice apparently called Blair three weeks ago to tell him that if he needed to back off that was fine. Bush wants to protect him, understanding Blair's precarious position at home.

The smart money's on Blair resigning. But he is a brilliant political tactician, at least the best of his generation if not the best of the age in the UK, so there's money to be made on him staying. That said it's a pretty tough call.