

## BUSH'S FRONTLINE BRITAIN



In the modern world, democracy gets killed off more in parmesan shavings than para-military coups. Little bits get sliced off the system of public accountability and, before you know it, social authoritarianism has replaced social democracy; the democratic cheese has disappeared.

Well beyond press attention given to the war (that is supposed to be a peace) in Iraq, the succession race isn't supposed to have started in the Labour Party, and the silence that passes for a national debate on climate change, we have a wonderful cameo of the post-democratic world mapped out for Bush's Britain.

Behind the scenes, British diplomats have been agreeing on plans to place US interceptor missiles on British soil. The only bargaining that seems to have been done is that a formal request to site the missiles here will not be made until after the general election.

There has been no public debate about this, and the government ministers involved are keen for this silence to continue. Even after the election, parliament will have no vote on the decision, no oversight of any terms of deployment and use, no authority to revoke decision. It will all be done under the clandestine cover of existing reciprocal agreements between the US and UK on defence matters.

The particular cover for this decision is almost certain to be found in the murky depths of the 2003 UK/US Ballistic Missile Defence Framework Agreement. Technically, this commits the UK to a number of scientific exchanges in support of America's 'Son of Star Wars' programme.

Leave aside the awkward fact that over two thirds of British people oppose the weaponisation of outer space. The more immediate problem comes from a recognition that the US first wants to deploy land based interceptor missiles, for use with the radar navigation systems that would eventually conduct wars from space.

The cunning ploy in the Framework Agreement was to hide proposals for interceptor missiles in two separate Annexes attached to it. One agreed to the upgrading of Early Warning radar facilities at RAF Fylingdales. The other is an agreement to cooperate in 'Research, Development, Test and Evaluation of ballistic missile defence capabilities and systems,' ie. interceptor missiles.

Geoff Hoon, the Defence Secretary, has been very shy of linking the two together. Politically, it isn't difficult to see why. Any country hosting such missiles will make itself a frontline target. In an era of US military adventurism, being the country from which US missiles are launched immediately makes you part of the war. Forget any thoughts about your own sovereignty, independence or neutrality, you are automatically tied in to decisions taken elsewhere by US political and military leaders.

Forget too, any belief in assurances that such missiles would only be used for defensive purposes. We know from Iraq that Bush's intention to fight the war was based on a most dubious assertion of legality;

namely in that it defended the US from the potential threat of future wars from countries which might have an aspiration to acquire weapons of mass destruction. 'Defence' has been turned into a word that justifies pre-emptive attacks.

In the last week, press reports have dealt with some of the US excitement about scram-jet technology that will give missiles a strike range of 9000 miles. This would not be about intercepting other people's missiles, but conducting long range wars without having to send troops in. In one go, it makes the case for saying that if America wants to pursue wars of long range retribution let them keep missiles on their own soil.

Washington's Missile Defence Agency has made it abundantly clear that, in their rush to deploy a missile defence system, only 10% of budget spending is being earmarked for developments inside the USA. This is why collaborative agreements with the UK and (they hope) Canada are so important in the current strategy. Countries (or even movements) who saw themselves as likely victims of a US missile attack would have to target the countries hosting the missiles rather than the country that would decide to launch them.

Step back from the technical Annexes and the cloak and dagger politics that lies behind them, there is a simpler (and more fundamental) reason for refusing to play this game. The war on Iraq has resolved nothing and has proved only its own folly. Coalition troops will be flown in and carried out for years to come. Eventually the occupying army and puppet administration will be forced out by a nationalist movement that may also have become fundamentalist in character. Any number of 'interceptor missiles' will not fend off this inevitability.

It is far better for the rest of the international community to take a different lead in addressing common security in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Other nations are unlikely to attack the United States because of the certain knowledge of an overwhelming response. Terrorist movements with a stronger interest in attack are unlikely to do so with ballistic missiles that can be bombed out of the sky. We desperately need a more grown up discussion of risks, threats and security solutions in the real world we live in.

Saying 'no' to Bush, interceptor missiles, and missile defence is not to be anti-American. It is to take up a position that would save America (and the rest of us) from his military follies. It is also to save, for ourselves, a small fragment of the right to make open, democratic and accountable decisions that sovereign nations ought to guard jealously in these uncertain times.