

Cheering Bush down

In contrast to the icy-cold pomp of the president's royal "state visit," an exuberant protest march draws 150,000, who march through London and bring a gold-painted Bush puppet to its knees.

By Graham Joyce

A 20-foot effigy of George W. Bush was toppled in London's Trafalgar Square last night. Around 150,000 people jammed the square to cheer, whistle and blow foghorns as the statue crashed to the ground under the imperious gaze of Lord Nelson. It was the climax of an exuberant and largely good-natured seven-hour protest against George Bush's state visit to Britain.

Drums and dancing, whistles and songs, foghorns and chanting were the character of the day in this massive anti-Bush rally, with most of the demonstrators completely unaware of the appalling events in Istanbul. Meanwhile, organizers claimed the biggest workday demonstration in the history of the country, as many thousands of people quit work, school or college to flood the capital. And the numbers jamming London's streets for the symbolic march past Parliament and along Whitehall were swollen by over 5,000 police officers marshaling the demonstration. Add twice that number of officers deployed in security measures around the city, while an estimated 400 U.S. Secret Service agents patrolled the shadows and the rooftops. Police helicopters buzzed overhead in constant motion.

The police in their luminous yellow jackets stood guard at the interface of two cultures. On the one hand, the pessimistic culture of Security: paranoid, sullen and suspicious. And on the other, the optimistic culture of those who feel merely Insecure, but who believe they can change things by crowding the streets with their bodies in a carnival-atmosphere affiliation of the people.

Ironically it was supposed to be George Bush, Tony Blair and the queen who were throwing the party. This was the first "state" visit of an American president since the end of the First World War. And what is this "state visit" thing? After all, Bill Clinton used to drop in on an almost casual basis and without all the pomp, never mind the protest. The difference is the "head of state" has invited the president this time. And the head of state in Britain is not the prime minister. It's the queen.

For George Bush this would normally mean red carpets, the paralyzing corset of white-tie dinners, 41-gun salutes by guys in furry hats, the gleaming blond-plumed horse guards, and baroque open carriages trotted along the Mall as tourists and royalty junkies wave paper flags. But this year the carriage has been mothballed and the horses stabled. George was, instead, helicoptered in the dark into the grounds of Buckingham Palace in a modified gunship. A bizarre "welcome" was laid on after breakfast the following morning, with the president driven 100 yards inside the Buckingham Palace compound to be greeted by the queen and her phalanx of retainers in 18th century livery.

This exhibition of depressed panoply took place so that he wouldn't have to see the tumultuous and ebullient demonstration about his presence going on outside.

But that doesn't deter the marchers, many of whom have traveled great distances to join this protest. One contingent has made a grueling 10-hour overnight journey by bus from Glasgow, Scotland, but they're buoyed up by enthusiasm for the march. Parading screen-printed orange flags bearing the slogan "Globalise Resistance," Liam Gotch is among them, carrying his 3-month-old daughter, Rebecca, in a sling. "I'm here with my daughter to say that Tony Blair and George Bush's foreign policy is not acceptable. We're a peaceful group from Scotland and we're here today to make a stand."

Elizabeth Bashir hears us talking. She's 60 and the last demonstration she attended was an anti-Vietnam War march. Her granddaughter found the information about the

march for her on the Internet. "I fear for what we're leaving behind for the younger generation," she says, nodding at tiny Rebecca. Is this demonstration any different from those of over 30 years ago? "They used to be so sedate!" This march hasn't even got underway yet and she has to shout over the sound of whistles, horns and constant drumming. "This is chaos. But I'm enjoying it."

Globalise Resistance is typical of many of the groups comprising the march. Gill Hubbard, a striking woman in her 30s, explains to me that, "It's a fusion of antiwar, anti-corporate and anti-capitalist groups and individuals. Bush is the biggest terrorist threat to world peace."

And it's clear from the multicolored variety of placards that while foreign policy is today's focus, it draws in its wake a raft of other issues: There are banners against McDonald's; posters against Bush's abortion policy; billboards about the Health Service; flags about Palestine; and even a sole protester holding aloft a hastily improvised but baffling piece of cardboard imploring us "Do You Remember?" Well, OK, but the core energy, the hard middle, is all about George Bush, Tony Blair and Iraq.

The muster for the march takes place in Malet Street and is scheduled for 2 p.m., but the number of demonstrators is so great that the police hold back the march for almost an hour to clear greater passage ahead. The line is to be headed by the huge effigy of George Bush and a mock-tank, pink, decked with balloons and driven by children. There are lots of kids here. And many elderly, quite frail people. It seems an unlikely prospect among the face paintings and the constant drumming and the upbeat festival vibe of the crowd, but the nightmare for the security forces is the double threat, from the hard-case agitprop contingent hell-bent on leading the march into violent confrontation with the police, and the idea of terrorists lurking behind the carnival mask.

With bobbies called in from all over the country to buttress the Metropolitan police force, the security operation is estimated to cost 10 million pounds. London wants the rest of the country to share in the bill. Hey, only London gets to sit down at the banquet, thinks the rest of the country: It's your bill and you can bloody well sort out the tip, too.

Though even this jaw-dropping level of security is not enough to satisfy U.S. security officials. They want closure of the London Tube network. A rumor sweeps the crowd that they have asked for immunity from prosecution for any of its rooftop sharpshooters who accidentally takes a bead on a protester. Oh, and the rumor goes, they've been given that reassurance. From the top.

Right.

The core of the protest is the Stop the War Coalition. It is a broad affiliation of peace activists, trade union groups, church assemblies, teachers' and students' organizations, Muslim groups, members of parliament and rainbow political alliances. Some impressive cells inside the complex and fluid biology of this behemoth include London American Students Against the War, the New Eton Socialist Party (er, yes, Eton, England's most elitist private school), Ravens Against the War (a group of drum 'n' bass DJs, MCs and fanatics who are opposed to the war, and who organize street and field parties) and the Young Muslim Sisters London. It's a gala of British diversity you are unlikely to find assembled under one banner under any other circumstance.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, a man who has the misfortune of looking like Heinrich Himmler with hair, dismissed the protest in advance as "fashionable anti-Americanism." He would know, since he was present at a lot of marches in the days when a young careerist politician desperately needed to be seen at such fashionable events. But in Trafalgar Square, speaker after speaker goes out of his or her way to deny this. One of the most popular speakers is Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic. There are plenty of American flags at the demo, too. And one hand-painted sign reads: "Warm-hearted, Generous American People, WHAT IS YOUR COUNTRY DOING?"

Many Americans are marching. One group marches under the slogan "Proud of My Country, Ashamed of My President." Numerous individuals have made it here. Faith

McDonald, 20, is from Cape Cod, Mass., and she's over here studying English. Faith also traveled overnight to take part. "We don't live in a democracy. No one's listening. Blair and Bush operate without the checks and balances that should come with a democracy. But by being here today this is democracy. This is a place to start."

There's a greater awareness among Brits that there is resistance in the United States. It's just that to a lot of British people George Bush represents the worst of all things American. He's the right-wing Christian crusader, the toxic Texan who refused Kyoto, the poll-cheat eel who undermined democracy on the back of something called chads, a notion we've never entirely grasped. He's the plutocrats' puppet. He's the fundamentalist cowboy.

And he represents, above all else, the great failures of democracy. A word I keep hearing, mainly from younger people, is the "plutocracy." It hasn't eluded attention that Bush's Cabinet is the wealthiest in history, the 16 members squatting, in their palatial bunkers, on an average of \$11 million apiece. Or who his financial backers are. Plutocracy. It has a perfect nuance: chilly, inaccessible, icy-rich. This march is about democracy standing up to the bullying plutocracy.

I also frequently hear people offering up a "bushquote," with or without Texan accent. He's reported to have said, "More and more of our imports come from overseas." When asked by a British child what the White House was like it's claimed he said, "It's white." And to Tony Blair, he was quoted in the Times of London as saying, "The problem with the French is they don't have a word for 'entrepreneur.'" It seems important for the marchers to repeat these stories to establish how stupid he is. The idea that no one stupid gets to be president of the United States is shelved. Is that because dangerous and stupid is more threatening than dangerous and smart? Or less? It's a tough call.

Tony and Her Majesty came up with this plan for the state visit two years ago, just after the Taliban had been chased into the caves. No one on the English side of things quite foresaw Iraq unfolding. In the White House—the place that is white—one suspects they did. This visit has come at the worst possible time for Tony Blair. He's reeling from the loss of credibility in the failure to find WMD, on the basis of which this war was sold to the British public; in the wake of the public inquiry into the suicide of Dr. Kelly; and from the apparent inability to make progress in Iraq. The last thing he needs is massive and popular demonstrations against his foreign policy. George, on the other hand, stands to collect an album of regal and legitimating photo opportunities to show the folks back home. He's got nothing to lose and plenty to gain. Just so long as they can keep him away from the noise of the demonstration. As he and Tony frequently point out, they are glad they live in countries where folks have the freedom to protest.

And, of course, cushioned deep in Buckingham Palace and surrounded by state-funded aides, flunkies, valets, servants and security men, the freedom not to listen to that protest. Tony and George might even have been cheered by a poll published the morning before the demonstration that suggested 46 percent of Brits thought that the visit should go ahead.

But the marchers think differently, and the loudest whistles and jeers and drumming frenzy is reserved for the shuffle past Whitehall and 10 Downing Street. Meanwhile the river of bodies is so broad that there are currents in the flow: faster at the edges, fast too in the midstream but inclined to eddy there, sluggish in the channels. Depending on the current you find yourself in it takes about two and a half to three hours for the stream to pull up at illuminated Trafalgar Square. When the effigy of Bush starts to topple, thousands are still marching way back and proceeding toward the electrified atmosphere of Trafalgar Square.

The toppling of the gold-painted statue, constructed from papier-mâché, chicken wire and cardboard goes ahead anyway. The effigy has Tony Blair in Bush's pocket, holding a missile. At least it could be a missile. George nurses the weapon uncomfortably in his lap and the testicular-like bulges at the base of the missile are surely coincident-

tal. When the statue of Saddam Hussein was dragged down in Baghdad the event was watched by about 150 people. Here by a hundred times that number, and in a finely staged moment of theater. Just as in the original event, it seems at first that the thing wouldn't come down and we might have to ask for help from the U.S. Marines. But no, they're just kidding, and following a New Year's Eve style countdown George bites the dust.

It marks the end of an extraordinary day in London. One can only wonder if George and Laura, deep in the icy fastness of plutocracy's halls of stone, ever get to hear about it.