

# Breaking Up that Old Gang of Mine

By Col. Daniel Smith, U.S. Army (Ret.) | October 18, 2006

George Bush's most steadfast backer in the March 2003 preventive war invasion and occupation of Iraq has been British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The Bush-Blair "dynamic duo" act is, however, about to end. Blair is soon to resign his post in favor of the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown.

Like the date on which British, U.S., and all other foreign occupation troops will leave Iraq, the exact month and day of the hand-over of #10 Downing Street remains undeclared. But pressure is sure to mount for some declaration on both points because of remarks by top British military official General Sir Richard Dannatt.

Sir Richard, who became the UK Chief of the General Staff (CGS) only last August, said in an October 12 interview with London's *Daily Mail* that UK forces should leave Iraq "soon" because the very presence of foreign troops "exacerbates the security problems." Sir Richard also drew attention to the swift change in the level of tolerance of the Iraqi public toward the foreign occupation. "The military campaign we fought in 2003 effectively kicked the door in. Whatever tolerance we may have had in the first place ... has largely turned to intolerance" after 42 months. Dannatt also opined that planning for the occupation phase was "poor, probably based more on optimism than sound planning."

Within 24 hours, Sir Richard was again speaking to the British press, "clarifying" what he meant by "soon" and refuting the media's contention that his original interview represented a break with the government's position. He did not call for a timetable for withdrawing all troops, yet he expressed concern that morale in and recruiting for the ground forces have been damaged by the war and the loss (to date) of 119 UK personnel. The demands of occupying Iraq have caused "a fair pressure on ourselves," Dannatt said. "We don't want to be there two, three, four, five years. We've got to think about this in terms of a reasonable length of time."

## Pentagon Response

Set against the most recent comments by the Pentagon hierarchy, Dannatt's "revisions" strike a distinctly discordant note. On October 11, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Peter Schoomaker told reporters that the Army had contingency plans for staying in Iraq through 2010 with the same number of deployed combat troops as now. In an October 12 Pentagon press conference, General George Casey, the senior U.S. commander in Iraq, revealed that he had been prepared this past summer to recommend that some of the then-130,000 U.S. troops could be withdrawn. But the increased sectarian violence over the past four months, particularly in Baghdad, actually has required extending tours for some units and repositioning others—and this even before the usually bloody month of Ramadan started.

At the same press conference, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld reminded the press that General Schoomaker is not in the command chain that sets the troop levels for Iraq (and for Afghanistan). The chain in Iraq runs from the ground commanders to General Casey to U.S. Central Command commander, General John Abizaid. From there it goes directly to Rumsfeld and Bush. And only last month General Abizaid stated that no reduction of troops in Iraq would take place before next spring—at the earliest.

Dannatt professed to be "puzzled" by the stir following publication of the original interview, contending that other, well-known UK officers had earlier made the same or even harsher criticism. Indeed, in early January 2006, retired General Sir Michael Rose, who commanded all UN forces in Bosnia in 1994, called for impeaching Tony Blair. And General Sir Michael Jackson, Dannatt's predecessor as CGS and deputy NATO commander in the late



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1990s under U.S. General Wesley Clarke, had earlier called for withdrawing UK troops from Iraq.

Dannatt, however, is to date the only active duty senior officer in either the UK or the United States to have come close to an explicit call for removing foreign troops. After Sir Richard's original remarks became public, retired Major General Patrick Cordingley, who commanded the UK's "Desert Rats" in the first Gulf War in 1991, commended Dannatt for speaking out.

Neither Downing Street nor the Ministry of Defence (MOD) publicly challenged, let alone attacked, Sir Richard. Blair's office said foreign troops were in Iraq "at the express wish" of the Iraqi government and under a UN mandate, while a MOD spokesperson said the military "had a clear strategy." This moderate response contrasts sharply with how, just before the U.S.-led invasion took place, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz rebuked then-U.S. Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki for telling Congress that "several hundred thousand" troops would be needed to occupy Iraq.

## Transatlantic Future

Blair may force Dannatt to leave or the CGS may "resign" on principle. One long-serving MOD civilian, in a private communication, observed that Sir Richard's stand caused "a bit of a stir" and that "most opinion is with him although there may not be many that speak out." UK public opinion, the source continued, is increasingly supporting the proposition that "now that the Iraqis have

their own democratically elected government, it's time to let them use it and take responsibility for their own country."

Alternatively, the Ministry of Defence could declare substantial progress and withdraw some troops. Two of the four Iraqi provinces once controlled by the UK contingent have been "handed back" and are being run by Iraqis. Blair will want to leave on a high note, and he's not got much to crow about other than these two returned provinces.

One thing seems certain. Even though the signature B-B relationship will survive the coming "regime change" in the UK when Brown replaces Blair, the intensity of UK enthusiasm for staying on in Iraq will diminish. With casualties mounting, with the generals beginning at last to criticize the war and the effects of combat, Brown will find himself under enormous pressure to set a timetable, declare an exit strategy, and bring the UK troops home.

And should the Republicans lose control of the House or Senate in next month's election, George Bush may have to declare "victory" and follow the lead of the British: out the door that was kicked in on March 19, 2003.

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