

THE ORWELL PRIZE 2008

LOGLISTED ENTRY: JUSTIN WEBB, BBC RADIO 4 From Our Own Correspondent

FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT

JUSTIN WEBB

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It began with an odd joke about toothpaste at their first joint press conference in February 2001. President Bush explained that he and Tony Blair would get on fine because they used the same brand. People giggled.

And the relationship became closer -- the two men met frequently and talked often on the phone. When Mr Bush was re-elected, Tony Blair was the first foreign leader to come to see him at the White House. He was also the foreign leader most openly committed to the president's plan for regime change in Iraq.

So was he, as some suggested, a poodle, who came in response to a whistle from his master? Justin Webb in Washington says Americans do not believe that to be the case and across the political spectrum they will miss him:

[GOTO AUDIO
NAME: US BLAIR
NUMBER: 19025
IN WORDS: The Texan
OUT WORDS: Labrador I guess.
DURATION:5'00"]

The Texan sitting next to me on a recent flight across the country is gloomy. "No-body likes Americans any more", he explains, "or virtually no-body." "We still have you folks -- he means the British -- and I suppose the Australians, but that's about it." This overly paranoid view of the outside world is widespread in America -- a woman wrote to me recently to enquire about France -- had it fallen to Islamic radicals yet?

She had read somewhere that it was about to and she was worried about the future of French nuclear weapons. I cannot remember where she wrote from, but I suspect it was Kansas or one of the Dakotas. On the eastern and western seaboard you can look out across the water and at least imagine foreigners – indeed they come here as tourists so you can see and meet them. The paranoia is reduced: but in those vast under-populated bits in the middle it is taking off in worrying fashion.

Which is why the passing of Tony Blair is a concern to all of us who have an interest in the mental health of this great nation. I am worried it might send them off the deep end. Many Americans are aware that Tony Blair and the Australian Prime Minister John Howard have not exactly prospered politically as a result of their pallyness with the White House. There is a horrible prospect that barbarians – anti-American barbarians – are at the gate and about to take over in the last remaining places that US passport holders can go without having to pretend they are Canadian. Is Gordon Brown one of those barbarians? The American right is very suspicious of the Mr Brown – they know he's been in charge of the money and they know how much Brits pay in tax on petrol and they put two and two together – but in a wider sense they just don't trust his instincts. As one Bush backing columnist put it recently: Tony Blair gets it. Gordon Brown doesn't. I wonder what President Bush himself makes of the Chancellor – Mr Brown was in Washington recently and the two men had a 45 minute private chat. Significantly, Mr Brown was very keen to point out afterwards that the meeting had been set up by the White House – when I interviewed him here in Washington he told me it was a complete surprise to him that the President dropped by while he was in the building seeing more junior

officials. Did they get on – yes. But my efforts to seek any further information about the Brown view of this relationship – or potential relationship, were firmly rebuffed.”

If Gordon Brown becomes the long term resident of 10 Downing St he will of course outlast the current resident of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave – so what really matters is who follows Mr Bush. Since the 2008 Presidential election is going to be the most open contest in modern American history it is perhaps futile to conjecture. Though two names do spring out as being likely friends of Gordon – sharers of his toothpaste. The first is not a candidate at the moment but he could become one. Al Gore – who lost to Bush in 2000 -- and Gordon Brown seem to me to be made for each other – Mr Brown told me they’d met years ago when Gore was a Senator and Brown a junior MP – Gore had a blackboard in his office and lectured the British visitor for an hour on the subject of global warming, “so he’s nothing if not consistent”, Mr Brown remarked with grim relish and obvious respect. Both are serious men who respect other serious men. Both have seen political prizes snatched from them in the past. This relationship could work though goodness knows how the outside world would cope with the lecturer in chief and his dour Scottish sidekick?

The other potential President with whom I think Gordon Brown might get on rather well, is the 70 year old republican Senator John McCain. Mr McCain is famous at the moment for backing the troop surge in Iraq – but his Presidency would be about much more than that. Again he is a serious – a substantial person – who was tortured in the Vietnam war, who has clashed often with his own party on matters

of conscience and morality. McCain is often seen as an overly gloomy character, moody and remote and unwilling to do the touchy feely stuff necessary to win in the modern age. For McCain read Brown. As Private Eye would say: perhaps they are related.

For now though Americans will mourn the political passing of Tony Blair, whom most regard as a true friend of their nation, up there with Churchill and Thatcher. Interestingly they do not – emphatically do not – regard him as George Bush’s poodle. They almost always credit Mr Blair with more intelligence and more guts than their own president – a faithful friend but a bright one as well. I pressed an acquaintance of mine to pick a breed of dog that summed up Mr Blair’s strengths – his response; “Labrador, I guess!”