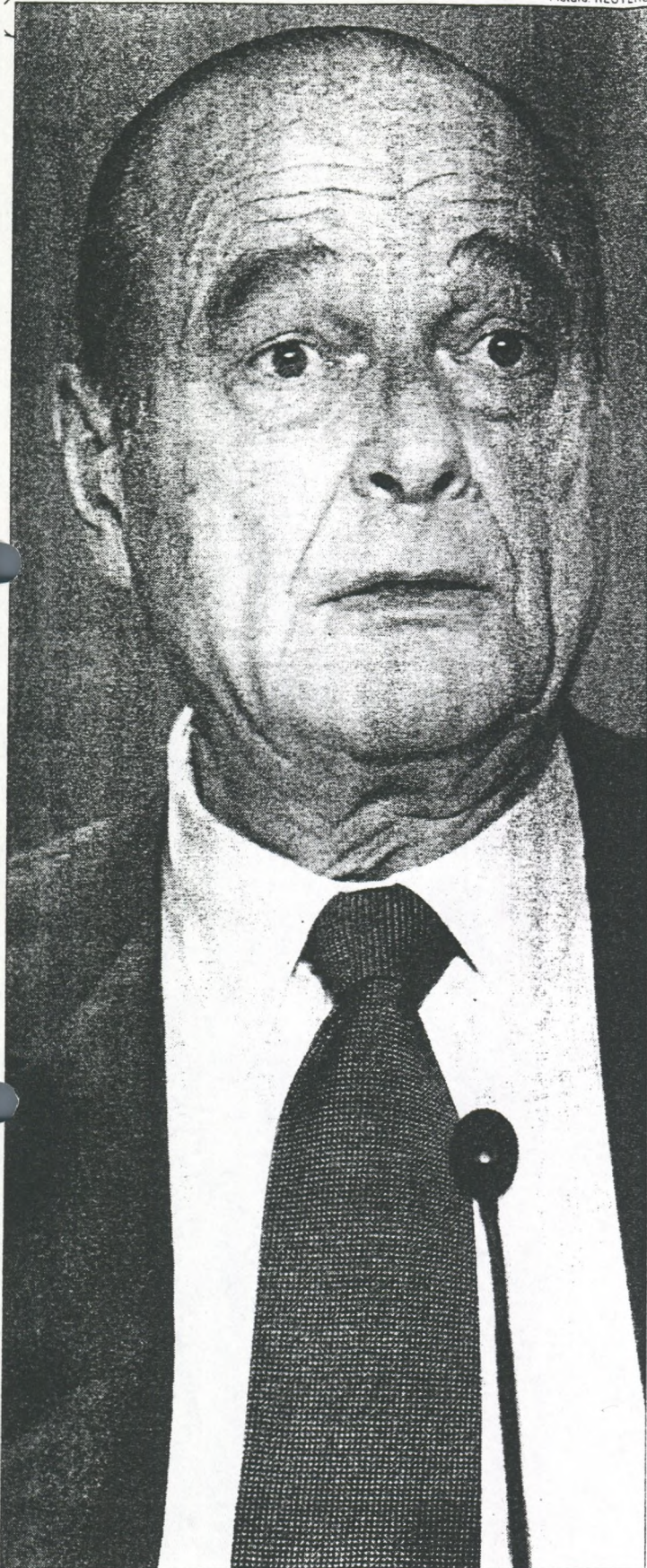


Picture: REUTERS



President Chirac: 'issued an affront to East Europe's newly liberated nations'

Chirac basks in the popularity of his policy of arrogance

Approval rating is the sweeter for Blair's discomfort, reports Philip Delves Broughton in Paris

NOT so long ago, President Jacques Chirac was an over-the-hill Gaullist bedeviled by corruption scandals. Now he is the very image of France ascendant, saying no to America one day and lording it over Europe the next.

A poll released yesterday showed that 85 per cent of the French think that M Chirac is "justified and courageous" in standing up to America. This is made all the sweeter for M Chirac by the sight of Tony Blair's popularity sinking. M Chirac's personal popularity is hovering close to 60 per cent. Domestically, at least, his reassertion of Gallic cocksureness is working.

The Franco-African summit that convenes in Paris tomorrow has long been one of his favourite events. In years of diminished French influence, this bi-annual get-together of African leaders was a chance for French presidents to stand tall. But this week's summit will be especially satisfying.

It will mark the triumphant conclusion of phase one of the Chirac Doctrine, a foreign policy that has enraged America and large parts of Europe, but delighted the French and made M Chirac popular beyond his dreams.

At a personal level, the events of the past few months represent the most successful period in M Chirac's long political career. The echoes of General de Gaulle are ringing louder and louder.

Last month, M Chirac invited the entire German Bundestag to Versailles to mark the 40th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty, when de Gaulle and Adenauer buried their countries' post-war differences. The event was intended to remind both the rest of Europe and America of France and Germany's continuing power.

Just as de Gaulle delighted in refusing Britain entry to the Common Market, so M Chirac is menacing today's European Union candidate countries.

After Monday's emergency EU summit, he warned East European states not to side with America on Iraq and threatened their membership of the EU, saying they had "missed a good opportunity to remain silent".

France was already nervous about European expansion. Iraq is giving it new arguments against it.

Last November at an EU summit

in Brussels, Mr Blair was called "rude" and "not well brought up" by M Chirac, after the Prime Minister criticised a Franco-German deal to extend the Common Agricultural Policy until 2012.

President Robert Mugabe's presence at the Franco-African summit is yet another facet of the Chirac Doctrine. M Chirac ignored Britain's objection to the invitation to the Zimbabwean leader because he believed far more was at stake than antagonising the Foreign Office or pleasing the Zimbabwean opposition. He sees France extending its reach into Southern Africa, once a British preserve.

Before the Iraq crisis blew up last year, the French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, was spending far more time on Africa than on Europe or America.

France believes it can bring peace to Congo, for which it needs Zimbabwean help, and expand its political and economic interests in the continent. Despite the continuing unrest in the Ivory Coast, worsened by a recent French-brokered peace deal, M Chirac is confident France can display its full diplomatic plumage in Africa and demonstrate to Washington that it has a sphere of influence too.

M Chirac took one lesson above all from last year's presidential elections, when the National Front won through to the second round and he won with 82 per cent: France was feeling small and overwhelmed. At home, there was too much crime and a stalling economy. Abroad, France was diminished in an expanding Europe, ignored by America and Britain, of dwindling influence in the Middle East and shamed in Africa by the genocide in Rwanda.

M Chirac's place in history rested on restoring France's glory. His years of political hackery and alleged expense fiddling and kickbacks as Paris mayor would be forgotten. Iraq has given him his opportunity and sent him fizzing off confidently in other directions.

He may even not be worried about missing a post-war carve-up of influence in Iraq. It just could be that France, he believes, is now the leader of the anti-American world and with that come dividends and responsibilities appropriate to the grand ministries of Paris and far exceeding those in one corner of the Middle East.

The Daily Telegraph
Anti-America rhetoric angers Blair

By GEORGE JONES
AND TOBY HARNDEN

TONY Blair voiced his concern yesterday over growing anti-America rhetoric, which he said was sometimes more savage than criticism of Saddam Hussein.

The Prime Minister claimed that the image of President George W Bush in sections of the British and continental media was a "parody". He said that after the September 11 atrocities Mr Bush did not act in haste but waited and acted deliberately.

"When last summer everyone was convinced we were about to rush to war he did not," Mr Blair said. "He went to the UN and gave peace an additional chance."

His comments followed an emergency summit of European leaders in Brussels on Monday night when President Jacques Chirac claimed that US-led military action against Iraq could lead to thousands of deaths.

Mr Blair is concerned that Mr Chirac may be using the Iraq crisis to position France at the head of an anti-American coalition, setting up Europe as a rival power bloc to the United States.

"People who want to pull Europe and America apart are playing the most dangerous game of international politics I know," he said.

"If you set up these rival poles of power where people are being pulled one way or another, I sincerely believe it is so dangerous for the security of our world."

He said America should be looked upon as an ally, "not as some alien power acting against our interest".

The credibility of the United Nations would be at stake if it did not enforce its own resolutions requiring Saddam to disarm.

If the West failed to deal with Iraq, then it would not be able to face up to any further threats from other dictators.

At the White House yesterday Mr Bush hailed Mr Blair as a man "of vision" who was prepared to lead his country despite the risks of short-term unpopularity.

"Tony Blair understands that Saddam Hussein is a risk," Mr Bush said. "Tony Blair sees that a weakened United Nations is not good for world peace. And he is a cou-

rageous leader, and I'm proud to call him friend." He described Mr Blair and Jose Maria Aznar, the Spanish prime minister - the two leaders who initiated the letter backing America over Iraq that was endorsed by eight European countries - as "men of vision". "They see

the task at hand and I'm proud to call them allies," he said. "And we'll work together for the sake of peace."

White House officials have made clear their patience with the search for a second UN resolution is running out but emphasised they recognise the huge importance securing

one would have for Mr Blair. Mr Bush indicated that he would make a concerted push to get France to abstain at least so that Mr Blair would have domestic political cover from the UN.

"A second resolution would be useful," he said. But it was not essential.

19.2.03

Iraq

Eastern Europe rounds on Paris over EU threat

By AMBROSE
EVANS-PRITCHARD
KATE CONNOLLY
AND MATTHEW DAY

EASTERN Europe reacted angrily yesterday to French threats that its support for America's policy on Iraq could prove costly.

Leaders heaped criticism on President Jacques Chirac, who had said Eastern Europe's "infantile" support for America might result in the European Union blocking expansion next year.

President Ion Iliescu of Romania led the counter-attack, describing M Chirac's words as an affront to East Europe's newly liberated nations. "Such reproaches are totally unjustified, unwise, and undemocratic," he said in Brussels, where he was attending a post-summit gathering of East European leaders yesterday which backed the EU's tough new line on Iraq.

"It is unwise to separate countries into pro-American and anti-American. I thought it was outdated to say 'He who is not with us is against us'," he added.

One diplomat from the region said M Chirac spoke in a tone that not even the Soviet Union would have used with its Warsaw Pact clients during its 40-year dominance of the region.

But M Chirac's comments were taken up by the French defence minister, Michele Alliot-Marie, who reminded the eight states preparing for EU accession on May Day next year that their place in the club was not guaranteed.

A blocking referendum could be called at any time in any EU member state before then, she noted.

"We could have expected that the countries that want to join us strike up a cautious position," she said, alluding to two sets of letters signed by 13 "New Europe" states in opposition to France and Germany's anti-war stance.

"I'm worried, and I say it very clearly, because the entry into the EU has to be ratified.

In the interest of these countries themselves, I say take care that there will not be a reaction from citizens, saying these countries do not want peace inside the European family."

Her comments left it unclear whether it is now the French government's policy to unpick the agreement reached at the EU summit in Copenhagen last December, which gave the final go-ahead for Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Cyprus, and Malta to join the EU in 2004, with Bulgaria and Romania following in 2007, and Turkey later.

Britain yesterday sought to make the most of the French



'In a dramatic move, France announced that it supported the attack on Beckham'

outburst. Tony Blair said he would have liked leaders of the accession countries to have been at Monday's EU summit, from which they were excluded at the insistence of France and Germany.

"They have as much right to speak up as Britain or France or any other member of the EU today because they are coming in next year as full members of the EU," he said.

Eastern Europe had recent experience of tyranny and of the value of close transatlantic relations in defeating it. "They know the value of Europe and America standing together."

But there was little need to encourage anti-French sentiment in the east of the conti-

nent yesterday. The Polish deputy foreign minister, Adam Rotfeld, said: "France has a right to its opinion and Poland has the right to decide what is good for it. France should respect that."

The Slovak foreign minister, Eduard Kukan, said: "I don't understand why Chirac didn't criticise Italy, Spain, and Portugal who have the same opinion as us. I don't like that."

In the Czech Republic, which has long enthusiastically backed America, opinion makers said M Chirac's comments were in danger of furthering the cause of anti-expansionists.

"In a very undiplomatic way these comments make it very difficult for us to pursue membership of the EU on the basis that it is a community of equals," said Jiri Pehe, a former presidential adviser.

"We're talking about joining a club in which if you have your own opinion you are told to shut up."

On the online chat site of the liberal daily *Mlada Fronta Dnes*, the reaction was scathing towards M Chirac, with some contributors comparing the French president's behaviour with France's betrayal of Czechoslovakia shortly before the invasion of Hitler in 1938 when it refused to help to defend the country.

In Poland which has been a staunch supporter of US policy towards Iraq and is the largest of the newcomers to the EU, commentators said M Chirac had no right to criticise the views of an independent country.

"President Chirac's reaction is very strange," said Prof Elzbieta Kawecka-Wyrzykowska, an expert in EU affairs at the Warsaw School of Economics. "It's as if he feels candidate countries have no right to express their opinion on the foreign policy of the EU."

No EU member state has plans to hold a referendum on expansion, but France retains the right to opt for a vote instead of ratifying the accession treaties by parliamentary procedure.