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## The Special Relationship

Britain is no longer assured of privileged status with the US. This country can be the ally it promises to be only by matching words with military action

On January 13, in one of his last acts as President, George Bush will award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Tony Blair in thanks for Britain's unyielding support of the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. Mr Blair will follow Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Nelson Mandela and Walt Disney as recipients of a medal that is, jointly, America's most prestigious civil tribute.

But it is the medal with which it shares that status, the Congressional Gold Medal of Honour, that will dominate the coverage. Mr Blair was awarded the medal in July 2003, since when he has allowed almost 2,000 days to pass without collecting it. He really ought to do so as a matter of urgency. The award was made not by the President but by the Congress of the American people. And it was granted not to Mr Blair as a lone individual but to him in his capacity as Prime Minister of the British people. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which this newspaper supported, the American people have honoured their allies the British and it is uncharacteristically ungracious of the former Prime Minister not to turn up to receive it.

Mr Blair is the first Prime Minister since Winston Churchill to be awarded the Congressional

Medal. It is intriguing to wonder whether he might be the last. Certainly, the election of Barack Obama presages serious changes to the relationship between Britain and the US.

This is, in part, a matter of personal history. President Obama will not share with some of his predecessors any emotional ties with this country. But it is also more than personal. The British Prime Minister is already vying with the French President to be the first official visitor to the new administration. There will be plenty of national leaders heading to Washington in the hope that some of the Obama glint will rub off. Suddenly, with a new president in the wings and with the Iraqi intervention in its latter stages, the relationships between America and the nations that dissented over war can begin afresh.

In the new circumstances of 2009 the first big test for the relationship of Britain and America will come in Afghanistan. If the new president increases the American presence he will surely look to Britain to do the same. This test of friendship will come as serious questions are being asked, in the highest command of the United States military, about the effectiveness of the British contribution to the war efforts. These doubts are very much to the point. They expose

the central flaw in British thinking about the special relationship. The medals awarded to Mr Blair were for saying all the right things at the critical moment. That is no small matter. To be a staunch and vocal ally at an historical turning point is the first requirement of an enduring relationship.

But it is not enough. Britain has tried to extend its military reach without committing the required resources. For fifty years after the Second World War, defence spending, as a proportion of national income, declined. Since 1997, even with the extra spending specific to Iraq and Afghanistan, it has remained flat, at 2.5 per cent of GDP. Too often weapons and ammunition have been faulty, vehicles have been unreliable, living accommodation inadequate. Now, the £4 billion aircraft carrier project has been delayed.

The doctrine of liberal interventionism, famously set out by Mr Blair in his speech in Chicago in 1999, implies a far bigger military budget. The case that the security threat to the world is now of a qualitatively different type, which needs to be confronted rather than appeased, is a cogent one. It is a threat that the United States faces. If Britain wishes to win the medals that come with special status, it is no good willing the end without the means.