

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

**Prime Minister Gordon Brown in Washington**

Reginald Dale

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**Q1: Is it important for British prime minister Gordon Brown to be the first European leader to visit the Obama White House this Tuesday?**

**A1:** Yes, very. Although British diplomats play down talk of a race with France and Germany to the Oval Office, the symbolism of arriving first is highly important for Brown, who for many reasons wants to establish a preeminent alliance with Obama. First, Brown, a committed Atlanticist, believes that Britain's long-term strategic interests demand a close relationship with the United States. Second, he sees the two like-minded countries as the natural leaders of a bid to rescue the world economy and reform the international financial institutions at a moment of crisis that marks the dawn of a new era in global economic and political history. And third, Brown desperately needs success at international level to offset his dismal poll numbers at home—with an election due by June 2010 at the latest.

**Q2: How can Brown's visit to Washington help him domestically?**

**A2:** Brown, like other European leaders, hopes that closeness to the new president will somehow transfuse a shot of Obama's star power into his own more sluggish political bloodstream. He hopes to rebuild his battered image at home by basking in Obama's acceptance of Britain, under Brown's leadership, as America's most loyal ally and partner, and he hopes to win Obama's backing for his efforts, as he himself has put it, to "save the world" from economic and financial catastrophe. The aim is to convince British voters that if Brown has the economic skills, experience, and clout to save the world economy, he must be the right man for the same job in Britain.

**Q3: So, what will they talk about?**

**A3:** Brown's ambitions benefited from a big lucky break with his selection as chairman of the G-20 leading developed and emerging economies that will hold a summit meeting in London in early April to tackle the global financial crisis. Obama will attend that meeting during his first presidential trip to Europe, which will also include NATO's 60th anniversary summit on the Franco-German border. So, in Washington, Brown must try to persuade Obama to see the economic crisis from a global perspective, a dimension that has so far been strikingly absent from Obama's public pronouncements, and to convince Obama that the U.S. and British approaches—big economic stimulus packages, bank rescues, and promises of sweeping regulatory reform—are close enough that the two leaders can join forces to promote a "global new deal" that modernizes the world economy and recognizes the shifting patterns of global economic power. Brown will also try to get Obama on board with a strong commitment to renounce protectionism, on which Obama is seen as "wobbly" in Europe.

**Q4: Will they only discuss economics?**

**A4:** No. Other international issues such as Iran, Iraq, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are on the agenda, but the most important subject is likely to be Afghanistan, where Obama wants the European allies to give much more support to NATO operations against the Taliban. Here again, Brown sees a chance for British-American leadership, as Britain already contributes the second-largest combat force after the United States and has been engaged in heavy fighting. Rather than focus on the need for more British troops, although some may be forthcoming, Brown will rather aim to persuade Obama to join a combined drive by London and Washington to persuade the other allies to step up their efforts. Thus, Brown would achieve a British-American axis at both the G-20 and the NATO summits.

**Q5: What about the personal chemistry?**

**A5:** There could hardly be stronger contrasts between the two leaders. Brown has a dour, sometimes gauche, ascetic, and introspective personality, whereas Obama is smooth, effusive, charming, charismatic, and unflappable. Brown is fighting hard to survive in a hostile electoral climate; Obama has just triumphantly won a historic election. While Brown is very pro-American, the British don't see Obama as a natural Anglophile. Obama likes to be liked, whereas Brown is

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more interested in results than body language. On the other hand, both have a background in left-of-center politics, and Brown has many old friends among the Obama team, and his wonkish side, especially on the economy and aid to poorer countries, could appeal to Obama. Both will certainly want to look as if they are getting on well.

**Q6: Is there still a “special relationship” between the United States and Britain?**

**A6:** Yes. Although the British media has for decades now been quick to announce the end of the “special relationship” any time differences arise between the leaders of the two countries, the relationship is far deeper and more multilayered than the interaction between president and prime minister at any given moment. Obama has made some gestures to the “special relationship” by saying in London last July that he wanted to strengthen it, adding that there is a “deep abiding affection for the British people in America and a fascination with all things British.” But the British media recently pounced on a White House description of the link as a “special partnership,” rather than “relationship,” and much has been made of Obama’s decision to return to the British government a bust of Winston Churchill that graced the Oval Office during the tenure of George Bush. Although symbolism is important, it will take more than such trivia to destroy a relationship so deeply rooted in history, culture, and language and shared attitudes, values, and interests. Brown’s speech to the joint houses of Congress on Wednesday will give him a chance to reassert the special nature of the relationship by making some of these broader points.

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