

PETER RIDDELL

**HUG THEM
CLOSE** Blair, Clinton,
Bush and the
'Special Relationship'



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Preface

This book is the result of frustration and annoyance. These may seem strange motives for authorship, but during the early months of 2003 I became increasingly frustrated and annoyed about how Tony Blair's relations with George W. Bush were being portrayed in the media and in Parliament. Much of what was said and written struck me then, and even more now, as ill-informed and superficial. Jibes about Blair being 'Bush's poodle' or charges about Blair and Bush being war criminals were matched by one-sided partisanship ahead of, and during, the war. Condemnations of the 'axis of weasel' and 'cheese-eating surrender monkeys' were common, and not just in the more xenophobic tabloids. The demonisation of France and Germany, and the celebration of 'Rummy' as if the American Defense Secretary was some kind of cartoon hero, reflected the debasement of journalism in Britain. President Chirac made several big errors during the early months of 2003, but both he and Chancellor Schröder had serious reasons for acting as they did, widely shared by their own voters. These need to be understood rather than just abusively dismissed. Similarly, Tony Blair's relations with Washington are much more complicated than implied by the crude anti-American placards of the anti-war demonstrators or the anti-Bush comments of many Labour MPs. I wanted to redress the

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balance by trying to explain what happened and what motivated the main players on both sides of the Atlantic.

The following pages are about the politics and personalities of transatlantic relations, not about the war in Iraq. The war was the occasion for writing the book, and is its climax, though we are far from the end of the story. But as important is what happened over the preceding months and years. You cannot appreciate why Tony Blair backed the US in 2003 unless you take into account not only the 11 September attacks, but also, much earlier, his attitude towards newly elected President George W. Bush, and his relations with President Bill Clinton. To understand these events, and his decision to adopt his 'hug them close' approach to the White House, you have to look back at the relations between Prime Ministers and Presidents since the 1940s. Only then is it possible to appreciate why Tony Blair has been, in many ways, a traditional British Prime Minister in his approach to Washington, and in his desire to avoid choosing between Europe and America.

Hug Them Close is a mixture of reporting and analysis, based on my own experience as a journalist, on both the *Financial Times* and, since 1991, *The Times*. I first visited Washington in 1975 and have been back virtually every year since then, spending nearly three years there as Washington Bureau Chief of the *FT* in the days of the first President Bush. I have covered many of the events described, observing prime ministers and presidents at first hand since the early 1980s.

I feel as much at home in Washington as in any European capital, more so in many ways since I both lived there and met my wife there. I despise the patronising anti-Americanism, and contempt for American culture and

society, of some on both the left and right in Britain, and many more in the rest of Europe. America is a second home, where I have enjoyed the warm friendship of many thoughtful and intelligent people. I never fail to be thrilled each time I approach Washington from Dulles Airport and catch a first glimpse of the Lincoln Memorial across the Potomac, or see the Manhattan skyline for the first time coming in from JFK airport. That is why, on my first visit to the US after the 11 September attacks, my initial sight of the Manhattan skyline without the twin towers was so poignant, as it has been for so many other British friends of America. That is also why I regard the 'America had it coming' attitude of some on the European left as contemptible and morally bankrupt. I understand why, for many Americans, something fundamental did change on 11 September.

Yet the United States is still a foreign country. Terrorism is a real and urgent threat, but it is not the only serious global problem. I do not share the belief of American neo-conservatives – a diverse group anyway – that what works in the United States is, by definition, best, and can, and should, be transplanted around the world. This attitude has stimulated much of the anti-Americanism seen in the Middle East and Europe. America is the most powerful nation on earth, and is mainly a force for good. But it cannot ensure security and peace on its own. The US needs allies and partners, to whom it listens, rather than dictates.

Also, when I lived in Washington, I became more of a pro-European – or, rather, I realised that Britain's future is primarily as part of Europe, rather than as a 51st state. The visits of Jacques Delors, then President of the European

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Commission, mattered far more than those of virtually all British ministers, apart from Margaret Thatcher. For all the close bilateral ties of so many kinds, ultimately in the eyes of Washington Britain is a European power, albeit one usually closer to America than either France or Germany. Thus any attempt to separate ourselves from the rest of Europe is a damaging delusion.

During the course of writing this book, I spoke to many of those involved in the Downing Street–White House relationship over the past decade. Some conversations date back several years to the time of the events described. Most were after the end of the Iraq war. As often with works of contemporary history, much of the information has been on an off-the-record basis, as well as on-the-record via public statements, interviews and, most recently, the revelations about Whitehall in the Hutton inquiry. This presents any author with an awkward dilemma. References to ‘private information’ in the footnotes of many books understandably irritate readers who wonder about the reliability of the unattributable quotations. The sources are unwilling to be named because they are still working for the government, in London, Washington, Paris and Berlin. Not using such unattributable quotations would deprive readers of information which would otherwise not be available and which, I believe, enriches the book.

In the following chapters, I have tried to be open and transparent. Where possible I have attributed quotations. References to major speeches, articles and books are given in the bibliography. In other cases, where a statement is attributed to someone, I either heard it directly from them or had

it reliably reported to me by someone who was present when, say, Tony Blair, Bill Clinton or George W. Bush made the reported remarks. That applies, for example, to the account of Blair and Clinton's conversation at Chequers in December 2000, which was reported to me by one of the participants the following day. Similarly, my accounts of Blair's response on 11 September and his meetings with Bush are based on reports by those who were there. Definitions of who is a senior or close Blair adviser or official tend to be elastic in the British press, just as a senior backbencher tends to be anyone who has been re-elected for a second parliament. But when I use the terms 'senior' or 'close', I mean people who would be recognised as such, not least by Tony Blair himself, if their identities were revealed.

Most of this book comes from conversations with still-serving senior politicians, civil servants, diplomats and advisers since the events described are so recent. Few are willing to be quoted by name. However, the handful of senior officials who were closely involved in these events who have now retired have been willing to have their comments attributed. For instance, Sir Christopher Meyer, who served as British Ambassador to Washington from November 1997 until the end of February 2003, has been very candid about his memories of these years in television interviews, and in talking with me while I was writing this book. I am very grateful to him for his generosity in giving me time during many conversations over the years, both in Washington and since his return to London. His insights have been invaluable. Lord Wilson of Dinton, Cabinet Secretary from January 1998 until July 2002, also allowed me to quote him attributably, for

which I would like to thank him. Even though my thanks to still serving senior officials and advisers are anonymous, they are nonetheless considerable. Those in 10 Downing Street, the Foreign Office, the Bush administration, the State Department and the French and German Governments who helped me know who they are. I hope they will think I have done justice to their assistance in the following pages. Of course, all interpretations, and inevitable misinterpretations, are entirely my own.

Much of what I learned about transatlantic relations has come from former colleagues on the *Financial Times*, both in London and particularly during my happy period in Washington, as well from my current colleagues on *The Times*, especially in the political team at Westminster who make my working life so much fun and so stimulating. I also owe a considerable debt to many American and British friends who are part of my transatlantic world.

This book has been produced, very quickly, by Politico's, whose publishing arm is now part of Methuen. My good friend Sean Magee has now had a hand in bringing out most of my books in various publishing houses over nearly two decades and I am, as ever, grateful to him for his humour and gentle editing. The irrepressible Iain Dale of Politico's accepted and backed my idea for this book on the spot, and John Schwartz was his usual efficient self in seeing the book through. (Two stylistic points. I have generally adopted English spellings except in direct quotations and in reference to the World Trade Center, where I thought the American version was more appropriate. I have also referred to George W. Bush's father, the 41st, as opposed to the current 43rd, US

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President as Bush senior or the elder Bush, for reasons of convenience as opposed to correctness.)

My wife Avril and my daughter Emily have, as always, offered advice, encouragement and love. They have been very patient and supportive during the self-absorbed few months while I have been writing this book. Their unique contribution is recognised in the dedication. I hope they, and all those others who have helped me, believe the effort has been worthwhile.

Peter Riddell
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