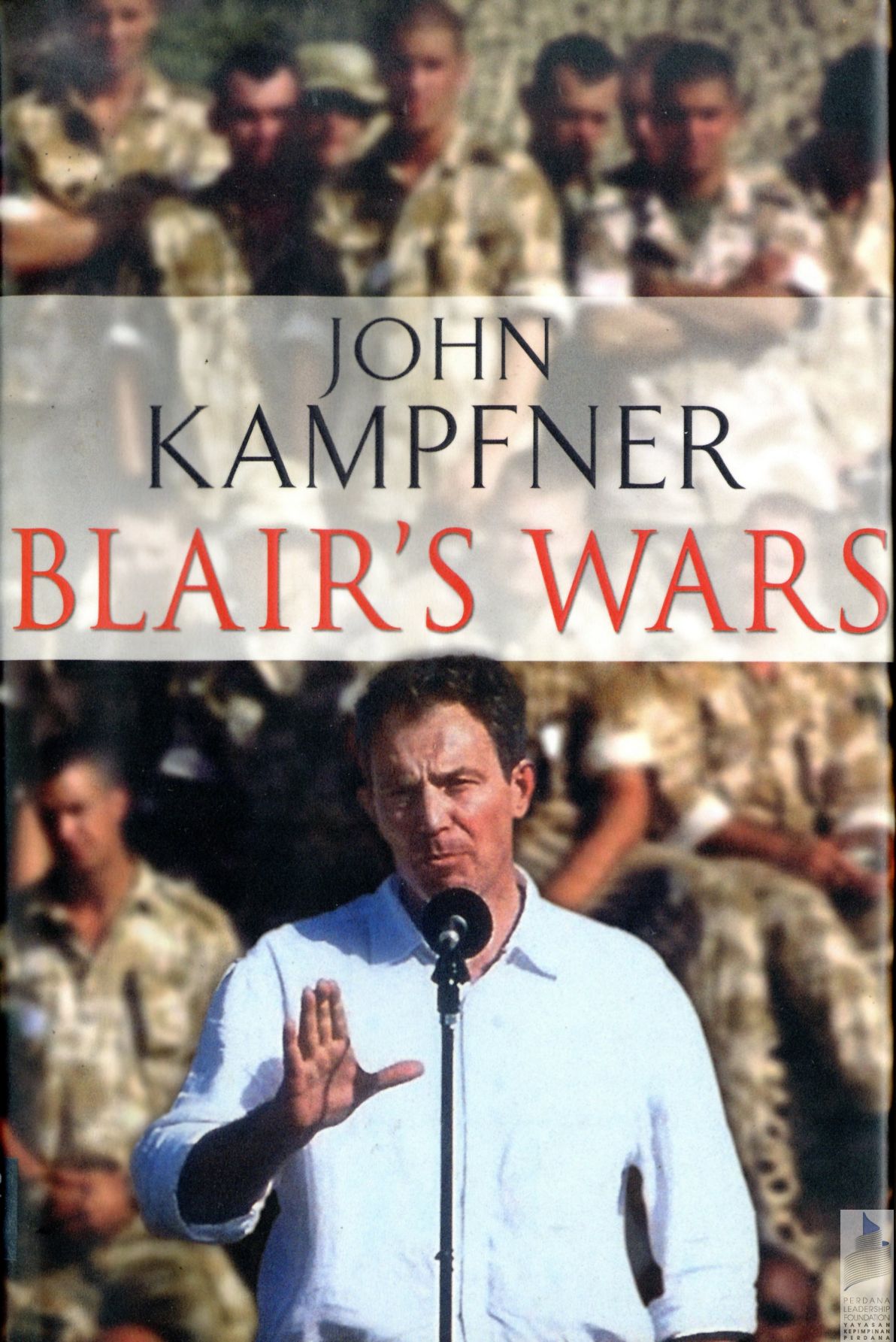

Tony Blair has committed British forces to action five times in six years. No British Prime Minister and few world leaders have come close in contemporary history. What is it about this deeply Christian man that has given him such a taste for war?

In *Blair's Wars*, award-winning journalist John Kampfner gives the inside story of a man who came to office with no experience of – and virtually no interest in – foreign affairs but who quickly moulded himself into a man on a mission: to punish dictators and spread democracy across the globe. To do that he fell back on the basic tenets of British diplomacy, a yearning for friendship with the United States and a reliance on the armed forces, while proclaiming his vision in the more modern guise of liberal intervention.

This mission has taken Blair from the first air strikes against Iraq in 1998, at the time of Bill Clinton's impeachment trial, to the Kosovo conflict of 1999; from the deployment of troops in Sierra Leone to George W. Bush's attack on the Taleban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan after September 11 – and then on to the final and decisive war against Saddam Hussein.

Through in-depth and revelatory interviews with the main players in London, Washington, New York and European capitals, *Blair's Wars* details the processes by which the Prime Minister has conducted these campaigns – and why. It reveals in riveting fashion the failure of diplomacy that preceded the showdown with Saddam. It shows how Blair decided from the beginning of Bush's presidency that he would allow nothing to get in the way of their close alliance; how he reconciled himself to war on Iraq at a very early stage; how he willed the intelligence material to conform to his plans; and how he dismissed the warnings of his diplomats that his approach would alienate him from countries he had so assiduously courted. This is the definitive story of one of the most divisive issues of our time, as told by those who were intimately involved – the story of a Prime Minister who had convinced himself that his powers of persuasion could overcome all problems and right all wrongs, only to see those powers disappear.

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BLAIR'S WARS

JOHN KAMPFNER

First published in Great Britain by The Free Press in 2003
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Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
Africa House
64–78 Kingsway
London WC2B 6AH

Simon & Schuster Australia
Sydney

www.simonsays.co.uk

A CIP catalogue for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN: 0-7432-4829-5

Typeset by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
The Bath Press, Bath

To Lucy, Alex and Constance

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PREFACE

It is some feat to go to war five times in six years. That statistic impelled me to write this book. No British Prime Minister and few world leaders come close, and none of these five wars could be defined through the traditional concepts of national interest or repelling an invader. So what is it about Tony Blair that has given him such a taste for the battlefield?

This is the story of a man who came to office in 1997 knowing precious little about foreign affairs, who within a year had defined a new mission for Britain overseas. The idea of humanitarian intervention was developed as he went along. It came awry when confronted by the new realities after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and by George W. Bush's strategic doctrine of preemption and primacy for the United States. As Blair struggled to maintain his authority on the global stage, as his approach unravelled, the mismatch between his ends and his means became ever more stark. This is the story of a man who had convinced himself that his powers of persuasion could overcome all problems and defy all logic – only to see those powers ebb away.

Blair's Wars traces the evolution of the relationship between

the Prime Minister and war in three sections. Part I looks at his approach to foreign affairs in opposition and then in Downing Street, taking in his first military conflict, the air strikes against Saddam Hussein in 1998; the Kosovo war a year later and the despatch of British troops to Sierra Leone in 2000.

The second part takes in Blair's response to the rise of the neo-conservatives in the US, the events of September 11, the war in Afghanistan, and the early diplomatic manoeuvres against Iraq, culminating in the passing of Resolution 1441 by the United Nations Security Council. It was during this period that Britain and the US agreed on war. It was during this period that British and American intelligence pointed up the threat posed by Saddam's weapons of mass destruction – a threat they would later struggle to sustain. How much did Blair really know? How accurate was the story he told?

Part III tells the dramatic story of the road to war. It gives an insider's account of the failures in British diplomacy and the tensions at the heart of government. It reveals the extent of the concern in much of Whitehall at the speed with which Blair dismissed the efforts of UN weapons inspectors and embraced the strategy of the White House. After the war, as the reconstruction of Iraq faltered and as evidence of WMD proved elusive, it shows how an increasingly fraught government machine battled to vindicate its approach.

Blair's Wars is the culmination of more than sixty interviews conducted over six months with more than forty people. These include senior ministers, senior advisers and senior civil servants across government – from Downing Street to the Foreign Office to other Whitehall departments and security agencies. These officials were all players in the five military conflicts and the processes that led up to them. Most are still serving in their posts, some are not. My enquiries also led me to senior figures in the US, France, Germany, Russia, the Middle East, the UN and Nato.

The rules of engagement throughout were 'strict background': no attribution that could identify the source. All those who spoke to

me know who they are, but I hope they do not know whose company they keep. I am very grateful to them all for speaking to me so candidly on sensitive subjects in obviously difficult circumstances, especially given the events that transpired over the summer of 2003. My publisher and I took the view that, since note numbers in the text would often lead only to references to 'private conversations', we would not encumber the narrative with source notes on each page. All open-source material derives from speeches, newspaper interviews and the like.

When I began the task in January 2003, my intention was to fill a gap in the bibliography of Blair studies – foreign policy. Neither I nor my interlocutors had any idea at the time how sensitive the subject would over the course of the year become. For all the acrimony around the Iraq war, I have sought in this book to play it straight, to tell it as it is, rather than as either the government or its opponents would want it told. As the news story on Iraq developed on a day-to-day basis, I sought to include the salient points, not to follow it slavishly. This is a book as much about the motivation of Tony Blair as his actions.

My thanks go to all those interviewees who gave me their time – sometimes for several hours in one session – and to friends and colleagues who helped fill in the background or pointed me in particular directions.

At the *New Statesman* I received considerable support, notably from Peter Wilby, the Editor; Cristina Odone, the Deputy Editor; and Geoffrey Robinson MP, the owner. Dougal Stenson was always on-hand to provide back-up. For six months I have been lucky to have such an assiduous and talented researcher as Abbie Fielding-Smith.

I am particularly grateful to my agent, Bruce Hunter at David Higham Associates, for encouraging me in the venture and for linking me with Simon & Schuster. I would like to thank Tim Judah for giving me invaluable help on Kosovo and Sierra Leone. I am indebted to several former special advisers who provided insights,

including David Mepham, now at the IPPR, Bernard Gray, Andrew Hood and David Clark. The same goes for Professor Lawrence Freedman at King's College, London; Professor Timothy Garton Ash at St Antony's College, Oxford; and Charles Grant and Heather Grabbe at the Centre for European Reform.

Throughout the past six months two close friends and confidants have given me much of their time. Steve Richards at the *Independent on Sunday* and Jonathan Steele at the *Guardian* read through various drafts, providing telling insights and advice page by page. I am forever in their debt. At Simon & Schuster my editor, Andrew Gordon, showed calm when nothing appeared for months, and more calm when it all appeared at the last moment. Working with him has been a pleasure and an inspiration. The publicity side has been managed superbly by Hannah Corbett.

For about three months I turned into the kind of person I vowed never to become – an absent father. For their forbearance and love, I would like to dedicate this book to my wife Lucy Ash, and to our two daughters, Alex and Constance.

JOHN KAMPFNER
August 2003

PART I

HUMANITARIAN WARRIOR


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1

Travelling Light

'I AM A BRITISH PATRIOT AND I AM PROUD TO BE A BRITISH patriot. I love my country. I will always put the interests of my country first. The Britain in my vision is not Britain turning its back on the world – narrow, shy, uncertain. It is a Britain confident of its place in the world, sure of itself, able to negotiate with the world and provide leadership in the world.'

Tony Blair had got into his stride. With each page of his speech his delivery became more assured. This was what he believed in. The Conservative government, he said, was guilty of 'presiding over the largest reduction in our military capability since the war'. John Major's 'negative' vision had damaged transatlantic ties. His years in power were synonymous with national decline, weakness and uncertainty over Britain's place in the world. New Labour would not make the same mistake. 'Century upon century it has been the destiny of Britain to lead other nations,' the Prime Minister-in-waiting proclaimed to his handpicked audience. 'That should not be a destiny that is part of our history. It should be part of our future. We are a leader of nations or nothing.'

Bridgewater Hall, Manchester, 21 April 1997. This was Blair's

only speech on foreign policy in the General Election campaign. Labour's pledge cards had been issued. The messages on public services, on the economy and on Europe had been carefully crafted. Governments across the world were now curious to know what this new visionary had to say about problems further afield. Their ambassadors to the Court of St James travelled eagerly to the north-west even at the risk of appearing as extras in another New Labour public relations triumph. It had been hard for Blair's aides to convince him to engage in foreign policy – he saw it as a distraction from what he called the real issues of the campaign.

The speech he delivered in Manchester that day bore little resemblance to the Labour manifesto he had launched two weeks earlier, in which the party pledged to be a force for good in the world. There was no mention of controlling the arms trade, let alone of setting up a defence diversification agency to shift weapons production to goods for civilian use. Third World poverty was skated over. Blair's right-hand man, Jonathan Powell, a diplomat wooed back from the British Embassy in Washington, had asked party officials for contributions to the speech. Labour's foreign policy commission was entrusted with setting out an agenda for the next five years. Its officials sent Powell a draft emphasising the importance of development and humanitarianism. He rejected it. Robin Cook, shadow Foreign Secretary and head of the commission, was aghast when he read the final version. The only success they had was to convince Blair, minutes before he was due to give the speech, to excise a line written by Powell which proclaimed: 'I am proud of the British Empire.'

Blair was not shy about Britain's past military glories. He was particularly pleased with one Labour party election broadcast, which featured a British bulldog. This was just the message he wanted to project. But the image-makers faced a technical problem, or rather a problem of taste: the dog's testicles occupied too much of the screen, and had to be airbrushed out.

Four months before the election Blair had had another

showdown with Cook. The two had been waiting in an anteroom just off the main hall of Labour's media centre in Millbank Tower. They were preparing the presentation of the policy commission's report, 'Britain and the World'. Peter Mandelson was also there, hovering. The two close friends discussed whether it was necessary to raise the issue of Trident – opposition to Britain's nuclear deterrent had been one of the left's talismanic issues of the 1980s. Blair and Mandelson agreed that one journalist would be encouraged to raise the question during the press conference. Cook objected, arguing that this would detract from the more positive proposals contained in a report that had taken years to compile. 'That is what I'm going to do,' Blair told him tersely. Sure enough, in question number three, Blair was asked if he was prepared to launch a nuclear strike. 'Yes,' he replied. The next day's headlines were 'I WILL PRESS THE BUTTON – BLAIR'. There was barely a mention of Labour's other foreign policy commitments. Mission accomplished.

Ever since becoming party leader in 1994, Blair had sought to 'close down' foreign policy as a contentious issue. Labour had form. It was still seen in many voters' eyes as the unilateralist party that was 'weak on defence'. Blair wanted to move on, to stress that any government under him would be tough. It would fight when needed.

The pillars of Labour's 1980s internationalism – unilateral nuclear disarmament, hostility to American foreign policy and withdrawal from the European Community – meant nothing to Blair. It wasn't that he was actively pushing a different line at party meetings; he just didn't engage in these issues at all. One friend who remembered Blair and his wife Cherie at the Hackney South Labour Party recalls: 'We talked an awful lot of politics in those days, but I can't remember him talking about foreign affairs at all.'

Blair's first real experience of the popular mood had come in May 1982, when he was selected as Labour's candidate in a by-election in the staunchly Conservative seat of Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire. As Blair hit the stump, British troops were landing in the Falklands to force out the Argentine invaders. Blair

showed early signs of 'Third Way-ism', supporting the dispatch of the task force, but adding: 'At the same time I want a negotiated settlement and I believe that given the starkness of the military option we need to compromise on certain things. I don't think that ultimately the wishes of the Falkland islanders must determine our position.' For that he was harangued in papers like the *Daily Telegraph* as just another dangerously anti-patriotic left-winger. This, after all, was a former member of CND who at Fettes public school had opted to do community work rather than join the Combined Cadet Force.

On other foreign policy issues Blair fastidiously toed the party line as set out by his leader, Michael Foot. 'We'll negotiate withdrawal from the EEC, which has drained our natural resources and destroyed jobs,' he said in his personal manifesto. The young candidate knew he was never going to win in a constituency like this. But even so, the reception at the doorstep shocked him. This would be a seminal experience. Blair commented to a friend that he had been 'turned over', that he had been forced to realise that 'wars seem to make Prime Ministers popular'. Labour were beaten into third place. Its share of the vote collapsed, and Blair lost his deposit. But he believed he had been taught a valuable lesson. Significantly, it had come in foreign policy.

A year later, Blair was selected for the safe seat of Sedgefield in County Durham. Curiously for a privately educated, London-based lawyer, he felt more at home in this predominantly working-class cluster of small towns and former mining villages. The people there seemed to have concerns more in tune with his. 'The experience of being a north-east MP turned him into the politician he became,' says a friend active with him at the time. 'He was never very interested in the passions of the post-'68 London crowd. He was driven by the feeling that the language of the Labour Party then had nothing to do with working people. The only thing that mattered to him was getting the party elected.' The talk in the pubs, clubs and local party committee meetings was not of Britain's

nuclear deterrent, the collapse of Communism or the fate of the Middle East.

As Labour – first under Neil Kinnock and then John Smith – divested itself of the old shibboleths of unilateralism and hostility to Europe, Blair grew a little more confident in talking about foreign affairs. But on all the big international issues of the late 1980s and early and mid-1990s he played it safe. His comments on arms sales and human rights did not extend beyond generalities.

Many of his colleagues, however, had taken up these causes. The gassing of Kurds at Halabja in March 1988 by Saddam Hussein's forces exercised a large number of Labour MPs. Eight parliamentary motions were tabled condemning it. If Blair had joined his colleagues, he would have been in the company of the likes of George Robertson, Paul Murphy, Ian McCartney, Mo Mowlam, Chris Smith and Harriet Harman, all of whom were later to serve in his Cabinet. Other motions condemned the British and American governments for supplying Saddam with chemical weapons. One called for the immediate termination of all financial aid to the Iraqi government, including a £340 million export credit guarantee signed a month after Halabja.

One signatory was Ann Clwyd. From the late 1980s onwards she became an ardent advocate of the Kurdish cause. Her attempts to highlight their suffering at the hands of Saddam were distinctly unfashionable. In April 1995 she was sacked as shadow Spokeswoman for Overseas Development for going to Turkey and northern Iraq without permission, and missing an important Commons vote on Europe. She was the first person Blair dismissed as party leader.

The extent of the Conservative government's complicity in arming Saddam from the start of Iraq's war with Iran in 1980 until the end of that decade only really came to light during the dog-days of the Major regime. Alan Clark, the former trade minister, admitted during the trial of the Matrix Churchill executives accused of breaking the arms embargo against Iraq that the government had

secretly relaxed the rules and should have known all along that the equipment was not intended for peaceful purposes. Major responded to the uproar by setting up a public inquiry led by Sir Richard Scott, a judge of the Court of Appeal. The hearings began in 1993. They made for gripping theatre, with Tory ministers subjected to fierce cross-questioning. Robin Cook, who was in charge of the operation for Labour, attended the sessions most days. He pared the issue down to a simple charge: 'Britain armed Saddam Hussein. Ministers engineered a cover-up and were prepared to let three men go to jail for doing no more than what ministers had agreed they should do.'

When Scott finally published his report in February 1996, Cook was given just two hours to read it before speaking in the Commons debate. He then demolished the Conservatives. Blair thanked Cook for his parliamentary *tour de force*. He was grateful for a performance that had nearly brought down John Major's government. He dwelt less on the principle at stake – the duplicitous behaviour of British and American governments that had armed Saddam before, during and after his gassing of civilians.

When Blair swept into Downing Street on 2 May 1997, past the carefully choreographed lines of well-wishers, he was taking charge of Britain's role in the world with less foreign policy knowledge or experience than almost any incoming Prime Minister since the Second World War. He had not served on any parliamentary committee on foreign affairs and, prior to his Manchester address, was not known to have made a single significant speech on global issues. He spoke serviceable French – an achievement in itself for Britain's linguistically challenged parliamentarians – and had a typical British middle-class knowledge of France and Italy. But overall he was not particularly well-travelled. In his decade in parliament before becoming party leader he had not signed a single parliamentary motion on the Kurds, the first Gulf War in 1991 or the disintegration of Yugoslavia. He had travelled light.

Much of his inner circle knew – and cared – as little as he did about 'foreign'. Alastair Campbell, his head of communications, brought with him a tabloid view of political priorities that rarely ventured away from domestic issues. Anji Hunter, Blair's friend and gatekeeper whom he had known since school, saw as part of her role the need to convey the prevailing view from the Home Counties. Since Blair's election as party leader both Campbell and Hunter had been focused on one goal alone: making Labour credible, electable and unthreatening to Middle England. It was the job of Jonathan Powell, the new chief of staff, to deal with foreign affairs. He had clear views of his own and Blair saw no need to question them. For all those around Blair, the bottom line was defence. When Blair was working on a draft of a new Clause Four for the Labour Party, Mandelson saw that there was no reference to defence. He is said to have scribbled on one version: 'Won't TB fight wars?'

Powell first met Blair when he was tasked to show him and Gordon Brown around Washington, and to introduce them to key figures on Capitol Hill. They instantly warmed to each other and early in 1995 Blair asked him to join his team. By this point Powell had acquired close contacts inside the new Democratic administration. One of the traditional tasks of the First Secretary at the embassy is to follow the campaign trails of the main candidates during US elections. In the 1992 contest, Powell spent considerable time with Bill Clinton's camp as well as that of the Republican incumbent, George Bush senior. Powell described to friends the Clinton operation as 'awesome'. In his small room at the House of Commons, next to Blair's, he proudly displayed memorabilia from the Clinton campaign – posters, coffee mugs, signed photographs.

These were heady days. Blair too was fascinated by the Clinton phenomenon, the marriage of centre-left politics with electoral success, by the idea of triangulation – identifying the two traditional conflicting views of an argument and placing oneself in the middle of them. Fresh from the humiliation of Neil Kinnock's second General Election defeat in April 1992, Philip Gould, Blair's behind-

the-scenes strategist, spent time in the US learning the arts of the Clinton campaign.

As leader of the opposition, Blair was required as a matter of etiquette to meet foreign dignitaries if they requested it. Senior party figures at the time recall how he would agree to do so, but how his mind was rarely on the ensuing conversations. On one occasion Blair was talking to a delegation from South-East Asia but forgot exactly where they were from. His visitors did most of the talking, and for the first fifteen minutes he chipped in with the occasional 'In your country . . .' He avoided any embarrassment with a consummate piece of improvisation. It taught him a lesson about the importance of detail.

With the Major government in its death throes, Powell organised a series of discreet meetings to talk Blair through the finer points of diplomacy and to go through the global hot-spots one by one. Several gatherings were held over coffee in the front room of the Blairs' house in Islington. In each, around half a dozen eminent former diplomats and academics were invited to give their views. The only condition was strict secrecy. Among the great and the good were Sir David Hannay, former ambassador to the United Nations; Sir Robin Renwick, former ambassador to Washington; Sir Rodric Braithwaite, once our man in Moscow, who also spent time as Major's adviser at Number 10; Sir Michael Butler; Sir Nicholas Henderson; Raymond Seitz, who had just stood down as the US ambassador to London; Timothy Garton Ash, fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford; and Lawrence Freedman, Professor of War Studies at King's College, London. This was the orthodox view of the mandarins. Blair, given his inexperience, was in no position to challenge it.

One of the participants recalls: 'The thing that attracted me about Blair was his intelligence and willingness to listen. The thing that alarmed me was his almost complete lack of knowledge of detail.' Another says: 'Blair was educating himself. He was listening. He gave no impression of having a foreign policy philosophy worked

out. His aim was to ensure that foreign affairs didn't become an election issue.'

Once in Downing Street, Blair was careful to stick to prevailing orthodoxies. The Foreign Office had had decades of experience in moulding ministers to its image. But an entire generation of diplomats had never worked with a Labour government. Still, they were eager to move on and to help the new Prime Minister establish a more central role for Britain in Europe. They knew that such was the scale of the election victory, such was his novelty value and such was Blair's charisma that he would instantly command the attention of other world leaders.

Blair was happy to rely on a close-knit team of advisers in Downing Street – all seconded from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The mandarins were eager to impress their thoughts upon him. One of their central concerns was to restore the so-called 'special relationship' with Washington. British concern at nurturing good relations with the US had been an obsession in Downing Street since Winston Churchill first started writing long letters to Franklin Roosevelt in 1940. The relationship had endured several cyclical downturns, most famously Anthony Eden's falling-out with Dwight Eisenhower over Suez and Harold Wilson's refusal of Lyndon Johnson's request to send British troops to Vietnam.

Then came Major and Clinton. They had never hit it off since revelations that the then Prime Minister had sent people to Washington to help the Republican campaign in 1992. In July 1994, on one of his first visits to Europe as President, Clinton stood alongside Chancellor Helmut Kohl at the Brandenburg Gate and made it clear the US now looked to the new united Germany as the pivot of a new united Europe. Echoing John F. Kennedy thirty years earlier, Clinton declared: '*Nichts wird uns aufhalten. Alles ist möglich. Berlin ist frei*' ('Nothing will stop us. Everything is possible. Berlin is free'). In London, the Foreign Office was alarmed. But with a Conservative government in turmoil over Europe, there was little the diplomats

could do. Relations deteriorated further as Clinton and Major clashed frequently and furiously over Bosnia and Northern Ireland.

The FCO was keen that Blair and Clinton rejuvenate the Anglo-American relationship. They were preaching to the converted. The two had met several times before Blair's election victory, but their first meeting in Downing Street, on 29 May 1997, set the tone for the two men in office. Clinton was the first US President to be invited to address the British Cabinet since Richard Nixon in 1969. Alone, the pair discussed Ulster, the withdrawal of Nato peacekeepers from Bosnia and the imminent handover of Hong Kong. But they also spent time comparing notes on their domestic agendas, discussing election strategies and just 'shooting the breeze'. Inside the building they were called the 'kindred spirits'. Outside, as sunny skies shone down on the garden of 10 Downing Street, they had the perfect backdrop for their first press conference together. Clinton knew how to press the right buttons. He spoke of the 'unspeakably beautiful British spring'. He paid homage to his host and said he would like to learn how to acquire for himself a 179-seat majority. He joked that Blair wasn't his clone. 'I'm sick of it, because he's seven years younger than I am and has no grey hair.' He then went into serious mode. Recalling the 'unique partnership' between the US and UK, he said: 'Over the last fifty years our unbreakable alliance has helped to bring unparalleled peace and prosperity and security. It's an alliance based on shared values and common aspirations.'

Clinton had another message for Blair that the Prime Minister was happy to hear. British influence in Washington would in future depend largely on British influence across Europe. Henry Kissinger's comment that he could not consult Europe because 'Europe has no phone number' would now have to be rectified. But it went further than that. Prime Minister and President also had a domestic agenda they wanted to share with the rest of the world: the Third Way, or 'progressive politics', 'modernisation', 'progressive internationalism' – it came with many labels as they tried to put flesh on the broad idea

of remaking centre-left politics. Their Third Way roadshow would take like-minded politicians and thinkers to Washington, Florence, Berlin and New York.

Blair's own European odyssey as Prime Minister began on 6 June in the southern Swedish port of Malmö, at the Congress of European Socialists. Blair told them the institutions they were constructing were 'impossibly remote' from the people. He asked rhetorically: 'Am I satisfied with Europe? Frankly, no.' 'Modernise or die,' he told them starkly. Blair's willingness to sermonise, so soon after joining the elite club of European leaders, ruffled the feathers of his more experienced counterparts, notably Lionel Jospin of France, who had also only just been elected but whose views on social democracy were lodged very firmly in the traditional continental European mould. Blair was confident that others in the room would eventually come round to his view. His hopes were invested most in Gerhard Schröder, the leader of the German Social Democrats, who was also seen as a 'moderniser' ready to bring his party back in from the wilderness.

Blair's behaviour that day was put down to exuberance. But it left a mark. European leaders and diplomats would later recall it as the first sign of a British Prime Minister given to hubris, of a man who wanted to use the political stage as a pulpit and who was convinced that he possessed extraordinary powers of persuasion.

In those first months of summer in 1997 Blair was indulged like a prodigal son. The sight of a Prime Minister just trying to get along with other European leaders was remarkable in itself. Blair's first EU outing was at the Amsterdam summit in June. Two photo opportunities with accompanying prepared soundbites were engineered for him. The traditional 'family photograph' of the leaders of the fifteen, on a canal bridge, ensured that he was centre-stage. Then the mayor of the city gave each of them shiny new seven-speed bicycles. After a warning not to get caught in the tram tracks, Blair made the fastest start, and sped ahead. The Prime Minister, who had earlier called for a 'change in gear' to bring Europe closer to its

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ISBN 0-7432-4829-5

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