

Tony Blair's Long War

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In September 2006, on the eve of the Labour Party conference in Manchester, Tony Blair announced his intention to resign at some point during 2007. The British prime minister has opened the new year with something of a 'legacy tour', travelling round the country to deliver a series of 'lectures' on 'our nations future' in an effort to define his political achievement and, perhaps, to influence the priorities of his successors.

On Friday 12 January he gave a keynote speech on defence policy in a location designed for the purpose: aboard one of the Royal Navy's largest ships, the amphibious warfare vessel *HMS Albion*, berthed in Devonport, beside the city of Plymouth in south-west England. On a huge vehicle-deck deep within the ship, an audience of 400 people – many of them drawn from the armed forces – had gathered to hear him.

Blair's speech came at a time of intense international debate about the war in Iraq; it followed closely President Bush's decision to send some 20,000 additional United States troops to the conflict. It also occurred in the same week that the US had conducted bombing raids in Somalia and initiated the deployment of a further aircraft-carrier battle group to within range of Iran.

This military context is significant. In recent weeks President Bush has repeatedly reminded Americans of the importance of the war in Iraq, often linking it directly to his wider war on terror and thus back to the 9/11 attacks. At the same time, though, he has begun to acknowledge more regretfully and ruefully than before how badly the war has been going, and combined this with some admission of past mistakes.

It is true that the figures paying the price for these errors of judgement are not George W Bush or his vice-president Dick Cheney; they are, rather, senior military figures such as General George Casey and General John

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Abizaid, and civilians such as Donald Rumsfeld. But the admission of error, however qualified and fleeting, at least has the slight effect of suggesting that the administration has a degree of modesty as well as a soul of iron.

A global role

The Blair lecture had nothing of this, no suggestion even of the possibility that any mistakes had been made – even from the leader of a party deeply split by Iraq and of a country roused to passionate opposition to the war far more intense and durable than in the United States.

In the entire speech, the prime minister made no mention of the human cost of the Iraq war: the massive civilian casualties, the problems of detention without trial, rendition, and torture of suspects; nor of the 3.7 million Iraqis who have become refugees since March 2003.

Rather, the address was framed much more as a vision for the future rooted in a rigorous perception of the war on terror. It seemed to reveal – a sense reinforced by the experience of actually witnessing and hearing Blair’s performance – a deep and determined self-belief. This resonated in the speech itself, but came through much more in the forty-minute session of questions and answers that followed.

Blair characterised the radical Islam of Osama bin Laden and the wider al Qaeda movement in stark terms; the phenomenon is every bit as pervasive and threatening as ‘revolutionary communism in its early and most militant phase. It is global. It has a narrative about the world and Islam’s place within it that has a reach into most Muslim societies and countries. Its adherents may be limited. Its sympathisers are not. It has states or at least parts of the governing apparatus of states that give it succour.’

Blair made it quite clear – again, both in the speech and in the ensuing discussion – that this threat must be met primarily by the vigorous ‘hard’ power of military force, with the ‘soft’ power of diplomacy, sanctions and other instruments a long way behind.

This set of priorities was needed, Blair argued, because the decline in states willing to exercise such hard power constituted one of the crisis-points facing western nations. There was a great danger that Britain would join this band of weaklings. It must not happen:

‘There is a case for Britain in the early 21st century, with its imperial strength behind it, to slip quietly, even graciously into a different role. We become leaders in the fight against climate change, against global poverty, for peace and reconciliation; and leave the demonstration of “hard” power to others. I do not share that case but there is quite a large part of our opinion that does.’

Instead, Blair’s vision for Britain is a country that maintains a world role, punches above its weight through its preparedness to use military force, and is not diverted into the leadership of what appear in this characterisation to be lesser issues.

Blair is right that many in Britain would disagree quite fundamentally with this prospectus. But the argument raises two further points that should frame an

understanding of his position and of his desire to leave the legacy of Britain as a world military power.

The first point is that this position seems wholly unable to recognise how deeply counterproductive the global war on terror has been since October 2001. It is not just the immense human cost of the many tens of thousands of civilians killed and the millions of refugees created. There is also a litany of strategic damage created and (perhaps) promised: the deepening chaos in Iraq, the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the extension of US operations to Somalia, and the increasingly dangerous rhetoric directed towards Iran.

Moreover, support for al Qaeda and its associated movements is increasing (a trend reflected in fears by British security and intelligence agencies of further attacks). Even if Blair and his immediate advisers still deny any connection between such domestic threats and Britain's part in Iraq and the wider war on terror, this is well recognised throughout the outer circles of government and across the armed forces.

The only concessionary note in the speech is the claim that any problems encountered in the war must not divert Britain from the present course:

'The battle will be long. It has taken a generation for the enemy to grow. It will, in all probability take a generation to defeat. The frontiers of our security no longer stop at the (English) Channel. What happens in the Middle East affects us. What happens in Pakistan; or Indonesia; or in the attenuated struggles for territory and supremacy in Africa for example, in Sudan or Somalia. The new frontiers for our security are global. Our armed forces will be deployed in the lands of other nations far from home, with no immediate threat to our territory, in environments and ways unfamiliar to them.'

This is Tony Blair's worldview, and his legacy is to prepare Britain to perform such a role.

The instruments of power

This leads to the second point suggested by Blair's vision, which concerns the material plans for configuring Britain's armed forces to play the role specified in it. In this respect, two decisions now being taken will set Britain's path for a generation.

The first is familiar: the decision to replace the Trident nuclear force with a new system, setting Britain as a nuclear-armed power for thirty-five years or more.

The second is the extraordinary plan to build two massive new aircraft-carriers. These, each weighing 65,000 tons and deploying the new and hugely expansive US F-35 joint strike fighter, will be far larger than any other warship ever deployed in the Royal Navy's history – three times the size of the current *Invincible*-class and much larger even than the battleships of the global 1939-45 war.

The new carriers will give Britain a global expeditionary capability unmatched by any other country except the United States. In that very process it will define

Britain's defence policy until around 2050. The relatively modest size of the British economy, even allowing for Blair's wish to see an increase in defence spending, means that the new carriers will soak up resources to such an extent that all other military roles will be constrained.

The combination of Tony Blair's worldview and his government's military-strategic decisions is what makes his Devonport speech so relevant. On its own, Blair's vision of British power is subject to debate and disagreement that could in principle lead to substantial shifts of outlook by a future government. His real legacy, however, will be not the vision itself; it will be the decisions now being taken – new aircraft-carriers and a new nuclear force – to ensure that such a vision becomes a reality.

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