

# **Moral Britannia?**

## **Evaluating the Ethical Dimension in Labour's Foreign Policy**

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# Moral Britannia?

## Evaluating the Ethical Dimension in Labour's Foreign Policy

### Introduction

The re-branding of the Labour Party by Tony Blair and his fellow modernisers has been one of the great success stories in British political history. Having transformed the party whilst in opposition, Blair set about transforming the country whilst in government. Foreign policy, broadly conceived, has been central to this objective.<sup>1</sup> If Britain was to become a more self-assured country, one that was comfortable with its multiculturalism and proud of its liberal values, then it needed to play a more dynamic and constructive role on the world stage. In short, New Labour needed to rebut former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson's charge that Britain had 'lost an empire and not yet found a role'. Their answer was to replace the old siren of rule Britannia with a new vision of moral Britannia.

British foreign policy needed 'an ethical dimension', as Foreign Secretary Robin Cook put it in his famous 'mission statement' on 12 May 1997. In an evocative phrase, Cook claimed that 'The Labour government does not accept that political values can be left behind when we check in our passports to travel on diplomatic business'. He went on to add that the government 'would put human rights at the heart of our foreign policy'. Despite the fact that such sentiments were preceded by the more traditional goals of security and prosperity in Cook's statement, it was the 'ethical foreign policy' (as it predictably became) that attracted all the attention. The broadsheets referred to it as 'Cook's ethical bombshell', 'unprecedented', 'startling' and so on.<sup>2</sup> Six and a half years on and

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Blair, *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country* (Fourth Estate: London, 1996), esp ix to xiii.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed survey of press reaction, see Mark Whickham-Jones, 'Labour's trajectory in foreign affairs', in Mark Whickham-Jones and Richard

the debate has not subsided. Where some credit New Labour with arresting Britain's declining power and ambition,<sup>3</sup> others are unrelentingly hostile to what they regard as an 'outlaw state' that has 'open contempt for international ethical standards'.<sup>4</sup>

The level of interest in the issue – sustained by journalists, academics, and think tanks – puts it on a scale with the other great debates in British foreign policy since the 1930s. One of the aims of this essay is to undertake some conceptual ground clearing as a prelude to the main issue to be examined, namely, how far have the two Labour governments (to date) succeeded in making Britain 'a force for good in the world'. To do this, we first need to consider the debate surrounding the so-called ethical foreign policy. Given the intense media spotlight, it is perhaps not surprising that the message has been clouded by certain misconceptions about the nature of morality and its relationship to politics. Moreover, the interplay of personal rivalry and reputation has added an additional layer of complexity to the task of evaluating the morality of British statecraft.

Questions about 'who' and 'when' must inevitably be a prelude to a wider discussion of what exactly was meant by the term 'ethical', and crucially, how far Labour in office has succeeded in prioritizing internationalist principles ahead of more traditional realist understandings of the national interest. While the main body of the essay serves as an audit of aspects of the ethical foreign policy, it is important at the outset to articulate an understanding of what is meant by the phrase. In our view, two ethical commitments can be discerned from the various government texts:

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Little eds., *New Labour's Foreign Policy: A New Moral Crusade* (Manchester, MUP: 2000).

<sup>3</sup> For a judicious and partially favourable account of UK foreign policy in the first Labour government, see Christopher Hill, 'Foreign Policy' in Anthony Seldon ed., *The Blair Effect* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2001) p. 348.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Curtis, *Web of Deceit: Britain's Real Role in the World* (London: Vintage, 2003). We use the word 'others' in the plural to include, at least, John Pilger. See his foreword to Curtis's book, pp. ix-xv.

- Britain must play an active part in the international community by complying with its rules and cooperating with its institutions
- Britain should use its influence to protect and strengthen liberal and social democratic values of human rights, democracy, poverty reduction and good governance

It is one thing to proclaim these principles and quite another to implement them. As all previous foreign ministers will testify, policy-making at the international level is subject to a variety of constraints and events that conspire to derail the best laid plans. The vexed question of unintended consequences is compounded by a material constraint that is closer to home: how much difference can a state like Britain make and in what issue areas? Prime Minister Blair's answer to this question is that Britain is a 'pivotal power'. This is a useful description in so far as it avoids the *realpolitik* implications of the term 'great power' while recognizing that Britain is more than a middle power (at least in terms of economic and military power, and UN Security Council permanent membership). By pivotal, Blair meant a country 'that is at the crux of the alliances' that 'shape the world and its future'.<sup>5</sup> The decision to go to war against Iraq put this idea to the test as Blair sought to bridge the divide between Europe and the US and persuade domestic and international opinion that the powerful states in the world had a duty to intervene. In the wake of 9/11, 'those who can act, must'.<sup>6</sup> The problem he faced in March 2003 was what to do when the perceived imperative to act does not receive widespread agreement in the world of states or among international public opinion.

Iraq 2003 also illustrated how the twin foundations of the ethical foreign policy noted above can come unstuck: complying with the

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<sup>5</sup> Wickham-Jones, 'Labour's Trajectory', p.19.

<sup>6</sup> This statement accords with Blair's views after 9/11, but interestingly, the words were uttered after the use of force against Iraq in December 1998. This suggests that the British Prime Minister had, for a long time prior to the 2003 Iraq war, begun to fear the combination of WMD and unstable/aggressive regimes. See Wickham-Jones, 'Labour's Trajectory', p.15



rule that says 'no use of force unless it has been authorised' was in conflict with the Prime Minister's calculation that Saddam Hussein's regime was an affront to civilisation and a long-term threat to regional and global security. The fact that the edifice of the ethical foreign policy was crumbling was graphically illustrated by Robin Cook's departure from the government. In terms of their interpretation of the ethical foreign policy, was it just the Iraq case that set Cook and Blair on a collision course, or can their rival understandings be traced much further back?<sup>7</sup>

The conclusion will articulate ten lessons for British foreign policy. In the aftermath of the Iraq war, our moral standing has fallen considerably.<sup>8</sup> Defenders of the war point to the removal of a tyrant and the real possibility that, in the long term at least, Iraq can become a well ordered society rather than a brutal republic that causes fear and insecurity among citizens and neighbours alike. Many critics of the war approved of the goal (regime change) but were not persuaded by the justifications given by the government. Between these poles one can identify a section of the political class and public opinion that reluctantly gave the government the benefit of the doubt. Their complicity has turned into anger and mistrust as doubts grow about the political use of intelligence. What implications will this have for British foreign policy during the remainder of the Blair 2 government and after? Can there be an *ethical* foreign policy after Iraq?

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Lawler, somewhat prophetically, traces contending internationalisms right back to the beginning of Blair 1. He identifies the Prime Minister's version of internationalism as being Atlanticist and concerned with leadership, whereas Cook fits more comfortably into a pro-European style of multilateral internationalism. See Peter Lawler, 'New Labour's Foreign Policy', in David Coats and Peter Lawler eds., *New Labour in Power* (Manchester: MUP, 2000), pp. 297-298.

<sup>8</sup> An illustrative example of this argument can be found in Mark Leonard, 'Has Tony Blair made Britain a Pariah State', *Observer*, 30 March 2003.

## Section 1: The Ethical Foreign Policy Revisited

The response by conservative thinkers and politicians to the ethical foreign policy usefully illustrates the first of many myths. In our view, this and other misconceptions need to be cleared up before an evaluation of the ethical foreign policy can commence.

- **Myth 1 – Domestic politics matter.** Tony Blair said very little about international politics during his time as Leader of the Opposition. His team of close advisors was focused on one aim – to make Labour electable in a political environment that was hostile to social democratic ideas and values. The on-message slogan for the New Labour campaign leading up to the 1997 election was a version of the Clinton team's 'it's the economy stupid' slogan in 1992, albeit substituting domestic for economy. The priority accorded to internal changes to the Labour party moved Peter Mandelson to scribble on a draft document the words 'won't TB fight wars?'. When Blair was elected with the landslide 179 seat majority, he rode in to No.10 'with less knowledge or experience than any incoming Prime Minister since the Second World War'.<sup>9</sup> As he was to quickly find out, the extent of global interconnectedness is such that no leader of a significant country is able to hide from international events.
- **Myth 2 – A pragmatic foreign policy is an unethical one.** The second myth is not one of Labour's making; rather, it emanates from a general misunderstanding of what is meant by the term *ethical*. Upon hearing Cook's mission statement for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, almost all his Conservative predecessors lined up to trumpet that they too had been ethical in their foreign policies, albeit without the fanfare. Lord Carrington found the implication that 'all previous foreign ministries had been unethical' to be 'quite

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<sup>9</sup> John Kampfner, *Blair's Wars* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2003), pp. 9, 8.

ridiculous'.<sup>10</sup> Lord Hurd described British contributions to peacekeeping in the early 1990s as a modest attempt to create 'a more decent world'.<sup>11</sup> They are right to argue that the pragmatic way in British foreign policy reflected a set of ethical presuppositions about Britain's place in the world, our responsibilities as a former great power and as a leading member of the Commonwealth. Foreign policy theory further underscores the fact that ethics cannot be extricated from politics. While realists are often portrayed as the children of Machiavelli, such a caricature misunderstands the normative basis of realism (not to mention mis-reading Machiavelli into the bargain). Underpinning classical realism is the idea that the survival of the community and its values is the primary goal, and all strategies of statecraft follow from this moral premise. Those who see interactions among states as being generative of an international society have a less instrumental account of the role that morality plays in world politics. According to writers such as Hedley Bull, adherence to a moral code is built into the fabric of international society: being a sovereign state means adhering to international rules regulating trade, the use of force and basic human rights.<sup>12</sup> Liberal idealists reject this attempt to find a conceptual *via media*. For them, states have a duty to spread what they regard as 'universal' values of democracy and self determination. In short, both in foreign policy theory and practice, ethics is not something

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, *The Guardian*, 24 April, 2000, p.4 (G2).

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Hurd in 'Taking the High Road', transcript, BBC News and Current Affairs Department, first programme transmission 2 October 1997.

<sup>12</sup> As Chris Brown rightly notes, perhaps the only theoretical position that can coherently regard foreign policy as being devoid of ethics is a thoroughly-going cosmopolitanism which maintains that the state itself is necessarily corrupt and incapable of moral action. See his 'Ethics, Interests and Foreign Policy', in Karen E. Smith and Margot Light eds., *Ethics and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), p.27. For an excellent account of how ethics are constitutive of the social world in general, see the discussion at the beginning of Mervyn Frost's essay on 'The Ethics of Humanitarian Intervention' in the same volume.

that can be added or taken away, it is already there. The implication here is that the debate around New Labour's claim to an ethical foreign policy took a wrong turn at the outset. Instead of putting the emphasis on the 'ethical' as though *it* was the new dimension, the media should have focused on the extent to which Labour's particular interpretation of an ethical foreign policy departed from that employed by its predecessors. In other words, the question should have been: to what extent did the pursuit of the twin goals of activist multilateralism and the promotion of cosmopolitan values constitute a break with tradition?

- **Myth 3 – The content of an ethical foreign policy is self-evident.** Related to the above, the manner in which the ethical foreign policy has been debated in the media seems to presume that there can only be *one* kind of ethical foreign policy. Yet it is possible to conceive of a variety of ethical themes driving the foreign policy agenda: interventionist and non-interventionist; imperialist and multilateralist; statist and cosmopolitan; regional and Atlanticist. The implication here is twofold. First, politics often requires state leaders to make difficult choices between competing moral values: in this respect, states are like people in that they seek to chart a course between different moral ends and often these are in tension. Everyday versions of this dilemma include questions surrounding the rights of individuals and the needs of communities. The second implication relates more to the critics of New Labour: a decision to use force without Security Council authorization may not be unethical in all cases. An obvious hypothetical example is an intervention to halt genocide. Would this merit moral condemnation just because it lacked prior legal permission? The fact that the intuitive answer to this question is 'no' suggests that critics are selective in what they regard as an action in breach of an ethical code.
- **Myth 4 – The Mission Statement was merely spin.** John Kampfner's book *Blair's Wars* sheds important light on what were hitherto unanswered questions about the ethical

foreign policy, namely, how far Blair and the rest of the cabinet and party were committed to it. Was the Mission Statement driven by Cook's desire to have a piece of the 'new' epithet, a move that provoked anger and scepticism in the Prime Minister's office, even at the FCO? There are several issues here. First, the term itself. Much has been made of the fact that Robin Cook spoke of an 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy as opposed to the more full-blown 'ethical foreign policy'. If Cook – or Blair for that matter – believed that the more expansive epithet was wrong then why did they not put the record straight?<sup>13</sup> A second and deeper issue concerns the extent to which this element in New Labour's foreign policy was collectively sanctioned by the Prime Minister and other leading ministers. Kampfner argues that the statement had been cleared by Number 10 'but not the spin' which was put on it by Cook's aides who coined the term 'ethical foreign policy'. In turn, Blair was advised to clip the wings of Cook's internationalism. He took an early opportunity to do this in discussions with the Foreign Secretary over the priority to be accorded to arms sales over human rights concerns.<sup>14</sup> Yet despite this setback, Cook's speeches in the first year of government arguably showed a deepening commitment to a cluster of social democratic values, including multilateral activism, a greater commitment to Europe, and protection of the environment. The centrality of human rights was again fore-grounded in July 1997 in his landmark speech on 'Human Rights into a New Century'. This speech was important because it set out twelve policies geared towards the promotion and protection of human rights, and perhaps more significantly, the further claim that because we value

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<sup>13</sup> One thinks here, for example, of the BBC Radio 4 *Analysis* documentary called 'Taking the High Road' in which the Foreign Secretary participated with a number of fellow politicians, journalists and academics. Transcript, BBC News and Current Affairs Department, first programme transmission 2 October 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Kampfner, *Blair's Wars*, pp. 15-16.

these rights for ourselves 'we therefore have a right to demand for those who do not yet enjoy them'.<sup>15</sup>

- **Myth 5 – When Cook went, the ethical foreign policy went too.** The implication in Kampfner that Blair (and Straw) took a different position on the relationship between values and foreign policy is one that needs to be treated with some caution. There is no doubt there are important differences between Blair and Cook on key issues: support for big business versus the damage the arms trade does to Britain's reputation as a 'good citizen'; and their respective gravitational pulls towards the US in the case of Blair and Europe for Cook. Going back to the very early months of government, Blair used the occasion of the Lord Mayor's banquet to set out his own Atlanticist vision of British foreign policy which was cast in terms that Churchill had envisaged to be the UK role in the world after the Second World War.<sup>16</sup> Those who believe the tensions between Blair and Cook were unbridgeable point to a resolution of the matter towards the end of the Blair 1 government. By then, stories about the 'rise and fall' of the ethical foreign policy could be found in newspapers and academic journals alike.<sup>17</sup> First, there were admissions from inside the ministerial team that the government's rhetoric had created a rod for their back.<sup>18</sup> Second, there is no doubt that the ethical 'volume control' was turned down towards the end of the first administration.<sup>19</sup> And when Straw replaced Cook in Blair 2,

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<sup>15</sup> Robin Cook, 'Human Rights into a New Century' quoted in Brown, 'Ethics, Interests and Foreign Policy', p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Kampfner, pp. 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Williams, 'The Rise and Fall of the "Ethical Dimension": Presentation and Practice in New Labour's Foreign Policy', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 15.1 (2002). See also *The Guardian*, 4 September, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> See Peter Hain's admission in an interview with the *New Statesmen and Society*, April 2000.

<sup>19</sup> *The Guardian*, 28 January, 2000.

he and his team of ministers ceased to use the epithet, but – consistent with the argument set out above – this does not mean ethics somehow went away.<sup>20</sup> In fact, one could argue that after 11 September 2001, the Prime Minister's view of foreign policy became wedded to an even deeper attachment to ethical principles – to deal with the challenge to global order posed by failed states, poverty and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). To sum up this complex set of personal relationships and moral beliefs: while there is no doubt that there were important differences between Cook and Blair, they both were committed to a highly interventionist foreign policy being pursued in accordance with multilateral rules and institutions. They also maintained an unstinting belief that Britain could make a difference.

- **Myth 6 – It is possible to be morally consistent at all times.** The first Blair government was routinely criticized for practicing double standards. At the time of Vladimir Putin's visit to Number 10 in April 2000, Hugo Young wrote a stinging condemnation of the way in which New Labour was maintaining a dialogue with a leader who was committing massive human rights atrocities against Chechens. 'Having once talked about ethics', Young added, 'which neither Margaret Thatcher nor John Major ever did, Blair shows how irrelevant they are'.<sup>21</sup> The point made by Young and others was that New Labour was selective about which regimes they talked tough to and which they appeased. China and Russia fell in the latter category, while Burma/Myanmar and Zimbabwe fell into the former. One response to this charge is that some states matter more than others. Russia and

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<sup>20</sup> Notice also that in Jack Straw's speech on the strategic priorities for British foreign policy, he noted that 'good governance, respect for the norms and obligations of international law, and human rights are not therefore add-ons; but key to the work of the British government abroad'. Jack Straw, 'Strategic Priorities for British Foreign Policy', FCO leadership conference, 6 January 2003.

<sup>21</sup> *The Guardian*, 18 April 2000.

China are permanent members of the Security Council and cooperation with them is vital if international order is to be maintained. In a decentralized world order without an enforcer, consistency has sometimes to be sacrificed on the altar of order. This is not to imply that the declared 'third way' between the 'row' and the 'kow-tow' (to use Cook's terms) was ever adequately charted and explained. As Neal Ascherson put it, constructive engagement suffered from being 'an ill-marked path, which tends to become invisible at awkward moments'.<sup>22</sup> Blair's former foreign policy advisor, Robert Cooper, introduces an important twist to this argument. In his new book *The Breaking of Nations*, he claims that governments will not only have to compromise their values in diplomacy, they may need to abandon them altogether. 9/11 illustrated to many in the Blair government that the enemies of the West may no longer respond to strategies of rational diplomacy and deterrence.<sup>23</sup> While there are problems with the construction of this world-view, it raises an important question that critics of British/US interventionism have not adequately addressed.<sup>24</sup>

- **Myth 7 – To be ethical, a state must practice self-sacrifice at all times.** Such a charge underpins the position taken by the government's fiercest opponents. According to them, arms sales are always wrong, all constructive engagement with autocratic states is *realpolitik*, and intervention is nothing other than self-interested imperialism (especially when a hidden economic benefit can be uncovered). This absolutism finds little support among moral philosophers. Even Kant recognized that categorical imperatives would not be realizable in all instances. How, then, should we conceive of a moral calculus for judging our

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<sup>22</sup> Neal Ascherson, *Observer* 2 August, 1998, quoted in Lawler, 'New Labour's Foreign Policy', p. 291.

<sup>23</sup> See Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> We are indebted to Chris Brown for this point.



actions and those of others? Chris Brown provides a useful counter to such moral absolutism with his axiom that 'naked egoism is wrong... but self-abnegation is not mandatory'.<sup>25</sup> He goes on to argue that doing the right thing amounts largely to tempering one's own interests but not taking leave of them altogether. All actors – be they states or individuals – have mixed motivations for their actions. To claim that the UK government's reason for war against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was only to maintain/extend NATO's control over the Balkans, or that the reason for our participation in Gulf War 1 was only 'oil' is to misunderstand that material gains and moral impulses are always intertwined. If the test for evaluating any foreign policy was as pure as that which is implied by New Labour's critics, it is unlikely that any state would pass. Given the above, how much sacrifice is required on the part of a state in order for its foreign policy to be moral in the sense that it is adequately other regarding? Predictably, there is no easy answer to this question. One way of steering a course between the protection of vital national interests and respect for international norms is to argue, as Andrew Linklater does, that ethical states are required 'to put the welfare of international society ahead of the relentless pursuit of [their] own national interests'.<sup>26</sup> What this means is that states who are good citizens are required to forsake narrow commercial and political interests when these advantages conflict with their cosmopolitan commitments or the process of multilateralism. The only legitimate exception to this rule is where the state in question can conclusively demonstrate that its vital security interests would be undermined by such a calculation.

With these myths addressed, we can now offer an evaluation of the ethical foreign policy. What follows is an assessment of aspects of

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<sup>25</sup> Brown, 'Ethics, Interests and Foreign Policy', pp. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Linklater, 'What is a good international citizen', in Paul Keal ed., *Ethics and Foreign Policy* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992), pp.28-29.

the Blair 1 government's record – the big issue for Blair 2, the war against Iraq, features in the second half of the essay. This is not to imply that the historical break signified by the second election victory should be thought of as coinciding with a shift in foreign policy emphasis: to the contrary, many of the dilemmas that the Blair government faced over Kosovo in 1999 resurfaced in 2003.

From 1997 to the beginning of 1999 the government's ethical foreign policy was reasonably well received. The architects of the policy were regularly praised for their courage, and many of their substantive policy commitments were thought to be progressive, including: the formation of a Department for International Development (DFID); significant increases to the aid budget;<sup>27</sup> and the successful humanitarian intervention in Sierra Leone where the usual menu of interests were negligible. Added to these were a number of small scale initiatives which pointed to a different style in foreign policy making: the greater openness of the FCO and the accessibility of various documents on its excellent website; the formal inclusion of NGO staff in policy deliberations; the publication of an annual human rights report; Labour's support for the International Criminal Court and the Tribunal investigating war crimes in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; and the adoption of a more collaborative approach to policy making with other key departments of state such as DFID. Add to these achievements the government's willingness to engage in ideas about a better regional and global order, and the audit begins to look quite favourable. As the then Amnesty International Director put it, the government had a good record on human rights 'in many respects'.<sup>28</sup> To this he bracketed one qualification, the record had been marred by arms sales to regimes with a bad human rights records.

The most frequently cited example of the arms trade/ethical foreign policy dilemma is the chequered history of arms sales to Indonesia. Alongside the war against Milosevic's regime, this episode begged

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<sup>27</sup> We are grateful to Malcolm Chalmers for focusing our attention on these two points.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Latimer, *The Guardian*, 28 January 2000.

some very large questions about New Labour's commitment to internationalism. The brutality of the Indonesian military was exposed for all to see in the days following the ballot held on 30 August 1999 to decide the fate of East Timor. Yet, even after nineteen days of state sponsored anarchy in East Timor, the Foreign Secretary was standing by the claim that the government has refused to license any arms exports 'that might be used against the people of East Timor'. Given that the Indonesian government had little effective control over the military and security forces 'on the ground', such a suggestion was fanciful. One could go further and argue that it is almost inconceivable that British-made hardware had *not* been used for the systematic 'internal repression' of the East Timorese.

On 11 September 1999, Cook announced that the government had suspended the planned sale of nine Hawk trainer/ground-attack jets. He said that Britain will 'support an EU arms embargo and will take national action to suspend further arms exports'.<sup>29</sup> The problem is that all this came far too late; what New Labour should have done on arrival in office was to cancel the order for the Hawks. Governments who are 'gross violators' of human rights should be denied arms irrespective of their declared usage. And by linking external protection to good governance, strong incentives are created for states to act as guardians of human rights in the domestic sphere. The inescapable conclusion we draw here is that Britain failed to act as an ethical state in its relations with Indonesia because it placed selfish economic advantage prior to human rights concerns.

Supporters on the arms trade side of the debate argue that 'if Britain doesn't sell weapons, others will'. In other words, should our leaders be prepared to sacrifice jobs and profits merely for a futile gesture designed to appeal to readers of left-leaning broadsheet newspapers? Set against this, defenders of arms exports would no doubt be hostile to the same argument about drug dealers operating outside schools attended by their children. In this instance, they

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<sup>29</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office (1999). 'News: East Timor, Britain to Support EU Arms Embargo', 11 September. Source, [www.fco.co.uk](http://www.fco.co.uk)

would be very unlikely to agree with the view that 'there is no point trying to curb drug pushers because alternative suppliers will always come forward'. Moreover, even from a consequentialist perspective, selling arms to authoritarian regimes could be a mistake that will come back to haunt the arms producer – Iraq being a classic example.

According to Whitehall's latest annual report on arms exports, the value of exports sent to Indonesia has increased 20-fold since 2000 (from £2m to over £40m). The NGO Saferworld described this as 'very concerning' given 'the recent misuse of UK-supplied Hawk jets and armoured vehicles by the Indonesian government in the conflict in Aceh'.<sup>30</sup> There are significant issues at stake here, some on the side of the government (the importance of the arms traded for employment) and others against (in particular the concern that there are insufficient checks on the granting of export licenses). In short, while there are no 'clean hands' solutions, the government has been unwilling to face up to the tension between its ethical goals and its support for British arms manufacturers.

The other major issue of the Blair 1 government was the war against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). At the declaratory level, it was clear that the government believed itself to be fighting a humanitarian war. During the campaign, in April 1999, the Prime Minister boldly argued: 'We need to enter a new millennium where dictators know that they cannot get away with ethnic cleansing or repress their people with impunity. We are fighting *not for territory but for values*. For a new internationalism where the brutal repression of ethnic groups will not be tolerated'.<sup>31</sup> This demonstrates how far crusading humanitarianism was an important theme in New Labour's foreign policy before Iraq. Whether the action taken against Saddam Hussein's regime can be reconciled with activist humanitarianism is a prescient question that is considered further below.

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<sup>30</sup> Reported in *The Guardian*, 2 July 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Freedman 'Defence' in Seldon ed., *The Blair Effect*, p.299. Emphasis added.

The Kosovo war led Blair and his foreign policy advisors to reflect on the legitimacy of armed humanitarian intervention. In a title that many scholars of International Relations would find highly unhistorical – ‘the new doctrine of the international community’ – Blair set out criteria for judging when the norm of non-intervention should be suspended. The rule needed to be qualified in cases of genocide, or when refugee flows amounted to a threat to international peace and security, and to deal with ‘undemocratic’ and ‘barbarous’ regimes. This last category is obviously broad and was thought by some to be unrealistic,<sup>32</sup> but was clearly part of Blair’s reason for going to war against Iraq.<sup>33</sup> What makes the speech significant is, as Christopher Hill rightly notes, that it amounts to ‘a minor revolution against the pragmatic empiricism that has dominated the language of British foreign policy since the days of Cobden, Bright and Gladstone’.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from setting out the broad conditions under which interventionism is the right course, the Chicago speech set out five conditions which had to be satisfied before a decision to intervene should be taken.<sup>35</sup> These were:

- we must be sure of our case

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<sup>32</sup> In his assessment of Blair 1, Christopher Hill added in relation to this claim that it ‘is so obviously problematical that it can be counted as an aberration. His government has no intention of intervening in a state just because it is not a democracy’. In Seldon ed., *The Blair Effect*, p. 341.

<sup>33</sup> As Peter Stothard’s first hand account of the Iraq war makes clear, Blair openly talked to his advisors about the fact that regime change was a prime motivator for his actions. He noted how ‘uncomfortable’ he would be if the inspections regime had worked and ‘Saddam had disarmed and remained in place’. Rather, ‘[t]o remove that regime will send a huge signal not only to Iraq but right across the world’. Peter Stothard, *30 Days: A Month at the Heart of Blair’s War* (HarperCollins: London, 1993), p. 141.

<sup>34</sup> Hill ‘Foreign Policy’, p. 342.

<sup>35</sup> Prime Minister Tony Blair, ‘Doctrine of the International Community’, Economic Club of Chicago, 22 April 2000. See speech in full, at New Democrats website, <http://www.ndol.org>.

- we must exhaust all diplomatic possibilities
- we must be confident that military force will be successful
- we must commit to the long-term reconstruction of the state-society in question
- our own interests must be at stake

The glaring omission from this list – which would come back to haunt the Prime Minister – was the question of ‘right authority’ and crucially the issue of UN authorization

## **Section 2: Caught between Iraq and Hard Power**

When Cook and Blair declared at the outset that they wanted Britain to be 'a force for good in the world', it is doubtful that they had any idea that the UK would resort to force with quite such frequency in the years of the first administration. Nor perhaps, could it have been envisaged that pressing force into the service of wider moral purposes might be the undoing of the second Blair government. Lawrence Freedman came closest to recognizing this possibility. In the conclusion to his chapter on defence in *The Blair Effect* he wrote: 'When the objective of policy is to make the world a better place, or at least less bad, then the tests are likely to be regular. The government just about managed to pass these tests during its first term but there was always the risk that they would be caught out during the second'.<sup>36</sup> What follows is a thematic review of the Iraq case and the implications it holds for the ethical foreign policy.

### ***Conflict between International Rules and Moral Imperatives***

The Labour Party remained cohesive on the legitimacy of using force over Kosovo, despite the lack of a clear UN mandate. It was widely accepted in the party, and among the British public, that the plight of the Kosovars constituted a humanitarian emergency on such a scale that Britain was warranted in bypassing the Security Council. Many found the argument persuasive that the Council had been prevented from exercising its proper responsibility because of the capriciousness shown by Russia in threatening to veto a resolution authorising the use of force. Britain and its NATO allies, far from weakening the UN, were in fact upholding the humanitarian values embodied in the UN Charter.

A similar consensus did not exist over Iraq: few in the party, and even fewer in the country, were persuaded that there was a compelling humanitarian or security case for backing the US or breaking with the UN. This supports our earlier point that what counts as an ethical foreign policy is inherently contestable. Blair

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<sup>36</sup> Lawrence Freedman, 'Defence' in Seldon ed., *The Blair Effect*, p. 303.

would argue that his decision to take Britain to war against Iraq was in conformity with all the principles he had laid down in his Chicago speech. The problem is agreement on general principles does not necessarily translate into a consensus on their application in specific cases. New Labour's failure to win the argument over Iraq led to a major fissure in the 'liberal international consensus'<sup>37</sup> that had formed over Kosovo. Many of those who had signed up to an anticipatory intervention to rescue Kosovars were not prepared to countenance a preventive war against Iraq unless this had UN backing. The conflict of values at the heart of Blair's 'humanitarian global vision'<sup>38</sup> reached breaking point over Iraq.

One important casualty of the collapse of the consensus on intervention in the Labour Party was Cook himself. He took the momentous decision to resign from the Cabinet over Blair's decision to join the US and Australia in prosecuting war against Iraq. In an electrifying resignation speech to the House of Commons, Cook argued that the government's decision to use force – in the face of opposition from three permanent members of the Security Council – represented a fundamental challenge to the authority of the UN. As he wrote in *The Guardian* the following day: 'If we believe in an international community based on binding rules and institutions, we cannot simply set them aside when they produce results that are inconvenient to us'.<sup>39</sup> In this statement, Cook emphasised the importance of New Labour's commitment to the rules. But as we argued at the outset, an equally important part of the ethical foreign policy was a determination to defend liberal values. The dilemma facing Blair over Iraq was could he avoid having to choose between upholding these values and adhering to international rules?

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<sup>37</sup> David Clark, 'Iraq has wrecked our case for humanitarian wars', *The Guardian*, 12 August 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, 'Iraq has wrecked our case'.

<sup>39</sup> Robin Cook, 'Why I had to leave the Cabinet', *The Guardian*, 12 March 2003.



### ***Iraq as a Humanitarian War?***

A question that future historians will have to grapple with concerns Blair's own motivations for going to war against Saddam. As we discuss below, the primary justification for the use of force was Iraq's development of WMD in defiance of successive UN resolutions. However, we would argue that Blair also strongly supported regime change in Iraq on humanitarian grounds, and that this was an important driver of UK policy. Blair summed up the humanitarian case for war in a speech on 15 February 2003 by stating that, 'Ridding the world of Saddam would be an act of humanity. It is leaving him there that is in truth inhumane'.<sup>40</sup> Three important implications follow from Blair's use of this argument: the first is that if humanitarianism was a goal of British policy, Saddam's compliance with UN resolutions relating to Iraq's disarmament would not meet the goal of improving human rights inside Iraq. Second, there was no prospect of building an international coalition at the UN to support regime change on humanitarian grounds, given the strong commitment of member states to the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. Finally, the advice being tendered to the Prime Minister by his legal counsel was that there was no legal basis for removing a regime from power on account of its bestial character. Thus, whatever Blair's own convictions about the force of this argument, he claimed publicly that this is 'not the reason we act. That must be according to the United Nations mandate on Weapons of Mass Destruction'.

### ***Disarming Iraq through Multilateralism***

The humanitarian rationale for regime change was seconded by Blair's strong belief that Iraq posed a long-term threat to regional and global security that could only be effectively addressed by Saddam's removal from power. He shared this view with the neo-conservatives in Washington, and he was well aware that the Bush Administration believed that 9/11 had provided it with the opportunity to achieve this

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<sup>40</sup> Speech by Prime Minister at Labour's local government, women's and youth conferences, SECC, Glasgow, 15 February 2003.

goal. This echoes our earlier point about the limits of Britain's room for manoeuvre.

In security terms, the UK government perceived two major threats posed by Saddam's long-term development of WMD: the first concerned the risk that if Iraq were to develop chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons, it would be in a position to threaten the region. Blair argued that the UK would not be able to exclude itself from any such conflict.<sup>41</sup> The government set out this danger in its September 2002 dossier on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction. The document, and the Prime Minister's foreword, both included the now infamous claim that some Iraqi chemical and biological weapons could be operational within 45 minutes. Overall, the case made by the government at the time was that Iraq's existing WMD capability and its illicit weapons program constituted a *casus belli*. In Prime Minister Blair's words, 'the policy of containment has not worked'.<sup>42</sup>

Given the controversy generated by the failure of the Iraq Survey Group to find evidence of stockpiles and programmes consistent with the case made by the government, it is important to be precise about the government's assessment of the threat posed by Iraq. Blair described the threat in his foreword to the report as 'serious and current'. However, speaking in a *Newsnight* interview on 7 February 2003, he accepted that Iraq did *not* pose an imminent threat to the UK. In evidence submitted to The Hutton Inquiry it was revealed that an earlier draft of the Prime Minister's foreword included the words: 'The case I make is not that Saddam could launch a nuclear attack on London or another part of the UK (He could not).' Whatever the reason for these words being deleted from the final version, it does corroborate the view that the Prime Minister

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<sup>41</sup> BBC Newsnight interview, 7 Feb 2003.

<sup>42</sup> *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government*, Foreword by the Prime Minister, p. 3.

never believed Iraq posed an imminent threat.<sup>43</sup> The second dimension of the risk concerned the 'direct threat to British national security' [posed by]...the trade in chemical, biological and nuclear weapons'. In repeated press conferences and interviews, the Prime Minister referred to his nightmare fear that proliferation of WMD increased the risk that these weapons could fall into the hands of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. Speaking at a Downing Street press conference on 13 January 2003, the Prime Minister declared that the UN 'has to be the way of resolving this [trafficking in WMD] and sending a signal to the whole of the world that this trade will not be tolerated, that people who have these weapons in breach of UN resolutions, will be forced to disarm'. Blair's commitment to disarm Iraq through the UN reflected his hope that if the UN could restore its credibility vis-à-vis Iraq, this would establish an important precedent for managing future threats of this kind.<sup>44</sup>

Working within the UN framework was also crucial to the legal case supporting war. This rested on the proposition that the Council's authorisation to use force against Iraq for its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 continued to provide legality for the use of force thirteen years later. Resolution 687 set out the terms of the ceasefire that ended 'Operation Desert Storm', and as part of this, it demanded that Iraq eliminate all of its WMD capabilities 'in order to restore international peace and security in the area'. The UK's legal argument revolved around the controversial claim that Iraq's 'material breach' of Resolution 687, and all subsequent resolutions reaffirming its provisions, reactivates Resolution 678 of November 29 1990 that authorized the use of force against Iraq to restore Kuwait's sovereignty. As the British Attorney General Lord Goldsmith expressed this position: Resolution 687 'suspended but did not terminate the authority to use force under Resolution 678...Iraq has failed to comply and therefore Iraq was...and continues to be in

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<sup>43</sup> See Blair's published foreword and copies of earlier drafts on the Hutton Inquiry website: <http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/evidence-lists/evidence-cab.htm>

<sup>44</sup> Stothard, *30 Days*, p.38.

material breach'. This was a highly controversial legal claim<sup>45</sup> and the Blair Government realised that its case could be made watertight by a new resolution explicitly authorising the use of force. This became the policy goal that animated the government from September 2002 onwards.

### ***Influencing the American Hegemon: Bandwagoning or Balancing?***

Blair's strategy of disarming Iraq through the UN required a willingness on the part of the Bush administration to act multilaterally. Indeed, a fundamental consideration in his decision to support Bush over Iraq was his belief that such public and unstinting loyalty would be reciprocated by greater British influence over the course of American policy. This article of faith in the so-called 'special relationship' has been a hardy perennial in British foreign policy since 1945, and it was never more visible than over Iraq. The influence sought after 9/11 was to temper the strong unilateralist instincts of the administration, and this required persuading the President and his closest advisors that they could profitably work through the UN. Thus, Iraq became a wider test for Britain, as it did for France: could American hegemony be managed? What differed between the two European powers were the tactics deployed in achieving this. Blair considered that France's vision of Europe balancing American hegemony would be a recipe for increased conflict in transatlantic relations. He believed that by reassuring Washington of Britain's support, there was more likelihood of influencing American policy.

In persuading Bush to go down the UN route, the British had a significant ally in US Secretary of State Colin Powell. He laid the groundwork in convincing the President to return to the UN. British influence in the counsels of Washington is most effective when the administration is divided at the top. Blair, during his visit to Camp David on 7 September 2002, was able to reinforce the State

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<sup>45</sup> For some of these objections, see, Professor Ulf Bernitz et al, 'War would be illegal', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2003.

Department's concerns about acting outside the UN. This represented a defeat for Vice-President Richard Cheney, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, and his influential deputy Paul Wolfowitz, who worried that defending war against Iraq in terms of disarmament risked undermining the central US objective of regime change.

The success of Blair and Powell's strategy in persuading Bush to work with the UN was demonstrated on 12 September when the President announced to the UN General Assembly that he would work with the UN to secure the 'necessary resolutions'. The plural use of the word was not deliberate on the part of the President, but the fight over whether there should be one or two resolutions was to split the Security Council in the following months.

### ***The 'Unreasonable Veto' and the Failure to secure a Second Resolution***

Speaking on 26 January 2003 in an interview on BBC's *Breakfast with Frost*, Blair set out the only conditions under which he would support war in the absence of a new UN resolution. He declared: 'That is the circumstances where the UN inspectors say he's not co-operating, and he's in breach of the resolution that was passed in November but the UN [ie one of the permanent five members of the Security Council] unreasonably exercises their veto and blocks a resolution. Now in those circumstances you damage the UN if the UN inspectors say he's not co-operating, he's in breach and the world does nothing about it.'<sup>46</sup>

The precedent that Blair had in mind was Kosovo where majority opinion in the Council had supported military action that bypassed the Russian and Chinese veto. Resolution 1441 adopted on 8 November 2002 established the conditions Iraq would have to meet to prevent being declared in 'material breach'. However, it did not explicitly authorise the use of force. The British Government pinned

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<sup>46</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Saddam must co-operate', *The Guardian*, 27 January 2003.

its hopes on the inspectors finding a 'smoking gun' proving conclusively that Iraq was developing WMD. In such a context, Blair was confident that the other members of the Council would reluctantly sanction war to enforce UN resolutions. War in this context would inevitably lead to regime change, thereby securing the goals of Iraq's disarmament and humanitarian rescue.

In early February 2003, the UK followed the US in declaring Iraq to be in 'material breach' of Resolution 1441. As a result, the British argued the Council should issue a new resolution. This position failed to persuade the French, Russians and Germans and they formed a powerful anti-war grouping on the Council. These three governments accepted that Iraq was not fully complying with Resolution 1441, but believed that inspections should be given more time. Had Hans Blix in his major reports of 27 January and 14 February 2003 stated that Iraq was in complete defiance of the UN disarmament process, this would have changed the dynamics on the Council in favour of a new UN resolution. Instead, France and Russia strongly took the view that the US and the UK were premature in abandoning inspections in favour of the use of force. This position was widely shared on the Council, and the nightmare scenario in London was that France and Russia might not only veto a new resolution, but that it would also fail to secure the necessary nine votes.

Blair's strategy – making the UN an effective instrument to manage the threat posed by the coupling of global terrorism and WMD – hinged on securing a second resolution. Yet, the one power that was in a strong position to deliver votes in the Council failed to put its full weight behind Britain's efforts at the UN. Washington was never enthusiastic about a second resolution, and it only supported the British endeavour to secure one because it realised Blair needed it. Indeed, there was frustration among British officials that the Bush Administration did not expend greater energies in cajoling the so-called 'uncommitted six' into line. One official is reported as saying: 'Although everyone talked about all sorts of arm twisting and bribery, what was staggering was that there was very little of that'.

In the final days leading up to war, Britain made one last valiant effort to achieve a compromise in the Council. The UK Permanent Representative in New York, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, floated the idea of specific benchmarks for assessing Iraq's compliance with Resolution 1441. There was some support for this proposal in the Council, but it required the US to delay military action by at least a few more weeks. Given that disarmament was only one of the reasons motivating the Bush Administration, and that there was great suspicion about the effectiveness of UN inspection efforts among the neoconservatives, the benchmarks idea was never going to be acceptable to Washington. By supporting the US with over 20,000 of the UK's armed forces (nearly one third of the land power<sup>47</sup>), Blair hoped to temper the unilateralist instincts of the Bush team. The reluctance of the US to strongly push for a second resolution, and its refusal to accept any deadline beyond 17 March, demonstrated the clear limits of British influence over American policy.

The failure to achieve a second resolution was a massive political blow for Blair, given how much political capital had been invested in securing it. It represented the collapse of his strategy to ensure that Iraq was disarmed through the UN route. The contrast with Kosovo could not be starker. In that instance, the majority of non-permanent members accepted that Russia was acting unreasonably in blocking military intervention, that Serb violence posed an imminent threat to Kosovars, and that all peaceful options had been exhausted. Blair hoped that the 'uncommitted six' would feel the same sense of urgency and threat over Iraq, and hence view France and Russia's threat to veto as equally 'unreasonable'. But based on Blix's reports, Council members considered that the inspections process offered, at least for the immediate future, a viable alternative to the use of force. They were simply not convinced that Iraq posed the kind of imminent threat that justified immediate military action.

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<sup>47</sup> Williamson Murray and General Robert H. Scales Jr., *The Iraq War: A Military History* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003), p. 132.

Blair continued to maintain that there was clear legal authority to attack Iraq in existing UN resolutions, but the fact that he had put so much weight on securing a second resolution weakened his case. Subsequent to the war his case has become further weakened by the former head of the Iraq Survey Group's admission that they had found no evidence that Iraq possessed stockpiles of unconventional weapons at the time of the US-led war. If Dr Kay's cautiously stated view that 'we were all wrong, probably'<sup>48</sup> is vindicated by the inquiries underway in the US and the UK, then history will surely judge that although Blair acted in good faith<sup>49</sup> the grounds for engaging British forces in a preventive war were not justifiable.

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<sup>48</sup> Richard W. Stevenson and Thom Shanker, 'Ex-Arms Monitor Urges an Inquiry on Iraqi Threat', *New York Times*, 29 January 2004.

<sup>49</sup> A conclusion arrived at by Lord Hutton in his inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly, and the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Ninth Report of Session 2002-03 'The Decision to go to War in Iraq' (paragraph 186, p. 54).



## Concluding Reflections on the Lessons of the Ethical Foreign Policy

- **Lesson 1 – The government has no choice but to have an ethical foreign policy.** Despite the criticism heaped upon it for proclaiming an ethical foreign policy, the government was right to do so. At the most basic level, it is hard to conceive of a democratic state having an *unethical* foreign policy. To protect itself from unreasonable criticism, the government could do more in terms of setting out the principles underpinning the policy and acknowledging a) these are not always mutually compatible and b) what priority ought to be accorded to the various moral values.
- **Lesson 2 – Avoid instrumental argumentation.** The two dossiers published by the government illustrate a serious flaw in its understanding of the need to persuade others as to the justice of its cause. Two key select committee reports have cast doubt on the adequacy of the government's presentation of intelligence information. The public spotlight on the September dossier has meant that the composition of the second 'dodgy dossier', chaired by Alastair Campbell, was also subject to scrutiny. This paper was inaccurately presented to the House of Commons by the Prime Minister as the result of 'intelligence reports' about Saddam Hussein's 'infrastructure of concealment'.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the basis of part 2 of the dossier was a plagiarised article found on the internet and recycled without permission or attribution. When the true identity of the dossier was revealed, Robin Cook referred to its publication as a 'spectacular own goal' which was not only counter-productive, but also put in jeopardy the security of Mr Marashi (the author of the plagiarised article) and his family. The wider issue here is the ethics of communication. Governments obviously seek to persuade the public to accept their interpretation of events but this must be through open dialogue in which claims are

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<sup>50</sup> According to the Foreign Affairs Committee, 'most of the document was not in fact intelligence material', p. 37.

put forward sincerely and compromises are made if a consensus cannot be reached. All participants in the dialogue – government, media, public opinion – must be prepared to question their own position and be prepared to alter it in the course of political conversation.

- **Lesson 3 – The danger of ‘presidential’ foreign policy-making.** One of the most striking revelations of recent biographies of Blair which has been re-affirmed by submissions to the Hutton inquiry is just how much power the Prime Minister and his aides wield. There was, for example, no discussion of the direction of British foreign policy in the cabinet at the beginning of Blair 1, neither was there significant cabinet involvement in the decision to go to war against Iraq. There is mounting evidence that the FCO is increasingly marginal in the formulation of British foreign policy. Blair prefers to make policy in proximity to a few close advisors. The danger here is one of group-think where those around the Prime Minister filter information in such a manner that it only serves to reinforce his preferred outcome. This is precisely why constitutional states require built-in checks and balances to ensure reasoned argumentation prevails over individual conviction. Presidential power may also be at work in the sense that members of key committees such as the Joint Intelligence Committee might consciously or subconsciously allow their interpretation of intelligence information to be shaped by political ends. It would be surprising if the inquiry headed by Lord Butler into the accuracy of pre-war intelligence on Iraqi WMD did not offer strong recommendations in respect of the need to preserve the independence of the intelligence community. More broadly, we would argue that a less presidential approach to foreign policy might have averted the many mistakes made in the run-up to the war, both in terms of the use of intelligence and the misreading of the French position on the Security Council
- **Lesson 4 – Dealing with the double standards question.** Any government that regularly deploys moral arguments will inevitably be charged with double standards. The Labour

Government could rebut this charge by claiming that the best that can be achieved is coherence and not consistency. Letting go of consistency means facing up to the reality that not every case will be treated the same. There may be a range of prudential reasons as to why different cases demand different kinds of response. Coherence, however, must always be maintained. In other words, the government needs to demonstrate that it is applying the same principles to each case while at the same time acknowledging that different cases require different instruments in the foreign policy tool-box. With regard to WMD proliferators, for example, force will often be an inappropriate instrument but other kinds of diplomatic and economic pressures ought to be deployed. A policy of looking the other way would be both inconsistent *and* incoherent.

- **Lesson 5 – Develop a framework for legitimate military intervention.** The key issue here is winning the argument about the wider principle at stake – and then dealing with each issue according to the criteria. The Chicago speech set out a coherent and persuasive list of requirements to be satisfied before armed intervention could take place (although more thought needs to be given the issue of right authority). Yet the government never came back to these criteria prior to using force against Iraq, thereby adding to the sense that something else was in the driver (such as the special relationship or regime change).
- **Lesson 6 – The government must be sure of its case before using force.** Given the intelligence information that is coming to light, there are good reasons for doubting whether this was actually the case. Rather than searching for evidence that supports a prior political judgement, then spinning it to persuade a sceptical audience, British Governments should scrutinise evidence with the utmost care (especially single sourced intelligence reports from sources with their own agenda). The history of war shows all too clearly that it is far easier to break countries than to fix them. Moreover, the danger of not winning the argument domestically and going ahead regardless is that the public

may not support a future intervention when the case might be much more clear-cut. In this respect, it might be harder to implement the Chicago criteria after Iraq.

- **Lesson 7 – Return to the UN but not at any price.** As a general principle, a foreign policy purporting to be ethical should strengthen rather than weaken the framework of international law. However, there could be a human rights emergency – or an imminent WMD security threat – that demands action even if a consensus in the Security Council cannot be reached. Providing the government’s proposed course of action receives legitimacy from key sites outside of the UN Security Council (international public opinion, a majority opinion in the General Assembly) action that subverts the Council could be acceptable.
- **Lesson 8 – Being a pivotal power may require distancing the UK from the US.** The special relationship is clearly important to Britain’s security interests and cultural life in general. But if the idea of a pivotal power is to be realized, Britain needs to shift its post-9/11 Atlanticism in the direction of Europe. Iraq was an important test of the UK government’s ability to be a bridge across the Atlantic. After not getting the second resolution, Blair should have had the courage to withdraw British forces but commit heavily to post-war reconstruction providing the US was willing to make concessions to a more inclusive reconstruction process. British public opinion would have supported such action, the moral principle of following settled international norms would not have been breached, and the prospects of a common EU foreign policy would not have been shattered. The risk of such action would be to relegate the importance of Britain to the US, but was this risk as great as Blair believed? It is time that we faced up to the fact that the influence Britain gains from the special relationship is significantly over-shadowed by the costs it has to pay in terms of the damage done to our relationship with European partners and governments and peoples outside the Western world.

- **Lesson 9 – Wanted: a campaign to revive the ethical foreign policy.** In the aftermath of the Iraq war, the UK government lacks credibility internationally for its claim to uphold ethical commitments to internationalism and multilateralism. One way of re-capturing its reputation would be for the government to mobilize international opinion around an issue that was consistent with its professed internationalist values. Britain needs to act as a moral entrepreneur in terms of mobilizing domestic and international support for a worthy cause, as Canada did with the treaty banning landmines. One possibility, suggested by Oxfam, would be pushing for a treaty controlling the proliferation of small arms. Why small arms? The death toll from such weapons dwarfs all other weapons system, including WMD. Putting its weight behind this campaign would set the UK apart from the US (without causing great damage to the relationship), and it would foster improved relations with many Third World governments and NGOs.<sup>51</sup>
- **Lesson 10 – Bring foreign policy into the ‘big conversation’.** Towards the end of 2003, Prime Minister Blair launched a big conversation around the future direction of politics. The media coverage of this issue to date has centred upon the reform and delivery of public services. Leading figures in the government would no doubt be happy for the debate to remain on domestic issues given the on-going controversy over the Iraq war. On the contrary, it is crucial that the government engages in a conversation about foreign policy: credit must be given to the architects of the ‘big conversation’ for including as the thirteenth and last question on the agenda: ‘how do we develop our concept of international community’. As this paper has shown, we believe that from the outset the government has sought to

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<sup>51</sup> The case for tougher arms control of small weapons is made in *Shattered Lives* published jointly by Oxfam and Amnesty International (2003). See [www.controlarms.org](http://www.controlarms.org)

achieve this goal through an ethical foreign policy guided by internationalist values and implemented by multilateral institutions. Where the conversation matters most is in terms of how it should deal with the difficult choices which follow from the pursuit of principles in a deeply divided world.

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