

Critical Review

Blair, Tony (2010). *A Journey*. London: Hutchinson: 718 pp.

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Since the day Tony Blair left office, in June 2007, he has never really been away from the spotlight. This is mainly because the constant controversy around the 2003 Iraq war remains intact and questions over the motives and reasons behind Blair's decision are still seeking an answer.

Today, after a deliberate period of silence, Blair's memoir *A Journey* offers him the chance to *say* and *explain*¹.

Indeed, the book includes testaments over various events from his private life, such as the devastating feeling after the loss of his mother to whom he had a special connection or the surprising relationship with alcohol.

But as far as the politician is concerned, his book seems to be a personal account of a leader in a certain period of time, his vision and decisions, an instrument to preserve his legacy, justifying the war against Iraq, and staying loyal to New Labour.

Blair writes about his first day in office. He was inexperienced but determined to make a difference. Since the beginning, he created a personal warm relationship with the people of Britain, in particular after Princess Diana's death, when in his speech really captured the public mood.

But this relationship between Blair and the public was not to last long with the false prospectus of the Iraq War, which marked the lowest point of his popularity.

After the publication of Blair's memoir, the British newspapers concentrated mostly on his rivalry relationship with Gordon Brown. Alongside Gordon Brown and Peter Mandelson, Blair was indeed the driving force behind New Labour. However, it was not until June 2007, the end of Blair's premiership, that Blair would finally give way to

¹ Kettle, Martin. "World exclusive Tony Blair interview", *The Guardian*, Wednesday, 01.09.2010. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/sep/01/tony-blair-a-journey-interview> Accessed on: 31.01.2011



Brown. And Brown in fact had worked with strong political skills to ensure that there would be no rival for the succession.

Although domestic politics figure notably in Blair's book - the 1997 labour party campaign was fought almost exclusively on a domestic policy base - is his foreign policy that really defines Blair's decade in office, from 1997 to 2007. And it is his controversial performance in the world scene that really captures the mind of the reader abroad.

Blair admits *my awakening on domestic politics took place over time. Probably I only fully found my voice on domestic reform in the last term. The awakening on foreign policy was, by contrast, abrupt. It happened over Kosovo.*² This successful military intervention was to influence his subsequent decisions on Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and, crucially, Iraq.

Blair is a liberal interventionist. He does not withdraw anything he said in his Chicago speech, on 22 April 1999, and its liberal interventionist *doctrine of international community*.³ Starting from the reality of interdependence in an age of globalisation, a world where events in a faraway place can have immediate effect on our national security, he argues that intervention to bring down a despotic dictatorial regime could be justified on grounds of the nature of the regime, not merely the immediate threat to national interest.

Yet, the *Blair doctrine* has challenged notions of national sovereignty and non-interventionism principles going back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. And it appeared to justify the approach to Afghanistan and Iraq in which battle was to take place at a different scale. As a result he knows that his historical legacy is likely to be most closely linked to the ultimate outcomes of those wars. Therefore, he devotes a considerable amount of space in his memoir to defending military adventurism, especially in Iraq.

*I have often reflected as to whether I was wrong. I ask you to reflect as to whether I may have been right.*⁴

The book contains lengthy passages on 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. For Blair this was definitely a war, a war that had to be fought differently from any other. Precisely, it was an ideological battle, the *mores and modus vivendi of religious fanaticism versus those of an enlightened secular system of government that in the West, at least, incorporated belief in liberty, equality and democracy.*⁵

Blair does not proclaim that he did not fight for the British national interest. But, what he claims to be the focal point of the foreign policy of our days is globalisation. He does believe that the defining characteristic of today's world is its interdependence; and that unless we articulate a common global policy based on common values, we risk chaos threatening our economic and political stability.

And in practice, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in New York and Washington, 11/03/2004 in Madrid, and 21/07/2005 in London, prove clearly that terrorism can knock our doors, claiming thousands of innocent lives with no previous notice.

² *A Journey*, p. 223

³ Blair, Tony (1999). "Doctrine of the International Community", Speech at the Economic Club of Chicago. Available at *Downing Street website*: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page1297> Accessed on: 10.02.2011

⁴ *A Journey*, p. 374

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 346



For Blair, the enemy has to know that we are determined to act. This drove his policy drastically in Afghanistan and as well as in Iraq.

To win in this way would not and does not require simply a military strategy to defeat an enemy that is fighting us. It requires a whole new geopolitical framework. It requires nation-building⁶. [...] it had to be fought on the high ground – our values versus theirs [...] Like it or not, from then on, we were in the business of nation building.⁷

To the question is Iraq better now than in Saddam's time, Blair answers: *of course*. In 1979, when Saddam took the power, Iraq was richer than Portugal. By 2003, the population was dependent on food aid, by 60%. Today, GDP per head in Iraq is three times that of Iraq in 2003.⁸

However, Blair does not address critically the practical challenge of nation-building. He simply reasserts that the price must be paid in the battle against terrorism and radical Islam. Though he showed courage in the Iraq war, the war itself has been a failure. Indeed, there was no legitimising reasoning behind the endeavour, nor from the United Nations (UN) neither from the public opinion. There were not found Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in the possession of the Saddam regime. And definitely there was no planning for the aftermath reconstruction and stabilisation of the country. The Shia-Sunni gap has been wider across the Muslim world. The situation in Iran has been more aggressive too.

In addition, the case for a new *international community* is strong and Blair has often put it clearly. There have been some notable successes, as in Sierra Leone and Kosovo. But this community will only come into being if pursued through example and persuasion, not through war. Subsequently, the attempt to impose Western values on distant states through armed force is doomed to failure.

Blair in his memoir admits that there was not an active WMD programme in Iraq as they thought, yet he repeats the same arguments as to the reasons why he still would do the same thing, such as the tyranny of Saddam regime, the international law violations, the security threat to his neighbors and the world.

The books shed little light to Blair's feelings over the resignations and the hundreds of thousands of people who marched in protest in Britain and across the world. The list of those who disagreed with the invasion and occupation of Iraq was long, including personalities who fought for personal freedom and justice for years, like Nelson Mandela.

I finished reading his memoir still thinking of Tony Blair as an enigmatic leader. Enigmatic, as one can be easily inspired by his values and his philosophical conceptions about modern politics, but at the same time one can be profoundly disappointed by his unquestioning acceptance of US policy and interventionist approach in Iraq.

For Clausewitz⁹ moral courage and determination is what makes a great strategist. Blair had both, love him or loath him.

⁶ *A Journey*, p. 349

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 357

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 378-379

⁹ Clausewitz, Carl von (1984). *On War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.



In the end, his Journey was definitely as much a *triumph of the person over politics* as was a *triumph of the politics over the person*.¹⁰

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¹⁰ *A Journey*, p. 691