



HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN  
**Centre for British Studies**  
Großbritannien-Zentrum



## Working Paper Series

### **THE FOREIGN POLICY OF BRITISH PRIME MINISTER TONY BLAIR: RADICAL OR RETROGRADE?**

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I am honoured to be asked to speak to you this evening as part of the 10th anniversary of the innovative and multidisciplinary Centre for British Studies at Humboldt University in Berlin. The invitation I had to give this talk about Blair's foreign policy came well before the date of the last British general election was announced, and the organizers here at the wisely saw this as an opportunity for me, either to assess Blair retrospectively, or in the light of a third general election success. As we know, the election results brought success for Blair. However, any assessment must be provisional, not least because of the recent bombings in London, which may yet alter the political dynamics of power within the Labour Party, as well as the British public's appetite for a change of leader.



June 2005

1. I would like first to remind you very quickly about the May 2005 election, and to bring ourselves up to date. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 had a strong impact upon the election: the manifesto commitments do not reveal much beyond a determination to stay the course in Iraq. This was important, as trust in

Blair was an issue which attracted much attention: the enquiries into aspects relating to the war – the Hutton and Butler enquiries – largely exonerated Blair, although the events surrounding the lead time up to, and prosecution of the war, now appear to be a great deal murkier than was previously portrayed.

There was widespread discussion about how long after the election Blair would decide to remain in office, and the old tensions between him and his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, were never far from view. Blair's team seems to have decided to focus upon domestic issues, and to allow Blair to make this a personal, rather than collective electoral campaign. The skills of Blair as a communicator and proselyte- the actor, maybe, and the competent English barrister, came through very strongly in the campaign.

### Labour Party Manifesto, 2005

**' ...Globalisation means that events elsewhere have a direct impact at home. So we will pursue British interests by working with our allies to make the world a safer, fairer place. This means reforming Europe....And it means using our leading role in the G8, EU, the Commonwealth and UN to promote global action on climate change and poverty... ...We will help spread democracy and freedom around the world. We will be leaders in a reformed Europe...'**

## Labour Party Manifesto, 2005

**...EU constitution ‘ is a good treaty for Britain and for the new Europe. We will put it to the British people in a referendum and campaign wholeheartedly for a Yes vote to keep Britain a leading nation in Europe...’**

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## Labour Party Manifesto, 2005

**‘...Combating the threat of terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan....butchery of Saddam is over...we should all unite to support the fledgling democracy in Iraq. British troops should remain in Iraq under a UN mandate as long as the government there wants them. ... Our armed forces are a force for good...’**



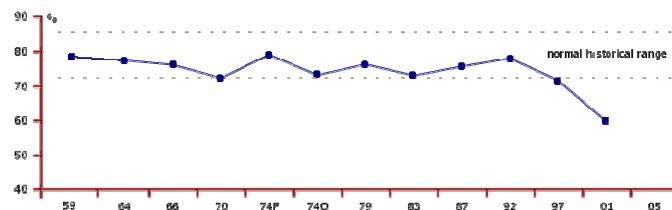
## UK general election, May 2005

### Labour majority 65:

<b>Labour:</b>	<b>355 (-57)</b>
<b>Conservatives:</b>	<b>198 (+32)</b>
<b>Liberal Democrats:</b>	<b>62 (+10)</b>

Turnout: 61.3% (+1.9)

## Voter turnout in UK general elections since 1959



So, despite the doomsayers, not only do we have the election success Blair wanted, but powerful and activist images of Blair in this third term have barely left the front pages of the newspapers since May 2005. G8, the EU presidency, the upcoming UN summit – quite apart from Live8 – have all put Blair somewhere rather closer to centre stage than most people anticipated, and it is

clear that Blair has decided to lead from the front, and not to allow any thoughts of him as a damaged leader to dominate the headlines. Before the election, Blair was seen as a liability for his party: he has sprung back from that with remarkable skill and alacrity over the past couple of months. Over the last few weeks there were three events – in Singapore (the Olympic bids), at Gleneagles (the G8 summit), and then in London (transport system bombings), which put a considerable strain upon his judgment and communication skills.

2. So how can we judge Blair's foreign policy? Is he a radical, bringing new and deep changes to UK foreign policy; or is he actually returning to some actual or imagined past of British power and influence in the world? Or, to put this provocative title in a more muted way: is he a conservative, a traditionalist who may be using different, 21st century presentation and methods; or is there a real paradigm shift, a sea-change in Britain's foreign policy under Blair? Or will we find a bit of both?

These are questions of considerable interest to political analysts and historians in Britain, as well as in the wider international community. Blair is aware of this: as he said in his Warsaw speech: 'We [sic] are parodied as either being Mrs Thatcher with a smile instead of a handbag; or as really old-style socialists in drag, desperate to conceal our true identity'. He is also aware of how the important political issues appear to have changed radically since the end of the cold war, and that how to respond on a day-to-day basis is as an important a question for those with the day-to-day job of running foreign policy, as that of whether there is a new and grand strategic shift in British foreign policy.

Analysts have looked variously at the notion of a reinvented British crusade; a neo-imperialist agenda (Barnett); or a moralizing and hubris-ridden foreign policy. Since May, there has been talk of a 'legacy-leadership' drive from Number 10. Others argue that there is a big difference between the rhetoric and the action, the performance abroad and that at home. Yet others focus on the development of a communitarian dimension to foreign policy globally, in which the basic rights of peoples, wherever they live, are of greater importance than international laws and the conventions of non-intervention in the affairs of other states. However, all agree that it is Blair himself who is at the centre of the British foreign policy machine, and he is a man with, we are told, a strong religious belief (he is Church of England, although his wife and family are Roman Catholics), and who talks with confidence, if not zest, about good and evil, right and wrong, in foreign policy. This is especially interesting, not least because Blair came into office in 1997 with little interest or knowledge about foreign policy: there was no serious manifesto policy over EMU in place; the 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy trumpeted by the first foreign secretary, Robin Cook, was not in the manifesto in 1997. (However, it should be noted that British prime ministers have always become increasingly absorbed by foreign policy questions as their term of office has progressed.)

There is a lot to talk about in foreign policy when we consider the last eight years. 'Blair's wars', to use John Kampfner's phrase, include: Iraq 1998; Kosovo 1999 (when intervention went ahead without a new UNSC resolution); Sierra Leone 2000; Afghanistan 2001, ( a 'coalition of the willing' with subsequent NATO involvement); Iraq 2003, (without new a UNSC resolution, and with a strange 'coalition of the willing' that managed also to split the EU, as well as peace-keeping actions as part of EU coalitions of military forces in the Balkans). These were so-called 'voluntary wars': and not wars in defence of a specific alliance commitment.

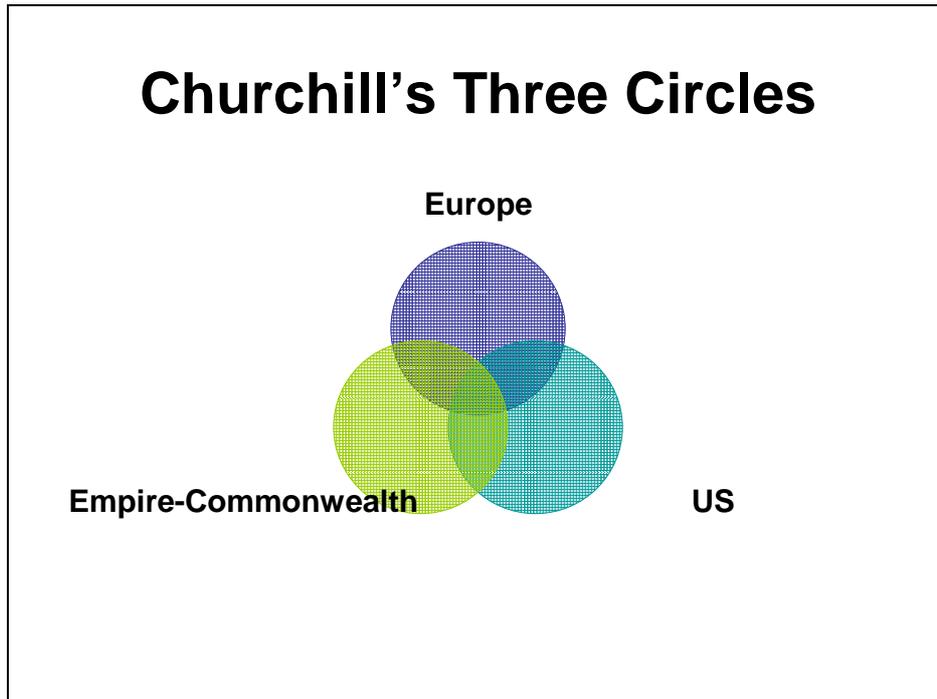
As I hope I will make clear, I see much in Blair's foreign policy that is traditional, even backward looking (retrograde). Blair is both deliberately using Britain's historical past as a tool for contemporary politics; while at the same time he is deeply shaped and formed by Britain's traditional political culture of foreign policy ideas. The Labour Government takes history and the lessons of history very seriously (although 'history' is not always accurately represented by the present government).



January 2003

Yet, a contradiction exists: there has been constant talk about breaking away from, of drawing a line under the past, while at the same time using what appears to be positive historical capital to make history work in the government's direction. There are at least three broad strands of policy that have –more or less– remained constants. I shall look at these traditional elements, and then go on to look at why and how leadership is something of a mantra for the Labour government, and how important the personality, the notion of leadership is to Labour and to Blair. From within a very traditional working model of British foreign policy, Blair has taken his country into voluntary wars in a way that can be called radical, in a manner which may be destructive to the subtle and sometimes fragile multilateralism that is at the centre of our international system.

3. I shall start with Winston Churchill, which may seem rather odd, but it happens to be where Blair's foreign policy also starts. During a speech to the Conservative Party conference in 1948, Churchill drew this image of the three interlocking circles that represented Britain's place in the world. When Churchill made this speech, he argued that the UK was thus in a unique position in the world, and capable of playing an influential role within the Empire/ Dominions; with the United States; and with Europe. He went on to argue that, together, the states in this configuration could stand up to the emerging forces of communism and the Soviet Union in the postwar world. It is worth remembering that Churchill was now out of office, yet, as leader of the Conservative Party in opposition, felt free to talk publicly (the Fulton speech, for example) about British foreign policy. (It is worth remembering that, during the run up to the 2003 invasion, the wags in the Pentagon used to call Blair 'Churchill'. Before then, Number 10 played to Bush's admiration of Churchill: an Epstein bust of Churchill is on loan to Bush; and a copy of the Atlantic Charter was given to him to hang on the wall at Camp David).



The three circles can be used as the starting point for an analysis of Blair's foreign policy. Note that they are very Anglo-centric, but that the argument is that New Labour thought that the Third Way/ Triangulation could be achieved between the three circles by the UK (much as Churchill did). This means that policy makers have to ensure that any apparent incompatibilities between the demands of the three circles can, and should, be reconciled. For example, Blair's use of the bridge between the EU and the US metaphor is based on exactly such an assumption.

3. a. Of course, in the 1940s, the centre of structural power for the UK was the Empire- Dominions-Commonwealth. Especially during his first term, Blair called upon this imagery, not least to the South African government. If the traction to be gained from the Commonwealth as a unified international actor turned out to be minimal, nevertheless, its rhetorical resonance was still quite powerful. The legacy, in practice, seemed to be as much one of responsibilities as power enhancement, especially in Africa. Yet, as the Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Sir Michael Jay, said in a radio broadcast in 2003, 'There's an awful lot of strengths that we have - traditional skills, the experience which comes from a tradition of a global foreign policy and the willingness to send our forces overseas to fight for British interests when we judge that to be right.' Empire and its successors have left a global power image deep within the heart of Whitehall. One example of this will suffice here: nuclear weaponry has been completely off limits for discussion since 1997. This remains the case, and the government has done a remarkably good job to keep this issue

off the agenda, and to decouple UK nuclear weaponry from the wider non-proliferation debate. Nuclear weaponry, of course, is the ultimate weapon for use *in extremis*...and legitimate ownership of nuclear weaponry is the ultimate gauge of a major power. Another example of the continuing desire to project a global power image is Blair's obsession with leadership. I shall deal with this at the end of my talk.

3. b. When we come to the European Union, it seemed that there would be something genuinely new when New Labour came to power in 1997. Blair appeared to be seriously in favour of a change of policy, and had close colleagues who were fervent pro-EU politicians.



Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson

The EC/EU (the European circle) has been a graveyard for British politicians of both parties since the war. This is because of beliefs that European projects would not work, that they did not 'fit' for the UK, that UK sovereignty did not allow for deep integration...the topic merits a talk to itself. Blair has in practice been as cautious as his predecessors. New Labour's approach to EMU was dominated initially by a feeling that the project would not work, and John Major had ensured that the UK would not be in the first wave anyway, while the five tests for potential membership only emerged in the autumn of 1997. The

agreement to the social chapter has been uncomfortable for Blair, given the technical constraints that it imposes upon employers, (but in reality it doesn't exist for professionals).

If we seek to find out how radical Labour's policies have been, we must look at the record, rather than the rhetoric. The rhetoric places UK at the heart of Europe, with a leadership role, as being in favour of enlargement, and as seeing the EU as part of the trans-Atlantic partnership. All of this is very classic and traditional British public talk on the EC/EU. However, the record is not very good: membership of the EMU project has been kicked into the very long grass; the Lisbon reforms – much trumpeted by the FCO – are proving to be tougher and slower to implement than was originally anticipated. Enlargement has indeed gone ahead, but it has not generated a cyclical shift in UK public opinion, as Eurobarometer consistently showed UK polling as second from the bottom in favour of enlargement.

There is one area in which Blair has been genuinely radical, and that is the St Malo process and the creation of E/CSDP. It broke the WEU, EU and NATO logjam, and took place in the face of continued Balkan strife. The ability of the EU to call upon EU military force was genuinely radical, undermining the 'civilian' character of the EU; while at the same time showing how powerful the British and French could be when they decided to act in tandem. However, as one who saw an internal EU logic in the development of ESDP, and favoured the initiative at the time, I nevertheless wonder now, whether ESDP has not taken the eyes of many off the economic tasks of the EU. Breaking through the glass ceiling of an EU embargo on the use of force has moved the EU into a completely new setting: we are not yet sure whether it takes Europeans away from, or moves them closer to a more genuinely integrated foreign perspective. Further, for Blair, unlike Chirac, the development of ESDP was within the context of showing the US that the European members of NATO could act effectively, rather than being, as it was in Paris, to do with the more autonomous use of power by the EU. Finally, Blair's subsequent prioritisation of the US over the EU in early 2003 with the invasion of Iraq, was an enormous blow to that EU solidarity which is essential to the successful promulgation of EU common foreign and security policies, and led some to fear that 'CFSP was in ruins'. This takes me straight to the third Churchillian circle.

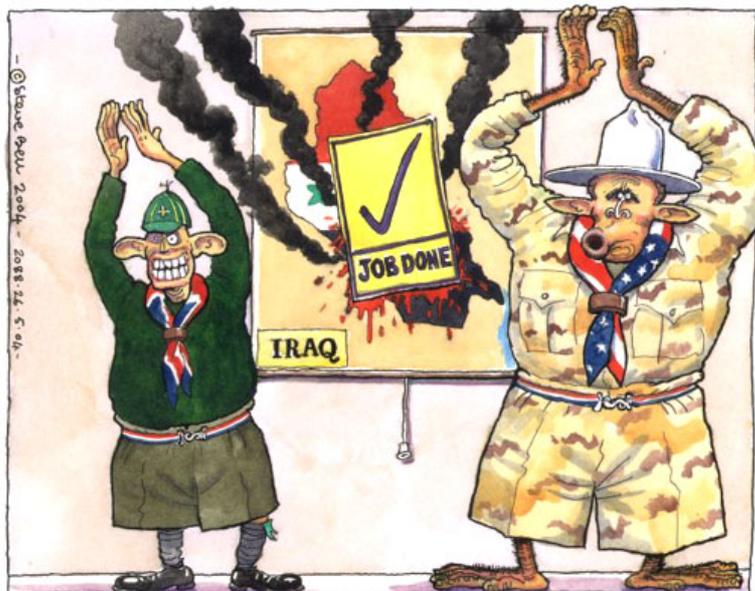


St Malo, December 1998

3. c. The third of Churchill's circles was the US. I do not have the time to take you through where the US fits into UK foreign policy making. Suffice to say that Blair, like many prime ministers before him, knows that, if he has to make the choice, he will cleave to American power. (Macmillan after Suez. Exceptions: Wilson over Vietnam, and Heath, 70-74.) This has been reinforced by the Americans themselves (although they are normally much less interested in the 'Special Relationship' with the UK than we are: take, for example, Bush's remarks about there being no *quid pro quo* between the UK's role in Iraq and any climate change deal at Gleneagles). Clinton told Blair after the US Republican victory that UK had to stay close to US, despite the ideological differences between Bush and Blair. Blair has adhered to this advice. This is doubly ironic, as, the early 1990s, even those in the UK were beginning to argue that the days of the old Special Relationship were dead. However, at the Lord Mayor's banquet in 1997, Blair trumpeted the UK as the bridge between the US and Europe: 'When Britain and America work together. . there is little we cannot achieve.' or as he later put it, the 'price of influence is that we do not leave the US to face the tricky issues on their own', a phrase that could only too easily have been that of Macmillan.



In this perspective, the core dilemma of Iraq is in fact about the US, and not Iraq itself. The Iraq invasion was about sustaining the UK-US relationship as well as any specific rationale for the invasion. The UK contribution has been relatively limited, and seen as psychological and political, (though Rumsfeld cast some doubt on that just before the invasion). For the purposes of my argument, Blair's attitude to the US on this issue – as on Kosovo, and on Afghanistan – is very much in the pattern of traditional British foreign policy. The adventure at Suez has taught lessons about UK- US relations, from the shadow of which – possibly overestimating US capacity and power – Blair has not escaped.



#### 4. Leadership

Having shown that the structural scaffolding of British foreign policy is very traditional, based – though surely unwittingly – upon the Churchillian belief in the capacity of Britain, and only Britain, to weave together the Empire-Commonwealth, the US, and the Europeans, let me now turn to the issue of leadership, for this is an essential ingredient of (New) Labour's foreign policy, and an obvious corollary to the Three Circles. Blair is obsessed by leadership. Where this obsession for leadership comes from is hard to judge, but I would suggest that it stems from our imperial history, as well as the way in which our empire was incrementally disbanded largely through decisions that were taken in Whitehall, coupled with the performance of Britain in the Second World War. The British still expect to be at the international top table: this is part of our political culture, whether Britain is depicted as being able to 'punch above our weight', or as having global interests as a power that is more than a normal medium-sized power.

In his Blair's only pre 1997 election speech on foreign policy, he argued that: 'Century upon century, it has been the destiny of Britain to lead other nations....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 we are nothing' This is not a new perspective: one of the core problems for the British has been, for example, that they felt that the EC/EU did not act as a suitable forum for British leadership, especially when the Franco-German tandem was functioning effectively. They have always assumed that the 'Special Relationship' – playing Greece to America's Rome as Macmillan put it – was more important than, for example, the crucial West-German/American special relationship in the cold war, never mind the American/Israeli special relationship in the Middle East. Leadership always seems to play out well with British public opinion: the historical memories of Churchillian leadership in the Second World War still resonate with enormous power in the British collective consciousness.

Leadership brings with its 'responsibilities', 'obligations' and costs, and public opinion has normally been quite comfortable with these concepts. There is a taboo about criticising a government on the eve of war – experienced not only before the Iraq invasion, but very notably before the Falklands war in 1982. This comes with an acceptance of the use of military force, which I would suspect that many Germans would find quite extraordinary today, and I would be prepared to hazard a guess that most Britons have no idea at all of the number of military actions that have been undertaken since 1997, the numbers of personnel involved, and their costs to the taxpayer.

#### 5. War.

So, this brings us to war. As I mentioned, and whether he likes it or not, and despite the sand that is kicked over the traces, Blair's premiership will be

remembered for its wars. We do not know whether there is a genuine Labour government shift in attitude to war, or whether the changes in the international system mean that any UK government would have responded in similar ways. What we do know is that these wars have been wars of choice. Further, they have not always been undertaken within the framework of existing international institutions and their rules.

Britain's historical default position, however, is war-avoidance, although we are a country that has had many imperial and post-imperial military policing and fighting operations to manage. The impact of appeasement in the 1930s left a double scar on foreign policy making. On the one hand, war was still seen as an expensive and unpredictable option, reinforcing the realization since the end of the first world war, that the costs of military policing, and military actions were increasingly prohibitive for the country. Yet, Blair, like so many of his predecessors, has a fear of repeating the errors of appeasement. He has expressed this fear by using historical analogies, both with regard to Milosevic, and to Saddam Hussein, (as Bevin did about the Soviet Union, and Eden did about Nasser...)

**'But let me advise you as a friend, to avoid the mistake of British foreign policy towards Europe for around half a century. That mistake is to think that by hanging back in Europe we can avoid the debate; that if we participate we get contaminated by the contrary arguments' (Blair, Warsaw speech)**

Blair's rationale for war has two main strands. The first is a threat to our national interests (the risk to the stability of Europe if Kosovo was not 'saved', the infamous 45 minute warning with regard to Saddam's apparent nuclear readiness); the second is an appeal to a higher humanitarian purpose. This is expressed most clearly in his Chicago Speech of April 1999 on the concept of the International Community, and the criteria for military intervention.

This speech is very heavily based upon the notion of the UK being a force for good: the moral dimension appears more important than any reference to international law. He set down, and here I summarise, the criteria for humanitarian intervention:

‘Are we sure of our case?

Have we exhausted all the diplomatic options?

Are there military operations that the UK can sensibly and prudently undertake?

Are we prepared for the long term?

Do we have national interests involved?’

This speech reveals much communitarian thinking that was very fashionable at the time. It was also novel in that, according to John Kampfner, it originated in the notes of a distinguished academic, based on well-known Just War thinking, and was not processed through the Whitehall system. It was not grounded in international law and institutions as part of the criteria for intervention. In that respect, it is a dangerous document. However, the FCO moved behind this shift. To quote Jay again, in the same radio programme; ‘There is now a much greater international acceptance of the case for intervening in countries in one way or another where there is a shortfall in certain basic principles of good governance or human rights. It’s interesting to look at the practice in the last few years not just of the big cases like Iraq, like Kosovo, like Afghanistan; but if you look for example at the British intervention in Sierra Leone, the European intervention supported by Britain and France in the Congo recently, the Australian intervention in the Solomon Islands, the French intervention in the Ivory Coast, the Americans in Liberia, there is a much greater acceptance, as I say, of the need for preemptive intervention at times and I think that’s quite new.’

This ‘communitarian’ approach presents a challenge to rogue states themselves of course, but it also presents a challenge to international institutions. Intervention may come in many guises: pre-emptive, or by invitation; selective, both in terms of allies/ partners; and in selectivity - where such intervention can feasibly take place. This was the justification for the Kosovo war. Both before the Afghan war and before the invasion of Iraq, Blair again flirted with this notion. Casting the spotlight on states that do not apply, to use the term deployed by the UN, their ‘responsibility to protect’ their own peoples, and being prepared to take military, and pre-emptive action is a radical change in foreign policy. As I have written elsewhere, one of the great challenges to international institutions and international stability is what I call ‘ad hocery’: the temptation to see each crisis as so overwhelming that the normal rules of international engagement can be laid aside. This is dangerous politics; it can lead to great uncertainty and perhaps greater instability in longer term. It generates very uncertain outcomes. Small groups of key international actors, and coalitions of the willing - which now exist in the politics of the Balkans, the Middle East, as well as in Iraq, may well, over time, undermine the stability of the international system. As the

former foreign secretary, Robin Cook has put it, in an observation that challenges the very core of Blair's decision-making in foreign policy: 'Our participation in George Bush's war on Iraq was a disastrous own goal. It has undermined the multilateral character of the structures we need if Britain is going to be safe, if it's going to be prosperous, if it's going to be able to use its influence and have leverage.'

### **Conclusion**

My analysis is partial: I have not considered the role of domestic politics in foreign policy making, or the effect that Blair's foreign policy style has had upon the traditional Whitehall foreign-policy making structures, particularly inside the FCO. It has not been possible to dissect in detail the road to war that Blair has now taken many times, and how much was learned from earlier wars. It has not been possible to analyse the extent to which our foreign policy is a series of short term decisions ('rolling rationalisation'), that only retrospectively appear to have a pattern. For this I apologise. However, I hope that I have painted a first-draft explanation of the nature of Blair's foreign policy. This is cast firmly in a mould from the past, that draws upon Britain's historic role, responsibilities and capabilities. It has a strong bias towards the United States, even if this is at the expense of the United Nations, Europe, and the EU. So with Blair's foreign policy comes the potential to weaken those institutional and multilateral frameworks upon which we ourselves also rely for our security in an interdependent world.