1 *The Problem of Blair's War*

In most wars the principle holds: to the victor go the spoils. But that was not the case in this war. The invasion of Iraq was a short affair, and in military terms an unambiguously successful one. The first sustained air bombardment began on 20 March 2003, and the ground offensive a day later. By 1 May George Bush was able to stand on the deck of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* and declare that major combat operations in Iraq had ended. Wars hardly come shorter and more successful than this.

Yet a mere three months later, the political honeymoon created for both George Bush and Tony Blair by that rapid military success was visibly gone. The heady atmosphere of success was already long gone in London, and it was beginning quickly to dissipate in Washington. By the middle of 2003 both the President and the Prime Minister found themselves under heavy and regular pressure to justify the war they had won. Both men found themselves facing repeated calls to explain why they had taken their countries to war; and both found themselves obliged to defend the justifications they had used earlier to do so. The list of woes faced by the victors mounted rapidly.

In the USA, the steady drip, drip, drip of returning military body bags (52 in the first three post-war months alone) rapidly corroded the President's standing in the opinion polls, by raising in wider and wider sections of the US electorate the fear of another 'quagmire' like Vietnam: of a distant war with no exit strategy in sight. Those fears were then compounded by the Administration's inability through the autumn of 2003 to persuade more than a token number of countries to send troops to Iraq to assist in 'post-war reconstruction'. By late September, indeed, the US Administration was talking openly of its

need to deploy more part-time soldiers (National Guard and Army reserve troops) in Iraq to make up for this international shortfall; and across the US population as a whole the popularity of its war began to decline commensurately.

This growing US unease about long-term troop deployments was by then being compounded on a daily basis by reports of anti-American demonstrations and ambushes in Iraq itself – news stories that made clear the degree of popular resistance within Iraq to an externally imposed 'liberation' that had earlier been projected by the White House as likely to be both rapidly accomplished and universally welcomed. Even more troubling for the Administration was the fact that this growing US unease was not restricted to the families of the men and women serving in Iraq. It was evident among the troops themselves: to such a point indeed that by July the US and UK media were openly reporting an unprecedented outburst of protest from US soldiers, angry that they were being ordered to police an increasingly dangerous Iraq rather than rapidly to return home, as they had been led to believe would be their fate.[1]

By then, in any case, the credibility of the whole exercise was being brought into wider and wider disrepute by the prolonged inability of US and UK forces to find any weapons of mass destruction in the Iraq they now controlled, and by the way in which the reliability of key pieces of evidence once used to sustain the case for war was now being brought into question. So, for example, the claim that the Iraqi Government had sought to develop nuclear weapons by seeking uranium in Niger – evidence which had been presented as 'hard' and 'totally reliable' as recently as in the President's 2003 State of the Union Address – was by July being dismissed as unambiguously false: and recognized as such by the White House itself.[2] Likewise, and in the same month, the second dossier of evidence on the threat to global security published by the Blair Government – a dossier hurriedly issued in February 2003 to bolster the fragile UK public support for unilateral military action – was now dismissed, even by the Foreign Secretary whose department had issued it, as 'the dodgy dossier . . . [and] a complete horlicks'.[3] And then, to cap it all, in October the interim report of the Iraq Survey Group on the post-war search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq very strongly suggested that no such weapons had existed immediately prior to the invasion whose prime legitimation had been their impending deployment by Saddam Hussein.[4]

Not surprisingly, then, popular support for the war and its architects also slipped away, as month followed month, in the UK as well as in the USA; and that erosion was compounded – in the UK case – by the

way in which the Government there had allowed itself to become embroiled in a bitter and prolonged public row with the BBC: over the Corporation's claim that it (in the person of the Prime Minister's official spokesman) had 'sexed up' its original (September 2002) dossier of evidence on Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear arsenal and potential. That public row triggered both a Select Committee Report into the BBC's claim and a judicial inquiry into the subsequent apparent suicide of the scientist who had been the BBC's prime source for the story: all of which kept the issue of the Government's credibility in relation to Iraq in the forefront of political debate in the UK right through the summer of 2003, and ate away at New Labour's standing in the opinion polls. The Hutton investigation proved particularly damaging in this regard: not least by making it clear that, even if the September dossier had not been directly tampered with, it had nonetheless been issued by a government aware that at least some of its intelligence data was less reliable than was initially claimed. So by the time the inquiry was over, and even before its report was issued, public opinion in the UK had switched decisively *against* the war. In the immediate wake of the war in April, public support for it in the UK had peaked at 63 per cent. But by August half the UK electorate was already convinced that the Government had embellished the case for war; and by September a clear majority of those questioned (58 per cent) replied that they now thought the war to have been unjustified, with only 38 per cent reporting that they now thought that the invasion of Iraq had been the right thing to do.[5]

Finally, in this catalogue of woes, the regular evidence of ongoing 'terrorist attacks' on US targets and allies overseas continued to place a huge question-mark over the credibility of the biggest of all the claims made for the war: the one that said that, by invading Iraq, the Bush Administration and its UK allies had actually advanced the security of the western democracies. There was a spate of such attacks in May – on targets in Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Israel – but though they then abated through the summer, the popular expectation that there would be more did not. When ABC News surveyed the US population in April 2003, they found that 58 per cent of those questioned thought that the war had reduced the danger of a further terrorist attack on the USA, and only 29 per cent thought that it had made domestic terrorism more likely. But by September those figures had reversed: 40 per cent feeling they were safer, 48 per cent that they were not. For by then other opinion polls were reporting that almost two-thirds of the US population now believed that a US military presence in the Middle East increased the likelihood of terrorism

at home, and the Bush Administration itself was on record as expecting another major al-Qaeda attack.[6]

In both capitals, therefore, by the summer of 2003, leading Government figures were being regularly called upon to do some or all of a series of things. They were being called upon to justify the war and its outcome; they were being called upon to defend their previous justifications of the war; and they were being exposed to accusations of inconsistency, lack of clarity or worse, even on occasion to calls for their resignation. Those calls were initially quite muted; and they remained so, in the United States at least, through the autumn of 2003. There was a call in Washington, as early as July, for the Vice-President to resign – made by a group of former senior intelligence officers angry at the selective use of intelligence data in the presentation of the case for war;[7] and the possibility of presidential impeachment on similar grounds was then floated by at least one of the senators seeking the Democratic Party nomination for the presidential election of 2004.[8] But the real pressure for resignation came in London, not in Washington; and it came on Tony Blair, not on George Bush. Clare Short was initially a lone voice making that call. She made it regularly after resigning from the Government in May; but by September she was alone no longer. For, as the Labour Party gathered for its annual conference, fully a quarter of the backbench MPs polled were of the view that Tony Blair should immediately resign, and another 25 per cent thought that he should go either just before or just after the next general election.[9] And in holding to those views, the MPs were by then at one with 50 per cent of the public polled by MORI for the *Financial Times*, who also thought that, because of the illegitimacy of arguments used to justify the Iraq war, the Prime Minister should now resign.[10]

That drift of opinion, within and beyond the Labour Party, was fuelled by at least two linked sets of concerns. One – a set of concerns about the legitimacy of the arguments used to justify the war – eroded public trust in political leadership on both sides of the Atlantic; but the other – concerns about the subordination of UK policy to Washington – was unique to London alone. Anti-American sentiment is deeply rooted in the British Left; and the fear that Tony Blair was acting as George Bush's 'poodle' was far more widespread in the UK than that. The two together then ate away at popular support for Blair and his war as the evidence mounted that there would be no quick withdrawal of US and UK troops from a 'liberated' Iraq. So that, for example, when Tony Blair was warmly applauded by members of Congress as he addressed them in July 2003, the very applause (and the Congressional gold medal) that he received actually eroded

his political standing at home. The tension was visible in the words he chose to deliver there, and in the way in which he called 'history' to his defence. For, having thanked Congress for applause to which he was unaccustomed at home, he said this:

> The risk is that terrorism and states developing weapons of mass destruction come together. When people say that risk is fanciful, I say . . . [i]f we are wrong, we will have destroyed a threat that, at its least is responsible for inhuman carnage and suffering. That is something that I am confident history will forgive. But if our critics are wrong, if we are right as I believe with every fiber of instinct and conviction I have that we are, then we will have hesitated in the face of this menace when we should have given leadership. That is something history will not forgive.[11]

How different in tone and content was this *cri de coeur* from the self-confidence with which the same Tony Blair had faced his critics as they marched in their hundreds of thousands against the impending war in the previous February! Blair in February had not posed the choice in terms of being possibly right or possibly wrong. In February, he had been full of certainties: that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and posed a real and immediate danger to his neighbours and to the world. Blair in February had not even privileged the moral case against Saddam Hussein. Far from it: in February, he had been explicit that it was the presence in Iraq of hidden weapons of mass destruction and of potential links to terrorism that could take UK troops into battle there. An earlier Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, had once famously said that a week was a long time in politics. By July 2003, Tony Blair had certainly learned that three months was longer still.

Thus far, the major domestic legacy of the invasion of Iraq by US and UK forces in March 2003 has been a widespread and growing erosion of trust in the honesty and capacity of the politicians who triggered it. This lack of trust has been particularly significant for the Government in London, elected as it was (in both 1997 and 2001) amid a widespread expectation that it would bring a new and higher morality to UK politics. The Iraq war has seriously tarnished the public reputation of New Labour's prime minister. It has undermined political support in the country for the New Labour Government he leads; and it has raised serious questions about the appropriateness of a UK foreign policy that is tied so closely to that of the United States. As Tony Blair's popularity has grown in America and declined at home, critical questions remain unanswered in both countries. *Why did the USA go to war? Why did the UK choose to join the*

coalition of the willing? Were the USA and the UK right to go to war, or should they have listened to their critics? And are there better – more ethical and more effective – ways of meeting the real security threat and demands for humanitarian intervention that are so prevalent a feature of our post-9/11 world? These are now the central questions of British politics in the wake of the war's successful military outcome; and inflected in a different way, and directed to George Bush, they are also likely to be the central questions of the presidential campaign of 2004. Because they are, they are also *the* questions which this book intends thoroughly and systematically to explore.