

## REVIEW ESSAY

### *The Accidental American: Tony Blair and the Presidency*

by James Naughtie

PublicAffairs Books. 250 pp. \$26.00

REVIEWED BY NICK BALDOCK

I think most people who have dealt with me think that I am a pretty straight sort of guy.

—Prime Minister Tony Blair, shortly after his election in 1997

**E**ight years after Tony Blair was swept into office, the best response he could expect if he reasserted that claim today would be a hollow laugh. Gone is his reputation for probity. Gone is the pine-fresh optimism that greeted his massive election victory on May 1, 1997. Lost forever is the immense popular support that led a national British newspaper not long after his election to publish a cartoon depicting a small boy asking his father, “Why does Tony Blair allow bad things to happen?” Surprising as it may be to an American audience, the British prime minister seems fatally mired in a slough of shiftiness, rhetoric, and sheer human frailty.

To say that Tony Blair was or is a fabrication is harsh, but there has always been something faintly mercurial about the prime minister. His unnervingly wide grin prompted many caricaturists to portray him as the Cheshire Cat. He frequently resembled “a grin without a cat,” and for a long time this description looked as though it was an ideal epitaph for his political career.

Toward the end of his book, *The Accidental American: Tony Blair and the Presidency*, BBC journalist James Naughtie notes that Tony Blair “was a necromancer in politics, creating things previously unknown ...[he] had the power to write his own rules and shape his own time.” Yet he did no such thing because, quite simply, his sole purpose was to win the election, drag the Labor Party back from eighteen years in opposition, and not mess up once in government. This was the es-

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sence of the New Labor project, and Tony Blair was simultaneously the medium and the message. It was difficult to define clearly Tony Blair's platform once he was in office. In his first year, he heavily relied upon an appeal to inclusiveness. He was less a Machiavellian schemer than a fledgling leader unwilling to toss aside the happy vision of being all things to all people.

Blair's appeal for inclusiveness could not last. Some on the Left (Labor is still technically a socialist party) distrusted Blair's project from the start, and their suspicion has turned to loathing over the past eight years. Some on the Right distrust his enthusiasm for Europe and his eagerness to extend the scope of government activity. There are also those on both sides who choke at his plastic understanding of liberal and liberty. The government's ham-fisted, and now successful, efforts to ban fox hunting led to the largest protest march ever seen in London. Shortly afterward an even bigger march protesting Britain's bellicosity toward Iraq broke that record.

Curiously, Tony Blair seems to have found his focus through the war in Iraq. International concerns animate Blair in a way that domestic considerations rarely seem to, a trait identifiable from the moment he decided to bomb Kosovo and to persuade a reluctant President Bill Clinton to join him in a military campaign, which, under common conceptions of international law, is quite as "illegal" as the action taken in Iraq. Shortly after September 11, 2001, Blair spoke at the annual Labor Party conference, where he committed Britain to the role of global superhero:

The starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan: they too are our cause. This is a moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us.

"His ambitions," *Times* commentator Matthew Parris recorded dryly, "left Kipling looking wimpish."

Blair is a true internationalist and speaks of the "global community" as if it were a real entity. However, he understood that Kosovo proved

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that European nations, in military terms, were doomed to be nothing more than Monday morning quarterbacks, second-guessing the U.S. military without any actual influence on the course of events. If any change required force—if something actually was to be done—then America had to be on board and practically in charge. Blair moved toward America while Clinton was in office. The attacks of September 11, 2001, hastened that process, and he found a soul mate in President George W. Bush, at least on the issue of reshaping the world order. As Naughtie notes, the prime minister was “not drawn to Bush by a sense of necessity,” but by a shared “moral assertion about the politics of his age.”

Blair has admitted that his premiership got off to a slow start, hampered by the overriding need to ensure the success of the New Labor project. However, the reason for his slow start could be that the real Tony Blair has finally surfaced: the twenty-first-century Wilsonian who really believes that he can change the world for the better.

*The Accidental American* describes how Blair became enmeshed in U.S. policies and the benefits he obtained from that entanglement. He forged strong personal relationships with both Clinton and Bush. Many in his own party are, to put it mildly, baffled that Blair could work effectively with both presidents beyond what is diplomatically necessary. There is no contradiction here. Clinton appeals to the social democratic, “feel-your-pain,” and focus-group “triangulation” middle-class liberal side of Blair. Bush appeals to the morally assured political leader who exercises the responsibilities of power firmly and clearly. Blair sees himself as the emissary between the United States and Europe, but while Blair’s U.S. friends are grateful for his support, the European media has never understood why Blair wants to play this role and he has never been able to convince them of why he made this effort in the first place.

The answer to what Blair got out of working so closely with Washington is clear: nothing. Blair’s claims at home that Bush is a far sharper leader than is commonly believed have convinced few. To most Britons, the caricature of Bush as the cowboy Toxic Texan has damned the president beyond redemption. It may not be too gross an exaggeration, if desperately disturbing, to aver that many Britons tend toward the view that Bush is the new Hitler, only dumber. This is ironic because, as Naughtie shows, Blair is in some respects more neoconservative than the neocons themselves. He is thoroughly com-

mitted to dealing with potential threats not only for the national interest but also on behalf of the rest of the world. In the case of Iraq, the consensual, internationalist Blair concluded at an early stage that Saddam Hussein's defiance necessitated action with or without the imprimatur of the United Nations, peaceably if possible, but militarily if required.

Journalism is history written in real time, and Naughtie's book, published in the fall of 2004, is already past its sell-by date. The caravan has moved on, and the elections in the United States and Iraq lend it the instantly dated sheen of last year's fashion. A good deal of woolly repetition about the apparently quixotic nature of the Anglo-American relationship also weakens the book. One suspects that much of the padding is a consequence of Naughtie's attempt to spin a book from very thin straw, chiefly from a conversation that he had with Blair in May 2004. That would have been enough to create a lengthy journal article, but too little is new to justify the augmentation of the book into a work that the author admits is "not an academic text." As there are no revelations, and hence no startling conclusions, it is difficult to justify the effort. Naughtie too frequently fills space with meaningless scribble. "Blair's journey has been in part a matter of personality and intellectual attitude, in part a series of accidents," is only one of the more obvious, less revealing, and thus pointless examples.

There is a fascinating story to be told about Blair's moral determination to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Americans in the face of domestic unpopularity. Referred to in a BBC debate as "the Member for Texas North," and repeatedly condemned as President Bush's poodle, Blair has doggedly refused to estrange himself from Bush despite the transparent political benefits he would gain from loosening—or at least appearing to loosen—transatlantic ties. Call it a Faustian Pact or a reworking of the movie *High Noon*. This story offers enormous potential for a serious and illuminating work. *The Accidental American*, unfortunately, is not that work. There is little in Naughtie's book that is new to the reasonably informed, although it may be of slightly more interest to an American audience unaware of the intricacies of Blair's domestic travails. There are, however, other and better sources, such as Philip Stephens' *The Price of Leadership* and Peter Stothard's *Thirty Days*, for anybody genuinely wishing to understand Blair's evolution into, as the cover depicts, a plausible contender for the face of the fifty-dollar bill. ■