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Conviction Foreign Policy: Thatcher and Blair Compared

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STEPHEN DYSON, APR 30 2013

“There’s not much point in being a weak, floppy thing,” Margaret Thatcher would say, and her refusal to bend to circumstance or opposition was the source of her triumphs and her ultimate downfall. In my attempt to assess her importance after her death, I saw the strength of her convictions as magnifying her ability to shape events. The only other modern British Prime Minister of comparable certainty – in international affairs at least – was Tony Blair.

Political leaders are multifaceted human beings, amalgams of temperaments, beliefs, and life stories. Thatcher and Blair, for all the differences between the working class Tory and the posh Labour man, had a common characteristic: aggressively angular minds drawn to stark dichotomies. Thatcher described herself as a “conviction politician,” and we might call international stances like those of Thatcher and Blair “conviction foreign policies” comprised of black-and-white worldviews, explicit moralizing, and intolerance for compromise. The conviction foreign policy is a product of the temperament of the leader. The dominant mode is relentless certainty.

Armed conflict is a recurrent feature of conviction foreign policies, a common correlate of certainty. Thatcher’s defining international moment was the Falklands / Malvinas war. In Britain today, discussion of the Falklands war evokes vague pride among some and apathy among many, a strange, half-remembered conflict in a place few could locate on a map. Yet to Argentines it is a still-fresh insult, reeking of first world imperialism. Why not just cede the islands or negotiate a solution, as Thatcher was advised and as her own government had previously attempted? U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig made the suggestion. It was not well-received:

In the drawing room at No. 10 after I had explained the American proposals to Mrs. Thatcher, she rapped sharply on the tabletop and recalled that this was the table at which Neville Chamberlain sat in 1938 and spoke of the Czechs as a faraway people about whom we know so little and with whom we have so little in common. A world war and the deaths of over 45 million people followed. She begged us to remember this: do not urge Britain to reward aggression, to give Argentina something taken by force that it could not attain by peaceful means...She was in a forceful mood, embattled, incisive.

Thatcher would brook no compromise, and her colleagues reflected in the years after that none of them, in her place, would have fought for the Falklands. Tony Blair would have.

Blair’s defining decision was to invade Iraq. Much political science theorizing posits that politicians are concerned above all else with staying in office, and in this light Blair’s choice was incredible. U.S. President George W. Bush was going to invade Iraq whatever Blair did. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said the British were not vital to the success of the operation, there were a million people protesting the onrush of war on the streets of London, and the policy provoked a once-in-a-century parliamentary rebellion by Blair’s own party. Charles Tripp, an expert on Iraq, was part of a group of academics who met with Blair in the run-up to war and sought to counsel him on the complexities of the country he proposed to invade. Blair focused monochromatically on the “evil” of Saddam. Tripp found Blair’s view of Iraq to be “moralizing and simplistic.” In the conviction foreign policy many issues are reduced to good vs. evil, and require action.

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Written by Stephen Dyson

If Blair would have fought Thatcher's war for the Falklands, would she have fought his in Iraq? She was in office when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, warning U.S. President George H.W. Bush not to "go wobbly" in dealing with the incursion. Yet this first Persian Gulf War was triggered by an overt act of aggression against another state's territory – similar in that respect to the Falklands. Was Thatcher impressed, as Blair so clearly was, by the glamour of American power? Would she, with her ferocious work ethic, determination to be the best-briefed person at every meeting, and sharp tongue, have asked tougher questions of the intelligence estimates that showed alarming Iraqi progress in manufacturing Weapons of Mass Destruction? Would Thatcher have more forcefully forwarded the British view on postwar governance in Iraq, where Blair was unable to influence American policy? Perhaps. But, like Blair, she would have found much to admire in the clarity of George W. Bush's convictions.

One issue where there were clear differences between Thatcher and Blair was Europe. Thatcher was a parochial Englander. She considered a great many things to be foreign to British life and had a negative view of most of them. She was horrified by the gathering pace of European political and economic integration. By 1988 she was likening European officials to Soviet central planners. Thatcher suffered a defining defeat when her cabinet forced her to join the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, pegging Sterling's international value to that of the Deutschmark. The pound was overvalued and the cycles of the economies misaligned, leading to a humiliating British exit from the mechanism under her successor John Major.

Tony Blair was more cosmopolitan than Thatcher, a fluent French speaker who had spent a university gap-year tending bar in Paris and regularly holidayed in lush European settings. He engaged constructively with the European Union during his first years in office and seemed poised to embrace a Europe-leaning future for the UK, including throwing the full measure of his popularity behind a referendum to join the single currency. Then the Iraq crisis erupted. Blair and French President Jacques Chirac traded barbs, and the friendship with Bush tightened. Deep rifts emerged within Europe.

Many regarded Blair's decision to spend his considerable political capital on Iraq rather than joining the single currency as the great tragedy of his prime ministership. But with the Euro zone now in crisis, Thatcher's warnings about the dangers of one-size-fits-all monetary systems and paralyzing international institutions seem rather less unreasonable than they did at the time.

The certainty of these prime ministers grew tiresome at home and abroad, and both were succeeded by figures operating in a lower key. Conviction foreign policies are likely, over time, to shade into self-righteousness and hubris, as the simple verities of the worldview are overwhelmed by the complexity of the actual world. Yet, this type of personality will continue to emerge in leadership positions, creating eras where the foreign policies of states are defined by the temperament of their leaders. In a recent poll of the British public, the highest-rated prime ministers were all three conviction politicians: Thatcher, Churchill, and Blair. As President Barack Obama said of Thatcher on her passing, conviction leaders remind us "that we are not simply carried along by the currents of history — we can shape them with moral conviction, unyielding courage and iron will."

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For more on this topic by the author please see:

The Blair Identity: Leadership and Foreign Policy (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009).

'Cognitive Style and Foreign Policy: Margaret Thatcher's Black-and-White Thinking' *International Political Science Review*, 30, 1, (January 2009), pp. 33-49.

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'Personality and Foreign Policy: Tony Blair's Iraq Decisions' *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2, 3, (July 2006), pp. 289-306.

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