CL: In September 2002, when the US invasion of Iraq was already impending, you went to Baghdad and talked with Saddam Hussein. What perspective does this give you on what has since transpired?

TB: I first went to see Saddam in 1990 and had three hours with him. I went with only one objective, to get the hostages returned. Ted Heath went with the same aim. In the end they were all returned. One of the things that came out then was his sense of utter betrayal. He said that April Glaspie, the American ambassador in Baghdad, had said to him in the summer of 1990, ‘If you go into Kuwait we will regard it as an Arab question.’ He felt utterly betrayed by the Americans. After all, Rumsfeld had just been there a few years earlier, selling him chemical weapons (that was confirmed by Tariq Aziz when I saw him again last year). I said, ‘Well, you’ll have to withdraw from Kuwait’; and he said, ‘Even if I do so the Americans will destroy me, because I’m too strong’ – and in a sense he was right about that.

Then in September 2002 it was obvious war was coming again, so I wrote and said, could I do an interview with Saddam? I paid my own fare, and my hotel bill – it was a lot of money but I didn’t want to be beholden to anyone. Before I went I sent a message to Number 10, saying, ‘I’m going, and is there anything you would like me to do?’ Number 10 then issued a statement denying they knew I was going. And coming back I rang Number 10 from Amman and said, ‘I’m coming back, would you like to see me?’ I never heard a word. They were not interested.

It was a full interview. I asked him: ‘Do you have weapons of mass destruction?’, and he said no. ‘Do you have links with Al-Qaida?’ and he said no. Then I asked him about the UN and a few other questions of that kind. I also had long talks with other people, including Al-Saadi, the chemist who once
headed Iraq’s advanced weapons programs, and who was in charge of dealing with Blix. He told me the whole story that has now come out. He said, ‘We tried a nuclear programme and we dropped it’, and so on with other weapons of mass destruction. I was really persuaded that that was true, so I said, ‘Why don’t you let the inspectors in?’ He said the reason was very simple: ‘the Americans would not suspend the no-fly zone, and they could be bombing us when the inspectors are there, and we’re not having responsibility for that.’ But at a very late stage I rather think Saddam did offer to let the Americans come in, before the war; it’s never been publicized, but from bits of information I picked up later I think that around that time Saddam did offer to let the Americans in, to prove there were no weapons of mass destruction. But of course by then Bush was determined to go to war.

That’s the background. And the arguments used to justify the war – that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, that it had links with Al-Qaida, that the coalition would bring democracy – every statement made has turned out to be a complete lie. What it is about is very clear: the American need for oil – every empire needs resources, but America is utterly dependent on oil. And remember, Iraq was one of the Arab states that didn’t even recognize the existence of the state of Israel, and Wolfowitz and Perle and Cheney and the neoconservatives in general saw the interest of Israel as being the important one; there is a link between the Palestinian and the Iraq issue.

**CL:** Let’s talk about the situation now. The Americans are trying to install a puppet government, and will try to ensure that another puppet government emerges from any elections that are held. They are also trying to create a puppet army that will take care of internal control, backed up by US forces in their new bases in Iraq, which will also control the wider region. The question is, can this work? Will most Iraqis eventually accept this, or will they continue to sympathize with, and in enough cases give practical support to, the resistance? How far will the new phenomenon of suicide bombing, by people trained in a fundamentalist version of Islam, perhaps largely non-Iraqis, alienate the majority who have grown up in a formally secular society? Will alienation from violence, and weariness from insecurity, make people inclined to support an American-backed puppet regime against the bombers?

**TB:** I can’t speculate about the future but let’s look at the past. Genghis Khan went into Iraq in 1258 and killed a million Iraqis. He took the books from the library, the oldest library in the world, and threw them in the Tigris. When I was there they told me the Tigris then was black with the ink from the books, and red with the blood of the Iraqis who defended the country. And Britain liberated Iraq from the Turks in the first war. Six hundred thou-
sand British troops were sent into Iraq; forty thousand of them died in the next ten years, before Iraq became so-called independent, under a king imposed by Britain. So from an Iraqi point of view, this is an old problem. I think they see Bush as Genghis Khan. And what Bush has done has united the Shiites and the Sunnis – they both want him out. That’s quite an achievement. And the transfer of power is completely fraudulent. The new Iraqi government won’t really control Iraq.

There are twelve American bases in Iraq. Whatever happens, these will be maintained. I don’t think Bush is interested in any of the things he says he is interested in, in peace and justice for Iraq; what he is interested in is the continued flow of oil. It will be rather different from the British empire, where there was an element of, I won’t say consent, but bitter acceptance of it all. Quite a small military presence held India down, using the Rajahs and Maharajas to govern on our behalf. I suppose they hope that Allawi, a CIA man, will be able to do the same in Iraq. I don’t know if he can. But my feeling is that so long as Bush has got his bases, he doesn’t particularly care. Look at Afghanistan, it’s a good case in point. Poppy production has gone up – it’s just market forces operating there. The Americans and their allies only control Kabul; the rest is just back to the warlords, and you never hear about that any more. I presume that the Americans think they can protect the pipeline through Afghanistan from the Caspian, which is what the whole thing was about anyway, and I imagine that Bush thinks in the same way about Iraq.

Will this project survive? Speculation is very difficult, but Arab pride in maintaining themselves against American power is very, very strong. I personally don’t see much moral difference between a Stealth Bomber and a suicide bomber. They both kill innocent people for political purposes. It is a fact that the suicide bombers kill people. But how many people have been killed by the Americans and the British in Iraq? What the world is now coming to realize is that you can have Stealth Bombers, or Star Wars, but it doesn’t protect you – 9/11 proved that.

**CL:** But if Bush’s interest is largely in controlling oil supplies, can a regime without any internal legitimacy, resting chiefly on permanently-occupied American bases, ensure that Iraqi oil does flow reliably to the west? If Allawi can’t form a stable government, with a degree of acceptance, however grudging, you think the Americans won’t really care? They will rely on force and money to make the oil flow, and not be concerned about anything else? I’m inclined to agree about their attitude, but I’m doubtful if it is possible to make oil supplies – as opposed to opium supplies, which provide farmers with their livelihoods – reliable under such conditions.
TB: Iraq’s pipelines, all pipelines, are very vulnerable. If you are in a country you haven’t really conquered and held down, that is still in a state of resistance, the capacity to disrupt the oil supply is infinite. And if Iraqi oil supplies stopped, and the US went in again with full force and restored the conquest, it still wouldn’t guarantee the oil supply. Though I don’t have a lot of contacts now, the Iraqis I know think that violence will intensify and that free elections will be impossible in the instability caused by that. So I think the American project won’t work. Of course the sheer capacity of their military forces to maintain bases is unquestionable. But let’s recall that in 1839 the British Governor General of India sent an army into Afghanistan to deal with trouble there. Kabul was easily captured. Eighteen months later the army was forced to leave and out of 16,000 troops and civilians barely a hundred made it back to India. That is one of the weaknesses of the Bush and Blair way of thinking – it is just utterly bereft of any historical perspective.

CL: Let’s turn to Britain’s role in this. Blair’s support has obviously been invaluable to Bush, but the result is that his position is rather like that of Gorbachev, who is lauded in the West but regarded in Russia with something like contempt; Blair is lauded in Washington but increasingly distrusted and disliked in the UK. The question is, how much does this matter? A key problem for the new American empire will be that governments in the advanced capitalist countries will lose legitimacy when they are carrying out American policies that are unpopular with their own electorates – rather like the way the western Communist Parties were discredited by having to support all the twists and turns of Soviet foreign policy enforced on them by the Comintern. Blair wants Iraq to be forgotten, and the Conservatives, who support Bush and the war, fully agree. They both insist that what people are really interested in are domestic issues – immigration, security, health, education, taxes. The question is, will they succeed? Assuming British troops are withdrawn by the end of 2005, as we are being told they will be, do you think people will eventually just accept what has happened?

TB: I do think that without Blair, Bush would have found it much harder to go to war. Memories of Vietnam were at the back of people’s minds. He was able to talk about the ‘coalition of the willing’, a new version of ‘the free world’ or ‘the international community’ – whatever words you use to describe something other than the UN. I think Blair’s motivation was twofold. First of all, the positive: now we haven’t got an empire, if you piggy-back on Bush’s military force you become an empire again, and ‘Bush-and-Blair’, ‘Bush-and-Blair’, are spoken about in the world as if Blair was
Vice-President of the United States. Secondly, the price we would have paid for standing up against the United States would have been terrifying. It wouldn’t just have been making it difficult to sell French wine or having Americans calling French fries ‘freedom fries’. It would have meant taking away our nuclear weapons and generally punishing us. So what you realize is that even if you wanted simple things like jobs, trade union rights, no means test for pensioners, no student loans, no privatization and no war – even if you wanted those things, for the US you’d be a ‘rogue state’.

But Blair has paid a very heavy price in Britain. The price he’s paid is easy to describe: people don’t believe a word he says about anything. In the end, in a democracy, there has to be some basic understanding that what you are told by the government is true; and if you think that it’s not true, and it’s all dictated elsewhere for other purposes, it has a fundamental effect on the confidence people have, not just in this government but in politicians altogether, as the European elections have shown – there was a great cynical, protest vote, that’s potentially very dangerous.

The impact on British politics is very profound. You’ve got a whole group of people who are against Blair on this: the Left, the Greens, and there’s also the pro-European Conservatives – Ted Heath is passionately opposed to this war, as he was against the Gulf War, and the Kosovo war, because he sees it as a threat by America to dominate the world without Europe as a counterbalance – and two million people came out against it last year, and anti-war meetings are going on all over the place. You’ve got a very strong combination of forces against it. So I think it will damage Blair, and Britain’s so-called special relationship with the US, fundamentally. In September 2002, Blair was asked on television if the ‘special relationship’ meant that Britain was prepared to fight American wars, to ‘pay the blood price’. His reply was that yes, it does: ‘At moments of crisis’, he said, the US ‘need to know “Are you prepared to commit? Are you prepared to be there when the shooting starts?”’ So what has happened has reopened the whole issue of the special relationship.

People are beginning to realize that we are a colony of the United States. I’ve written about that many times and been rebuked for it, but talk about a puppet government in Iraq – what about the puppet government in Britain? The Americans have God knows how many bases here. They’ve got Star Wars based here. We are exchanging our intelligence with them. We don’t have our own nuclear weapons – the Americans lend them to us, and we can’t use them independently; the Americans control their use. We are a puppet state. And people are now openly feeling and saying that we didn’t elect Blair to be Vice-President of the United States. We elected a Labour government to govern Britain on our behalf, not on Bush’s behalf. The fact is that we now have to think about a liberation movement in Britain.
CL: In one of your *Morning Star* articles last year you described Blair as a ‘Viceroy’ of the American empire. What do you think being a semi-colony of the US, ruled by a local Viceroy, implies for British politics? There are popular movements in Britain opposed to American control, and a number of people even in mainstream politics who think in multilateral terms, who still have a commitment to a rule-regulated world order. But thinking about what is still the only major political party with left traditions, the Labour Party, it’s been captured by the so-called modernizers around Blair who accept the ‘special relationship’. They’ve re-written the party constitution so that it’s very difficult for policy to be changed and they’re supported by a media system that’s partly owned by supporters of the neoconservative agenda, while other elements, especially the BBC, have been browbeaten and bullied, and are vulnerable to the same forces that Blair represents. New parties are effectively barred by the first-past-the-post electoral system – and anyway you’ve always advocated working within the Labour Party. But it’s hard to see how a left, anti-imperialist majority can advance within the Labour Party within the sort of time scale I’m concerned with, which is the next five to ten years.

TB: It is so important to understand the way progress occurs. It begins with pressure outside the system, and then the pressure gets so strong that inside the system they have to say to themselves, what are we going to do to defuse this? And if they think the only way to retain control is to concede, they will concede – unlike the French ruling class, the British ruling class don’t go to the guillotine rather than give up, they always withdraw. They withdraw, they appear to concede. They decapitate the leadership of the opposition by putting them in the House of Lords, by honouring them, and then with their support they come back again. If you understand that, you know what you’ve got to do: you go on and on and on pressing. And if you go on and on pressing even the spin-doctors get the message and say, Prime Minister, you can’t go on like this. That’s where the time scale is so important. You don’t get immediate results. You didn’t on the suffragettes, you didn’t on the Charter issues, you didn’t on the welfare state, you didn’t on trade union rights, you didn’t on apartheid – you didn’t on anything.

There is a sort of left pessimism which says it is all hopeless, all you can do is demonstrate. I’m the President of the Stop the War Coalition, they honoured me with that. But it hasn’t got a policy on anything else, it’s just about the war. And you can’t win public support on the basis of just being against the war, you’ve got to be for things. In New York there was this chant I heard: ‘Money for health and not for war’, ‘Money for jobs and not for war’, ‘Money for homes and not for war’. That’s the beginnings of a policy, at any rate. Confidence is what it’s all about. We are winning by the
usual slow process: to begin with, your argument’s ignored, then you’re mad, then you’re dangerous; then there’s a pause; and then you can’t find anyone at the top who doesn’t claim to have thought of it in the first place. That’s how progress is made.

So for me, the Labour Party is stage one in winning the battle for public opinion. I’m not defending the Labour Party, although I’ve been a member of it all my life. I simply say, without them, what’s the instrument? Where do you get progress – not just on the war but on all the other things that have to be dealt with. We’ve got many, too many, different socialist parties in Britain, and not enough socialists. My argument is a straightforward one: if you can’t win the Labour Party you can’t win Britain. And it’s Britain we have to win back. I don’t mean anything like armed struggle. I mean that you have to ask yourself what would an independent British state, pursuing an independent foreign policy, be like? It would be a non-nuclear state, putting all its effort into trying to make the UN work – because that’s the only long-term hope.

**CL**: In an article you wrote last year you sketched what a reformed United Nations would look like, with members of the General Assembly directly elected, in numbers proportional to populations, and a Security Council elected by the Assembly, with representation from all regions, and the World Bank and the IMF and the WTO and multinational corporations subject to UN control. You wrote that these were ‘dreams at present’, but that without a vision of this kind the global anti-capitalist, anti-war movement can’t move forward: there has to be a goal. So this is a question about the coherence of that goal: how would a reformed UN be able to impose sanctions on these other bodies and companies?

**TB**: The WTO or the IMF impose their conditionalities, and force countries to give corporations access to billions of dollars’ worth of public service spending, by economic pressure. You have to ask, what is the counter pressure? You can’t deal with the IMF except on a global scale. The General Assembly, by a majority of nations, is on the side of the poor and not the rich. A majority for change there puts the Americans in the position of not just repudiating the Security Council and the Charter but also the General Assembly, the whole idea of internationalism. And then the question is, would the American public accept that? I don’t think they would.

One of the interesting things is how imperialism ends. How did it end in Britain? An important element was that there was an alliance between the progressive forces in Britain and the anti-colonial movement. If you talked to the leaders of the old anti-colonial movement, like Gandhi and Nehru, they did recognize that the alliance with the progressive forces in Britain was
an element in changing British opinion about the desirability of trying to maintain an empire when you couldn’t afford it. All empires come and go, and if the American empire declines it will be because the American people see that it’s not in their interests to try to run the world – the cost is enormous, the casualties are enormous. This why I keep arguing that the left in the world has got to keep in touch with the left in the United States, because they’re the only ones who can bring about a regime change in Washington.

CL: I want to share your inveterate optimism, but I would like to probe it a little bit. When the UN was formed it was the product of over forty years of mayhem in Europe – people had gone through hell – and so the relatively advanced European capitalist countries put their weight behind the project. But can we imagine a reconstructed, democratic, egalitarian world order today, if the so-called North hasn’t undergone a period of suffering? Since Somalia the US has been determined to minimize its own casualties, and while hundreds of Americans have lost their lives, or been maimed for life, in Afghanistan and Iraq, they have mostly been professional foot soldiers, so-called grunts, from poor backgrounds, and moreover their deaths and injuries have been largely kept from public view. Most ordinary people in the North as a whole really feel no pain so far, not even economic pain. It is not clear to me that anyone in the North is hurting enough to make the sacrifices needed to create a new world order of the kind we are talking about. What drives the ecological movement, and to some extent also the anti-corporate movement that is linked to it, is an awareness that neoliberal global capitalism can’t go on, i.e. anxiety about what will happen. But can you win mass support for a transformation of the global order, relying only on anxiety?

TB: The entire human race is related, if you think about it – we have common ancestors – and we are like survivors in a lifeboat, with one loaf of bread. There are only three ways of distributing the loaf – you sell it, so the rich get all of it; you fight for it, so the strong get all of it; or you share it, so everybody gets a bit. That is the choice for the human race. That point is gradually reaching everyone through the environmental movement. And if that is the case, are we going to have wars with China, to see they don’t get oil? With India, to see they don’t get oil? With Brazil? Of course we’re not. The whole balance of the world is against that. And then the crisis of the UN is going to come back in a big way. Even if they don’t make the same dangerous mistakes they have in Iraq, can they really occupy every country that’s got oil? Of course they can’t. If you put that argument people understand it. Nobody wants to pay more for petrol, nobody wants rationing. But when you come to it, reality is the argu-
ment that counts. People understand it. Leave aside left morality or left analysis; really you can’t hold people down, and that has been the lesson of history. So it’s a very long-term ground for optimism, but I think it’s an easy argument to make. You don’t have to have read Marx and Lenin to make it. People understand it. And the internet has transformed things. The amount of information available to all thoughtful people, all the organizers, is now such that they all know what’s going on.

**CL:** I agree of course that the internet has transformed activism, but it hasn’t transformed the mainstream media. The mainstream media get all this information, and stock it, but most of them only use it when the owners, or editors, decide it is convenient and safe to use it. Most people are not active, and only read or hear what the mainstream media publish.

**TB:** The mainstream media are the modern church. The most powerful religion in the world at the moment is not Christianity or Buddhism. Money is the great religion; people worship money. The business news is given every hour, what’s happened to the FTSE, what’s happened to the Dow Jones averages; at least in the American media, it’s a constant hymn to capitalism. It’s no accident that Henry VIII nationalized the Church of England, because he wanted a priest in every pulpit every Sunday, saying ‘God wants you to do what the King wants you to do.’ And the Tories nationalized the BBC because they wanted a pundit on every channel telling you the government was right. I thought the BBC was ghastly during the Iraq war, but even just allowing a different view to be aired brought them down. I was doing a regular broadcast with William Hague and they took me off because on one broadcast I attacked Hutton and said it was a rotten report. They didn’t use it, and dropped me from the programme.

But it’s very difficult for the media to deny what people know. They know they can’t get a pension because the money is going to kill pensioners in Iraq. They know they can’t get education because the money is being used to bomb students in Iraq. It’s such an easy argument to put. I go round the country doing meetings. On Tuesday night I was in Manchester. One thousand seven hundred people turned up at a theatre and sat for twenty minutes and an hour and a half of discussion. I don’t know what their politics were, but by God there is an audience now, which there never was before, in the early days of New Labour, when politics were ‘dead’, and people were apathetic. Now there’s this great audience to hear positive, hopeful things. People are angry that no one listens. They don’t believe what they’re told. And anger and mistrust are not the same as apathy. There’s a force developing. It hasn’t yet got into the parliamentary system, but it will have to.
NOTES

1 Several hundred western foreigners, including 82 Britons, were taken hostage by Iraq when it invaded Kuwait in August 1990. The former Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath went on a similar mission to Benn’s. The British hostages were released in December 1990.

2 For a transcript of the meeting between Glaspie and Saddam, confirming Saddam’s claim, see http://www.whatreallyhappened.com/ARTICLE5/april.html.

3 Iyad Allawi, appointed executive prime minister in the interim government before the June 30, 2004 ‘transfer of sovereignty’, was well known ‘as the darling of the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency as well as the British MI6’, according to one of the most knowledgeable western journalists covering Iraq. ‘Alawi’s Iraqi National Accord (INA) was as prolific in supplying false information on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction as its rival Ahmad Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress. The INA was the source of the sensational claim that Iraq was capable of firing its weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes of a Saddam order to do so. During the bargaining at the Security Council over the new interim administration’s rights to its own security forces and its relationship with the US-led Multi-National Forces (MNF), the French insisted on an Iraqi veto over any large scale MNF offensives. By failing to support the French demand, Alawi proved his pro-American bona fides to top U.S. officials.’ Dilip Hiro, ‘Tipping Point in Iraq’, www.TomDispatch.com, June 23, 2004.