

Blair's Wars

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'Blair's Wars', John Kampfner, (Free Press, new paperback edition, £7.99)

John Kampfner is the political editor of the *New Statesman* and the first edition of the book was based on 60 interviews with senior ministers, advisers and civil servants from across government as well as key players in US, Europe, Russia, Middle East, UN and Nato. This updated new paperback draws on an additional 25 interviews and extends the book to include the Hutton enquiry. It's a Blair's eye view constructed without having access to the Prime Minister himself and the nearest we have to a UK equivalent of Bob Woodward's *Bush at War*.

Kampfner's original intention was "to fill a gap in the bibliography of Blair studies—foreign policy," but his title tells that the book ended up with a narrower focus starting with the observation that Blair has taken the UK to war five times in six years: Iraq in 1998; Yugoslavia in 1999; Sierra Leone in 2000; Afghanistan in 2001; and Iraq in 2003. It's quite an achievement. "No British Prime Minister and few world leaders come close," says Kampfner.

One downside of this approach is that—particularly in the earlier part of the book - Kampfner accepts official justifications a little too readily. But his principle mistake is the assumption—stated on page one and repeated later in the book¹—that "none of these wars could be defined through the traditional concepts of national interest or repelling an invader." To suggest that the Prime Minister has simply abandoned the traditional concept of 'national interest' in foreign policy is a shallow reading of events which omits much evidence to the contrary. Each of these wars can be read as a traditional resource war. The difference is that we are no longer the leading player but have been hanging onto the coat-tails of the world's superpower. The question Blair and his advisers are tasked with solving on behalf of the ruling elite is how well our 'national interests' are served in playing this subservient role—and there is a strong case to argue that they have been getting it wrong.

A Taste of Things To Come: Operation Desert Fox

Kampfner is all trees and no wood. He fails, for example, to provide the necessary background information to explain why Saddam Hussein might have constituted a threat that was not a military one. During the cold war Saddam had pursued an independent policy that was not allied exclusively to West nor East. Crucially in 1972 he nationalised the oil company (an unforgivable crime in the eyes of the West—particularly if you are sitting on the world's second largest proven reserves of oil) and fed the proceeds from rising oil prices into agriculture, health care and literacy projects for the benefit of his own people.²

At the time of the 1998 air strikes on Iraq the country had been effectively disarmed during eight years of UNSCOM inspections. As former weapons inspector Scott Ritter put it: "Iraq has destroyed 90-95% of its weapons of mass destruction. ... this missing 5-10% doesn't necessarily constitute a threat. It doesn't even constitute a weapons program. ... Likewise, just because we can't account for it doesn't mean Iraq retains it."³

But by this time 'regime change' in Iraq was the open policy of the US. Clinton had just signed the Iraq Liberation Act which authorised military aid of up to \$100 million to opposition groups. Kampfner relates that Blair was getting reports of Iraq obstructing the inspectors but omits Ritter's testimony that the US used the inspections to provoke the Iraqis in order to provide a pretext for bombing.⁴

US and UK planes hit around 250 military targets with supposed 'pinpoint accuracy'—but there was scant evidence that any of these directly related to the allegedly ongoing WMD programme. The bombings actually provided Saddam with a reason not to readmit the inspectors. "Operation Desert Fox" provided a precedent for an illegal attack without clear UN authorisa-

tion—something that would be repeated in many of Blair's Wars including the attack on Yugoslavia which followed.⁵

Goodbye Socialist Republic

"Kosovo for all its problems" declares Kampfner, "was the high point in liberal intervention, when Blair enjoyed the support of most of the party and country."⁶

In his analysis of the US-led NATO attack on Yugoslavia, Kampfner again fails to provide critical contextual information. There is no mention of the role of outside intervention in destabilising and fragmenting Yugoslavia after US policy towards the country changed with the 'fall' of the Soviet Union in 1989. Starting with the suspension of IMF credits, the attack on Yugoslavia formed part of the ongoing, global economic-military offensive of 'opening up' countries' economies to exploitation by Western capital.⁷ As with most journalists at the time, Kampfner overlooks the telling Rambouillet clause that stated: "The economy of Kosovo shall function in accordance with free market principles."⁸ He does mention that "[Robin] Cook and [Hubert] Verdine suspected that Albright had determined the outcome [of the Rambouillet talks] in advance ..."⁹ but doesn't mention the fact that "Henry Kissinger and many others have pointed out [that] some of Nato's terms [such as the right of Nato forces to move across the whole of Yugoslavia] seem to have been designed to be 'deal-breakers' designed to ensure that the Yugoslav government would reject the terms."¹⁰

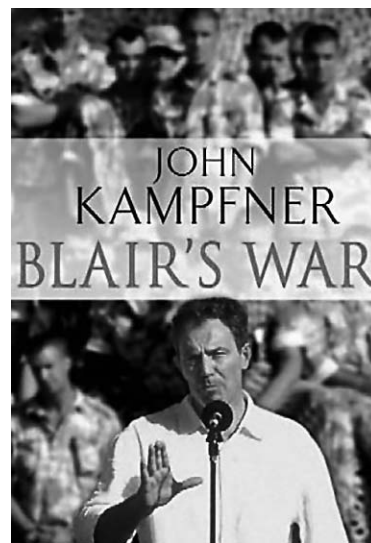
Nor does he question the official rationale or ask if the response was proportionate. Instead, his summary of the war is relatively upbeat: "Kosovo, while militarily flawed, did see the end of Serb ethnic cleansing and started the process that led to the removal and trial of Slobodan Milosevic."¹¹

Blair's sales pitch for war was a human rights one yet many atrocity stories that fuelled the enthusiastic media cheerleading for war turned out to be false.¹² The war was given retrospective justification by the refugee exodus which took place during the war—although this was something that had been predicted. Kampfner quotes "one of Blair's closest colleagues" as saying: "Our whole policy was saved by the refugees (...). Milosevic provided evidence to prove the case for bombing."¹³ But as media lecturer Philip Hammond noted: "No doubt refugees fled actual and rumoured violence by Serb paramilitaries, while many were expelled and deported. Yet it is also certain that many others fled from fighting between the KLA and Yugoslav forces, and from Nato bombing."¹⁴ The 'international community' did not seem to express the same concern about the 200,000 Serb refugees driven from Kosovo by Albanians after the conflict.

If the mission was a human rights one, why were NATO bombing civilian targets? "They ran out of military targets in the first couple of weeks," said James Bissell, the Canadian Ambassador to Yugoslavia. "It was common knowledge that Nato then went to Stage Three: civilian targets." These included "public transport, non-military factories, telephone exchanges, food processing plants, fertiliser depots, hospitals, schools, museums, churches, heritage listed monasteries and farms."¹⁵ After the war a UNHCR study found that only 12 per cent of pre-war health facilities remained and that 60 per cent of schools had been damaged or destroyed.¹⁶ Estimates of civilian deaths from eleven weeks of NATO bombings range from 500 to over 2,000 and the UN estimated another 10-15,000 were injured.

Somewhere in Africa

Comparitvely speaking, UK actions in Sierra Leone have not been given the same amount of coverage in the media as our local European crisis. The media spotlight did get drawn to the country in 1998 when a Customs and Excise investigation revealed that the mercenary firm Sandline International was operating in the region with UK complicity. Sandline is part of an elaborate net-



work of private military and mining companies which have been involved in many shady deals and would have gained mining concessions in return for helping restore the ousted elected president, Tejan Kabbah, to power. Sandline insisted "its plans including supplying arms in contravention of a UN arms embargo had been approved by the Foreign Office" and it appears that the UK High Commissioner Peter Penfold had a hand in the contracting of the company.¹⁷

Since "[Robin] Cook would later insist that this was the first he knew of any problem," the affair raises a general point about arms-length covert actions. To what extent did the FCO and intelligence agencies have their own agendas and how much did Cook and Blair really know? What other covert operations has the New Labour government been involved in that we do not know about?

For Tony Blair his conscience was clear: "Whatever mistakes may have been made in the drafting of the [UNSC] resolution [which imposed the arms embargo] and in the distribution of messages around the Foreign Office, Britain had been right to support Sierra Leone's elected government. Kabbah was back in power so what was the problem?"¹⁸

Abdel-Fatau Musah, an expert on the region, sees things differently: "The UK could have achieved this goal more honourably if it had used the UN and OAU [Organisation of African Unity] structures to pile more pressure on the junta that had, in principle, agreed to hand over power in 1998 but was prevaricating, testing international resolve ... By tacitly endorsing the use of Sandline in this project, however, the UK achieved the exact opposite of its objectives: it was obliged to collaborate with [Nigerian President] General Abacha's forces through Sandline; indirectly, it helped prolong instability in Sierra Leone and condoned the exploitative motive of Sandline's involvement."¹⁹

The Sandline debacle affair led the Foreign Affairs Select Committee to recommend that the government draft legislation to bring the mercenary trade under control. Four years later the UK is still dragging its feet on bringing in legislation that might bring the mercenary trade under parliamentary control and make it more accountable for its actions.

Instability continued with rival mercenary groups backing opposing sides for a share in the spoils²⁰ and in 2000 British forces supported a UN peacekeeping mission supported by a liberally interpreted UN Security Council Resolution.

Afghanistan

Awkwardly for Blair, the Bush junta which took power in 2001 did not deal in the rhetoric of liberal intervention but of pre-emption and US primacy. A September 2000 document produced by the principle architects of the new administration's foreign policy under the banner of Project for a New American Century "called for a massive increase in defence spending so that the US could 'fight and win multiple, simultaneous, major theatre wars.' They pondered that some 'catastrophic and catalysing event, like a new Pearl Harbour' was needed to assure US global power."²¹

The rationale given for the first of these wars—the attack on Afghanistan—was twofold: to route out al-Qaeda and reduce their threat in a response to their attacks on the US; and to overthrow the Taliban since they were harbouring them and since they were a repressive regime. The first aim was not achieved. Bin Laden was not killed or captured nor were any of al-Qaeda's other senior leaders.²² The Taliban were ousted from Kabul but the rest of the country has been carved up by warlords and is not under President Hamid Karzai's control.

The fact is that the US was already threatening Afghanistan with military action before 11 September 2002. The dossier Downing Street prepared for MPs, *Responsibility for the Terrorist Atrocities on the United*

States, overlooked “the use the terrorists had made of places like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Yemen, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.”²³

In his speech to the Labour Party conference that was a sales pitch to the country for the war, Blair promised the Afghan people: “The conflict will not be the end. We will not walk away, as the outside world has done so many times before. We were with you at the first—we will stay with you to the last.” Since Kampfner’s story is written from the perspective of No.10 there is little detail of the effects of the campaign on the ground.²⁴ Yet in the bombing campaign that followed, over three thousand people were killed—more than were killed in the collapse of the World Trade Centre. There has been negligible reconstruction of the country.

Yet again Kampfner’s Afghanistan analysis omits a crucial detail. Hamid Karzai, had previously worked as a representative for the UNOCAL oil and gas company who had been negotiating with the Taleban for a pipeline across the country that would be of critical strategic importance to the US in accessing the lucrative energy reserves of the Caspian Sea region. Several months after his coming to power he had signed a treaty with Pakistan and Turkmenistan authorising the construction of such a \$3.2 billion gas pipeline through Afghanistan²⁵ and at the end of the campaign the Americans were left with bases in all of the energy-strategic Central Asian republics.

Iraq did not pose a military threat

One of Kampfner’s key revelations is that Robin Cook had requested a meeting with the head of the Joint Intelligence Committee, John Scarlett, in February 2002 to view the intelligence that Blair had regarding Iraq’s WMD. This allowed Cook in his resignation speech to say with some authority: “Iraq probably has no weapons of mass destruction in the commonly understood sense of the term—namely a credible device capable of being delivered against a strategic city target. It probably still has biological toxins and battlefield chemical munitions, but it has had them since the 1980s.”

Tony Blair’s main rationale by the eve for war was to talk up the threat posed by the ‘linked dangers’ of terrorism and WMD²⁶: “That the world would face a threat of an altogether different scale if Saddam made his chemical and biological weapons available to terrorist groups.”²⁷ Yet there was nothing of substance to back up this concern either.²⁸ When Number 10 presented its human rights case in the December 2002 dossier “Crimes and Human Rights Abuses” Amnesty International accused Blair and Straw of being selective in order to support the drive for war.²⁹

“Blair’s political aides and senior intelligence officials agree that Saddam posed no greater threat on 12 September 2001 than he had on the 10th. They accept that the intelligence on that is clear.”³⁰ Since there was no threat the war was illegal under international law.

A Prior Commitment: Misleading Parliament and the Nation

The truth, as Kampfner reveals, is that Blair had already committed himself to war on 6 April 2002 at Camp David. The deal was that if Bush went down the UN route, Blair would go to war with Bush, with or without a resolution.³¹ Having committed himself and the nation to war he then had to make a case for war. Since a clear threat did not exist this inevitably involved misleading the nation.

The principle tool for making the case was the September 2002 dossier *Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government*. The first draft of the document was rejected by Downing Street for being insubstantial. Andrew Gilligan’s central claims—disputed by the government—have subsequently been substantiated by evidence given to the Hutton inquiry and by the testimony of Kampfner’s interviewees. “Downing Street, our source says, ordered a week before publication, ordered it to be sexed up, to be made more exciting and ordered more facts to be, to be discovered [and] ... the government probably knew that the 45 minute figure was wrong, even before it decided to put it in.”³²

In his evidence Scarlett “admitted that the 45 minute reference in the September dossier had ‘related to munitions, which we had interpreted to mean battlefield mortar shell or small calibre weaponry, quite different from missiles.’ Geoff Hoon told the inquiry that he had known this all along.” This fact was omitted from the

September 2002 dossier. Blair said that he was not aware of this until after the Commons debate on the eve of war. This is simply not credible.³³

By the end of 2003 none of the nine key conclusions of the September 2002 dossier had been proven.³⁴ In his speech before the 18 March vote in the House of Commons on the eve of war Blair repeated that the threat was real and growing and that people would just have to trust him.³⁵

The Oil Imperative

“For bureaucratic reasons we settled on one issue, weapons of mass destruction, because it was the one reason everyone could agree on.”

Paul Wolfowitz³⁶

War on Iraq had of course been a long-standing aim of the neo-conservatives who are now seated in the Bush administration. In a letter to President Clinton in 1998 Richard Perle, John Bolton, Richard Armitage, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz argued for “removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime from power” otherwise “a significant portion of the world’s supply of oil will all be put at hazard.”³⁷

It’s blindingly obvious of course that the Bush administration is an oil administration. If you need evidence for the only plausible explanation for the war on Iraq, look no further than the Bush government’s National Energy Policy Development Group report published in May 2001. Chapter Eight makes clear that oil is a key foreign policy objective. It states that America’s “engagement will be global, spotlighting emerging regions that will have a major impact on the global energy balance.” The Middle East will “remain vital to US interests” and “will be a primary focus of US international energy policy ... Concentration of world oil production in any one region of the world,” however, is considered “a potential contributor to market instability, so US attention is also focussing on increasing its domestic production and in developing production in Central and South America, West and Southern Africa, Russia and Central Asia. Promoting investment by American energy firms in oil exporting countries “will be a core element” in US “engagement with major foreign oil producers.”³⁸

Larry Lindsey, Bush’s former top economic adviser said in September 2002: “When there is regime change in Iraq, you could add three million to five million barrels [per day] of production to world supply. The successful prosecution of the war would be good for the economy.” Peter Beaumont and Faisal Islam writing in *The Observer* note that some analysts believed that Iraq’s production could rise to 10m barrels of oil per day after five years. They also pointed out that “the hawks have long argued that US control of Iraq’s oil would help deliver a second objective. That is the destruction of OPEC, the oil producers cartel, which they argue is ‘evil’—that is, incompatible with American interests.”³⁹

Then there is the threat of the Euro starting to replace the dollar as the dominant reserve currency (with all the benefits that brings) prompted by an oil trade conducted in the currency. This is a trend that has been spearheaded by Iraq.⁴⁰

It’s odd that there’s barely a mention of the “O” word in Kampfner’s book.

“Deeply reckless”

The nearest we get for an explanation for Britain’s support for the war on Iraq from Kampfner’s sources is that “he was irked by the neocons’ links with the Tory party. He was determined to do everything possible to prevent them driving a wedge between New Labour and the Republicans.”⁴¹ Perhaps it was David Manning’s dictum that put Blair behind Bush come what may. “At the best of time, Britain’s influence on the US is limited. But the only way to exercise that influence is by attaching ourselves firmly to them and avoiding criticism wherever possible.”⁴²

But is there any evidence for the existence of a positive or restraining influence? Blair might claim credit for making Bush ‘go down the UN route’ but he gave up any leverage the UK had by pledging to go to war with or without UN authorisation. His belief that he had secured Bush’s commitment to the road map was shown to be illusory when Bush agreed to Sharon’s unilateral plan to “withdraw from Gaza but to formalise Israeli occupation of several parts of the West Bank.”⁴³ Furthermore, we have seen little, if anything, concrete in return for our willingness to maintain the fiction of the ‘special relationship.’

The UK went along with the US in over-riding the authority of the UN and cutting the disarmament process short. Blair chose to side with the world’s leading rogue state rather than with “multilateralism, consensus and the rule of law.” After announcing its doctrine of primacy and pre-emptive attacks, the US proceeded to destroy the central tenets of progressive multilateralism: the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; the Kyoto Treaty; the Biological Weapons Convention; and the UN’s convention on small arms. If we had kept to the post war principles of international law and made a principled refusal to go ahead without UN authority—as Harold Wilson had refused to provide troops for Vietnam—it would have undermined the US’s domestic support at home and made the war difficult to execute.

Instead Blair went more than the distance to lend the Bush project an unwarranted legitimacy: flying numerous diplomatic missions, logging more air miles than Colin Powell and meeting with the leaders of over 70 countries.⁴⁴ The *New York Times* wrote: “He has often articulated the goals of the war on terrorism more eloquently than Mr Bush. He has not only been Washington’s partner in facing the wider world, but on many occasions the world’s ambassador to Washington. America should be grateful for both roles.”⁴⁵ Blair’s disposition caused a rift with Europe and now he commands little respect at either home or abroad.

Is the world a safer place?

The attack on Iraq compounded rather than addressed grievances of Muslim people. A Foreign Affairs Select Committee report in February concluded “that the war in Iraq had possibly made terrorist attacks against British nationals and British interests more likely in the short term.”⁴⁶ When UK targets were bombed in Istanbul in November 2003 Jack Straw “told Blair’s advisers he was in no doubt that Britain had been attacked for its role in the war.” In March this year 200 people were killed and over a thousand injured in Madrid as a result of the Spanish government’s support for the war. The same month the Metropolitan Police Commissioner declared that an attack on London was ‘inevitable.’

And what of Iraq itself? After a body count of over 11,000 civilian casualties⁴⁷ the country looks increasingly like the new Vietnam. *The Independent’s* celebrated journalist Robert Fisk writes in a recent dispatch: “Much of Iraq has fallen outside the control of America’s puppet government in Baghdad but we are not told. Hundreds of attacks are made against US troops every month. But unless an American dies, we are not told. This month’s death toll of Iraqis in Baghdad alone has now reached 700—the worst month since the invasion ended. But we are not told ... Baquba, Samara, Kut, Mahmoudiya, Hilla, Fallujah, Ramadi, all are outside government authority ... Foreign workers pour out of Iraq for fear of their lives ... Oil pipeline explosions are now as regular as power cuts. In parts of Baghdad now, they have only four hours of electricity a day; the streets swarm with foreign mercenaries, guns poking from windows, shouting abusively at Iraqis who don’t clear the way for them.”⁴⁸

Sooner rather than later though, America’s oil imperative is going to have to face up to the climate change imperative. In February this year the Pentagon put out a report warning that the threat to global stability from climate change vastly outweighs the threat posed by terrorism. The report says that the issue “should be elevated beyond a scientific debate to a US national security concern.” Abrupt climate change would “challenge United States national security in ways that should be considered immediately.”⁴⁹ Perhaps the necessity for urgent action to reduce our dependence on oil to avoid the worst affects of climate change, along with the painful lessons of Iraq, can help move us towards a less reckless future. Kampfner’s book meanwhile exposes the central folly at the heart of Number 10.

Notes

- 1 Kampfner, p.123
- 2 Said K Aburish “Saddam Hussein—The Politics of Revenge”, Bloomsbury, 2000, p.112
- 3 Scott Ritter with William Rivers Pitt, “War on Iraq: What Team Bush Doesn’t Want You To Know”, Profile Books, 2002, pp. 24-5
- 4 Ritter & Rivers Pitt, pp. 51-5
- 5 See for example, Mark Littman QC “Neither Legal Nor Moral: How NATO’s war against Yugoslavia breached international law”, Committee for Peace in the Balkans,

- 2000
- 6 Kampfner, p. 47
 - 7 David Chandler “Western Intervention and the Disintegration of Yugoslavia” in “Degraded Capability” edited by Philip Hammond and Edward S. Hermann, Pluto Press, 2000, pp. 19-30
 - 8 Quoted in John Pilger “Censorship by Omission” in “Degraded Capability”, p. 138
 - 9 Kampfner, p. 43
 - 10 Peter Gowan “The War and Its Aftermath” in “Degraded Capability”, p. 46
 - 11 Kampfner, p. 386
 - 12 See Phil England “Degraded Capability” review in Variant volume 2, number 11, summer 2000, p.16, www.variant.org.uk
 - 13 Kampfner, p. 59
 - 14 Philip Hammond in “Degraded Capability”, p. 127
 - 15 John Pilger in “Degraded Capability”, p. 143
 - 16 Quoted in Paul Watson, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14/6/99
 - 17 For a detailed discussion of this above episode and mercenary activity in Sierra Leone in general see A Country Under Siege by Abdel-Fatau Musah in “Mercenaries: An African Security Dilemma” edited by Abdel-Fatau Musah and J. ‘Kayode Fayemi, Pluto Press, 2000, pp. 776-116
 - 18 Kampfner, p. 68
 - 19 Ibid, pp. 102-3
 - 20 Ibid, pp. 105-6
 - 21 PNAC “Rebuilding America’s Defences: Strategy, Forces and Resources” quoted in Kampfner, p. 154
 - 22 Kampfner, p. 148
 - 23 Kampfner, p. 125
 - 24 See Mark Curtis “Web of Deceit—Britain’s Real Role in the World”, Vintage, 2003, pp. 47-55, for example, for details of the effects of the bombing campaign
 - 25 Lutz Klevevan “Oil and the New Great Game” in *The Nation* magazine, 16/2/04, www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Oil_watch/Oil_NewGreatGame.html
 - 26 Milan Rai “Regime Unchanged”, pp. 33-4
 - 27 Kampfner, p. 157
 - 28 “Leaked report rejects Iraqi al-Qaeda link”, BBC News, 5/2/03
 - 29 Kampfner, p. 225
 - 30 Kampfner, p. 157
 - 31 Kampfner, pp. 196-7
 - 32 Kampfner, pp. 338, 348, 375
 - 33 Kampfner, p. 375
 - 34 Kampfner, p. 360
 - 35 Kampfner, p. 309
 - 36 Kampfner, p. 338
 - 37 Quoted in “The Tiger in the Tanks, ExxonMobil, oil dependency and war in Iraq”, Greenpeace 2003, which makes a convincing case that the Iraq war is about oil
 - 38 “Reliable, Affordable and Environmentally Sound Energy for America’s Future”, 16/5/01, www.whitehouse.gov, quoted in Conflict, corruption and climate change, Friends of the Earth UK Briefing, June 2003
 - 39 Peter Beaumont and Faisal Islam “Carve up of oil riches begins”, in *The Observer*, 3/11/02
 - 40 W. Clark “The Real Reasons for the Upcoming War With Iraq: A Macroeconomic and Geostrategic Analysis of the Unspoken Truth”, January 2003, Independent Media Center, www.indymedia.org; a summary of the thesis appeared later in *The Observer* as “When will we buy oil in euros?” by Faisal Islam, 23/2/03).
 - 41 Kampfner, p. 161
 - 42 Kampfner, p. 117
 - 43 Kampfner, p.385
 - 44 Kampfner, p.137
 - 45 Kampfner, p. 137
 - 46 Kampfner, p. 375
 - 47 www.iraqbodycount.net
 - 48 Robert Fisk “Can’t Blair See that this Country is About to Explode? Can’t Bush?” in *The Independent*, 1/8/4
 - 49 Mark Townsend & Paul Harris “Now the Pentagon tells Bush: climate change will destroy us” in *The Observer*, 22/2/04