

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Did September 11, 2001, really change the world? This question was being asked across the globe within hours of the attacks taking place. But within days, it had become clear that there was to be no consensus on the answer. In Britain, at one remove from the raw emotion being felt in the United States, political commentators wasted no time in setting out their opposed positions. On 13 September, writing in *The Guardian*, Hugo Young, the most measured and reasonable of British political observers, declared:

What happened on September 11th, 2001, changed the course of human history. We cannot yet grasp, by any stretch, all that this means. But already we start to imagine how it will poison trust, wreck relationships, challenge the world order, and vastly magnify the divide between the enemies and friends of democracy. It will harden the last vestiges of tolerance for compromise, and further reverse the presumptions of freedom—of travel, speech, politics, everything. It calls into question what power any longer is or means.¹

Two days later, in *The Times*, Matthew Parris, an equally clear-sighted writer about politics, responded to Young. “And after September 11, 2001,” he wrote, “and the horrible, horrible deaths of thousands of innocent people, one thing will be certain: the world will be the same again after all.”²

Is it possible, after the passage of a few years rather than a few days, to say who was right? One thing now seems abundantly clear: Young was correct when he foresaw a poisoning of trust and a wrecking of relationships. There are few political relationships—between states, between political leaders, between politicians and

CHAPTER ONE

their electorates—that have not suffered contamination from the fallout of that fateful day. Some important political institutions—NATO, the United Nations (UN)—may now be in permanent decline. Others, like the European Union (EU), are in flux, and it is impossible to be sure in what form they will eventually settle down, if they settle down at all. Yet does it follow from all this upheaval that we can no longer be confident what power is, or what it means? The turmoil in global politics over the last few years is a consequence of the exercise of political power in one of its most recognizable forms: the power of the determined leaders of well-armed nations to seek security through force. When politicians exercise this power, the results are invariably serious, and often deeply disorienting. But it does not follow that the power itself is unfamiliar, or that we should be doubtful about what it means. It means what it has always meant: war.

It was not what happened on September 11, 2001, that contaminated political relationships and destroyed trust; in fact, for a short while many traditional political ties, including those between Europe and the United States, seemed to have been strengthened by the challenge of confronting the terrorist threat. It was the Iraq war of 2003, its build-up and its aftermath, that did the damage. It is true that this war would never have happened as and when it did if the United States had not been attacked two years earlier. But to many observers, September 11 simply provided George W. Bush and his administration with a convenient prop on which to hang a set of military and ideological objectives that had been identified well in advance. The feeling has been widespread feeling among opponents of the Iraq war that the Bush administration exploited the opportunity provided by September 11 to pursue its own, preferred course in Middle Eastern politics, and it is this sense of exploitation which has generated so much of the mistrust. This mistrust only deepened when it emerged that in attempting to fit the case for war in Iraq onto a post-September 11 political framework—in attempting to justify it in terms of the terrorist threat—the Bush administration was forced to stretch the evidence about Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and so misrepresented the nature of the threat he posed. Having been confronted with the evidence of this misrepresentation, Bush, and his ally Tony Blair, were repeatedly forced back onto

INTRODUCTION

their last line of defence. They had to argue that those who wished to pick holes in the arguments presented before the Iraq war for taking military action were missing the bigger picture. What was the bigger picture? It was, as Tony Blair put it in his speech to the Labour Party conference in September 2004, in which he defended his conduct in Iraq notwithstanding the mistakes that had been made over the intelligence, simply this: “September 11 changed the world”.³

This, then, is the real difficulty with trying to determine whether the world changed on that day. The claim is not just a historical one, to be confirmed or rejected by historians at some point further down the line than we are at present. It is also a political claim, and it has frequently been made to serve some blatantly political objectives. It was a central plank, at times almost the only plank, of the campaign to re-elect George Bush. The message that Bush’s opponent, John Kerry, did not appreciate the ways in which the world had changed after September 11 was hammered home by Bush and his running mate Dick Cheney throughout the campaign. “Even in this post-9/11 period”, Cheney announced in his brutal, highly effective speech accepting the nomination of the Republican Party at their national convention, “Senator Kerry doesn’t appear to understand how the world has changed”.⁴ In the first of their three presidential debates, Bush derided his opponent for what he notoriously dubbed his “pre-September 10th attitude”. It was a charge that was to be reiterated endlessly until polling day. Bush lost the debate, but he did not lose the presidency.

The attraction for any incumbent politician of talking up the significance of epoch-making events is obvious. If the world has changed, then politics must change with it, and elected politicians can shirk some of their old responsibilities along the way. A new world order needs a new set of rules. The temptation always exists for politicians to use the appearance of a transformed world to avoid difficult questions about the particular consequences of their own immediate actions. But the countervailing temptation also exists: to dismiss all political claims to be operating under the dispensation of a new world order as inevitably self-serving and evasive. The idea that September 11 did not change the world—that things are, in Matthew Parris’s words, “the same again after all”—can serve narrow political purposes of its own. Critics of the

CHAPTER ONE

Iraq war have repeatedly blamed its architects for not foreseeing the predictable, if unintended, consequences of a military occupation, because they were blinded by the transformative possibilities of September 11. Critics of the Iraq war, therefore, have every reason to want to argue that the world has not really changed at all.⁵

This is why it is so hard to determine what is new about politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and what is familiar. Much of what appears to be new has been exploited in ways that are all too familiar, and much of the familiar response to that exploitation neglects what appears to be new. This book is an attempt to disentangle some of these claims and counter-claims, in order to determine what has really changed. To do so, it explores not just the dynamics of the new world order, but the motives, arguments and deceptions of some of the politicians who inhabit it. Too often, these are treated separately, as though they occupied different universes. The torrent of writing about contemporary politics that has appeared in the wake of September 11 divides into two broad streams: those books and articles that use the attacks on New York and Washington to exemplify the new set of challenges politicians now face (many of the books were written or at least conceived in what George Bush would call a pre-September 10 setting, but when they appeared sought to demonstrate early inklings of a post-September 11 frame of mind); and those books and articles that wish to demolish the politicians who have used the attacks to pursue courses of action on which they were already determined. These books, like so many of the partisan political arguments on which they are based, often appear to be talking past each other. And it is not only books. For many critics of the Bush regime, the world did not change on September 11, because the day on which it really changed was 12 December 2000, when the United States Supreme Court finally determined, by a vote of 5–4, the outcome of that year’s presidential election. Michael Moore’s film *Fahrenheit 9/11*—which characterizes all the events consequent on Bush’s election as a literal nightmare—perfectly captures the terms of this argument, which is no argument in any terms but its own. Moore’s unwillingness to consider alternative scenarios to the one in which Bush steals the election and then contrives the war on terror serves only to enrage his critics. But

INTRODUCTION

Moore's own rage is fuelled by his sense that the alternative scenarios have all been hijacked by the politicians, and put to work serving sinister purposes of their own.

This book does not seek to take sides in the sort of dispute that finds George W. Bush on one side and Michael Moore on the other. Instead, it tries to find a broader perspective in which to assess the claims of both politicians and their critics to have identified a new pattern in world-historical affairs. Of course, there are many books, and many academic books in particular, that also seek to locate recent events in a wider historical or theoretical context. But in this book, I try to do it without losing sight of the narrower political arguments, and without ignoring the motivations of the politicians who make them. I do not believe it is possible to assess whether we have entered a new phase of politics without considering the ways in which politicians have tried to exploit such claims. Nor, however, do I believe that the fact that such claims can be exploited means that they are necessarily untrue.

Tony Blair and the New World Order

The particular politician on whom I concentrate in a number of the chapters that follow is not George Bush but Tony Blair. This may appear a somewhat parochial choice for a book about world-historical politics. In global terms, the British Prime Minister is a much less consequential figure than the American president. Indeed, Blair has proved much less consequential than many of the members of the president's administration, as he has discovered to his cost.⁶ Blair is a more conventionally articulate politician than Bush but, notwithstanding the silver-tongued reputation he acquired in the United States after September 11, I do not focus on him here because of his purported ability to articulate a more resonant defence of American policy than the architects of that policy have managed. Rather, I am interested in Blair because his articulation of the newness of politics since September 11 cuts across some of the arbitrary divisions imposed by that date, and by the American election that preceded it. The relative proximity of the contested election of late 2000 to the traumas of September 2001 has trapped much discussion of recent developments in global politics within a relatively narrow time-frame. It is all too easy to think of politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century

CHAPTER ONE

as defined by a choice between the relative significance of these two events: either it was the arrival on the world scene of Osama Bin Laden that made the all difference, or it was the arrival of George W. Bush. But Tony Blair's political career, though likely to be defined by his response to the same two events, is not limited to the period begun by them. Blair, unlike Bush, is a political leader of the late twentieth century as well as the early twenty-first. He was deploying many of the arguments that were to justify his conduct after September 11 well before that date. Moreover, he is a politician whose entire career has been built around his ability to embrace what is "new". In the mid 1990s he rose to power on the back of the rebranding of the Labour Party as "New Labour". By the end of that decade, his attention had turned to international politics.

In the speech Blair gave to the Economic Club in Chicago on 22 April 1999, under the title "Doctrine of the International Community", he used the example of the ongoing conflict in Kosovo to make the case that the world had already changed. "Twenty years ago", he announced, "we would not have been fighting in Kosovo. We would have turned our backs on it. The fact that we are engaged is the result of a wide range of changes—the end of the Cold War; changing technology; the spread of democracy. But it is bigger than that. I believe the world has changed in a more fundamental way."⁷ He went on:

We are all internationalists now, whether we like it or not. We cannot refuse to participate in global markets if we want to prosper. We cannot ignore new political ideas in other countries if we want to innovate. We cannot turn our back on conflicts and violations of human rights within other countries if we want still to be secure. On the eve of a new millennium we are now in a new world. We need new rules for international cooperation and new rules of organising our international institutions.⁸

If George Bush believed any of this in 1999, when he was Governor of Texas, he gave little indication of it. But it was the doctrine by which his presidency would ultimately be defined.

Blair's Chicago speech establishes an alternative time-frame in which to view the politics of the new world order. On this account, the defining moment came in 1989. The end of the Cold War

INTRODUCTION

marked the beginning of a new set of opportunities in international relations, but also created new kinds of imperatives. Both the opportunities and the imperatives derived from the increasing economic, political and technological interdependence of nation states. After 1989, it was possible to contemplate humanitarian and, if necessary, military intervention in the world's trouble spots without having also to face the prospect of initiating a wider conflict between nuclear superpowers. At the same time, it became harder to ignore what was happening in the world's trouble spots, because of the ways in which information could be spread. With the spread of information came the potential to spread the political consequences of the trouble itself—consequences that might include terrorism, racial hatreds and the displacement of peoples. All these developments Tony Blair brought under the bland general heading of “globalization”, and in 1999 it was globalization that he took to have changed the world, and to have fundamentally altered the terms in which national politicians should seek to engage with it. It was also this globalization that he used to justify the actions that he, Bill Clinton and the other NATO leaders had taken in Kosovo, without a UN mandate. In the post-1989 world, it was possible to confront a tyrant like Slobodan Milosevic without risking a catastrophic war with the former Soviet Union. It was also necessary to confront Milosevic, because the consequences of his tyranny could no longer be reliably contained. The doctrine of the international community, as Blair understood it, made intervention in such cases both possible and necessary.

What is striking about the arguments Blair deployed to justify the intervention he, George Bush and a few other national leaders were to undertake in Iraq four years later is how similar they are to what he said in Chicago, and how different. The core ideas of the Blairite philosophy did not alter. As he put it in a speech he delivered in his Sedgefield constituency on 5 March 2004: “Here is where I feel so passionately that we are in mortal danger of mistaking the nature of the new world in which we live. Everything about our world is changing: its economy, its technology, its culture, its way of living. If the 20th century scripted our conventional way of thinking, the 21st century is unconventional in almost every respect.”⁹ But three aspects of this doctrine shifted fundamentally after September 11, 2001. First, the tone changed,

CHAPTER ONE

from one of moral uplift to something much darker and more foreboding. Speaking in 1999, Blair did not cast the challenges of the new world order in terms of “mortal danger”; instead, he spoke optimistically about the almost limitless possibilities available to progressive, well-intentioned politicians in a newly integrated international community. In this respect, Blair was still riding the wave of hope that had broken over much of Europe ten years earlier, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. It was only with the collapse of the Twin Towers that the dark side of these limitless possibilities was revealed.

This change of tone also reflected the changing dynamics of American presidential politics. For Tony Blair, the idea of an international community is meaningless without the full support of the United States. To this end, he has always been willing to speak the same kind of language as the American political leaders on whom the whole project depends. In 1999, the leader whose support he needed was Bill Clinton, and the language he deployed was essentially Clintonian, with its emphasis on interdependence, technological change and open-ended opportunities for social and political betterment. Doubtless anticipating that Al Gore would succeed Clinton in 2000, Blair must have supposed that the need for this kind of rhetoric would only increase. But when Clinton was succeeded by Bush, and when Bush succeeded in defining his own presidency as an old-fashioned struggle between good and evil, Blair’s own language had to change. Whatever his private instincts, he did not have the option of embracing the Manichean political theology of the Bush White House because the British public would not have been able to stomach it.¹⁰ But he did have to show that he knew that the United States had embarked on a different sort of battle from the ones he had fought alongside President Clinton.

What he could not do, however, was buy into the most partisan accounts of what had happened in the transition from the age of Clinton to the age of Bush. For Clinton haters (of whom there were many), September 11 did not simply embody the downside of the new international order that emerged during the 1990s. Instead, September 11 marked a clean break with the Clinton years, and all their attendant fantasies, illusions and displacement activities—the years of Monica, OJ and the dotcom boom. Clinton had lulled

INTRODUCTION

the United States into a false sense of security, from which all Americans awoke with a bang on September 11, 2001, when they discovered that while they had been playing the stock market and watching “reality” television, America’s enemies had been plotting her destruction. On this view, it was the Clinton years, not the Bush years, that were the dream. After a brief interlude, the twenty-first century reverted to the type laid down by the twentieth—and to a quintessentially twentieth-century conception of the international order that rests, as Michael Ignatieff has put it, “less on hope than on fear, less on optimism about the human capacity for good than on dread of human capacity for evil, less on a vision of man as a maker of his history than of man the wolf towards his own kind.”¹¹ This kind of brutal realism does not cover the views of everyone in the Bush administration, but it does cover some. “My friends, there never was a time when terrorism was just a nuisance; there never can be a time when terrorism is just a nuisance” was how the vice president chose (unfairly but efficiently) to dismiss John Kerry’s approach to terrorism in the 2004 campaign.¹² For Cheney, September 11 changed the world by reminding the American public in general, and the Democratic Party in particular, that the world had never really changed at all.

Tony Blair needed something more than Cheney’s brand of cynicism to explain the note of dread that entered his rhetoric after September 11 (not least because some of the cynicism was directed at him—“that preacher on a tank”, as Cheney memorably dubbed him).¹³ He could not abandon either the moral uplift or the technocratic impulses of the Clinton years, having invested so much in them, but nor could he carry on as though nothing had changed. He found the bridge he required between Clinton and Bush, and between the twentieth century and the twenty-first, in the language of risk. This represents the second big shift in the Blair doctrine of international community between Kosovo and Iraq. In place of an emphasis on interdependence and opportunity came an insistence on something called “the balance of risk”, and on the fact that it had altered fundamentally on September 11 (see Chapter Three). The focus of this new anxiety was the possibility that terrorists would acquire WMD, and the apparent certainty that if they got them, they would use them. For Blair, this is the “mortal danger” threatened by the new international order. The

CHAPTER ONE

same interconnectedness that made it possible for the international community to act together against Milosevic is what makes it possible for terrorists and rogue states to act together against the international community, and threaten it with ruin. The dynamic of globalization is the same as it was before September 11—it provides both the opportunity and the necessity for a new kind of politics. But the stakes had suddenly become much higher.

The language of risk is nothing new in politics. The stakes for which politicians play are invariably high, and every politician has to make a judgment about what they can afford to lose, and what they cannot (see Chapter Four). Moreover, the technological changes of the twentieth century mean that the stakes have been getting higher for quite some time. The idea that modern technology has created a new world of risk had become fashionable among political scientists and sociologists long before Blair started to deploy it in the wake of the attacks on New York and Washington. Ulrich Beck, who coined the phrase “the risk society” to describe this new world order, has characterized late modernity (or as he calls it “second stage modernity”) as an age of “manufactured uncertainty”, in which the management of risk has become the primary instrument of political power. The language of risk serves politicians in two ways. On the one hand, as Beck puts it:

The concept of risk reverses the relationship of past, present and future. The past loses its power to determine the present. Its place as the cause of present-day experience and action is taken by the future, that is to say, something non-existent, constructed and fictitious. We are discussing and arguing about something that is *not* the case, but *could* happen if we continue to steer the same course we have been.¹⁴

This open-endedness empowers politicians, placing a premium on decisive action—*any* decisive action—in the face of uncertainty. On the other hand, the mechanics of risk assessment are precisely that—mechanical, and cautious, and impersonal—which allows politicians to advise against a rush to judgment whenever it suits them. The technocratic language of risk encourages the public to place their trust in experts, who have the capacity to weigh up all the evidence. In this way, risk allows politicians the twin luxuries of certainty and uncertainty, to be deployed interchangeably, as the occasion demands.

INTRODUCTION

Blair's use of the language of risk in the aftermath of September 11 captures precisely these double standards. In his assessment of the threat posed by terrorists acting in conjunction with rogue states, Blair relied both on expert risk assessment and on his own intuitions. He highlighted the importance of knowing the risks posed by global terrorism, all the while insisting that when it comes to global terrorism the risks are never fully knowable. In his justification of the war in Iraq, Blair championed caution and incaution at the same time: this was not a moment to ignore the balance of risk, but nor was it a moment to weigh the risks indefinitely in the balance. Yet what is most striking about Blair's deployment of these double standards is not that he should seek to have it both ways, but that he should be so explicit about it. This is where Blair's risk society differs from Beck's. In Beck's account, political risk management appears as an attempt to conceal the true nature of the threats posed to the planet by the industrial order, particularly the threat of ecological disaster. Therefore, politicians use risk to downplay the possibility of catastrophe in order to make all threats appear manageable. But Blair uses the language of risk to raise the spectre of the total unmanageability of the new world order, so long as the threat of terrorism cannot be contained. Beck's conventional view is that politicians and industrialists are happy to hear talk of catastrophe so long as it is someone else doing the talking, allowing the politicians and industrialists to appear in control, relatively speaking. Blair is a practical politician who is nevertheless happy to talk the language of catastrophe himself.

Blair has also been surprisingly open about another side of political risk management, one that politicians have usually preferred to keep to themselves. The catastrophes he has been forced to contemplate since September 11 have not only been global ones. The possibility of terrorist attack has focused the minds of all democratic politicians on the risks they personally face when confronted with disasters they might have foreseen but failed to prevent. As Blair has put it, the risk is that individual politicians will not be forgiven if they are perceived to have taken a chance on any intelligence that turns out to have offered early indications of avoidable future disasters. In such circumstances, it makes sense for politicians to be highly risk averse. But equally, it makes sense

CHAPTER ONE

for the publics they represent to remain relatively indifferent to these kinds of risks. Why should it matter to anyone but Tony Blair (and his immediate circle) whether the war on terrorism threatens Blair with catastrophic damage to his personal reputation? It is true that the general public has a very strong incentive to wish their political leaders to exercise sound political judgment when evaluating the terrorist threat. It is also true that the public will punish politicians who make serious misjudgments. But it does not follow that the private calculations of politicians concerning the huge political risks they face when assessing intelligence should encourage the electorate to give them the benefit of the doubt. Blair clearly thinks the opposite. He wants the public to recognize his predicament: to understand that the risks of the new world order are such that all politicians have to contemplate disaster on a daily basis, and act accordingly. Blair wants sympathy for being Prime Minister at such a time.¹⁵ But democratic politics, in its traditional forms, is a notoriously unsympathetic business. Even though all politicians face personal risks in the decisions they take, that is their concern. If they get it wrong, a well-functioning democracy will have other politicians waiting in the wings, ready to take their chances.

It is Blair's highly personal use of the language of risk that is new, even if the risks themselves are not. September 11 did not change the balance of risk, in the sense that the world did not suddenly become a more dangerous place—it is in the nature of risk that a single event does not alter the balance of probability. What changed was the readiness of politicians like Blair to deploy the idea of an increasingly risky world to provide a bridge between two distinct aspects of the new world order: on the one hand, the growing impulse towards a technocratic, managerial style of politics, founded on the interdependence of the international community; and on the other hand, the increasing premium being placed on decisive political action, and on strong political leadership, in the face of that interdependence. The language of risk serves Blair's purposes because it is both personal and impersonal at the same time—the risks are his, and the risks are everyone's.

The same double standards are visible in the other big shift undergone by Blair's doctrine of the international community between the wars in Kosovo and Iraq. In his 1999 Chicago speech,

INTRODUCTION

Blair recognized the dangers posed to the new internationalism by a potential falling out between the EU and the United States. But before the advent of the Bush presidency he understood this danger as coming from a failure on the part of both sides to recognize what was at stake in their relationship:

The EU and United States should prepare to make a real step-change in working more closely together. Recent trade disputes have been a bad omen in this regard. We are really failing to see the bigger picture with disputes over the banana regime, or whatever else... The EU and the United States need each other and need to put that relationship above arguments that are not ultimately fundamental.¹⁶

After September 11, it was no longer possible to argue that any differences between the United States and Europe turned on issues that were not ultimately fundamental. Instead, Blair was forced to justify his unflinching support for President Bush in the face of widespread European opposition as a kind of risk assessment. For Blair, the risks of alienating the United States in a dangerous and uncertain world were greater than the risks of alienating swathes of European and global public opinion. As he put it in his speech in Washington to the Joint Houses of Congress in July 2003: "Believe me, if Europe and America are together, the others will work with us. But if we split, all the rest will play around, play us off and nothing but mischief will be the result of it."¹⁷ Blair has also come to believe that Britain is uniquely placed to bridge the divide between the United States and Europe, because only Britain truly understands what is at stake for both sides. Where previously Blair saw his job as reminding both sides that there were more important things to worry about than bananas, now that nobody doubts it, his job is the more taxing one of trying to reconcile two distinct styles of politics that threaten to divide the world. On the one side is the consensual, managerial, legalistic style of the Europeans; on the other is the more robust, dynamic, self-willed style of the Americans. In the middle stands Tony Blair, who believes it is possible to combine them.

Europe versus the United States

Is it possible to combine them? The British Prime Minister is not alone in thinking that this is the most important problem facing

CHAPTER ONE

the international order, now and for the foreseeable future. But he is wrong to assume that Britain is uniquely well placed to provide a solution, by offering a political bridge between the United States and Europe. The truth is that the Western world is divided by two distinct ways of doing politics, but the division does not run between any particular geographical areas or power blocs—it cuts across all of them. American politics has succumbed to many of the same regulatory and bureaucratic pressures as European politics, as legislative and executive activity become subject to ever wider forms of scrutiny and oversight.¹⁸ Meanwhile, European political leaders are prone to many of the same self-assertive, bullying impulses as their American counterparts. The clash between the United States and France over the war in Iraq was a collision of world-views; but it was also a collision between two political leaders, each of whom was able to exercise extraordinary personal influence over national policy, an influence that their respective publics were willing to accept. Europe is a continent divided: not just between “old” and “new” (or anti-American and pro-American), but also between its impersonal governance arrangements—a technocratic, managerial, legalistic mode of politics perfectly captured in both the style and content of the now moribund EU constitution—and the personal authority of its political leaders, wherein caprice, charisma and strong tendencies towards egomania remain on powerful display. The United States is no different. As well as being split between the red and the blue states, the United States is being pulled in different directions by the conflicting trends towards the personalization and the depersonalization of its political affairs. George W. Bush’s administration is centred to a remarkable degree on the personality of the president and a select group of his advisers, whose political authority is wholly conditional on the personal trust the president places in them. Yet neither Bush nor his advisers can inoculate the United States against the steady encroachments of an impersonal, interdependent, intrusive world.

There is nothing new in this tension between the impersonal demands of governance and the personal dynamics of governmental power. Indeed, it constitutes the central dilemma of all forms of modern politics—how to reconcile governance with government, so that states can be efficiently and justly administered

INTRODUCTION

but also flexibly and confidently led. The history of the modern state has been marked by frequent conceptual and constitutional readjustments in the attempt to bring the rule of men and the administration of things closer into line. None has been entirely successful—government and governance can never ultimately be reconciled, because they are not the same. Nevertheless, in the most successful modern states, the personal and the impersonal have been prevented from drifting too far apart, so that the foundations of modern politics have remained intact. These foundations now appear under threat. The increasing interdependence of nation states has led to a proliferation of rules and networks that no longer appear to be under the control of national governments. At the same time, many national governments have become increasingly centralized, and the domestic politics of nation states is focused more and more on the personal qualities of a narrow band of individuals. The question is whether this double tendency will simply result in another of the periodic readjustments in the conceptual underpinnings of the modern state, or whether it marks the beginning of the end for the state itself.

In this book, I argue in favour of the state as the only plausible site in which these tensions can be resolved. But I do not believe that the tensions themselves are negligible, and nor do I believe that they can be resolved simply by plumping for one style of politics over the other. One of the difficulties in deciding between them is that the forces producing personalized politics and impersonal governance are often the same. An integrated, globalized world of mass communication, mass transit and open markets requires a vast framework of impersonal rules to regulate, coordinate and oversee the transactions that take place within it. At the same time, a globalized world tends to personalize the experience of the individuals who inhabit it, since each person's encounters with this complex, overlapping set of rules and regulations may be different. There may be many more experiences shared by diverse individuals as a result of globalization, but a common set of shared experiences for all the people in a given geographical area has become much rarer. The internet, which is the cause of some of these changes, also serves as their most potent

CHAPTER ONE

symbol. There is nothing more personal than trawling the internet for knowledge or advice or thrills that can be tailored to your particular individual preferences; at the same time, there is nothing more impersonal than receiving your knowledge or advice or thrills from a vast, rule-governed network of information-bearing machines.

The same forces are at work in politics. Electoral politics is increasingly tailored towards the personal preferences of diverse and often narrowly defined groups of voters. But electoral politics has also come to alienate many of these voters, because it appears to them as a technocratic, mechanical, passionless exercise. The information-gathering devices that make contemporary politics such a personalized business are also the ones that turn so many people off it, because it no longer speaks directly to them in a language everyone can understand. These trends are most obvious in the domain of 24-hour news, where the sheer variety of information available has led to a conformity in coverage, as newscasters seek to connect with their audiences by narrowing the scope of the stories they cover. What this means in practice is that politics is reduced to a series of discrete, self-contained events, through which individual politicians attempt to manage their relationship with a public whose experience of these politicians is invariably conveyed in personalized terms. The war in Iraq was one such event, and it was itself broken down into a series of such events (hostage crises, acts of torture, transfers of power, symbolic elections) (see Chapter Six). Terrorism has helped to create this climate of fractured political attention, but it also feeds off it. In the war on terror, we are taught all we could possibly need to know about a select band of politicians, terrorists and their victims, whose personal experiences and beliefs between them constitute the focus of global affairs. As a result, we learn almost nothing about what these experiences and beliefs might mean beyond themselves. A gap has opened up between politics as a rule-governed activity and politics as a set of personal experiences, and it appears to be growing (see Chapter Five).

This gap is not in itself evidence that we live in a changed world. The tension between personality politics and the impersonal responsibilities that individual politicians undertake has provided the central dynamic of representative democracy for

INTRODUCTION

over 200 years. What has changed is that some of the familiar political means for bridging this gap have started to fracture. Mass-membership political parties, large-circulation newspapers, robust representative institutions, and a stable and extensive system of welfare provision have served at various points to hold states together, by preventing power politics from becoming too detached from the impersonal requirements of democratic governance. But many traditional political parties are losing their members, newspapers are losing readers, some legislatures have seen their powers transferred elsewhere, or else simply dissipate, and welfarism is on the retreat as an electoral force. These changes are not uniform, and they are not irreversible. But they do present states with a new set of challenges. These challenges are most obvious in Europe, where some of the familiar structures of modern politics have started to fragment.¹⁹ The guiding principles of a recognizable form of welfare state were intended to be enshrined in the new EU constitution: “The Union shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth, a social market economy, highly competitive and aiming at full employment and social progress, and with a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment”.²⁰ But because the constitution did not address the allocation of political power, questions of personal welfare were removed to the level of impersonal governance, leaving national governments with their powers undiminished, but their capacity to engage their electorates severely curtailed. This new constitution would not have abolished national politics. But it would have made it much harder to know what national politics are for.

Attempts by national politicians to sell this constitutional vision of Europe’s future back to their electorates through the crude device of the plebiscitary referendum have served only to emphasize the divide between national power politics and the governance structures that now frame it. There were many things to be said for the vision of Europe contained in the constitution—it was a modest, sensible, pragmatic, if tedious, document. But it has proved to be a very hard sell, because it is very hard to recognize these qualities in the politicians whose job it is to sell it. This is not the politicians’ fault—they are, after all, still engaged in

CHAPTER ONE

the business of government, not just governance, and that means they have to compete for power with whatever tools are available. The constitution left them with the power, but also with fewer tools, though it has given them one extra tool, in the form of the constitution itself, over which national politicians have been playing out their power games for the last five years. This is a recipe for confusion and mistrust on all sides. The politicians cannot trust the electorate to judge the constitution on its merits. So the voters cannot trust the politicians to discuss it on its merits either.

The architects of the new constitution continue to hope that over time national politicians and their electorates will adapt to the new circumstances of European governance, and that new forms of national politics will evolve. If the European public eventually comes to see the merits of these constitutional arrangements, it is possible that they will also come to prefer national politicians who embody the aspirations contained in such a constitution, and the gap between government and governance will start to close again.²¹ If it does, then Europe may well provide the world with the example of a new kind of politics to emulate, as so many of its supporters fervently wish.²² However, there is currently no way of knowing whether this wish will be fulfilled. It is just as likely that government and governance will continue to drift further apart, as national electorates turn in on themselves, and national politics becomes ever more volatile, crass, fragmentary and personalized. If this happens—and there are hints of it, in the volatility and caprice of the voters recently displayed in various national elections, in the rise of minority parties, and in the decline across Europe in voter turnout—then it is hard to see how Europe's constitutional arrangements can be sustained.

The situation in the United States is different. The most recent presidential election showed that the traditional political parties are both still able to rouse the electorate, if skilfully managed, to feats of political engagement. The divide that clearly exists between the political rhetoric of many European politicians—consensual, managerial, evolutionary—and their political behaviour—confrontational, egocentric, power-hungry—does not hold for George Bush, whose manners match his message to a degree

INTRODUCTION

rare in the history of modern politics. Bush is a master of partisan politics, and he has managed to breathe new life into some of the traditional forms of electoral competition, leaving the United States more divided than it has been in recent memory, but also leaving no one in any doubt about the continuing importance of central government for the governance of the nation. The United States is still, in this sense, a familiar kind of modern state—albeit a more powerful state than any other in the history of the world—in ways that the core states of the EU can no longer claim to be.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to set the United States, as a model of “modernity”, against the open-ended and ill-defined “postmodern” political institutions of the EU (see Chapter Eight). Many of the differences between them are not fundamental, but contingent. The most important is the fact that the United States is currently at war, as Europe is not (see Chapter Ten). War has traditionally provided the most reliable means for reconciling the personal and impersonal sides of modern politics: a state at war is able to connect the personal fate of its individual citizens with the wider demands of the national community in ways that a state at peace never can. Whatever one thinks about the conceptual and practical viability of fighting a war against terror, there can be no doubt that the Bush administration has successfully deployed the idea to re-engage many individuals with their national political institutions. This option is not available to the political leaders of the EU. Although September 11 was a universal event, it was not a universally personal one, and after the initial shock of the first few days, many people outside the United States did not feel it personally. It did not take long for this gulf to reveal itself, in the mutual incomprehension displayed by individuals with similar political viewpoints but widely different emotional ones, shaped by their different nationalities.²³ In this sense, much of the divide between Europe and the United States since September 11 has simply been determined by where the attacks took place. The contrast between the US’s character as an aggressively modern state and the postmodern, pacifist tendencies of Europe would not be so clear if Europe had been attacked first. The contrast remains real. But because the United States was attacked first, it has been exaggerated.

CHAPTER ONE

The US's character as an emblematically modern state is also limited by the fact that this model of democracy is much harder to export than it once was. There are many reasons why the sort of state building that took place in the aftermath of World War II no longer appears a plausible option for transplanting democracy around the world. One is that the welfarist, corporatist mechanisms through which political stability was guaranteed in nations like Germany and Japan are now outmoded, and nowhere more so than in the United States itself. Equally, the spread of global governance institutions has coincided with a growth in national particularism; again, the United States has led the way in this respect, opting out of international agreements that do not suit her national political interests. Nationalism and anti-Americanism have gone hand in hand in many parts of the world, with the United States providing both an example and a target for resistance to the idea of creeping globalization. But the biggest problem with the idea of exporting democracy is that the sheer complexity and multiplicity of contemporary global governance arrangements means that no one is sure how it is done any more. States, particularly failed states, are no longer self-sufficient; yet it is far from clear what minimal degree of self-sufficiency is still necessary for them to participate in a democratic international order. Francis Fukuyama, who celebrated the end of history with the end of the Cold War, now acknowledges that "state building"—on which a stable liberal democratic order ultimately depends—is a very uncertain and complex business. Much of this uncertainty derives from what he calls the "bewildering variety of standards-setting and technical organizations" currently regulating international affairs.²⁴ But it also derives from the fact that no one can be sure where the balance between global governance and national government should ultimately lie. Fukuyama, who was one of the original signatories of the 1997 Project for the New American Century, recognizes that this is as much a problem for American as it is for European conceptions of the international order. A stable society of states appears to require both international oversight and national independence. No one on either continent has worked out how to square this circle (see Chapter Six).

INTRODUCTION

In the face of so much uncertainty, it is not hard to construct a dystopian vision of an American twenty-first century, just as it is not hard to construct a dystopian vision of a European one. Philip Bobbitt, in his book *The Shield of Achilles*, imagines a world governed according to the Washington model, in which an ever more complex, interrelated, market-driven global society is overseen by ever cruder, more personalized, more brutal forms of power politics (see Chapter Eight). In such a world, rapid technological change quickly outstrips the capacity of political institutions to manage that change, with potentially catastrophic consequences. But equally, Bobbitt is able to imagine a utopian version of the Washington model as well. In this scenario, a stable world of market-driven politics provides the framework within which separate communities are able to experiment with their own voluntary social and political arrangements. Here, personal politics finds its own level under the umbrella-like protection of a dominant market state, allowing individuals and groups to choose the politics that suits them best, without those choices being implicated in any wider struggles for political power. The fantasy of a world in which there is global agreement about power politics, so that all lesser disagreements cease to be political, is an attractive, as well as an enduring, one. It is a fantasy nonetheless.

Much harder is to construct a realistic model of politics for the twenty-first century, in which global governance and national governments are able to coexist. Most attempts to construct such a realistic model contain a utopian streak of their own. For example, it is not enough to argue, as Robert Cooper does in *The Breaking of Nations*, that the challenge of contemporary politics is simply “to get used to the idea of double standards” (see Chapter Eight). Cooper believes that we need to be able to move freely, as the occasion demands, between modern and postmodern forms of politics, alternating a hard-headed military response to some threats with a readiness to pool national sovereignty when the opportunities present themselves.²⁵ Cooper explains why it might be desirable to adapt to these double standards, but he does not explain how. Yet the problem of double standards in political life is hardly a new one. Cooper, like so many other theorists of the new world order, fails to recognize that the most reliable mechanism we have for making ourselves accustomed to double standards in politics

CHAPTER ONE

is the modern state itself. It is modern politics, not postmodern politics, which offers the best guide to understanding a world of flux and conflicting values.

The Liberty of the Moderns versus the Liberty of the Postmoderns

That is why, in trying to decide whether the world has changed, a long perspective is needed alongside a much shorter one. We need to view our current predicament against the backdrop of the historical development of the modern state. Many of the best-known recent accounts of the new world order have deployed the broad history of modern political ideas to frame their arguments about the novelty of our current predicament. But too often these historical ideas emerge as caricatures, and are used simply to categorize and parcel out various fixed and frequently obsolete alternatives.²⁶ For Robert Kagan, for example, the West divides up between Americans, who come from Mars, and Europeans, who come from Venus; at the same time, Kagan draws an equally rigid distinction between contemporary Hobbesians, who recognize the anarchic conditions of real power, and Kantians, who have given up on power in order to build their own fantasy world of peace (see Chapter Seven). Simplistic contrasts such as this one have served to reinforce the wider contrast that is often drawn between earlier doctrines of politics, with their stark certainties and rigid demarcations, and the uncertainty and complexity of the present age. When the political world we now inhabit is described as Hobbesian, it is meant to remind us that underneath all the intricacy of our endlessly varied lives, certain basic truths persist. Yet this is entirely to miss the point of what writers like Hobbes have to teach us. None of the truths of modern politics set out by Hobbes are basic, and most are a good deal more varied and complicated than the simple-minded platitudes that tend to characterize the discourse of the new world order. It is worth going back to classic theorists of the modern state like Hobbes, not so as to have convenient labels with which to impose an artificial order on the chaos of our own thoughts, but to see how other writers, as attuned to complexity as we are, tried to impose order on the chaos of their own time.

INTRODUCTION

In the second part of this book, I move beyond looking at the attempts of politicians like Blair to justify themselves in the light of history, and explore the attempts of writers like Kagan, Cooper and Bobbitt to use history to make sense of the political world Blair has helped to create. In doing so, I go back to the original ideas of some of the great thinkers of the past, whose names are routinely bandied about in the political arguments of the present, to see what they really have to say. I also go back to the ideas of one writer whose name has been almost entirely forgotten: it is in the work of the great French revolutionary theorist Emmanuel Sieyès that some of the most significant lessons of modern political thought are to be found (see Chapter Nine). Sieyès understood as well as anyone that the task of modern politics was to find a way of accommodating the double standards of modern life: the personal and the impersonal, the private and the public. The modern state emerged as a practical response to the challenge of trying to combine the personal political authority of powerful leaders with the impersonal administrative capacity on which such political leadership had come to depend. The foremost interpreters of this new order recognized that a means had therefore to be found for reconciling two different modes of social and political existence, and two different styles of politics. They eventually found it in the idea of representation, which enabled modern politics to be personal and impersonal at the same time. But this idea also placed modern politicians, and modern political institutions, under severe strain, as the double standards inherent in representative politics threatened to pull them apart. The great political theorists of the emergent modern state—Hobbes in seventeenth-century England, James Madison in late eighteenth-century America, Sieyès in late eighteenth-century France, Max Weber in early twentieth-century Germany—understood both the risks and the opportunities of representative government. The risk was that the political and intellectual resources needed to hold the state together would be lacking. The opportunity was that if these resources could be found, it might prove possible to have the best of both worlds: strong government and good governance together.

The birth of the modern state also saw the attempt to combine an older way of doing politics along with the new. Many political

CHAPTER ONE

theorists recognized the need to temper the values of modern politics with some of the virtues of ancient systems of government. One of the most resonant statements of this position was provided by the émigré Swiss philosopher and man of letters, Benjamin Constant, in his lecture “The liberty of the ancients compared to the liberty of the moderns”, delivered in Paris in 1819. Constant was speaking in the aftermath of thirty years of epic turbulence in French politics, which he viewed as the consequence of a horribly misguided attempt by some revolutionary politicians to impose an outmoded conception of political liberty on what had already become a distinctively modern political society. The liberty of the ancients—the collective, martial, austere form of politics that had suited the highly regimented city states of the ancient world—simply did not fit a state like modern France, where too many separate, self-serving individuals were engaged in private pursuits of their own. Revolutionary politics celebrated valour, and discipline, and collective responsibility; but modern citizens were more interested in commerce, and money, and leisure, and they did not welcome political interference in their personal affairs. Any attempt, Constant believed, to force these citizens to give up their personal freedoms for the sake of the wider political community could only be sustained by the violent oppression of the citizens themselves.

Yet Constant was, if anything, even more clear-sighted about the dangers of celebrating the liberty of the moderns for its own sake. Simply to champion privacy, and the right of individuals to manage their own affairs within a framework of law, did not negate the danger of oppressive forms of politics. Instead, it increased the dangers, by removing personal freedom from the domain of politics altogether. Constant recognized the temptations of wishing politics away, but he also understood that politics never goes away.²⁷ Citizens who turn in on themselves will find that government turns in on itself as well, and starts to govern them in ways that they cannot control. Modern liberty, therefore, furnishes the pretext for its own kind of tyranny. What was needed was a defence of ancient liberty—a defence of participation, equality, virtue—in terms that suited the modern world. Constant found what he was looking for in the idea of representative government, which presupposed the independence of

INTRODUCTION

individual citizens, but also required their participation in the political life of the state. “Sirs,” Constant concluded his lecture, “far from renouncing either of the two sorts of freedom which I have described to you, it is necessary, as I have shown, to learn to combine the two together.” He went on:

Even when people are satisfied, there is much left to do. Institutions must achieve the moral education of the citizens. By respecting their individual rights, securing their independence, refraining from troubling their work, they must nevertheless consecrate their influence over public affairs, call them to contribute by their votes to the exercise of power, grant them a right of control and supervision by expressing their opinions; and, by forming them through practice for these elevated functions, give them both the desire and the right to discharge these.²⁸

We now live in a world where the liberty of the moderns contends with the liberty of the postmoderns. Modern political liberty has evolved in the ways Constant foresaw that it would—personal freedoms have been protected but also modified by the institutional demands of the representative politics of the nation state. But some of these demands now appear outmoded in the face of rapid technological and social change: individuals enjoy new kinds of freedoms in an increasingly borderless, hedonistic, information-rich, transient world. The idea that personal freedom still depends on a willingness to participate in the political life of a given nation state is no longer compelling for large numbers of people. Moreover, any attempt to impose modern forms of politics on progressively postmodern political societies is liable to generate its own kind of tyranny. The nation-state model of government cannot simply be relocated into the international arena and used to create modern political communities on a transnational or global scale. There are good reasons to think that the EU would oppress its citizens if it were to become a superstate of a conventional modern kind—it would be too cumbersome, too remote, too uniform for their diverse needs. Certainly, that is the view that most of its citizens currently take, and they are profoundly resistant to the kind of “moral education” that would be required to persuade them otherwise. A world state—on any conventional understanding of what that would mean—seems

CHAPTER ONE

even more certain to be a recipe for violence, repression and civil disorder.²⁹

But equally there are serious dangers in celebrating the liberty of the postmoderns for its own sake. Conventional modern politics is not going to go away, and national governments will turn in on themselves if postmodern governance arrangements are allowed to drift away from the domain of politics altogether. What is needed is a defence of modern politics for a postmodern world. This book attempts to offer such a defence, using history as a guide. The value of modern politics—the unifying, clarifying power of strong representative institutions—remains clear, even though the world itself has changed. Yet modern politics cannot provide any simple solutions to our current problems, given the inherent complexity of the thought that lies behind it, in the ideas of even its most clear-sighted champions. Constant himself is sometimes remembered as a great simplifier, as a result of the beguiling simplicity of the title given to his 1819 lecture.³⁰ But though Constant saw the sharp contrast between ancient and modern conceptions of freedom, he knew that political freedom itself could never be allowed to rest on the crude certainties of such an all-or-nothing divide. In this respect, Constant's diagnosis of the possibilities of modern politics has more in common with the formidably complex and intricate proposals put forward by his near-contemporary Sieyès than it does with the simplistic, all-or-nothing choices that so often characterize political discourse today.

The complexity of political existence generates a persistent temptation to seek out simplistic solutions to the problems of politics, as a means of cutting through the knotted difficulties that human beings have in living together in peace and prosperity. It also makes it tempting to recruit the great names of the past on one side or the other of some deep divide in contemporary politics, and to ignore the ones who do not fit. I end this book by looking at the thought of Sieyès, not because there are any easy answers to be found there, but precisely because he illustrates how few easy answers there are in the work of some of those who understood modern politics best, and who do not fit our contemporary divisions as a result. Constant himself drew on some of Sieyès's

INTRODUCTION

arguments, though he rejected others that he saw as unnecessarily complicated. Nonetheless, Constant too understood the deep perils of the siren call of simplicity. He saw the challenge of early nineteenth-century politics as that of finding a way of defending the liberty of the moderns, while recognizing that the best defence lay through the ancient value of participation. The challenge of early twenty-first-century politics is likewise the formidable one of finding a way to cope with the double standards of postmodern political life, while recognizing that the best guide for coping with any double standards in politics lies in the traditional theory and practice of the modern state.

The Politics of Good Intentions

What then of Tony Blair? The relative longevity and success of Blair's political career has been built out of his ability to straddle the divides of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century politics: between old Labour and new Labour; Clinton and Bush; the United States and Europe; military power and international law; national sovereignty and global community. These divisions existed before September 11, 2001, but the terrorist attacks that took place on that day exacerbated them, and served to bring them to the surface of world affairs. The challenge for Blair has been to develop a style of politics that allows him to accommodate all of these divisions, without sacrificing either his own political identity, or his capacity to act decisively when the occasion demands. This he has managed to do, and though it has become increasingly difficult over time, it is a style that has continued to suit Blair well, as he demonstrated in the immediate aftermath of the London bombs of July 2005.

His method for achieving it has been to embrace the double standards inherent in contemporary politics, thereby bringing them to the surface of his own political rhetoric. His is a self-aware style of politics and he takes great pains to show that he understands the ways in which all national politicians must currently be prepared to be pulled in two different directions at once. It is also a very personal style, and he uses his self-awareness to personalize the difficulties and choices that he faces. Blair knows that trying to straddle the divides of contemporary politics leaves him open to accusations of hypocrisy from all sides. But it is a part of the

CHAPTER ONE

genius of the style he has developed that its self-aware, personal, confessional character forestalls the charge of hypocrisy before it can be made. How, he seems to be saying, can I be a hypocrite if I know just how hypocritical I must appear? This self-knowledge provides the bona fides of his own good intentions.

Blair places a lot of weight on his good intentions, but he also recognizes that in politics good intentions are never enough. The role of good intentions in politics is the subject of the title piece in this collection (see Chapter Two). Blair's approach to this question is emblematic of many of the dilemmas currently facing the new world order, such as it is. But what his approach also shows is that awareness of these dilemmas is not sufficient to resolve them. Blair is a politician who has succumbed to the temptation to exploit complexity in an attempt to reinforce the appeal of simple-minded solutions. Paying lip-service to the double standards of contemporary politics does not serve to justify or to explain any particular course of action a politician might choose to take. In this sense, Blair's personal style of politics is part of the problem, not part of the solution. For all its appeal in times of heightened emotion (after the death of Diana, following September 11, and in the heady, traumatic days of July 2005), it has also caused him some acute personal political difficulties, as the British public have come to tire of its endlessly confessional character. But Blair's own fate also serves to expose some of the deeper difficulties faced by the forms of politics he has chosen to embrace. The new world order requires more substantial tests of a politician's judgment than their own sense of the difficulty of what they are undertaking, and their readiness to communicate this to a wider public. The best way to provide tests of political judgment is to have strong political parties, robust representative institutions, fiercely contested elections, and a fully engaged public, with all the difficulties that the coexistence of these things entails. Whatever Blair has done has been without these tests of judgment. There is no reason to suppose that it is possible to meet the challenges of the new world order without them. In this sense, nothing has really changed.