

DC Confidential

**The Controversial Memoirs of Britain's
Ambassador at the Time of 9/11 and
the Iraq War**

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Extract

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Vanity and Ambition

‘We want you to get up the arse of the White House and stay there.’ So spoke the Prime Minister’s chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, in the splendour of one of Downing Street’s reception rooms.

I was, as the Americans would say, a thirty-year veteran of the British Diplomatic Service. Now, after all that slog, I was about to reach the pinnacle of a diplomat’s career and become Britain’s ambassador to the United States. Trust the blokeishness of New Labour to reduce it to an anal metaphor (mind you, on entering the Diplomatic Service, I had been enjoined by a military-looking type of the old school to be ‘as crisp as a fart’).

It was all quite hard to believe. As I sat opposite this young, tousle-headed chief of staff, who had once been my subordinate, I had one of those can-it-really-be-me? moments. I had a modest middle-class background. No member of my family had ever been a diplomat; I had never had a burning desire to become one. My uncle had made a lot of money as a quantity surveyor. For years it had been assumed that I would follow him into the business. But my uselessness with figures – I had scraped an O level in Maths – and my total lack of interest in quantity surveying had ruled that out.

When I was about seven, I found in my grandmother’s attic one of those illustrated, leather-bound histories of the kings and queens of England, of which the Victorians were fond. My imagination was immediately fired. History became my passion. When I was twelve or thirteen, it took me to second place in a national competition for schools called the Townsend Warner History Prize. It then carried me a decade later to a scholarship at Peterhouse, the oldest Cambridge college, distinguished in equal measure for eminent historians and scientists. I disappointed my professors by not getting a first-class degree. I got instead what was called a

two-one. I always rationalized this by saying that the best diplomats are those with good second-class minds. Too much intellectual firepower can damage your common sense.

I had not a clue what I would do with my degree. The university careers advisory service suggested that I put my expensive education in the service of the fruit-and-vegetable business. They commended a company based in London and Sicily. This was on the strength of my telling them that I liked travel and had hitchhiked in Italy. I dismissed the idea with the arrogance of youth. I considered myself destined for higher things. I made also an irrational connection between fruit and veg and the chicken factory near Bath, where I had once worked as a student 'hole-cutter'. This task – three chickens a minute, seven hours a day – is too disgusting to describe. I was an interloper in a close-knit rural community, where archaic forms of English were still in use – 'thy' and 'bain't' – even among the German and Italian ex-prisoners of war, who preferred the chicken factory to returning to their homelands. They accepted me with a friendly curiosity. In due course I was to choose a career where success depended on the ability to be welcomed by alien communities.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had gone into fruit and vegetables. I might now be sunning myself on the balcony of a fine Sicilian country house, surveying my empire of lemon groves and olive trees. Who is to say that this would not have been a better choice?

The careers advisory service also sent me to BP for an unpleasant and unsuccessful interview, where I was criticized for wearing a sports jacket and brown shoes. 'No gentleman wears brown shoes in London,' I was told. This remark was uttered just as the Beatles, Carnaby Street, and the Swinging Sixties were tolling the knell of the traditional English gentleman, so beloved by Hungarian *immigrés* and the French.

It was my Peterhouse supervisor, Maurice Cowling, who suggested the Diplomatic Service. I had my doubts. My mother and stepfather, an officer in the RAF, had led a peripatetic life. We had lived in Aden and Turkey, where our landlord had been hanged after the military *coup d'état* of 1960. That is one way of avoiding the rent. As a teenager, I had met Foreign Office people in these places, including one who hated the career. But Cowling convinced me. 'Take the exams,' he said. 'If you pass, you have a career, if you

want to be a diplomat. If you pass, but decide to do something else, you will have a qualification of interest to any employer.'

I took the exams and tests in the spring of 1965. To my astonishment I came top. This more than compensated for having failed to get a first in my final university exams; and for the ignominy of having organized a May Ball that lost a large amount of money and led to the bacchanalian destruction of the Fellows' Garden. The experience had almost tempted me to get into the pop-music business. I discovered that I had a nose for talent and an ear for hits. I hired three bands, who at the time were either unknown or at the outer fringes of commercial success. One was called the Jokers Wild, a local Cambridge band that played every week at the Victoria Ballroom above the cinema in the market place. Their leader was David Gilmour, who went on to create Pink Floyd. Then there were the Paramounts, who later morphed into Procol Harum. Their 'Whiter Shade of Pale' was a global hit, which is still widely played today. I also hired Zoot Money's Big Roll Band. National fame largely eluded them, but Zoot was huge on the south coast for years.

As I basked in the success of getting into the Foreign Office, a letter suddenly arrived, inviting me to report for duty in early September. Real life loomed and I took fright. I was still not sure that the Foreign Office was for me. More to the point, I was reluctant to abandon the student's life. The college notice board carried a seductive advertisement for a one-year diploma in international relations from the School of Advanced International Studies in Bologna, Italy (subsequently renamed the Paul Nitze School, after one of its most illustrious benefactors). This was an American establishment run by the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Because Bologna had a communist city government and was in Italy's so-called Red Belt, the rumour was, as I later discovered, that the school was funded by the CIA. The deputy director of the school was certainly a mysterious fellow with a crew cut who had no obvious academic or administrative functions. Much later, when I told a Soviet diplomat who had KGB written all over him that I had studied in Bologna, he replied, 'Ah! The spy school.'

I had little difficulty in persuading the Foreign Office to give me a year's deferment to go to Bologna. It liked the glossy brochure and the impressive set of courses. It also hoped I would learn Italian, which I did. Typically, it never took advantage of this to send me to

our embassy in Rome. The best it could do was, later, to send me to Madrid on the grounds that the Spaniards, like the Italians, spoke a Latin-based language. In the end Spain, with the United States, proved the most enjoyable and fulfilling of my postings abroad. But that is another story.

Bologna was an idyllic interlude, in which my attention to advanced international studies was cursory at best. A year passed in travel around Italy and dancing with Italian girls in the little bars that dotted the hills around Bologna. I returned to London in the autumn of 1966. My year away had given me no fresh ideas about a career. Without further ado, I entered Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service and was posted to the West and Central African Department of the Foreign Office. I was made responsible for French-speaking African states. The prospect terrified me. There were so many of them. My head of department brushed my worries aside. 'No need to worry, old boy. We have damn-all interests in these places. The French have them sewn up.'

If Bologna did little to fire enthusiasm for the Foreign Office, it marked the start of my fascination for America. Most of the students and faculty were American. They were pulsing with debate over the war in Vietnam. I took a course in American history, did my first multiple-choice tests, ate my first Thanksgiving dinner and duly emerged with a diploma. I went on to spend the summer working for the American School in Switzerland. This was an American high school based in Lugano, which used to recruit its 'senior counselors' from the students in Bologna. It ran a two-month summer programme for American teenagers, overwhelmingly girls, which provided a distilled course in European culture. The job of a senior counselor was to drive a minibus, with eight girls aboard, on week-long excursions around Europe, returning to Lugano for much-needed rest between sorties. Hotels were forbidden. Camping sites were obligatory. The senior counselors were supposed also to be chaperones. It was a struggle to protect the American girls from the attentions of Italian and Spanish men. I was offered money for access to them in Rome and Barcelona. Our minibus was pursued all the way from Milan to Chiasso on the Italian-Swiss frontier by a car-load of Italian boys. The girls were torn between fear and longing. I still have ringing in my ears the Mickey Mouse song, rendered horribly by eight tuneless voices in the claustrophobic

confines of a Volkswagen minibus. I learnt to purchase Tampax in French, Swiss, Spanish, Italian, German and Austrian pharmacies without batting an eyelid.

Almost twenty years were to pass after these adventures before I set foot on American soil. It used to be said that the most common dream experienced by the British people was to have tea with the Queen. Mine was always to go to America. I finally did it in 1985, when, as his press secretary, I accompanied Sir Geoffrey (now Lord) Howe, the then Foreign Secretary, to a UN meeting in New York. We stayed at the posh UN Plaza hotel on East 42nd Street. My first night I was so excited that I got up and went for a walk around the East Side. It taught me something about America that has remained with me ever since. So much was intensely familiar from movies and television; but so much was alien. This was a foreign country, not Britain writ large. It was a huge mystery, to be explored and explained. That first morning I had breakfast in John's restaurant, a diner on the corner of 42nd and 2nd Avenue: two eggs over easy, Canadian bacon, hash browns, toast, jelly, orange juice, coffee. I listened to the raucous conversation of office workers, policemen, waiters, postmen. I had finally arrived.

After that I travelled frequently to the US with Geoffrey Howe, usually to Washington and New York. Geoffrey had struck up a good relationship with George Shultz, the American Secretary of State. They both spoke in a low rumble, barely audible to their staff and sometimes to each other. On one occasion Howe tried to persuade Shultz to get the American military to buy a battlefield communications system called Ptarmigan. After Howe had made his pitch, Shultz replied bafflingly that the US would always support democracy in the 'Southern Cone'. What had he meant, we asked Shultz's staff after the meeting. 'The Secretary,' they said, 'thought that Sir Geoffrey was talking about Argentina.'

Geoffrey got it into his head that he could extract more value from his lightning trips to Washington if we took Concorde. It would add an entire afternoon to the time available for talks with the Americans. That was fine as far as the afternoons were concerned. But with a five-hour time difference working against us, by the time the working dinner arrived, we were all dead from jet lag. Shultz once had the idea that it would be nice to have the dinner on the old presidential yacht *Sequoia* and sail down the Potomac River.

Shultz and Howe decided to get away from matters of the moment and discuss long-term trends in world affairs. It was a balmy spring evening, with the sun setting over the Virginia shore. To the gentle throb of engines and the sound of swishing water was added the soporific rumble of the two Great Men, as they grappled with subjects like population control. The entire British team was soon asleep at the dinner table. Shultz and Howe would sometimes doze as the other spoke. I opened an eye to see that jet lag was contagious. American heads were drooping.

As my time with Sir Geoffrey drew to a close in 1988, he asked me what I wanted to do next. I said that I wanted to get to know America better. Our thirty-six-hour visits to the US had been tantalizing. I was more and more aware of the vast country that lay behind the east coast. I was also exhausted after spending four years dealing with the press. There was a programme at Harvard University which every year brought together from all over the world twenty or so foreign policy ‘practitioners’ – diplomats, businessmen, politicians and so on. The idea was to bring academics and practitioners together in a creative synergy. In reality, as I was to find out, most of the academics did not want to touch the practitioners with a bargepole, in case the real world were to burst in on the musings of the ivory tower. Each year, the Foreign Office sent someone on the course. I asked to go in the academic year 1988–9. Howe granted my wish. In due course I set off for Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Harvard is located, with my first wife and family.

Our arrival in August coincided with the final stage of the 1988 presidential election campaign between George Bush the father and Michael Dukakis, the Governor of Massachusetts. Dukakis was leading Bush by around fifteen points in the polls. In the end he was to be beaten heavily by Bush; but as we arrived, a number of Democrat-supporting Harvard academics were expecting to be called to Washington to serve in a Dukakis administration. Harvard proved to be a superb observation point as the campaign moved to its climax. I found myself living a political melodrama as the Dukakis campaign went down the drain, taking with it the hopes and ambitions of most of Harvard’s academic community. I learnt lessons about presidential campaigns, which were to stand me in good stead when I was ambassador twelve years later. One of them

was to pay little attention to the predictive power of the polls before the beginning of September. I became hooked on American politics and have remained so ever since.

When, after a few weeks at Harvard, I took a call from the Foreign Office asking me if I would like to stay on that side of the Atlantic and take up a posting at our embassy in Washington at the end of the academic year, I jumped at the chance. My family were delighted too. The alternative option of Eastern Europe, even as ambassador, was not so appealing.

We moved to the nation's capital in May of 1989. I was to stay for five and a half years until the end of 1993 in this, my first, Washington incarnation. It converted me in the eyes of the Foreign Office from a Russian to an American specialist, so paving the way for my appointment four years later as ambassador to the United States.

Which explains why, just before leaving for Washington in this second and more elevated incarnation as ambassador, I had gone to see Jonathan Powell, the Prime Minister's chief of staff. It was normal for senior ambassadors to get their marching orders from Downing Street. His crisp instruction was the most important briefing I received. Six months after New Labour's crushing election victory in May 1997, it was clear already that the Prime Minister's office would control relations with Washington. As in the days of another dominant Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, the Foreign Office was about to be relegated to second fiddle.

My thoughts went back to those years when the relationship between Powell and me had been reversed. He too had been in the Washington embassy in the early nineties. I was the ambassador's deputy, he a middle-ranking member of the staff, who reported to me. He was good: quick off the mark, with an astute understanding of American politics. His job in the embassy was to follow closely the presidential election campaign of 1992 between Bill Clinton and George Bush senior. He travelled around the US with both campaigns. This enabled him to get up the arse, as it were, of key figures in the future Clinton administration. This was to be of inestimable value to the Blair government.

At about the same time Tony Blair, sometimes with Gordon Brown, started visiting Washington. They were members of the Labour Party's Shadow Cabinet. They set out to forge close links

with the New Democrats, the political and intellectual force behind Clinton. Blair and Brown were energized by Clinton's election victory in 1992. After long years in opposition they wanted to learn how to win too. The New Democrats warmly welcomed them. In the 1997 election much of New Labour's political strategy was borrowed from the Clinton campaign book.

Embassies are required to give all assistance to 'Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition'. So, Powell and I used to help Blair and Brown set up these visits. They were an odd couple: Blair effervescent and talkative, with a flashing smile and almost unnaturally youthful; Brown taciturn and brooding, with nails bitten to the quick. This gave the impression that Blair was the senior partner. But after a while, as you observed them, you began to ask the question that has bedevilled British politics for almost ten years: who is the organ-grinder and who the monkey?

Their visits were useful because they introduced me to the stokers in the New Democrat engine room: Al Frum, Sid Blumenthal, George Stephanopoulos, James 'the ragin' Cajun' Carville and others. Among those around Blair, I thought only Peter Mandelson, Alastair Campbell and, later, Jonathan Powell himself, matched these thirty-somethings for intellectual firepower and political imagination.

Gordon Brown was hard to read because he said so little. So was Tony Blair, perhaps because he talked so much. Eric Anderson, Blair's housemaster at his public school, Fettes, once said to me that all I had to know about Tony Blair was that he was a great actor.

After I became ambassador in Washington, I saw another side to Brown. Unlike other cabinet ministers, he never stayed at our embassy, nor any other, apparently. He would plant himself in a downtown hotel, frequently the Watergate, surrounded by a small band of advisers. I think he regarded ambassadors as the eyes and ears of Tony Blair. I can understand why this bothered him. Brown did not confine his American contacts to his economic opposite numbers, like the Treasury Secretary or the Chairman of the Federal Reserve. He built his own political network with the Democratic Party. He is, for example, a close friend of Bob Shrum, who was a senior adviser to both Al Gore and John Kerry in their presidential campaigns. Shrum was hired as an adviser to New Labour in the 2001 general election in Britain. His greatest claim to fame is his

skill as a speech-writer and communicator. I may have detected his hand in some of Brown's speeches.

From time to time I was admitted to the Brown magic circle. I once went with Brown to New York, where he was to make a speech. He was terrific company. I was surprised at his voluble interest in American politics, on which he was a fair expert. He was friendliness and charm personified. Brown drafted and redrafted his text until the last moment.

I got another surprise on a later visit. I went with Brown to see Bob Zoellick, US Trade Representative in George W. Bush's first administration. Bob was an old acquaintance of mine: brilliant, tough-minded and acerbic. When deputy White House chief of staff, he was reputed to have fallen out with George W. over his father's doomed campaign against Bill Clinton in 1992. I heard George W. once say that Bob's bedside manner left something to be desired. He was the best National Security Adviser the US never had. He had a passionate interest in foreign policy and, though he brought his usual laser focus to the business of trade, he felt a little shunted out of the mainstream of things. Bob had a surprising knowledge of British nineteenth-century history, especially military. He immediately spotted that the abysmal 2002 remake of the movie *The Four Feathers* had the late Victorian British army incorrectly fighting in red, instead of khaki. I sent him a copy of the more accurate and far superior 1939 Korda version of the film.

Brown wanted to sell Zoellick on the notion of a European-American economic cooperation agreement. As far as I could tell, this sprang from his own political imagination, with minimal, if any, concertation with No. 10, the Foreign Office or anyone else in Whitehall. Zoellick was not buying. 'Gordon, come back when you have sold the idea to your European friends.' But the meeting was a great success. The two of them settled down to a knowledgeable and animated discussion of British prime ministers in the nineteenth century.

My final encounter with Tony Blair in this first incarnation in the Washington embassy was towards the end of 1993. Clinton was in his first year as President, and Blair had come to Washington to talk politics with the victorious Democrats. It had just been announced that I was to become Press Secretary to the British Prime Minister, John Major. I fixed a lunch for Blair with a bunch of high-powered

Democrat consultants and advisers in a private room at the Four Seasons Hotel in Georgetown. They had played big roles in Clinton's victory. They were cock-a-hoop. They hoped to get insights from Tony Blair into how the Labour Party intended to plot a similar course to election victory.

Blair was hesitant and banal. At the time he was Opposition spokesman on home affairs. This was the first occasion that I heard the slogan – the quintessence of New Labour – ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’. Slogans were about as far as Blair got that day. He kept eyeing me nervously. I have always wondered if his reticence was just unformed thinking, or reflected concern that I would spill his beans to John Major and the Tories. If the latter, he had not yet grasped that civil servants like me had to be politically neutral, even in the job of Prime Minister's press secretary.

Jonathan Powell himself left the Diplomatic Service a year later to work full-time for Blair. And lo! here we were in Downing Street in the autumn of 1997, with him giving me instructions and not the other way round. Like most of my friends, Jonathan had thought me daft to go to work for John Major at the beginning of 1994, as the wheels started to come off his government. Not for the first time, I allowed vanity and ambition to get the better of me. But it all led indirectly to my becoming ambassador in Washington.

Geoffrey Howe had hired me in 1984 as his press secretary when I was working in our embassy in Moscow. He used to say that I was the only British diplomat in the Soviet Union who had been recruited by someone other than the KGB. My four years with Geoffrey were among the happiest in the Diplomatic Service. He was a fine Foreign Secretary, thoughtful, astute and meticulous. I knew little about the press at the time; but I grew to love newspapers in all their grubbiness and glory, where all human life met and the sublime and ridiculous were impossible to disentangle. I liked the company of journalists and came to count several as friends. I also learnt that if the choice lay between the story and friendship, the story would usually come out on top. In most cases this was not betrayal, but simple professionalism. It is striking how few politicians understand this. Journalists are held in low public esteem. More than a few deserve to be. But on the whole their profession is marked by an impressive ability to encapsulate accurately the essence of the story, often against a tight deadline.

It was on the strength of these four years lashed to Sir Geoffrey's mast that I was asked in late 1993 if I wanted to be John Major's press secretary. The call came from Sarah Hogg, who ran Major's Policy Unit in No. 10. She painted a glowing picture of life with the Prime Minister, deploying those descriptive arts which come so easily to estate agents. I was receptive. I was just finishing my first stint in Washington. I expected, with no great enthusiasm, to become chairman of the now notorious Joint Intelligence Committee. I agreed to come to London to be interviewed by John Major himself.

This was a bizarre event. I was ushered into the Cabinet Room. Major liked to work there, at the middle of the long table, under the portrait of Sir Robert Walpole, the first British Prime Minister. I had met Major once before, when he had come to Washington in 1989 as Margaret Thatcher's brand-new Foreign Secretary. There was an obscure row going on with the Americans about a hideous thing called chewing tobacco. This intensely carcinogenic substance is what you see American baseball players and good ol' boys in the southern US spitting out in long, brown streams. For some reason an American company produced it in the UK for export to Scandinavia, where this repellent habit had taken root. The British wanted to close the factory for health reasons. The Americans were resisting. I was impressed at how Major had got on top of this obscure brief in his very short tenure as Foreign Secretary. He obliged me to produce samples of the stuff. He interrogated me in depth on how to settle the dispute. Then, in a rapid change of gear, he gave, across the lunch table, a rather brilliant assessment of the situations in Russia and South Africa.

It was a different kind of Major who interviewed me four years later in 1993. He was tense, irritable and tired.

'Why do you want the job?' he asked. This was couched in tones suggesting that I had taken leave of my senses. I bumbled pompously about how the Lobby – the collective name for the journalists who covered Westminster and Whitehall – conveyed a more pungent sense of journalism.

Major gave me a sharp stare. 'Pungent, pungent? Putrid, you mean?' On that felicitous note I was hired.

The calm and ever affable Gus O'Donnell, whom I was to replace (he is now Cabinet Secretary), ushered me rapidly from the Cabinet Room.

‘We need to make an announcement today.’

‘What?’ I quavered. ‘Surely we don’t have to rush things.’

‘Oh yes, we do,’ said Gus firmly. ‘It will leak. This place is like a sieve. We will do it at the four o’clock Lobby briefing.’

I realized later that Gus, who could not get out from under fast enough, was petrified that I would change my mind. I had discovered, to my alarm, that I was the sole candidate for the poisoned chalice. I was crowded with second thoughts. Too late. The deed was done that afternoon. In a moment of pure surrealism I awoke next morning to the gruff tones of Sir Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher’s long-serving press secretary and an old friend and mentor, talking about me on the BBC’s *Today* programme.

A good friend, who remains prominent in public life, consoled me by saying that John Major’s political fortunes could not sink lower, that I was joining his team at just the right time, that as things got better for him, I would rise with his tide and be able to share in the credit. Never has a prediction been more wrong.