Searching for the Successor Generation: Public Diplomacy, the US Embassy’s International Visitor Program and the Labour Party in the 1980s

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This article looks at the influence of US public diplomacy in the UK, in particular the use of the International Visitor Program as a channel for encouraging dialogue and the introduction of new ideas into the Labour party during the 1980s. The drift towards the left and the adoption of unilateralism caused great concern for the Americans. What was at stake was the future direction of the party and the need to realign its international stance with American interests. A keen eye was always kept on new talent entering the House of Commons after each election. In 1983 the ‘best and the brightest’ were undoubtedly Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. By using the Program to open up the United States to these young politicians and their political allies, the Embassy contributed to the linkage and cross-fertilisation between those who would become New Labour and the New Democrats a decade later.

Introduction

How can one prove the effectiveness of such a program? Is it enough to point to the leaders throughout the world in a variety of professions who have benefited?1

In his recent biography of Tony Blair, Anthony Seldon rightly devotes a few pages to the importance of the growing relationship between Blair, Gordon Brown and the United States from the mid-1980s onwards. The two young politicians travelled together in 1988, 1991 and again in 1993 to the United States to become acclimatised with the American political scene and to learn as much as they could about the modernising forces then active in the Democratic Party (Seldon 2004, 119–123). The culmination of this groundwork was the close partnership with Bill Clinton’s administration between 1993 and 2000. The cross-fertilisation and mutual development of New Labour and the New Democrats was the fundamental international axis in the rise of the centre-left Third Way during the 1990s. Blair has since proved that his belief in the transatlantic alliance with the United States crosses all party boundaries. Recent studies have highlighted the remarkable similarities and convergences in ideological standpoint and world-view between Blair and Bush, giving some explanation to Blair’s efforts to stand shoulder to shoulder with George Bush since the Republican president entered the White House (Parmar 2005, 218–231). Blair’s Atlanticism and his familiarity with the United States remains a subject that deserves in-depth analysis. When did it begin, and why?
The purpose of this article is to look at particular efforts of US public diplomacy during the 1980s to facilitate a transformation of the Labour Party towards greater openness. This involved focusing especially on the young talented politicians who began to congregate under Neil Kinnock’s leadership. In particular, attention here is given to the International Visitor Program (IVP) as a means to set up contacts, transfer ideas and establish long-running relations on an informal but often fruitful basis. It is not the intention here to overplay the impact that the Program had. Former Foreign Service Officers who were involved with the IVP in the US Embassy in London, such as Raymond Seitz (Deputy Chief of Mission 1984–1989, Ambassador 1991–1994), have expressed their doubts on this point. For Seitz the seeking out of political compatriots across the Atlantic would have happened with or without the IVP. Also, the high level of professional mobility, the extent of private contacts and the scale of media saturation on the United States prevent an accurate assessment of the IVP’s specific impact. With or without these exchanges, an ‘Americanisation’ of the style of British politics was occurring anyway.

However, it would be a mistake to dismiss these activities as no more than a minor addition to the densely-woven patterns of existing international relations. There was political intent behind these invitations, as these same Foreign Service Officers openly admit, and this intent only becomes accessible if one examines the Program’s function and purpose over time. The IVP and its predecessor the Foreign Leader Program were, from their inception in 1950, designed to influence opinion abroad. During the 1980s the Program was part of an information and public diplomacy strategy developed by the Reagan administration to improve the image around the world of the United States and its foreign policy. This article discusses the ways in which it was used to that end, and the level of success that should be granted to it.

Seldon has done a service by pointing to the impact the IV trips to the US had on the belief-systems of Blair and Brown when they were ambitious young MPs. However, he concentrates most on the December 1991 and January 1993 trips, which lasted no more than four days each, but which were apparently ‘defining’ for the MPs who were both ‘changed profoundly by the experience’. Both trips were private affairs, the first apparently through a grant from tobacco giant Philip Morris and the second organised by Jonathon Powell at the British Embassy in Washington (the source of funding for the second trip is unclear) (Seldon 2004, 121–122). It was certainly a heady period, with Philip Gould’s experience in the Clinton ‘war room’ during the election summer of 1992 adding to the influence that New Democrat thinking had on the Labour modernisers. Blair was shadow home secretary from 1992 to 1994, and it was during this time that, according to Seldon, ‘the US experience began to make a deep impression on him’ (Seldon 2004, 444). Blair biographer John Rentoul has also remarked how the 1993 visit ‘marked a turning point in his development as a politician’ (Rentoul 2001, 198). Blair made another brief visit to the US in November 1993 to study law enforcement methods in New York, a source which he used to back up his ‘tough on crime’ policy standpoint and which led to his article on this topic in the Evening Standard (15 November 1993). With Blair and Brown searching for new paths for Labour, the United States became the prime source of new ideas. In this pursuit they were running at
odds with the leadership of John Smith, who did not regard Clinton or the New Democrats as a model of any consequence for British politics (McSmith 1994, 302). However, Clinton’s ability to promote a socially progressive agenda while reassuring the middle class that they would not be financially overburdened looked like a model that could cross the Atlantic very easily (Naughtie 2002, 213–214).

In fact, these trips in the early 1990s, and the fascination with all things American, built on foundations that had already been laid by US public diplomacy efforts during the previous decade. The experiences of Blair and Brown were only part of a wider strategy pursued by the US Embassy in London to bring the Labour Party into a constructive dialogue with its natural counterparts across the Atlantic. Public diplomacy was one of the most important means by which the Embassy could try to build contacts and, ideally, have an influence on the political direction of the party over the longer term. During the 1980s the Foreign Service Officers in the US Embassy in London were fortunate enough to be working in the context of the close personal and official relations established between the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan. Yet, the political officers of the embassy continued to work under the sensibly pragmatic assumption that this situation would not last for ever. At some point, thanks to the traditional pendulum swing in British electoral behaviour, Labour would return to power. While this seemed a long way away following the election disaster of 1983, it was still treated by the Americans as an inevitability of British political life. The aim, therefore, was to make sure that when a Labour prime minister did once again enter Number 10 he was at least familiar with and at best supportive of US interests. Based on the outlook of the Labour Party in the early 1980s, this was by no means guaranteed. As Peter Riddell has commented:

Hostility to both the United States and to the European Union were the hallmarks of Labour’s approach in the early 1980s and featured strongly in Labour’s manifesto for the 1983 general election ... These attitudes—and the associated commitments to unilateral nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from the EU—were only gradually abandoned during the rest of the 1980s by Neil Kinnock, with the active support of his protégés, Blair, Brown and Mandelson (Riddell 2003, 62).

The International Visitor Program and US National Interest

The original definition of public diplomacy from 1965 offers little more than a description of increased cross-border interaction:

The role of the press and other media in international affairs, cultivation by government of public opinion, the non-governmental interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another, and the impact of these transnational processes on the formulation of policy and the conduct of foreign affairs (Tuch 1990, 8).

While this quote emphasises the ‘mutual understanding’ element of public diplomacy (Mitchell 1986), the use of these activities for specific political ends remains largely absent. During the Reagan era this political dimension was made explicit.
National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 130 from 6 March 1984 declared the following:

International information is an integral and vital part of US national security policy and strategy in the broad sense. Together with the other components of public diplomacy, it is a key strategic instrument for shaping fundamental political and ideological trends around the globe on a long-term basis and ultimately affecting the behaviour of governments.3

The intent expressed in NSDD 130 has always existed to varying degrees in US public diplomacy. Improved communication between peoples through exchange programmes and other media has certainly been the goal, particularly for many professionals involved with public diplomacy activities in both the public and private sectors (Thomson and Laves 1963; Davison 1965; Frankel 1966). Nevertheless, national interests have always been present in the background, and certain presidential administrations have simply made this aspect more explicit than others. The Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Reagan administrations in particular emphasised the political content of public diplomacy activities (see Sorensen 1968; Hixson 1997; Lord 1998; Cull 2003; Osgood (2006). Joseph Nye, in outlining his understanding of ‘soft power’, states that it refers to the promotion of international cooperation through the adoption of shared values while simultaneously assuming that the values in question are effectively those of the United States globalised (Nye 2004, 7–11). Public diplomacy in this sense becomes the cultivation of norms of behaviour and perception abroad that correspond with long-term national interests and short-term policy orientation at home. In this context several studies have examined the practice of exchange programmes in general as an exercise in support of long-term US foreign policy goals, with particular reference to West Germany and the Soviet Union (Kellermann 1978; Espinosa 1976; Fairbank 1976; Starr 1986; Kim 1990; Duggan 1998; Schmidt 1999; Richmond 2003; Scott-Smith 2005). There is enough evidence to argue that public diplomacy initiatives need to be taken more seriously as successful channels of influence, thereby requiring a reassessment by historians and political scientists of the importance of these initiatives alongside, or within, traditional diplomatic practice (for one such reassessment see Melissen 2005).

Aside from official events and cocktail parties, one of the most valuable methods for US Foreign Service Officers to establish constructive relations with a member of parliament is with the offer of an invitation to visit the United States. While shorter information-gathering trips with a set itinerary could be provided under the auspices of NATO Leader tours (actually nothing to do with NATO but funded and run by the State Department), more prestigious was participation in the International Visitors Program (on the apparatus and ideals of the IVP and its predecessor, the Foreign Leader Program, see Elder 1961; Norton 1977). A close examination of the IVP in any one country over a period of years can give a revealing insight into who US Embassy officers considered worthy of attention, what local political trends they were following and how this activity fitted with the overall strategy of US foreign policy at that time.

The IVP has always operated with political intent, although this varied over time and was often buried under the overall orientation of the Program towards
promoting cross-cultural understanding. In 1978 the State Department’s Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (responsible for the IVP) was transferred to USIA. Three years later, in June 1981, Reagan appointed Charles Z. Wick, a close friend, as director of USIA. Wick was determined to improve America’s image abroad, and he placed special emphasis on ‘fast media’ methods such as the Voice of America and Worldnet to achieve this rapidly. One of Wick’s main challenges during the early 1980s was Western Europe. In 1979 NATO had agreed to the stationing of US Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) on European soil as a modernisation of its strategic missile arsenal and as a response to the Soviet deployment of SS-20s in the same military theatre. This entailed the placement of Pershing II and Cruise missiles in several Western European countries by 1983, a decision which caused much political upheaval and social opposition in West Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Kahler 1983; Kurth 1988).

Wick led the effort to restore public opinion in America’s favour with ‘Project Truth’, announced in August 1981, which aimed to revive the anti-communist, anti-Soviet verve of USIA’s message. In January 1983 the overall outlook of the Reagan administration was emphasised by NSDD 77, entitled ‘Management of Public Diplomacy Relative to National Security’, which stated that ‘public diplomacy is comprised of those actions of the US Government designed to generate support for our national security objectives’. NSDD 77 created an inter-agency Special Planning Group answerable to the National Security Council for the ‘overall planning, direction, coordination and monitoring of implementation of public diplomacy activities’. Exchanges, along with all public diplomacy activities, were to be more ‘politicianised’ to tie them to specific US foreign policy goals.

Initially Wick’s desire to shift resources into technology and ‘fast media’ caused him to propose sweeping budget cuts for exchanges, regarded as ‘slow media’ and unable to deliver the required quick results. In 1982 the Fulbright Program was facing a 53 per cent cut ($25.6m), the IVP 58 per cent ($11.5m). However, a powerful coalition of congressmen and the public diplomacy community inside and outside government was able to derail much of Wick’s proposed agenda. While politicisation remained a problem for many in that community, Congress accepted it in principle to give all programmes a sharper edge in support of US foreign policy in general. But the major turnaround was on the budget. The Pell amendment on the Fiscal Year (FY) 1982 budget for USIA, named after Senator Clairborne Pell, stated that the Wick proposals for expansion in the ‘fast media’ apparatus would only be accepted if funding for all exchanges be doubled over the ensuing four years. As a result, the IVP budget alone soared from $17.7m in FY 1981 to $40.5 m in FY 1986 and remained at that level until the end of the decade (Middlebrook 1995, 126–189, 308–325).

In the context of INF deployment, the UK was of vital strategic importance for the US during the early 1980s. As a consequence, IVP grants for British participants increased dramatically from 28 in 1981 (roughly the level they had been for the previous decade) to a total of 68 in 1986. This increase was carefully managed by the US Embassy in London. It is not as if the extra resources were channelled immediately into inviting more MPs. In 1981 only five members of the Houses of Parliament went on the Program: Peter Bottomley and John Patten (Conservative),...
George Foulkes (Labour), John Tilley (Liberal) and Lord Alton of Liverpool (Liberal). Meanwhile, among the 68 participants in 1986, there were still only 5 MPs: Tony Blair and Martin O’Neill (Labour), Alistair Burt and David Willetts (Conservative) and Malcolm Bruce (Liberal). Due to political sensitivities and the need to avoid any accusation of ‘undue influence’, results through careful selection rather than saturation of the House of Commons were the aim. The rest of the invitations were spread out across various professions—Hanif Kureishi, for instance, was also a recipient in 1986, four years before *The Buddha of Suburbia* made him famous. However, there was a particular focus on education at the secondary and higher levels, reflecting the emphasis on encouraging the adoption of the United States as a topic in curricula and the passing on of positive images of the US to British youth. From the 1950s onwards the encouragement of American Studies as a serious discipline abroad had been a priority for USIA staff, since a better knowledge of the United States abroad was seen as an important prerequisite for its international leadership. While the Fulbright Program was the best means to foster this, the Leader/IV Program was also made use of if extra grants were required for a wider impact. Reflecting the security priorities of the 1980s, several academics working on international political and security issues were also invited, with influential institutions such as the International Politics Department at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth being singled out for special attention.

The IV Program is a subtle exercise that trades heavily on America’s considerable cultural and social capital—in other words its soft power. The fact that invitations are offered to headmasters of secondary schools, directors of charities and curators of art museums ensures that the opportunity reaches a broad cross-section of professionals within society, with the added hope that they pass their positive experience on to their peers and beyond. Effort is generally made to gather participants from different regions and to avoid concentrating on a single political party. Political bias is always consciously avoided, as this accusation could be damaging for the Program as a whole. For this reason, it is not necessarily the quantity of participants chosen, but the quality—who would benefit most from a trip to the United States? The altruistic aspect of providing the trip is always balanced with the intention of some kind of return. An invitation offered at the start of a young, obviously talented politician’s career can pay off later if, as expected, that politician rises through the ranks in the following years. An IV trip has the potential, thanks to the extra information sources or contacts it can provide, to be career-enhancing, particularly for those in the media or academics but also for MPs. It is not a case of undue influence but of pragmatically attempting to establish favourable, constructive relations early on with someone expected to achieve greater influence in the future. In the words of Ray Seitz, ‘just discussing the possibility gives our mid-level officers access to important people and helps build relationships’. The element of chance that it will succeed in the long term is of course large. In the words of a former USIA officer:

> We wanted to cast our nets as widely as possible because, after all, we were interested in picking out people who might be leaders in their field not tomorrow or next year but perhaps in five or even ten years time. Who could predict with accuracy what the political considerations would be in those time frames? We wanted to select future decision-makers so
that, when their time came, they would make decisions regarding the United States with some degree of knowledge about the country and not solely on the basis of knee-jerk and often uninformed prejudices.\(^8\)

Sometimes it is a recognition of talent pure and simple. At other times it represents an attempt to sway a talented but perhaps critical politician towards a more receptive stance. But, the aim over the long term is to build up a loose network of ‘allies’, be they sympathetic listeners or vocal advocates open to co-operative ventures. The selection process of candidates and the decisions on the allocation of grants are in general far from arbitrary and often carried out with a keen eye on possible future returns. As Political Counsellor Miles Pendleton has remarked, ‘you can’t be all that scientific in selection’, but good judgement nevertheless counts for a lot. An extended trip of several weeks to the US at the US government’s expense is in itself an indication of prestige and worth for the recipient. As one FSO has said, ‘trips were but one arrow in the quiver’ but still ‘it helped in terms of contact with people if you could offer them a trip to the United States’.\(^9\) The positive psychological impact of an IV trip on the grantee cannot be denied, even if this works in different ways with each individual and is difficult to quantify. It is worth noting Seldon’s remarks on Blair’s 1986 IV trip: ‘The cumulative impact of meeting so many people in so many locations would have had a powerful effect in opening his mind to a country he hitherto barely knew’ (Seldon 2004, 120).

The IVP and Labour in the 1970s: Dealing with the Drift to the Left

Looking at the Labour MPs who participated in the IVP after 1970, it is immediately obvious that far more travelled to the US during the 1980s than in the previous decade. Familiar figures from the 1970s include the young MPs Jack Cunningham and John Smith in 1973 and Margaret Beckett in 1976. John Grant, of special value due to his close relations with Harold Wilson, was offered a remarkable three IV grants in five years (1973, 1976 and 1977), then travelling again to the US as a Voluntary Visitor in 1980. Neil Kinnock went in 1975 (Hattersley had been picked out much earlier, in 1965). In order to demonstrate how the IVP functioned in this period it is worth looking at the visit of Robin Cook. Cook, who entered parliament in 1974, had been a CND member since his teens and was in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament. During 1976–1977 he was highly critical of the arms trade, particularly the sale of Hawk aircraft and other weapons to Indonesia in the wake of its invasion of East Timor (Pilger 1998, 140). The US Embassy officer who arranged his trip was Jack Binns, head of the political section from 1974 to 1979. Binns found co-operation with the Labour government very smooth, but he was aware of potential problems ahead.

One thing that was of concern was the leftward drift of the Labour party, which, if it had continued, might have threatened the British commitment to the [Atlantic] alliance, threatened their participation in European affairs and our collaboration in other areas of the world.\(^{10}\)

In this context it is not surprising that Binns took note of Robin Cook, and an IV grant was offered to him for a trip in September 1977. For Cook it must have been
a golden opportunity to get a closer look at US foreign policy and intellectual circles, and he was keen to organise his trip around east–west relations, weapons development and US defence policy, on which he was ‘a well-informed and critical observer’. He was also determined to hear a variety of views on these matters in order to avoid just receiving the official line. The Embassy duly emphasised the need to provide a balanced programme.

Because the most important of these [issues] relate to USG policies and the operation of government, Mr Cook’s program should include more time than usual with senior officials. However, he is particularly anxious also to meet with as many independent experts and representatives of private groups as possible, in order to get a non-governmental view of the questions that concern him ... [I]n a number of critical areas ... Mr Cook aims to look behind the official USG reports and statements that represent most of what an average British MP is able to find out about American policies.11

The airgram added significantly that ‘any tendency, even inadvertent, to limit Mr Cook’s program to official USG contacts would be highly counterproductive’.12 The trip was Cook’s first to the US, and it was a typically packed three weeks. Meetings with State Department officials dominated his agenda in the first week: NATO and Political-Military Affairs, Arms Control and Disarmament, Office of Research and Analysis, and International Security Operations. A particular interest in the functioning and consequences of the Freedom of Information Act got him an appointment with the CIA’s director of Strategic Research. Outside government he made contact with the Center for Defense Information, the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Brookings Institution and the Institute for Policy Studies. Cook was also able to take in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Phoenix and San Francisco for meetings with trade unions, local politicians and other civil society groups.13 No expense was spared to provide Cook with multi-faceted insights into American government, policy-making and proactive civil society. While he had many appointments in the Departments of State and Defense, dissenting viewpoints were also part of his packed schedule. As his IVP Officer remarked to him, ‘at this rate you will be one of the best informed people around as to the strengths and weaknesses of US rationalizations’.14 It is certainly not the case that the trip prevented any further criticism from Cook of US foreign policy. Nevertheless, it did offer him a remarkably in-depth cross-section of the foreign policy-making apparatus and the civil society groups that contribute to and contest it.

From the American perspective, the attitude towards defence policy was the most important issue when considering the Labour Party’s direction. Binns’ successor Richard Melton, political officer in London from 1979 to 1982, had to deal with a pessimistic scenario.

The expectations were that Labour would take control again—probably relatively soon. The last election [1979] had been close ... The basing of Cruise missiles in Europe was coming to a head with the UK being one of the countries in which this would be based [sic]. In order for the program to go forward—and it was one of the cornerstones of the defense
strategy—required a critical mass of European participation with the UK being a pivotal country.

There was some concern in the Embassy that a future Labour government might well withdraw its support for the basing of US intermediate range missiles, under NATO, on British soil. The party remained divided on the issue. There was a strong unilateral and pacifist sentiment among party cadres ... One of my assignments was to make sure that the Labour party understood our position on defense issues, not only to try to explain our policies but also to expose Labour MPs more broadly to defense issues, which can be very intricate and complex.15

The international dimension was a crucial factor in terms of which way Labour policy would go. Cook’s invitation was part of a broader attempt to establish a dialogue with those Labour MPs and officials with knowledge of international affairs and defence issues, the areas of most concern to the Americans. Thomas Cox MP, a left-leaning internationalist, received both a NATO grant in 1976 and an IV grant two years later. Likewise Kevin McNamara MP, also on the left and one-time defence spokesperson during the 1970s, was a participant on the NATO programme (1982) and the IVP (1978). Bruce George MP, an expert on defence and strongly in favour of transatlantic co-operation within a then-sceptical Labour Party, received two NATO tours (1975, 1982) and an IV grant (1976). The International Affairs office of Labour HQ was also the focus of attention. Jennifer Little, the party’s international secretary, went on a NATO information tour in 1974 and, unusually, two IV grants close together, in 1977 and 1982. From the same office, Michael Gapes, an MP since 1992, was the recipient of a NATO tour (1974) and an International Visitor trip (1983). Dianne Hayter, the chief executive of the Labour Party in the European Parliament, was a recipient of an IV grant in 1981.

Labour MPs on the IVP during Melton’s time in London (1979–1982) demonstrate a pragmatic approach to the party’s divisions: Ann Taylor from Labour’s moderate right in 1980, George Foulkes of the Labour left in 1981 and Clive Soley of the moderate left in 1982. But, at that time the party was at war with itself. In the words of David Hill, elections campaign manager in 1992,

in the 1980–83 period everyone was at one another’s throats, and everything was crisis management ... You got the most extraordinary period of conflict with a party that was unmanageable and a party which did not know how to change its ways, how to modernise itself, how to make itself unified (Gould 1999, 36–37).

The 1983 general election debacle shook this situation up, and it was after this that Labour MPs began to appear more regularly on the Embassy’s IV list. In the wake of the anti-nuclear, anti-Europe party manifesto, special efforts were made to make contact with any open-minded Labourites around Westminster, no matter how far they might be down the party hierarchy. Robert Hopper, Melton’s successor as US Embassy Political Officer responsible for liaison with the Labour party from 1982 to 1986, recalls that ‘there was a whole bunch of talented staff people who were disgusted with the party leadership and Walworth Road’, and it was a simple matter to identify and get to know them by inviting them to meetings and other events.
The MPs themselves could then be reached more easily once a good relationship with the staff network had been established. Important Embassy contacts were David Cowling, a public opinion pollster then working with Peter Shore; Richard Clements, then a senior staffer with Michael Foot; Charles Clarke, Neil Kinnock’s political secretary and after 1987 his chief of staff (now home secretary); David Warburton of the GMBATU (General Municipal Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union). The Embassy made contact with Peter Mandelson very soon after he was appointed director of campaigns and communications in October 1985. Due to the dominance of the Celtic fringe in the party at that time efforts were also made to get to know many of the Scottish MPs, including John Smith and George Robertson.

The aim of the US Embassy’s Political Officers in the 1980s was twofold. Firstly, in Hopper’s words, ‘trying to get the Labour Party people to be more internationalist’, meaning Atlanticist. Reaganite foreign policy and the placement of Cruise missiles at Greenham Common and other USAF bases were causing a visceral reaction among the Labour left, which tended to regard the United States as a monolithic imperial power. What the Embassy wanted to bring home to the party was the fact that there was plenty of political dissonance on these issues within the US itself. As Hopper’s successor Jimmy Kolker remarked, ‘we didn’t think they understood what the debate was about in the US’, and there was a great need for Labour ‘to get the US right for it [Labour] to be taken seriously by the British public’. Secondly, and as a means to achieve this first aim, there was a determined drive to connect open-minded Labour MPs with their ‘natural allies’ in the US, the Democratic Party. This was not just official strategy but reflected the actual political leanings of the Embassy officers themselves. Before arriving in London Hopper had worked for a year with Democratic congressman Al Swift in Washington State. Swift, an experienced media anchorman in Seattle, believed that the Democrats had to occupy the moderate middle ground of American politics in order to achieve a breakthrough against the Republicans. Hopper carried this view with him to London, where he ‘consistently looked for people to meet with moderate Democrats’. According to him, this reflected not only the view of his successor as Labour liaison, Jimmy Kolker, but also of his predecessors, Richard Melton and Jack Binns. Melton himself has confirmed the aim to link staff with subject matter:

The embassy was very selective about its staff. It could afford to be. It tried as best it could to match the work to the talents and experiences of the new arrivals. It actively recruited whenever vacancies occurred and tried to find the right person for every upcoming vacancy.

The IVP and Labour in the 1980s: Searching for the Successors

The importance of making contact with the ‘successor generation’ in Western European politics became a major focus for the US public diplomacy drive during the early 1980s. Hans Tuch, then a Public Affairs Counsellor in Bonn, has explained what was meant by this concept:
In the late 1970s and early 1980s, both Americans and Germans concerned with US–German relations began to recognize a problem posed by the gradual passing from positions of power and influence of a generation of Germans and Americans, many of whom had formed a network of human relationships linking the two nations since World War II ... The generation taking their places had no similar formative experiences ... This gap of knowledge and understanding was perceived as posing a danger to the future cohesion of the German–American relationship (Tuch 1990, 152).

Tuch describes how this led the US Embassy in Bonn to concentrate on increasing youth exchanges and promoting American Studies within German secondary and higher education. In 1983, building on Reagan’s International Youth Initiative from May 1982, these schemes were supplemented by the co-funded Congress–Bundestag Youth Exchange Program (Tuch 1990, 152–160, 178–187; Tuch 1988). A meeting of the State Department’s Interagency Working Group on Public Diplomacy in December 1982 discussed ‘programs for gaining greater understanding among the “Successor Generation” in Europe, including not only USG programs but also pressing private groups (e.g. Atlantic Associations) and other governments to put priority on such groups’. In Britain one result of this was the formation of the British-American Project for the Successor Generation, established as a private enterprise in 1985 (good information on the BAP is scarce and the best source remains Easton 1997).

Fostering a more positive Labour stance towards the United States became a kind of talisman for opening up the party to new ideas and thus making it more electable. A key figure in this strategy was Raymond Seitz, from 1984 to 1989 the Deputy Chief of Mission in London and from 1991 to 1994 the first career Foreign Service Officer ever to be awarded the post of Ambassador to the United Kingdom. Seitz says very little in his ambassadorial memoirs on this matter, except to muse about how contact with President Reagan would have progressed had Michael Foot been elected in 1983 or Neil Kinnock in 1987: ‘the likelihood of poor transatlantic relations was one of the reasons neither did’ (Seitz 1998, 324). Seitz was active in encouraging his fellow Embassy officers to seek out the transatlantic links that would open up dialogue with the Labour party. Miles Pendleton, who worked under Seitz as political counsellor from 1985 to 1989, recalls how Seitz had a ‘very refined notion of what an embassy could do to enhance contact across the political spectrum’. Seitz made a point of meeting with MPs or government officials both before and after their trips to the US, in some cases discussing and helping to shape their itineraries. He recalls dining with an effervescent Tony Blair after the latter’s return from his IV trip to the US in 1986, the young MP clearly delighted with the experience. One important aspect of Seitz’s influence had to do with countering the negative effects of Ambassador Charles Price (1983–1989), a Reagan Republican appointee who did not express a positive demeanour towards Neil Kinnock or Labour in general. In this context Seitz was successful in building bridges that Price would neglect, such as with Charles Clarke, in Neil Kinnock’s office. Referring to the Blair-Clinton soirée at Number 10 following New Labour’s 1997 victory, Seitz remarked that ‘the refraction of political light between New...
Democrat and New Labour was unmistakeable’ (Seitz 1998, 322). From his vantage point in Grosvenor Square Seitz had done his best to set this up.

In 1984 the IVP showed the first signs of this approach, with invitations offered to Gordon Brown, Frank Field and Paul Boateng, the latter being then with the GLC but later a Blair ally as an MP after 1987. Brown was Hopper’s candidate, and it is not hard to see why. Seldon has described the majority of the 209 Labour MPs in the Commons after the 1983 election as ‘distinctly unimpressive’. Of the party’s 32 new MPs, Gordon Brown certainly stood out as among the pick of the intake (Seldon 2004, 94–95). Rector at Edinburgh University, Chairman of the Scottish Labour Party and author or editor of three books on devolution and Scottish policy, Brown turned 32 in 1983 and was already well connected in the party hierarchy. A US Embassy airgram from early 1984 described how Brown was ‘already being seen as a leading light among the new members’.

Brown is an articulate, hard working and dedicated MP who is likely to go places within his party ... As Brown has never been to the US the IV Program will give him an ideal opportunity to learn first-hand about the US political system and meet his American counterparts early in his career, which could have immense value to both sides of the Atlantic.23

Brown’s programme in the United States was dominated by three issues: the American political process at federal and state levels, US defence policy, and regional and urban redevelopment schemes. Defence policy and NATO missile deployment were covered by the usual meetings at the Departments of State and Defence. On redevelopment questions, the Embassy was aware that Brown’s constituency of Dunfermline East was suffering from high unemployment and was also deeply involved in the miners’ strike. This was the background to his visit to Pittsburgh to view its urban renewal schemes, and his meetings with union officials (including infamous AFL-CIO International Affairs director Irving Brown). But, the main focus was on the apparatus of the political parties. Brown was interested in the organisation, fundraising, campaigning and the role of political action committees in both major parties. Hopper has since commented that ‘one of the things we concentrated on was getting him connected’. His access to the 1984 Democratic National Convention, which has been noted elsewhere (Naughtie 2002, 215–216), was secured through Hopper’s contacts, as a US embassy telegram confirms: ‘Post political officer will arrange entrance to convention through Democratic National Committee’.24 Brown was definitely fascinated by the United States. While he went back at every opportunity in subsequent years, it was his IV trip that initially opened the door.

Since most IV grants were allotted to candidates from education, the media and cultural pursuits, and due to the political sensitivities of dramatically increasing the quota for Labour MPs, the only real hope lay in identifying early on a future leader who would have the ability and the open-mindedness to take the party in a new direction. Not for nothing has Hopper said that ‘we were very busy with the “successor” thing’, and that he approached every IV nomination with the question: ‘Would it be good if they did succeed?’ In 1984 Brown was a hopeful choice. He was followed on the IV Program the following year by Michael Meacher. Meacher
GILES SCOTT-SMITH

was not a newcomer, having been in parliament since 1970, but by the early 80s he was a prominent figure in the shadow cabinet and a significant ally of Tony Benn. Despite being defeated by Roy Hattersley for the deputy leadership post in 1983, Meacher was still considered by some as a potential future leader. In these circumstances an IV grant was a logical move by the US Embassy to reach out a hand and perhaps soften the edges of Meacher’s critical politics.

It was in 1985 that Tony Blair began to show enough promise for Hopper to recommend a grant. Gaining support from John Smith and deputy leader Roy Hattersley, by 1985 Blair had sat in the party committee examining the government’s Trade Union Bill and was the first of the 1983 intake to have a front-bench position, as deputy opposition Treasury spokesperson. Media exposure came with a valuable appearance on BBC Question Time in May 1985. Blair also came to the attention of Labour communications director Peter Mandelson soon after the latter’s appointment in October that year (Seldon 2004, 97–99). Blair’s nomination was put forward by the US Embassy already in July 1985 when he was identified as ‘one of the brightest and most ambitious of recent Labor intake’.25 The reasons for his nomination were expanded on in January 1986:

Widely respected for his grasp of complex issues, Blair will play a central role in the development of the party’s economic platform, dealing with the contentious subjects of investment, exchange controls and international finance.

At this stage in his career Post recommends that he be brought into contact with major US financial institutions and key-policy-making bodies. Blair has had few contacts with American political counterparts and would benefit from meeting young Democrats. Such contacts will be of long-term benefit and will encourage a continuing dialogue between US politicians/businessmen and a potentially influential young Labor politician.26

Blair’s nomination was accepted three days later, but with a proviso that went against the Embassy’s strategy. Wanting to avoid any hint of political bias, USIA’s Europe desk cabled back that ‘the Program is designed to introduce visitors to a broad range of the political spectrum and to expose them to both conservative and liberal politicians. Post should emphasize in pre-departure briefing that the Program will provide such political balance’.27 The Embassy’s push to connect Labour with the Democrats, now coming out into the open, was going against the ethical principles of balance which the IV Program administrators demanded. That this was occurring under a Republican presidency made it additionally awkward. Blair’s proposed IV schedule for the US therefore duly requested meetings with Republican and Democratic party functionaries. Not surprisingly, the Republican Party ultimately proved less interested in the young British leftist than the Democrats. Meanwhile, Blair’s Washington programme included a full morning with the Democratic National Committee.

Seldon’s analysis of Blair’s 1986 IV trip mentions the interest the young MP had in learning more about American economic and financial policy, a logical move considering his parliamentary position shadowing the Treasury. The Embassy
airgram quoted above confirms how the Americans were keen to stimulate this. It is therefore mistaken to conclude, as Seldon seems to, that the economic aspect of Blair’s trip was less important for either the Embassy or Washington. Hopper has spoken of Blair and Brown that ‘they were interested in business, and if you wanted jobs you had to have business’, clearly indicating the aim to encourage this line of thinking within the Labour Party. International security affairs were also included as a major factor for Blair’s US visit. The possible future direction of the Labour party in this field, as the quotes above have demonstrated, was seen as crucial. This element of his IV visit was standard practice for all British MPs coming through Washington on this Program. What is significant about Blair is how the Americans perceived his stance on this particular issue in 1986: ‘He is described as center-left, is a non-nuclearist, and pragmatic about the EEC’. Seldon has pointed out how Blair’s standpoint on particular issues of major importance was at times difficult to discern in the immediate years after 1983, causing him to be seen by some as more on the left than he actually was (Seldon 2004, 96–97). His membership of CND may have been no more than a badge of convenience in Labour’s leftist atmosphere of the early 1980s, but for the Americans this would have been a serious matter. Since Blair did not appear occupied with international issues it was also a good opportunity to provide him with the US viewpoint on the transatlantic relationship and security questions such as the Strategic Defense Initiative.

In 1993 Blair was still an unknown around Washington political circles, yet his IV tour in 1986 included an engagement at the Cosmos club, one of the prime establishments for the Washington elite. The long-term effects of this trip on Blair, at that time in his career, justify far more reflection than journalist Michael Elliott’s unnecessarily cynical comment that this was ‘one of those “study tours” that are meant to convince you what a Big Country America is’ (Seldon 2004, 120). Soon after his arrival in London to replace Robert Hopper, Jimmy Kolker was assigned by his political counsellor Miles Pendleton to keep in touch with Blair. When the young MP’s parents visited the United States in 1987, it was Kolker who arranged White House tour tickets and entrance into the Congress gallery for them. There is no doubt that this kind of careful attention paid dividends in terms of building a positive relationship.

From 1986 onwards the Embassy stepped up its efforts to link selected Labour members with their Democratic counterparts. Democrats who visited London for whatever reason were set up with meetings with Labour personnel. Under Neil Kinnock there was in general more openness to these kinds of contacts being arranged. Previously there had been something of a stigma around these trips to the United States, associated with the feeling ‘Am I being bought?’. By 1986 the Democratic Party consultant Joe Napolitan had arrived to advise the Labour Party. But, these contacts remained largely unacknowledged and out of sight, a sign that they were still regarded as somehow tainted (Gould 1999, 162).

The IV Program also continued its focus on selected Labour figures while at the same time maintaining its spread of attention over the other parties and over the country at large. Martin O’Neill, the shadow defence spokesperson, was one such individual. A moderate-left supporter of Neil Kinnock, O’Neill played a vital role as shadow defence spokesperson in moving Labour away from unilateralism during 1983–1987. During that period O’Neill benefited from visits to the US on the back
of a conference grant (1985), an IV trip (1986) and a NATO group tour (1987). The emphasis on youth and ‘comers’ is shown by the other political IVs in 1986 alongside Blair. Brian White was already impressing as a councillor in Milton Keynes, 11 years before he became MP for the town (against the odds) in 1997. From the Conservative side went David Willetts, then a rising star in parliament and a member of Thatcher’s Policy Unit, and Liam Fox, at that time only a prospective candidate for the seat of Roxburgh (he was elected in 1992). Key strategists were also on the list: Roger Liddle was an IV grantee in 1986, while he was still with the SDP and director of the Public Policy Center; David Ward, then one of John Smith’s chief advisers and ‘a key contact in the corridors of the Parliamentary Labour Party’, went in 1987.31

The 1987 general election proved to be a major turning point. Labour suffered another defeat, with the Conservative majority slightly reduced. The result was a stronger belief within sections of the party of the need for radical change. In terms of interest in contact with colleagues in the United States, ‘the floodgates opened’.32 Blair and Brown visited the Democratic National Convention (Brown’s second in four years) in Atlanta in the summer of 1988, where they saw Michael Dukakis being nominated as the party’s presidential candidate (Seldon 2004, 120). This was probably worked out via the Democratic Party’s international office, but the Embassy actively encouraged trips of this sort and publicised the necessary information to establish the contacts and credentials. Brown would go to the US alone a year later, once more with the encouragement of the US Embassy.

Significantly, after 1987 IV grants went increasingly to the cabal of modernisers and loyalists that was beginning to gather around Blair and Brown. Two young political allies of Brown were recipients: Douglas Henderson in 1988 (elected 1987) and Nick Brown, then a powerful Labour Party official in the north-east, in 1990. Rising stars such as Keith Vaz and Hilary Armstrong, both elected in 1987, were offered trips to the United States in 1988.33 Moderniser Fraser Kemp, a long-time Labour Party official before being elected in 2001, was a recipient in 1989. The anti-unilateralist, anti-leftist MP John Spellar went in 1990, during the period 1987–1992 when he was out of office. Blair loyalist and current defence secretary John Reid, who was a political adviser to Neil Kinnock before being elected in 1987, was an IV grantee in 1988. The momentum and the targeting of invitations to Labour MPs during this period are very evident. But there was, as always, a certain hedging of bets going on as well. John Smith, widely touted at that time as the man expected to follow Kinnock as party leader, received a second IV grant in late 1987.34

The IVP and Peter Mandelson: The Importance of Election Strategy

Aside from introducing young talent in the Labour party to the United States, there was also the aim to transform the party’s election strategy. Broadly, from Seitz’s perspective, this meant connecting its electability with a positive stance on transatlantic relations. More specifically, it meant linking party strategists with their Democratic counterparts in order to make it more open to new ideas. For this
approach there was one individual who was of special interest: Peter Mandelson. Mandelson had been appointed director of communications for Labour in October 1985, and inherited a shambolic, unco-ordinated public relations apparatus with little idea of how to present the party to the public as an electable force (Gould 1999, 41–45). Mandelson’s experience as a producer with London Weekend Television from 1982 to 1985 had given him important insights into how the media worked, particularly to do with its presentation of politicians (on Mandelson’s impact on the Labour party see Bartle and Griffiths 2001). Yet ‘media savvy’ was not a common commodity in the mid-80s Labour Party, whatever the genuine willingness of Kinnock to modernise. In these conditions it is not surprising that Mandelson focused all his attention on promoting the most appealing young members of the Labour parliamentary group, Blair and Brown. Overlooking other leadership contenders such as Michael Meacher, Mandelson recognised his protégés’ talents and passed as much of the media attention from print, radio and television to them as he could. It was during 1987–1988, before and after the general election, that the contact between the three became solidified (Seldon 2004, 157–159).

If Blair and Brown were to be the future leaders, their respective roles yet to be decided, Mandelson was the key figure in planning their media strategy to succeed. This was recognised immediately by the US Embassy. While Hopper had established contact with Mandelson soon after the latter’s appointment, the Labour man was Kolker’s first lunch appointment after he arrived in London in August 1986. Mandelson was obviously the perfect candidate for an IV grant, but his responsibilities for the 1987 general election prevented him from accepting until 1988. The Americans recognised that Mandelson ‘could change the thinking and the message of the Labour party’, and were keen to assist in any way they could. The US Embassy’s nomination for an IV grant makes this perfectly clear:

Mandelson, Labor’s youthful publicity director, is a key figure on Kinnock’s general election team. He has developed a more sophisticated method of packaging party policies than Labor has ever used by borrowing from the US experience of political presentation to try to project a more modern Labor party. During the last eight months, Mandelson has consistently made himself available to facilitate our discussions with the Labor party on defense and other issues. An international visitor program following the UK general election and in the run-up to the presidential elections will give Mandelson the opportunity to see the US style of campaigning at close quarters. It will also allow the USG to build upon this important contact.

Following Mandelson’s respected handling of Labour’s 1987 election campaign, especially ‘in turning Labor party image from worst on television to most professional’, his reputation began to spread across the Atlantic. In February 1988 the Embassy reported that he was keen ‘to follow up on US interest’, since he ‘has been invited to consult with senior level political strategists and advisors in and out of the Democratic party on the strength of his innovative campaign for Kinnock’. Wanting to make sure that their goals would be met, the Embassy stated further that it ‘would cable names and numbers to provide [IV] program agency with additional leverage for obtaining top-level appointments for Mandelson’.

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Mandelson was in the United States from 22 August to 17 September 1988. His programme was focused entirely on the electoral strategies used in American politics, and his schedule noted that ‘Mr. Mandelson has requested that the principal theme of his visit be maximum exposure to US campaigns and their strategy, the use of media, and principal campaign resources’. He was especially interested in the details of campaigning, such that the ‘opportunity to observe decision-making with his counterparts and campaign strategists would be particularly valuable’. A full working week of appointments around the political networks of Washington followed his arrival: political consultants John P. Sears, Squier/Eskew, Francis, McGinnes & Rees Inc., Hickman-Maslin Research Inc., and Capital Video, *Public Opinion* magazine, the Institute for Policy Studies, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and political correspondents from the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Daily News*. Once again the demands of political balance required a meeting with the Republicans, this time in the form of Franklin L. Lavin, the director of the Office of Political Affairs at the White House. Having fulfilled this protocol visit, contacts with the Democrats, the main aim of the trip, could be arranged at will. Mandelson spent several hours with the Democratic National Committee, meeting the chairman, Paul Kirk, the director of ‘Campaign 88’ Wendy Sherman, and Reed Wilson of the Senate Campaign Committee. Alongside these meetings he also discussed the upcoming Senate campaign with Gina Despres, the general counsel of Senator Bill Bradley. He then went to Boston to meet with staff from the Dukakis campaign headquarters, after which it was expected he would join the presidential candidate on a campaign tour through Massachusetts. By 5 September 1988 Mandelson was in Nebraska, attending the televised debate between Senator David Karnes and his Democrat challenger Bob Kerrey, arranged through Kerrey’s campaign office. Two days later he was in San Francisco, visiting the city’s Dukakis-Bentsen campaign headquarters (an attempt was made to arrange a meeting with the rival Republican headquarters, but it is unclear whether it took place). A last stopover was arranged in New York, with two days of meetings with public relations and media experts such as Victor Gotbaum (Center for Labor Management Policy Studies), Ted Voss (Dukakis campaign advertising consultant), Tony Schwartz (media consultant for Democratic campaigns) and David Garth (political campaign consultant).

Mandelson’s wish that he could be ‘“a fly on the wall” during this year’s campaign activity’ had been met, many times over. This was a barnstorming visit through the American electoral landscape, seen predominantly through the eyes of the Democrats. The IV Program’s New York reception centre noted that ‘although political campaigns are run quite differently in England, the visitor felt sure he’d be able to utilize some of the techniques and reasoning employed on American campaigns back home’. Mandelson returned to prepare and supervise immediately the Labour party conference at the end of September, but in early October he was able to discuss the findings of his US trip personally over dinner with Ambassador Price. It is clear that important bridges across the Atlantic had been built during Mandelson’s trip. Of course, the Dukakis campaign showed exactly how not to run a campaign from the left. In the words of Labour political adviser Philip Gould, ‘they had capitulated to the awesome Republican attack and they had failed to connect to the great American middle class’. Gould visited the US after the 1988
presidential election to hear for himself the views of the Democratic campaigners on their defeat. The need to shift the emphasis of the party to reconnect with the mainstream of American politics was unmistakeable. In 1989 Gould and Mandelson visited the Democratic National Committee together (Gould 1999, 162–163). It may not have been a very successful meeting, but the normalcy of these trips was becoming evident.

On the basis of the evidence presented above, Seldon’s claim that the 1991–1993 period was the phase when US politics had its most concentrated effect on Blair and Brown therefore has to be seen in a much wider context. Labour politicians in general continued to be targeted as a vital focus group for the Embassy as the party’s path to reform seemed gradually to open up. US Embassy records indicate that Blair and Brown went to the United States in December 1991, the trip that was funded by Philip Morris, as IVP ‘Voluntary Visitors’ (VVs). VVs are travellers who pay their own way to the United States but whose costs and arrangements within the US itself are often covered by the Embassy, such that ‘we tried to pay in-country expenses for Labour politicians to prolong their stays in the US and add additional stops’. This can include setting up meetings, ‘opening doors’ and other logistical assistance. Normally the travelling party initiates the request, and the Embassy obviously only agrees if the request comes from a worthwhile source. However, in the case of the December 1991 trip, it was the Embassy which recommended strongly that Blair, Brown and Nick Brown all go to the US prior to the May 1992 general election. Therefore, while Philip Morris covered the travel costs, it is likely that the Embassy contributed to expenses while the group was in the United States. It is worth noting that the US ambassador during 1991–1994 was none other than Ray Seitz. While he was by then far removed from the workings of the IVP, the FSOs under Seitz continued to regard the fostering of transatlantic connections for Blair, Brown and their modernising allies as an imperative.

The December 1991 trip was a watershed for the Embassy’s role as facilitator. In 1992, following Labour’s defeat in May and prior to Clinton’s victory in November, transatlantic contacts increased as Labour MPs and officials crossed to the United States via independent party-to-party connections. Philip Gould’s stint at the Democratic election headquarters is the most high-profile example of a phase when cross-fertilisation between Labour and the Democrats was occurring on many fronts. The ability of the Clinton campaign to move from negative criticism of President Bush to offering a positive message of hope and opportunity was not lost on those who questioned the reasons for the May 1992 defeat. By January 1993, when Blair and Brown once again returned to Washington, the organisation was covered by Jonathan Powell and British ambassador Robin Renwick, who successfully set up meetings with leading Democratic strategists and the likes of Alan Greenspan and Larry Summers. But, the MPs were still relative unknowns. When Blair returned alone in November of the same year his contacts with administration officials relied heavily on the connections of journalist Sidney Blumenthal, who he had met in 1991. However, once Blair became party leader in 1994, he had reached a level of authority and celebrity that no longer required the machinations of public diplomacy to open any doors in the United States. His next trip to Washington in 1996 involved a personal visit to President Clinton in the White House, and the pioneering period of Labour-Democrat transatlantic contacts was
well and truly over. But the basis for this familiarity had been deliberately laid 10 years before.

Conclusion

From the mid-1970s onwards US public diplomacy in the UK developed a specific strategy towards the Labour Party. The drift towards the left and the abandonment of cold war orthodoxy by the party, exemplified by the adoption of unilateralism, caused great concern. The US Embassy appreciated that it was not out of the question that Labour could assume power under a more radical banner. What was at stake was the future direction of the party and the need to realign its international stance with American interests.

Alongside the effort to influence experts in the field of international affairs and defence, a keen eye was always kept on new talent entering the House of Commons after each election. In 1983 the ‘best and the brightest’ among the ‘successor generation’ were undoubtedly Blair and Brown, who the US Embassy soon regarded as the most able candidates to steer their party towards a more sensible course in the future. Commenting on the openness of the two MPs to American influences at a time when much of the party was going in the opposite direction, James Naughtie has remarked that ‘between them Blair and Brown were a pair who found the Americans at the right moment’ (Naughtie 2002, 216). What is closer to the truth is that the Americans found them at the right moment. A series of Foreign Service Officers in the Embassy from the mid-1970s onwards paid close attention to the manoeuvrings of the Labour party and the arrival of new lights on the political scene after every general election. As Blair and Brown were increasingly pushed forward by Mandelson as representatives of a new-look Labour Party in embryo, the Embassy moved with the times and shifted its attention to the modernising MPs and officials gathered around them, including Mandelson himself. By the early 1990s many in the party who were out to reform it along New Democrat lines had benefited from IV trips to the US. Within the space of a decade the United States had moved from being a power treated with suspicion to being the source of fresh, practical and just socioeconomic and political approaches.

Some provisos are in order at this point. The IV Program was but one limited means by which ideas and people criss-crossed the Atlantic during the 1980s and early 1990s. Labour did not change direction purely because of US public diplomacy and the efforts of the US Embassy, and it would be a mistake to give the Embassy too much foresight and determinacy in the events and political trajectories of certain individuals during that period. Nevertheless, the evidence does indicate that a form of ‘strategic public diplomacy’ was being implemented (Manheim 1994, 7). As the USIS Country Plan for the UK for 1978 stated, in among the plethora of transatlantic exchanges already taking place, exchanges like the IVP

perform an indispensable function. They are the only programs we can direct and focus, to ensure an essential level of quality and relevance to US foreign policy goals. The element of relevance applies particularly to the International Visitors Program. 43
Public diplomacy is most successful in securing an impact, both on a personal as well as a party political level, when it engages with trends and opinions that are already in motion. Through subtle management it can lay out a potential path, with no obligations but plenty of benefits, which a recipient can voluntarily choose to accept. This is less the engineering of consent than the creation of the circumstances for its realisation, and it is often highly effective. For those who take part in the IVP, the impact is as much psychological as material.

Firstly, it has to do with the political access it provides in the United States. Robin Cook, Gordon Brown, Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson were all young politicians with little or no professional network in the United States to make use of at the time of their visits, and they all were given top-level appointments in Washington and elsewhere. This is especially relevant for Blair, who was still not being taken as seriously as he should have been in American government circles in 1993.

Secondly, as the Program offered a visit of a few weeks it could open up a much deeper and broader channel for developing contacts and exchanging ideas than would normally be available to political visitors. The list of appointments arranged for Mandelson’s IV Program, covering the Democratic apparatus at federal, state and city levels, is the best example of this. Without the IV grant Mandelson would not have had the funds or made the time to put together such an extensive trip.

Thirdly, the US Embassy was able via the IVP to communicate to these MPs that they were individuals of some importance and talent. This will have contributed to their sense of self-worth, an important factor for leadership. Power is an attractive commodity in politics and the United States can trade on this more than any other nation.

Fourthly, it is best to see the Program as a primer which, if it functions as intended, will attract and encourage further contact with the United States in the future. This can have a powerful effect with younger professionals who then get to realise what the US has to offer them in the long run. Tony Blair would fit into this category. His 1986 IV trip opened up the United States to him in an impressive but undefinable way. Later, on return visits, he sought out the specific areas of expertise and policy which he wanted to explore further. But, it was the 1986 trip that ‘normalised’ the United States and provided him with an indication of the opportunity available. A similar claim can be made for Margaret Thatcher, a young politician in Heath's shadow cabinet at the time of her IV trip (her first visit to the United States) in 1967 (Scott-Smith 2003).

Fifthly, since each visit is based around intensive human contact, it often creates a powerful sense of visitor and hosts being on the same side, if not on a policy level then at least on a personal level. This factor is important when considering those visitors from the left side of the political spectrum who were otherwise critical of US policies.

Sixthly, the Program helps to perpetuate ‘American exceptionalism’ and the notion that the United States remains at the forefront of social, cultural and political change (Lipset 1996; Madsen 1998). The young Labour modernisers recognised
that the transformations occurring within the Democratic party were highly relevant at a time when Labour was itself struggling to create a new identity. The United States became a source for finding successful paths to reform. The US Embassy played an important behind-the-scenes role in promoting this scenario.

In short, it is not a question of whether the IVP has a benign or malign impact on the political culture of a particular country in a particular period. The answer to that is generally decided by one’s political preferences. The most important issue from an international relations perspective is the subtlety of the power relations according to which the Program operates. Before these are appreciated, no full understanding of the impact and importance of the IV Program and similar efforts in public diplomacy can be obtained. This is the challenge for future research. As one astute observer has put it, ‘the Americans are at their most effective when they stand back and simply plant the seeds of their distinctive Enlightenment ideology, water them and watch them grow’ (Pendry 2004).

About the Author

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Notes

4. Although between 1978 and 1982 USIA was termed the United States International Communication Agency, for consistency it will always be referred to here as USIA.
6. FOIA request.

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12. ‘FY-77 IV Robin Cook, Programming Information’.


18. Hopper, telephone interview.

19. Melton, ADST. Other Foreign Service Officers take a more circumspect view of being able to control the staffing process: ‘In weighing in on possible candidates for individual positions, we at the Embassy tried to find good fits for specific openings and support their candidacies ... What I am suggesting is that, while we had particularly strong officers following the individual parties, our ability to control the process was somewhat more limited than you might think. That said, we were particularly fortunate in the string of officers who were assigned the day-to-day lead in interacting with the Labor Party and the TUC over a relatively long period of time.’ Miles Pendleton, correspondence, 26 January 2005.

20. ‘Report on 12/2 Meeting’, 7 December 1982, Declassified Documents Reference System. This greater focus on youth was evident in the IVP already in the late 1970s. In 1978 35 per cent of participants from Western Europe were in their thirties and 19 per cent were in their twenties. In 1970 the respective figures were 12 and 1 per cent. The International Visitor Program: A Review, Directorate for Educational and Cultural Affairs, USICA, 1981.


26. US Embassy London to USIA Washington DC, 8 January 1986, MH.


29. US Embassy London to USIA Washington DC, 29 January 1986, MH.

30. Kolker, interview; Pendleton, interview.


32. Kolker, interview.

33. Armstrong, Henderson and Vaz were part of a small group of newly elected MPs who were offered an IV Program to match them with a congressional counterpart in the US. Once again, the demands of political propriety required that Republican participants also be included, leading to the unfortunate (and unsuccessful) pairing of Armstrong with a right-wing Republican congresswoman from Nevada.

34. In his biography McSmith (1994, 182) mentions only that Smith was in the United States in late 1987, with no mention of why he was there or what he was doing. The new biography by Mark Stuart, John Smith: A Life (2005), makes no mention of Smith’s 1987 trip at all.

35. Kolker, interview.

36. ‘FY-88 IV Nomination—Peter Mandelson’, 8 June 1987, MH.

37. US Embassy London to USIA Washington DC, 4 August 1988, MH.

38. US Embassy London to USIA Washington DC, 2 February 1988, MH.

39. ‘United States Program: Mr. Peter Mandelson, Campaign Director, Labor Party’, MH.

40. US Embassy London to USIA Washington DC, 2 February 1988, MH.
41. ‘Sponsor’s Report on Visitor: Mr Peter Mandelson’, NYC Reception Center, 3 October 1988; Mandelson to Nancy Buttermark (IV programming officer), 12 October 1988, MH.

42. Kolker, correspondence, 23 February 2005.

43. ‘Country Plan Proposal FY78—CU Portion’, USIS London, 4 May 1977, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Historical Collection, MC 468, Box 14, Folder 9, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

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