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NICK DANZIGER HAS PHOTOGRAPHED WORLD LEADERS AT CAMP DAVID AND ABANDONED CHILDREN IN KABUL. NOW HE IS USING HIS E-400 TO CAPTURE THE FINAL DAYS OF TONY BLAIR'S PREMIERSHIP. **NICK BLACKMORE** TALKS TO HIM ABOUT POWER, CELEBRITY AND HOPE

Silent witness

Blair returns to 10 Downing Street via The Mall, following his Middle East tour through Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Israel and the occupied territories, and the UAE, December 20, 2006

A working weekend can mean a variety of things depending on your vocation. For shop assistants it can mean a day of familiar chores. For business travellers it can signify a degree of personal inconvenience that is alleviated by the perks of a company credit card. But if you were to spend Saturday and Sunday with a photojournalist it could present a door into another world. During the course of my interview with Nick Danziger, I discover that

he spent his weekend in Iraq, a fact that he mentions as casually as if he had paid an inconsequential visit to a relative in a sleepy suburb.

There is no false modesty behind this statement. For a start, Nick was "hitching around Europe and sneaking on to planes" from the age of 13, and can therefore be forgiven for being a little blasé, even about visiting a country that makes global headlines on a daily basis. But he is also a man who displays a genuine lack of hubris about his

work. This is not a moral or artistic affectation, but a necessity born of the kind of photojournalism he practices. He is self-effacing in the literal sense of wanting to remove his presence as much as possible from the world of his subject – he tells me about his fortnight spent in Afghanistan photographing Hamid Karzai, the country's President. Every morning, whether in the presence of a minister or a foreign dignitary, President Karzai would greet Nick with a cheery "How are you, Mr Danziger? Have you

had some breakfast?" This kind of personal chitchat is anathema to Nick, whose aim with his subjects is always to "try desperately hard for them to not notice I'm around".

When he saw President Karzai next, Nick was in 10 Downing Street, but he was following a different subject around the building. This was the man that he would later follow on a surprise visit to British troops in Iraq during that May weekend. Nick's subject was Tony Blair: still Britain's Prime Minister at the time of going to press, a position he



From left: Kim Darroch (EU advisor to the Prime Minister), Tom Kelly (Prime Minister's official spokesman), Caroline Wilson (private secretary), Justin Forsyth (special advisor on foreign policy), James Roscoe (press officer), Tony Blair, David Hill (Director of communications), February 13, 2007



Blair flies low over Baghdad visiting the Iraqi Prime Minister and President during his tour of the Middle East, December 17, 2006



Blair chatting with Prince Andrew at a private party in Davos, January 2007. Bono, also pictured, was the host



At the end of the Monday morning Foreign Policy Unit meeting, Tony Blair is told that three British soldiers have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, January 15, 2007



Blair and Bill Gates being interviewed in Davos hotel room



OLYMPUS USER MEETS... NICK DANZIGER

Blair walks with a group of youngsters from West Conforth's medical practise to 'No 66', a drop-in centre for Ferryhill's young people, in his home constituency of Sedgfield in County Durham, North-East England, February 2, 2007

has held for more than a decade.

How Nick came to be photographing Tony Blair's final days in power is a study in persistence: at the end of a day spent getting shots for a magazine feature on Blair's 50th birthday, Nick called Downing Street to ask if he could come back for another day's work. "They said, 'Haven't you got everything you wanted?'" Nick recalls. "I said 'What's happening tomorrow?'" A cabinet meeting and a call to Yassar Arafat were to be high on the order of business, he was told. Nick immediately asked for permission to return the next day and this negotiating process was repeated for a total of 30 days.

The resulting material formed the basis of 'Blair at War', a fascinating series of black and white images documenting the Prime Minister's often lonely journey toward the invasion of Iraq. Meetings with President

Bush, backbench rebellions, and backstage arguments with Jack Chirac – all are revealed in stark detail. Now, two years after photographing the premier during his successful 2005 election campaign, Nick is on the verge of completing a project called 'The final days of Tony Blair' – a succession of colour images that allow a wider view of the Prime Minister's activities during his last months in power. They present a very different narrative to the sombre chapter that was 'Blair at War'.

What is striking about these images is that they are more *West Wing* than *Yes, Minister* – as Nick points out, the modern politician is seen as both celebrity and CEO; an itinerant, multi-tasking, occasionally even glamorous figurehead. For the British Prime Minister, wielding power and negotiating priorities on a global level now means not only engaging

with other international leaders, but also mixing with self-styled diplomats and celebrity statesmen from the worlds of business and entertainment.

Nick is ambiguous about the effect that this has on the images he has produced. Looking through them, there is a persistent thrill that comes with the feeling that you are the 'fly on the wall' in the corridors of power – seeing Blair share a joke with Bill Gates, a man whose personal wealth exceeds that of some countries – can overwhelm any other objective reaction to the work.

One shot in particular sums up this quandary – it is an intimate, crowded image taken from a private party in Davos, Switzerland. In the background, Blair and Prince Andrew appear to be in relaxed conversation, drinks in hand, while in the foreground Bono has turned his attention away, his eyes covered (even

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indoors) by his trademark sunglasses. Nick does not have much affection for the shot and an assistant was dismayed when a photo agency sent it to *Newsweek* as part of the 'final days of Blair' editorial. For him, the only real virtue of the image is that it depicts a moment in which three very famous people from different spheres of public life were within a metre of each other. Other than that he feels the image is poorly composed – anonymous revellers crowd in to the right-hand side of the shot – while the harsh flash photography means the eye is left wandering in search of some kind of structure. It is that rare thing in Nick's work: a guilty pleasure. The viewer is able to stargaze for the sake of it.

The majority of Nick's oeuvre could not be further from the transient joys of celebrity spotting. His work has taken him across the globe to photograph some of the most

marginalised people in society: "It's indescribable," he says, "the desperate nature of what one comes across." Many people will be surprised to discover that this statement refers in part to his work in the UK – for his book *Danziger's Britain*, he lived with the homeless and unemployed, constantly aware of an "unbridgeable gap" between the life he was able to return to and the lives of his subjects.

Having mingled with those most able to change the world and those most in need of change, one might expect Nick to have become jaded about what can be achieved in lifting people out of poverty, war and disease, but this is not the case. "I went to the World Economic Forum in Davos and that made me more of an optimist in the belief that people can do a lot to change the world," he reveals. "Everyone can do



Blair on board a Royal Navy Merlin helicopter making last-minute changes to a speech on defence and strategy

something but some can do more than others.” His real heroes, he says, are not the world leaders he has profiled, but the individuals who he has met “in distant and dire circumstances”.

It is clear that this work has left Nick with no illusions about the limited power of art when compared to that of practical aid: at one point I describe his images of Rwandan genocide victims as being ‘a testament’ to what the subjects have suffered. “Well, hopefully,” Nick replies, before pointing out, “that’s not much good to them.”

Such an opportunity to see both sides of the story has been available to Nick in another, equally profound sense. Asked to pick his favourite image from his work on Blair, he selects one on the basis of personal experience rather than artistic quality. He chooses the image because it was taken while he and the premier were flying over Baghdad in late 2006. In the information age it is difficult to really get a palpable sense of the cause and effect involved in a decision like going to Iraq – for most people, Britain’s action in the conflict exists only as a televised event that has, at best, a remote impact on their lives. Nick was able to see the exact consequence of the preparations he had witnessed in the the preceding years, what he calls “the other side of the war”.

Whether he is photographing the impoverished or the empowered, Nick’s attitude to composition is the same – everyone is treated as an individual and no one is asked to pose. “Because I’m doing reportage I don’t want to manipulate situations or the images,” he says. In contrast to the media-savvy Blair often perceived by the public, Nick observed that the Prime Minister shared this disdain for posing. Instead Nick worked quietly and unobtrusively to get the shots he needed, even the profile images, a fact that led Blair to comment to one of his press advisors that “Nick is dangerous because I forget he’s around.” This fact, which Nick takes as the highest complement, is due in large part to his equipment. “People notice immediately that I’m not



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Ayaz, an Indian boy who works 10-hour shifts for 10 rupees per day to support his HIV+ mother and younger brother. His father died of AIDS

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carrying the usual photojournalist’s long lens,” he explains. “I work with old Olympus cameras – traditional SLRs and now the E-400 because it’s so small.” His choice of equipment has even become a talking point among his subjects. “Jack Straw and Colin Powell had a good natter about my camera with me when we were at Hillsborough Castle,” he remembers.

That his choice of camera allows him to

appear unthreatening is an advantage for Nick, as is the fact that he has learned to remain level-headed in the face of historic events. “When you realise that there is an incredibly important meeting going on – Bush and Blair are talking about the war as it is unravelling – you realise that you really are at the centre of power. There’s no good thinking about it, you just have to document it.” As one would expect, Nick is expected to use his eyes but not his ears during such occurrences. “I get access to meetings where, in a sense, I’m deaf,” he points out. “The only way for me to be present is to make sure that what I hear isn’t repeated.”

Nick is open-minded about following Blair into his next job or his successor, Gordon Brown, into 10 Downing Street. Aside from that he remains eager to carry on with his work following eight individuals as their lives are improved (or not) by the UN’s Millenium Development Goals. This kind of editorial is more difficult to sell than his work on Tony Blair, but in Nick’s eyes it is no less important – for him, these are stories that should not fall on deaf ears.