

Britain at War

From The Falklands to Iraq

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On 12 January 2006 he received the Chesney Gold Medal, RUSI's highest honour, which recognizes an exceptional, lifelong contribution in the defence and international security fields, to the benefit of the United Kingdom and/or the broader Western Alliance.

The day after I took up the Chair of War Studies at King's College London, 1 April 1982, Britain was at war with Argentina. I soon felt that I had been offered the Chair under false pretences. I knew a lot about defence policy and nuclear deterrence theory; I knew next to nothing about war. For the whole country the Falklands conflict was a steep learning curve in contemporary crisis management and warfare. Instead of helping with the teaching, I was among the learners. It was because of the Falklands that I realized that I had to make some effort to understand conventional warfare. Watching this particular conflict and then studying it closely has helped me to do so.

During the 1960s there had been Malaysia and Aden, but these came under the low-intensity heading, while the continuing 'troubles' in Northern Ireland were support to the civil power. For a proper war, or at least an attempt at a proper war, one had to go back to the 1950s – Korea and then Suez. The experience of the Anglo-French intervention and the humiliating withdrawal from Egypt coloured attitudes to the use of military force for the next quarter century, in fact until the Falklands.

There was what might be called a Suez syndrome. This was different from the Vietnam syndrome in that it resulted from a short, sharp and rapidly curtailed action rather than a prolonged campaign, and withdrawal was the result of American pressure rather than mounting casualties combined with a sense of futility. Yet the long-term political impact was as profound. It damaged the reputation of the military, demonstrated dramatically Britain's reduced capacity as a major power, for

the Americans had an apparent veto over its ability to act independently, and warned generally of the speed with which the country could find itself isolated if it started to give a hint of bellicosity.

The Falklands War

It was not surprising that Suez was the reference point when contemplating military operations in the South Atlantic. One military planner observed in 1981 that retaking the Falklands would be a 'practical nonsense, besides which Suez would look sensible'. When Sir John Nott as Defence Secretary heard the First Sea Lord promise that the fleet could sail within days he could only think back to watching Suez as a Gurkha officer when the fleet seemed unable to get itself ready in months.

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Terry Lewin, Chief of Defence Staff, had been in command of a destroyer in 1956, stuck in Malta, and was determined this time that the politicians would give the military clear objectives (which he actually wrote himself). The worry about the tolerance of international opinion for any show of strength was reflected in early assessments which worried about the consequences of the first shots fired in anger. The international community, it seemed, might be expected to support the use of force to support national

interests, but they would just draw the line at actual violence.

The Americans were aware that abandoning Britain in 1956, when it was in the wrong, had left a lingering resentment in the Tory party, which would be severely aggravated if it abandoned it again in 1982, when Britain was largely in the right. As Haig set in motion his doomed effort at mediation, he sought to reassure the doubtful British that there 'cannot be another Suez'.

In some respects, when it was all over, one lesson of the Falklands was that the Americans could still not be relied upon to back Britain when it took independent action. For the Prime Minister the matter was straightforward: America's closest ally, a democracy, was the aggrieved party; Argentina, a new acquaintance and a military dictatorship, was the aggressor. She was staggered that the Americans even hesitated before backing Britain and progressively exasperated at their efforts to mediate in such a way that was bound to leave the aggressor better off as a result of illegal action. She was astonished to be asked to help save President Galtieri's 'face', not her highest priority, lest a humiliated Argentina, or an emotional Latin American public, embrace the Soviet Union and Cuba in their anger at the latest example of imperialist perfidy. Thatcher, whose Cold War credentials were not in doubt, always found these scenarios incredible.

In his first session with Thatcher, Haig warned that:

In the final analysis once engagement starts it will become an increasingly difficult burden to protect principle. People will begin to ask difficult questions like why are they making such a sacrifice for a thousand sheep herders. U.S. opinion now supports the principled position Britain has taken but we cannot be sure it will last too long if the issue is not settled.

The British transcript adds a reference to Vietnam. Though at this time Ronald Reagan was widely considered by Europeans to be reckless and irresponsible, here it was his

Administration warning the British of the dangers of diplomatic isolation if they pushed forward with military action when a peaceful settlement was available.

Anglo-American relations were saved by the fact that when it came to the crunch the Administration did come down on Britain's side, although they never stopped angling for concessions and magnanimity (a word the Prime Minister found increasingly irritating). More importantly from the start the Pentagon and the intelligence

came to the crunch, British forces were rather good – far better than many supposed at a time when practically every other traditional British institution had acquired a threadbare and struggling image. It was evident without the rush of revelations that followed the war's successful conclusion that there had been the full quota of the spats among the senior commanders, operational cock-ups and confusions, common to all wars. If the task force had been obliged to limp home, not



Royal Marines, safely returned to Bagram airfield, Afghanistan, during Operation Snipe, May 2002.

community conducted their own and far more pro-British foreign policy, in the guise of carrying on business as usual. Extraordinary efforts were made to keep Britain supplied with intelligence, materiel and weaponry. Caspar Weinberger, who got an honorary knighthood for his support, concluded that the Atlantic Alliance would be damaged immeasurably if Britain was defeated and that his department must do its utmost to ensure that this did not happen.

The most important military lesson from this conflict was that when it

only depleted but with the Malvinas firmly in Argentine hands, then all this would have provided plenty of scope for later recriminations. Yet the British had won through superior training and tactics, as much as superior equipment, as well as superior nerve – at all levels from the Prime Minister right through the command structure. The journalists with the task force, the majority of whom had no previous war experience, suddenly appreciated that the military was not populated by upper-class twits (at least not many), but professional and brave men, with strong internal bonds of

solidarity. The military had re-established itself as a reliable and respected instrument of national policy.

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The timing was also significant. This was a crucial moment in transmitting from a generation of senior officers, notably Lewin, who had fought in the Second World War, a view of the responsibility of the Armed Forces in the service of their country. Simply put, it was that the test of success lay in whether the objectives set by the Government – the mission – had been achieved and not the level of sacrifice. If the Government was unprepared for sacrifices and could not justify them to the public then they should not send men into battle. The military must certainly seek to keep the sacrifices to a minimum – but not at the expense of the mission.

There were of course other issues, particularly about the vulnerability of ships at sea to Exocet missiles, land-based air and nuclear submarines. Most of the land battles underscored the importance of a theory that has recently been developed at great length by Stephen Biddle, namely the key to victory often lies in comparative advantages in bringing down sustained firepower on enemy positions, despite their best efforts to protect themselves through mobility, camouflage or digging in.

The political lessons were more complex. Public opinion was robust throughout the campaign. A quarter were never reconciled to the need to use force to retrieve such a doubtful strategic asset; almost as many were nervous that the Government would not be tough enough (a viewpoint well represented among the Government's own backbenchers). In general, national support remained robust, even as the conflict acquired tragic elements in the early days of May, when it could no longer be treated by the media as another form of sporting spectacle. A

weak compromise presented the biggest domestic political danger to the Government; hard military action the biggest international danger. The staunchest support was provided by Commonwealth, small Third World countries with their own neighbourhood predators, and France, which could imagine itself in the same predicament. Most Western states gave the impression of deep unease, even when giving official support. It was not only attitudes in Washington that raised questions about the dependability of allies. Even though (as most agreed) Britain was acting as the aggrieved party, deep reserves of national resourcefulness were needed to see the conflict through to its conclusion. This resourcefulness involved presentational and diplomatic skills, exemplified by Tony Parsons at the United Nations. That elusive quality of legitimacy was always at risk. Irrespective of the legal position, it was always necessary to demonstrate that force was not being unreasonably employed.

Legally, the position was not too difficult. Article 51 of the UN Charter allowed for the inherent right of self-defence. The more complicated legal arguments surrounding the 2003 Iraq War have rather obscured the simple virtues of Article 51 as a catch-all rationale for military action, even at a stretch in anticipation of an enemy attack. It meant that legal cover did not require constant reference to the vagaries of Security Council politics to achieve further sponsorship for military operation and allowed those who could claim to be acting under its aegis ample freedom of manoeuvre, limited only by due reference to the Geneva conventions.

The Iraq War 1991

This was one lesson Margaret Thatcher learned. Her instincts were to rely solely on Article 51 following the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait on 1 August 1990, in this case in support of the recognized government of Kuwait's exercise of those rights. President George Bush Senior's readiness to go back to the Security Council to get authorization for each escalation, largely to ensure President Gorbachev's

support, made her nervous that in the process he might compromise over essentials. It was in the context of the first debate over the military enforcement of the blockade of Iraq that she issued her famous injunction to the president that it was 'no time to wobble, George' (which I always imagine her saying in a Joyce Grenfell sort of way). Note, too, here the presumption was that when it came to the crunch the British were less likely to bottle-out than the Americans.

The fear of an American loss of nerve at delicate stages of international crises remained a powerful factor in British policy-making. Given the rather small contribution Britain would be able to make to the liberation of Kuwait, a campaign that would bear absolutely no resemblance to the liberation of the Falklands, the Government's estimate of the size and character of the necessary contribution was almost entirely geared to the requirements of getting an entrée into American decision-making at the highest political and operational levels. Arguably, this has long been a guiding principle of British policy-making in defence and military policy, taking in Korea and nuclear deterrence, as well as such examples as the 100 men sent to participate in the Beirut multinational force in 1982-84.

By the time that the Gulf War was being fought, John Major was in charge. It is an interesting question as to whether Thatcher would have argued harder against the abrupt decision to conclude the land war after 100 hours, which was largely taken because of the unfavourable impression being given by the 'turkey shoot' in the Mitla pass. The demands of legitimacy, but also geopolitical prudence, had narrowed the war aims to the liberation of Kuwait and not Iraq, but not enough was done to leave Saddam's regime vulnerable to internal discontent. Certainly it was Thatcher who was to the fore in wondering, after the war, why more was not being done to care for Iraqi Kurds after their insurrection was brutally suppressed. While John Major was behind Thatcher, he was before Bush in arguing for a response.

War in the Former Yugoslavia

It was the 'safe havens' policy for the Kurds in northern Iraq rather than Desert Storm that set the pattern for the military operations of the 1990s. Soon civil war was raging in Croatia and then in Bosnia. While the British were hardly enthusiastic in their interventions in these wars, and took time to grasp their ferocity, they were again ahead of the Americans. In 1991 and 1992, Bush Senior was happy to hear European voices saying that the former Yugoslavia was their problem and they could deal with it without American help.

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Unfortunately they couldn't. By the time president Clinton came along the situation was desperate. The arguments over Bosnia in the first months of 1993 revealed once again that, despite the special relationship, the United States and the United Kingdom could take quite different approaches to conflict. Clinton was as supportive of the Muslim cause as he was reluctant to put US troops in harm's way on its behalf. The American proposal for lift and strike – lifting the arms embargo and mounting air strikes in support of anti-Serb forces on the ground – appeared to the British to show a reckless disregard for the vulnerability of their forces who, with other national contingents, were configured as a standard peacekeeping force and would be dangerously exposed if the Serbs took against them and decided to retaliate for air strikes.

It was actually the Americans rather than the British who felt their approach vindicated by the 1995 Dayton Accord which brought a sort of solution. This was achieved by a combination of a thrust on the ground by anti-Serb forces and sharper air strikes. The British by this time had come to accept that the conflict was

well beyond any normal UN mission and that their forces, with their European allies, needed to be able to defend themselves and exercise a coercive effect. Through Bosnia, the British learned the need to accept that humanitarian interventions were as likely to have more in common with old-style counter-insurgency operations than classical UN peacekeeping. This new approach was reflected in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, which developed the idea of the Armed Forces as a 'force for good'. The implication of this and the whole line of policy during Tony Blair's first term, was that there was now less need than ever before to prepare for a major inter-state war, but more need to prepare for getting involved in nasty and possibly long-lasting entanglements in civil wars. The Americans were far more reluctant to come to this conclusion, so in Kosovo in 1999 President Clinton resisted publicly Blair's pressure to add a land component to an air component that was making no apparent difference to the ability of Serb paramilitaries to engage in ethnic cleansing against the Kosovo Albanians. Over this period, casualty aversion was the most striking driver of American policy leading to almost total reliance on air power, not only in Kosovo but also in the August 1998 responses to the Al-Qa'ida attacks on the US embassies in East Africa, and the December 1998 series of strikes against Iraq for refusing to allow UN inspectors in. It was the painful realization that, even when faced with instability within their own continent, European countries had a remarkably limited capacity to act without the US, even if they wanted to, which led Blair to take seriously the possibility of developing a distinctive European defence entity.

So if one was looking at the period leading up to 11 September 2001, the obvious conclusion was that the British were more militant in their interventionism than the Americans. The US did not see the role of their forces as doing good; they saw them as defending America and preparing for proper, regular wars. Employment in lesser activities would put them at risk. The

generals wanted to keep well clear of irregular wars or 'constabulary duties'. Madeline Albright, when Ambassador to the UN and an advocate of intervention, famously asked Colin Powell (as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff): 'What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?' When obliged to get involved, the first priority was to keep casualties to an absolute minimum.

If they must get involved then their troops should not get hurt. The story is told of the commanders of adjacent British and American sectors meeting in Kosovo. The British commander is reported to have said that 'we have a problem. You tell me that your first priority is to protect your own forces; my orders are to protect the local people.'

Over this period American strategic thinking was preoccupied with a revolution in military affairs that would involve effortless, almost cost-free victory. Even terrorists were supposed to be excited by the information revolution and plotting attacks using viruses, worms and Trojan horses in order to cause chaos in vital infrastructure. At the start of the presidency of Bush Junior, the likely American disinterest in the troubled parts of the world was considered to be a much greater danger than reckless intervention.

9/11 and the Iraq War 2003

I mention all this because it is the prologue to more recent events. The debate now is about how Prime Minister Tony Blair allowed himself to be dragged into a foolish war out of a misplaced sense of a special relationship. What I am seeking to establish is that prior to 9/11 it was a reasonable assumption that Blair's task during the Bush years would be to find ways of encouraging the Americans to get involved. The British attitude to the use of armed force was more confident and assertive, as exemplified by Sierra Leone. After that successful operation, Blair observed in his Lord Mayor's speech of 2000:

On Sierra Leone there were those who said: what's it got to do with us? But I am sure Britain's and Europe's long-term interests in Africa are best served, if we intervene, not excessively, but to



do what we can to save African nations from barbarism and dictatorship and be proud of it. And talking of pride, there can be no better advertisement for this country's values, spirit and professionalism than our Armed Forces.

He concluded insisting that the true patriot these days

is not the person who pulls up the drawbridge and sits in his tower musing on the errors of the world; but the person who recognises that today no drawbridge makes a nation safe and that we are better out in the world, fighting for what we believe in; that tough choices over how to act are a better way of life than the soothing illusions of inactivity.

If contemporary wars were wars of choice then the British were likely to choose one way and the Americans the other. 9/11 gave Blair an even greater sense of conviction that he was on the right lines. His whole approach was to persuade the Americans that they must not see the problem in terms narrowly as retribution and the elimination of Al-Qa'ida as an effective entity, but must instead be prepared to address the collection of problems bound up with failed states, social cleavages and unresolved and deadly quarrels that provided the backdrop to the rise of Jihadist groups. Blair was a willing participant in Afghanistan operations, in a hurry to get ground forces established in the country to get involved in what are now called 'stability operations' – taking over Bagram air base in November 2001 to the irritation of the local warlords and the surprise of the Americans. The Americans were still into chasing Osama bin Laden and the terrorists while the British were already starting to prepare for nation-building, a role which the Americans had yet to embrace. Even in their chase for Osama, the Americans preferred to use local forces, a stance which worked fine while the Northern Alliance was also pursuing its own objective, but less well when they had no better reason than the Americans for entering the caves of Tora Bora.

The point I am seeking to establish here is that the contemporary caricature of Blair as Bush's poodle in agreeing to go to war against Iraq in 2003 does not work. He was already an established activist and, in his lights, a successful one. In his first term he had seen British forces get Kosovar Albanians back to their homes, rescue Sierra Leone from complete collapse and, under Australian leadership, help pacify East Timor. In Afghanistan, British special forces were active, if unreported, and the Government rushed to get stuck in to nation-building – far more so than the Americans, who took a long time to realize that they could not duck this task. As far as Saddam Hussein was concerned, Blair had no compunction in joining in air strikes against Iraq in December 1998, and if Clinton had been willing, I have no reason to suppose that Blair would not have supported ground action.

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This is not the time to go into the origins of the war, but I do want to address the question of the common charge against Blair that he failed to extract a price from Bush for his support for military action. First, as noted, he was not an unwilling participant. Second, stepping up the pressure on Iraq during 2002 was wholly consistent with the policy followed since 1997, which presumed, correctly, that Iraq was in violation of UN resolutions but, incorrectly, that it had stocks of weapons of mass destruction. Leaving aside questions of dodgy dossiers and the exaggeration of intelligence, there is no doubt that some Iraqi chemical and possibly biological stocks were assumed, and were even allowed to influence military planning. Third, Blair did exercise influence – in cahoots with Colin Powell he persuaded Bush, against the wishes of Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Cheney, to take the problem to the Security Council to give any action

more legitimacy. And he also persuaded the President to take some initiatives on the Palestinian-Israeli dispute to blunt criticism that the allies no longer cared.

Blair's problem, and this is my fourth point, was that the first of these moves may have made the problem worse and the second fizzled out, because the time was simply not ripe for a new Middle Eastern initiative. If France had stayed as engaged as it had been in framing resolution 1442 in November 2002 and if the assumption on which US-British policy was based, that Saddam really did have something to hide, had been valid, then getting the problem into the UN would have been a diplomatic masterstroke. Because the assumption was in error then the process created new doubts among the war's potential supporters, undermined the case for early action and provided a focal point for diplomatic grandstanding. The problem was that Bush accepted that the UN was necessary for presentational purposes but did not expect it to solve the Saddam problem. The last-minute compromises being canvassed by Blair to get a second resolution might have succeeded if they had been part of the earlier proposals. In the end, Blair's whole diplomatic strategy unravelled before him and he had to decide whether to support the French or the Americans, a decision he did not find difficult.

My fifth point is that there was a more fundamental problem which was not a matter of influence but a matter of world view. In key respects, Blair's vision was quite different from Bush's, and many of the later problems came from this difference being fudged. Unlike the Americans, the British did not really see Iraq as part of the War on Terror because they did not accept that Saddam had much connection with Al-Qa'ida, let alone responsibility for 9/11. They had no other security reason to justify action other than illicit weapons programmes. Unlike the Americans they thought the post-war situation could be difficult and that this should be addressed in planning. Here Christopher Meyer has recently criticized the Government for not putting more pressure on the Americans to plan more carefully for the day after.

Now, in the light of the last two years, the failure to prepare for a vicious insurgency and so to realize the dreams of a more civilized, democratic Iraq stands out as the most catastrophic misjudgement in a quite stunning set. Having participated in some pre-war debates on the post-war problems, I am not sure that even those innately suspicious of the exiles' fantasies about a happy populace cheering the liberating troops expected things to be this bad. In retrospect, as with so much else in this sorry story, the problems lie in the Pentagon's very clear agenda, which included a determination to control the whole operation, which meant taking over the post-war planning portfolio weeks before the start of hostilities and then making a point of tearing up all the hard work undertaken by the State Department over the previous year. In addition, they refused to accept the need for vastly higher troop numbers, to provide the necessary capacity for pacification. To do so would have left them unable to show just how superior America's conventional military capabilities really were, enabling them to occupy a whole country with three divisions. Lastly, so long as there was still a possibility of a diplomatic outcome, and even when this was no more than a pretence, there was reluctance to make any conspicuous preparations for Iraq's future lest that suggest that the UN process was already being discounted. At any rate, the British expected their sector in the south to be relatively straightforward. Perhaps it was assumed that in the end American resources would buy off any trouble in the Sunni areas.

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The lessons of Iraq are bound to be largely political – don't go to war on the basis of intelligence claims unless you

are very sure that they are accurate; don't go to war if public opinion and allies are divided unless you are very sure of your cause and expect them to be eventually won over; don't go to war if it will conclude with the occupation of a brutalized country unless you are very sure what you are going to do with it; don't get all the above wrong and expect to be forgiven.

With regard to the military lessons, what came to be called the 'main combat operations' demonstrated the almost effortless superiority of Western conventional forces against third-rate opposition. Countless thousands of Iranians over many years died in a failed effort to take Basra during the 1980s; the British took it in a matter of days during 2003. The very ease of these operations has rendered them comparatively uninteresting and almost devoid of lessons, except for the rather obvious but nonetheless basic point that this superiority is so self-evident that only the very foolish will prepare to fight according to American preferences. In this sense the revolution in military affairs may be over before it had a chance to get started. Just as the period required for main combat operations has contracted into a few weeks, the 'war after the war' has expanded into a long haul which could go on almost indefinitely.

To carry on with this obvious but

basic point: if you must fight the United States and its allies, you better to do so by irregular means, because the Americans do not like that sort of war and are not, or at least have yet to become, very good at it. The British can claim to be better. Yet, while they have not had as torrid a time as the Americans, they have been too few to be able to exercise much influence over the frenetic politics of southern Iraq. I suspect a better test of their counter-insurgency capabilities will come with the challenging operations on which they are now embarking with European allies in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The case of Iraq brings home to me the importance of independent analysis. I always get nervous about playing the role of advocate, for or against wars. When the claims and counter-claims are so intense then there is a role for the academic in trying to sort out the good arguments from the bad, and testing them against the available evidence. Sometimes that can only be done when the issues have slipped out of partisan debate and can only be dealt with by the historian. It was my privilege to be able to do this with the Falklands. While emphatically not seeking to do this as Official Historian, one day I hope to be able to make sense of this even more complex and controversial story of Iraq. ■

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