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Iraq and Afghanistan

After the election of a Labour government under Tony Blair in 1997, Britain developed a more interventionist strategy than it had had since the Boer War. The previous government under John Major had sponsored the idea of establishing zones in Kurdistan and in the South of Iraq over which no Iraqi aircraft were allowed to fly and attack the Kurds and Shiites, but elsewhere it was cautious about involving British forces. In particular, it only slowly and reluctantly committed forces to participate in European peacekeeping operations during the collapse of Yugoslavia. Blair's approach to intervention there and elsewhere was much more enthusiastic; in his last tour in Africa in May 2007 he stressed that the basis of his policy was the conviction that 'it is better to intervene and try to make a difference than stay out and cope with the consequences at a later time...I believe in the power of political action to render the world better and the moral obligation to use it.'[1] It will be many years before the impact of this period of interventionism becomes clear, in the meantime the debate focuses on the short-term effects in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Because of the ferocious guerrilla attacks on coalition forces in these two countries and the failure to discover chemical and biological weapons in Iraq, there was more soul-searching in Britain between 2003 and 2008 than after any intervention since the First World War. In fact, to add to the other 'firsts' associated with the war in Iraq, it sparked the most fundamental re-examination of the efficiency of the governmental system for making decisions on war and peace since the Boer War at the start of the 20th century. The revisions then were designed to make the system more efficient for planning the defence of the Empire, the appraisals after 2003 were intended to assess the checks and balances, to see whether the executive could be restrained from unwise

overseas interventions.[2] This was all the more ironic because few interventions by British forces have been preceded by such a long period of preparation, at least for the initial stage of the attack, as the operation against Iraq in March 2003. The gaps between the German invasion of Belgium in 1914 and of Poland in 1939 and the British declarations of war were only a matter of hours, the attack on Iraq was prepared over months.

The new interventionism and particularly the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were made possible by long-term changes, or apparent changes, in the strategic balance. In the early 1990s, Britain's position in the international system was transformed when the Soviet Union collapsed and with it the balance between the Great Powers, creating a unipolar system and making Britain's closest ally the United States much more assertive. President George W. Bush expressed the new US approach most clearly in his speech to the US Military Academy at West Point in June 2002:

> We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge...America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge – thereby making the destabilising arms races of past eras pointless.... The 20th Century ended with a single surviving model of human progress, based on non-negotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women and private property...[3]

This was predicated on two fundamental misconceptions; first, that other cultures accepted Western views on human dignity and Bush's 'non-negotiable demands' and secondly that conventional power was the only sort of military power and thus that the United States had the capacity to intervene wherever it wished. But senior officers in the US armed forces knew their country did not have, and had never had, 'military strengths beyond challenge' because they had experienced defeat in Vietnam and setbacks in Somalia and elsewhere.[4] The area of the world in which even a superpower could intervene successfully had been steadily shrinking; China and India were no longer vulnerable to such interference because of their size and development, and in Southeast Asia guerrilla forces had rebuffed outside intervention by France between 1945 and 1954 and by the United States between 1964 and 1973.[5]

Appreciating the dangers inherent in Bush's misconceptions, many Europeans became increasingly uncomfortable with Washington's policies in the Middle East and elsewhere. However, so strong were the

British security links with the United States and so powerful was the Blair government's interventionism that these factors outweighed the centuries-old British determination to bolster the balance of power which would have led the government to move closer to Europe. Blair himself clearly shared many of the President's attitudes and particularly his belief in the possibility of spreading democracy by force. Both Bush and Blair were also convinced that the sort of terrorism displayed so graphically and horrifically on 9/11 was something that could be eradicated rather than simply a tactic employed by those who lacked conventional power and were infuriated by Western actions. The country's prosperity and the relative cheapness of the Falklands War and the Gulf War of 1990–1991, the second of which was largely paid for by the Saudis, Japanese and Kuwaitis, meant that financial interests were less of a constraint on British policy than they had been from 1919 to 1990. Similarly, the rapid military successes in these campaigns obscured the series of defeats the British suffered at the hands of insurgents in Palestine, Cyprus and Aden between the 1940s and the 1960s. The scene was thus set for the imbroglios in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As we saw in the previous chapter, when al Qaeda attacked the Twin Towers on 9/11 the majority of British (and indeed most European) people supported the US campaign against the Taleban government in Afghanistan which had given refuge to the terrorists. The British government realised the extent of the anger in the United States and thus the political importance of supporting its actions. The commitment also seemed relatively slight as US airpower together with the Afghan forces of the Northern Alliance quickly overcame the Taleban's conventional forces. Britain's contribution was initially confined to the provision of airborne tankers for US fighter-bombers and to Special Forces. But the long-term implications were not widely debated in the haste and heat of the moment; if the United States withdrew, the Taleban would probably return and the campaign would be seen as a failure, if they did not withdraw, they would become semi-colonial occupiers of a land peopled by a proud and ultra-conservative people with a long tradition of fighting invaders and an open frontier with the Northern provinces of Pakistan where the guerrillas could retire and refit.[6] In retrospect, it would have been better to follow the example set by the British rulers of India in the 19th century who periodically launched punitive expeditions against the Wazirs and Afridis on the Afghan frontier when their behaviour became too aggressive. Such expeditions might not have put an end to the Taleban but they would have been less expensive and temporarily effective.

As it was, the military and political difficulties were exacerbated by the Blair government's decision to become involved in a second campaign alongside US armed forces in Iraq in March 2003. This decision followed the pattern set in the French Wars and the two World Wars in which British leaders pushed for ever more interventions and were only restrained by the opposition of the armed forces. In 2003 the US and British armed forces either did not try or did not succeed, in insisting on finishing one campaign before starting another. The proclaimed objective was to destroy the chemical and biological weapons which the two governments believed Iraq was manufacturing and which it had been banned from producing after the 1991 Gulf War.[7] The erroneous claims were also spread by the US administration that the Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein had, in some way, backed the terrorists who carried out the attack on the Twin Towers and that he had restarted his nuclear weapons programme.[8] Saddam Hussein had committed many crimes, ironically, in the end, he was attacked for some which he did not commit.

Once again the United States failed to plan for the long term and assumed that the Iraqis would adapt to Western ways as enthusiastically and easily as the Germans and Japanese had done after their defeat by the allies in 1945.[9] Initially the invaders were, indeed, welcomed by many of the Iraqi peoples, particularly Kurds and Shiites, and others who had been persecuted by Saddam Hussein. But the disbandment of the armed forces, the failure to restore water and electricity facilities and provide employment quickly enough, and the encouragement given to democracy, to the disadvantage of the minority Sunni who had previously run the country, meant that the invaders found themselves fighting a determined insurgency of the sort the British had encountered when they took over Iraq after the First World War.[10]

When the invading forces were unable to pacify Iraq, while the war in Afghanistan showed no signs of abating, there was growing anxiety amongst senior officers about the morale of the armed forces and the extent of British commitments. Although well-informed observers, including Richard Holmes, the military historian, who spent time with them in Iraq, were impressed by how well the young troops responded, press reports became increasingly pessimistic about the state of their morale.[11] This was partly because of the shortage of troops and the intensity of the fighting, but it was also because of the scepticism amongst the soldiers about the objectives of the two wars and the feeling that the British people were not giving them support.[12] During the Iraq War General Sir Michael Rose, who had commanded British forces in

Bosnia in the 1990s, commented on the motives which influence troops in any war:

> There can be no more debilitating effect on the morale of the members of the armed forces than for them to know that their country does not support the mission or that the case for war is based on doubtful moral or legal arguments. A proper justification should always be a sine qua non for engaging in conflict.[13]

The root cause of the problems was the determination of the United States and Britain to rebuild Afghan and Iraqi political institutions in the Western image. As Bush put it, 'Afghanistan and Iraq will lead the world to democracy. They are going to be the catalyst to change the Middle East and the world.'[14] But the United States needed the cooperation of neighbouring countries, and the governments of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were hardly likely to support policies designed to subvert their power.[15] Furthermore, Afghans and Iraqis might tell Western representatives that they favoured democracy and, when offered the opportunity, they voted in elections, but their good intentions were undermined by feuds between the various groups in both countries, and the lack of the tradition of compromise which is the basis of democracy and of a stable legal system.[16] As we saw in Chapter 1, national culture is shaped over the centuries and, thus, democratic instincts cannot be created overnight by a foreign power. Western armed forces were left fighting against nationalists as well as Islamists and feuding tribes. Shortly after Tony Blair's resignation, the Chief of Defence Staff, Sir Jock Stirrup, commented:

> I think some people expected that, with the British presence on the ground, we could put Basra society, Basra infrastructure, Basra politics and Basra life back on its feet and make it look some sort of stable, secure, prosperous urban centre. That is the right aspiration to have, but we could never do that, only the Iraqis could do it.[17]

Resentment in the armed forces about being landed with an impossible task was increased by the widespread feeling amongst them that they were isolated from the rest of society because of the ending of conscription and the death of those who experienced the two World Wars. Everything that has been written in this book suggests that the perception is mistaken; they are held in very high esteem; whenever there is a problem from foot and mouth disease amongst animals to flood-

ing in cities or to anti-terrorist measures at airports, the cry goes up to 'send for the army'.[18] Today, warfare and conflict are now all around us in a way that they have not been before because they come to us both directly and via the media. While the age of total warfare has apparently receded, at least for the time being, it has been replaced by ubiquitous insecurity. If the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon were vulnerable on 9/11, so, by definition, was every other building.[19] Britain had experienced similar events for three decades because of the IRA offensive; the City of London had been bombed, Downing Street had been the target of a mortar attack, members of the cabinet had been blown up in a Brighton hotel, MPs and senior civil servants had been bombed or shot in Britain and abroad. Other European countries including Spain, Italy and Germany have had similar experiences.

It is impossible to watch television or listen to radio news without being inundated with information about warfare in some distant country as well as about terrorist threats closer to home. During the last quarter of a century the British armed forces have been involved in half a dozen significant conflicts, in the Falklands, in the first and second Gulf Wars, in Bosnia, in Kosovo and Afghanistan, all of which have been extensively covered by the media. They have also been deployed in numerous smaller peacekeeping operations. As a result of the television coverage of these engagements, the mass of people know much more about weaponry and military operations than they have ever done, even possibly during the two World Wars; the media have made us all armchair strategists. The armed forces are far less isolated, because everyone knows what weapons and warfare looks like, however hard they might try to shut their mind to them. Nevertheless, because the armed forces believed that they were isolated, as well as involved in unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, their morale was affected.[20]

When this became clear, it increased the feeling that the British governmental system had failed or been circumvented by the Prime Minister and his immediate colleagues. The main cabinet committee responsible for intervention, the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, apparently never met while preparations for the Iraq war were undertaken;[21] key papers were not circulated to the whole cabinet which, in the words of the official committee under Lord Butler's chairmanship investigating Intelligence on the war, meant that it was 'obviously much more difficult for members of the cabinet outside the small circle directly involved to bring their political judgement and experience to bear on the major decisions for which the cabinet as a whole must bear responsibility'.[22]

Above all, it was the first time in the last 200 years that Britain's casus belli had been shown to be false after a major war began. In March 2003 the Government laid down: 'Our primary objective remains to rid Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction and their associated programmes and means of delivery, including prohibited ballistic missiles.'[23] But it gradually became clear after the invasion that no such weapons existed. Other states had previously experienced similar dichotomies between claims and facts; the United States had attacked Spain in 1898 because it had erroneously believed that the US battleship Maine had been blown up by the Spanish, instead of by the spontaneous combustion of its own magazine[24]; similarly, the crew of the US destroyers Maddox and Turner Joy mistakenly believed that they had been attacked by North Vietnamese gunboats in the Tonkin Gulf on 4 August 1964, leading to the crucial Congressional resolution giving President Johnson authority to expand the Vietnam War. There had been no equivalent British error over a casus belli for a major conflict in the previous 200 years. It was rather as if the Liberal government had discovered in August 1914 that the Germans had not, in fact, invaded Belgium or the National government had found in September 1939 that the Nazis had not attacked Poland. The error in 2003 was vital because, although Tony Blair subsequently justified the war in terms of the repressive nature of the Iraqi regime, as the Butler report put it:

> Officials noted that regime change of itself had no basis in international law; and that any offensive military action against Iraq could only be justified if Iraq were held to be in breach of its disarmament obligations under Security Council resolution or some new resolution.[25]

It was perfectly true, as the government asserted, that Saddam Hussein had been a brutal dictator, but many believed his overthrow was illegal because he was not involved in genocide, which alone could justify the overthrow of a government by foreign troops.[26] Moreover, as the Iraqi civil war intensified after the invasion, it became clear that that unfortunate and fissiparous country could only be kept together by force.

There were criticisms of the Intelligence Services, the way the war was planned in the Cabinet, the legal advice tendered to the government and the Parliamentary response to those plans. Rightly or wrongly, there was a widespread feeling that the Attorney General's advice on the

legality of the war had altered under government and US pressure. As one lawyer put it in a letter to *The Times*:

> The Government relied on the final opinion of a vacillatory Attorney General whose professional expertise was commercial, not public international law, in preference to the consensus stance of the legal staff of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office . . . whose view on the legality of the war without a second UN Security Council resolution was shared by almost every international lawyer of repute, as well as by Lord Goldsmith himself until his volte-face.[27]

As far as Intelligence was concerned, the Butler report concluded that more reliance had been placed on the information supplied by the half dozen Iraqi sources in contact with British Intelligence than was justified in the event:

> The fact that reporting from one of their important pre-war sources has been withdrawn, and that from the other two main sources is open to doubt, led us to question the standard procedures adopted by SIS to ensure that their sources are valid and that their reporting is subject to quality control.[28]

Such failings were brought to public notice by the attribution to the Intelligence Services of the document published in September 2002 claiming that Iraq had apparently not abandoned its banned weapons programmes and, of course, by the subsequent failure to discover any chemical or biological weapons. The fundamental problem was that it was most unusual, if not unique, for Britain to go to war on the basis of Intelligence reports alone. Given the tentative nature of human Intelligence (as opposed to signals Intelligence) and the impossibility of explaining the sort of sources, let alone the individual informants, on whose evidence it was based, this seems, in retrospect, to have been unwise.

 While Intelligence had not been properly assessed or presented to the Cabinet and to the public, many blamed Parliamentary procedures for the failure to check the rush to war. In fact the House of Commons had held a very thorough and wide-ranging debate about Iraq on 18 March 2003, the problem was that some MPs, who harboured severe doubts, were not prepared either to trust their own judgement, to let down their party and the armed forces or to follow public opinion. Nearly 60 MPs spoke, not counting the numerous interruptions, and many of

their speeches were both deeply felt and prescient. To take some of the most impressive examples, Ronnie Campbell, the Labour MP for Blyth Valley, warned:

> Moderate young Muslims will be told that that is what the West does to them: it invades a Muslim country and drops thousands of bombs on its people.... Such action will make it far easier for al Qaeda to recruit young people to become human bombs in this country..... That is the worst scenario if this war goes ahead.[29]

Sir Teddy Taylor, the Conservative MP for Rochford and Southend East, pointed out:

> There is a great feeling among us that we are going to intervene, improve matters and restore democracy, freedom and liberty, but where is the evidence that such intervention has been successful in the past? For example, a great deal has been said about Afghanistan, a country that I know a little about, but can we say that things are much better as a result of the intervention that took place? Rather, it is a pathetic country, run by a group of people who have no democratic responsibility whatever.[30]

Tony Worthington, the Labour MP for Clydebank and Milngavie, warned:

> We are going to invade a country of Balkanesque complexity where occupying forces will be unable easily to withdraw. We are rapidly in danger of becoming piggy in the middle for every discontented ethnic or religious group in the area. There seems little doubt of speedy initial victory but it is worth remembering that the Six Day War in the Middle East is still going strong after 35 years. This war has similar potential.[31]

Richard Page, the Conservative MP for South-West Hertfordshire, commented, 'I am greatly concerned that we have not spent enough time considering how to rebuild Iraq.... What exactly shall we put in place? I have heard about territorial protection and the maintenance of borders, but has anyone talked to the Kurds of northern Iraq about that?'[32]

There was also, and rightly as it turned out, a good deal of scepticism about the evidence that Iraq had chemical and biological weapons. Andrew Mackay, the Conservative MP for Bracknell, pointed out that the

government's 'dodgy dossier' (which had been based on a student's thesis) and spurious claims of links between Iraq and al Qaeda had 'caused huge harm to the credibility of the government's case'. Similarly, John McDonnell, the Labour MP for Hayes and Harlington, argued, 'the great persuaders have failed to persuade. People have seen through the dodgy dossiers and the forged nuclear weapons evidence', while David Heath, Liberal Democrat MP for Somerton and Frome, talked of a 'superfluity of dubious evidence'.[33] On the other side, government and Conservative spokesmen and their supporters stressed the threat from weapons of mass destruction, the repressive nature of Saddam Hussein's regime, the way in which it had frustrated the United Nations, the blocking of the Security Council by the French and the need to support Britain's armed forces. In the event, the government won by 396–217 against a proposal to amend its motion and 412–149 on its motion that the United Kingdom 'should use all necessary means to ensure the disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction'. Invasion would lead to the installation of 'a representative government which upholds human rights and the rule of law for all Iraqis'.

Some of the government's critics argued later that a favourable Parliamentary vote should become mandatory before a government could again take the country to war, even though the House of Commons had failed to vote against the war on 18 March. One who made such a proposal was the former Development Secretary, Clare Short, who resigned over the war and explained that she believed that the system was 'outdated and undemocratic':

> I . . . remain stunned and worried by the way in which we saw our constitutional arrangements malfunction on the route to war and a trail of deceit, which I think helps to explain the failure to prepare for afterwards and the dreadful situation and the terrible loss of life. . . . The Defence and Overseas Policy Committee never met, so all the options were not properly scrutinised and the legal authorisation was concocted in a very disreputable way, which is now a matter of record.[34]

The former Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer Kenneth Clarke argued that Parliamentary scrutiny had been similarly subverted as the government had waited until the last possible moment before allowing the House of Commons to vote 'because the Prime Minister seriously doubted he could get a majority for what he proposed to do. I think it is doubtful whether he would have got authority for what he did if he had

tried to seek it two months earlier and been totally candid about where we were.'[35]

The war had precipitated such reflections but they were undoubtedly also the consequence of public attitudes. People now feel confident enough to reject dubious ministerial claims. At the same time, Parliament's position as the centre of the political nation had been usurped by direct democracy via the opinion poll and the television or radio station. Thus, as we saw in Chapter 8, the electorate has become ever more apathetic about Parliamentary debates; the 1918 election excepted, voting turnout fell to its lowest level ever in 2001, 59.4 per cent voted compared with over 70 per cent in every election from 1922 to 1997. Labour retained power in 2005 with the support of 21.6 per cent of the electorate or 9.56 million votes, fewer than any victorious party had polled since the 1920s, when the population was far smaller, and 4 million less than it had in 1997.[36] It is more accurate to say that, because of their unpopularity, the Conservatives lost three elections in a row, leaving Labour to win by default. Giving Parliament an overt veto on a government's right to declare war was an attempt to increase members' power, recoup their prestige and persuade voters that it was worth casting their ballots at elections.[37]

The House of Commons' Public Administration Select Committee published a report in 2004 agreeing with Clare Short that Parliament should have to approve a decision to engage in armed conflict either beforehand or as soon as possible afterwards. The Lords' Select Committee on the Constitution disagreed and recommended in July 2006 that a convention, rather than a law, should be established under which a Government should seek Parliamentary approval if it were proposing the deployment of British forces outside the United Kingdom into actual or potential conflict. If such prior application were impossible, the Government should provide retrospective information within seven days of the onset of hostilities or as soon as it was feasible. As a matter of course, it should keep Parliament informed of the progress of such deployments and, if their nature or objectives altered significantly, it should seek a renewal of the mandate.[38]

Some of the witnesses before the Lords Committee agreed with the Commons' Select Committee that the obligation to secure Parliamentary approval should become law rather than convention. However, even those in favour, sometimes recognised the difficulties. Some thought it might lead to wrangles in the courts and to impractical delays in military movements. A debate could warn a potential enemy of Britain's intentions precisely when the government wanted to move

forces surreptitiously to a threatened area. As the former First Sea Lord, Admiral Lord Boyce, reminded the Lords Committee, this is particularly true of naval forces, which have the capacity to 'loiter' off a distant coast for a considerable time. Such was the situation in 1977, when Britain was involved in negotiations with the Argentine government over the Falklands, and to show its determination to resist an attack, 'one nuclear-powered submarine and two frigates were deployed to the area', though it was never necessary to tell Buenos Aires of the movement and the force was withdrawn once the threat receded.[39] It would have been both futile and provocative to announce such a deployment before it took place since it could have precipitated the very invasion of the islands it was designed to deter. Similarly, Lord Vincent reminded the Lords committee of the way in which British Forces had had to mount a secret and rapid rescue of peacekeepers captured by a group called the 'West Side Boys' in Sierra Leone.[40] In such cases, although forces have been moved into a potential combat zone, public debate can only take place afterwards, if at all. Servicemen involved in a deployment, which led to war and which had not received prior Parliamentary authorisation, would clearly worry about their legal standing if there were a statutory obligation on the government to receive prior approval.

Of course, even though it has not voted on the issues involved, before major wars there has, as we have seen, nearly always been time for Parliamentary debate. Since 1800 there has only been one significant occasion when debate was redundant because it was not a war of choice, following the Japanese attack on Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore in December 1941, and even then Winston Churchill recalled Parliament. Before every other major war, as we have seen in Chapter 8, Parliament debated the issue as if the war was one of choice not just for the government, but for Parliament and for the people.[41] There was also time for such a debate even though preliminary military movements had already begun. Thus, for example, in 1914, before the crucial Parliamentary debate and the government's decision for war, the First Lord Winston Churchill had kept the Fleet mobilised following naval manoeuvres; in 1990 Tornado aircraft had been sent to the Gulf, nine days after the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait and some weeks before Parliament met, while a number of Royal Naval vessels were assembled in the region.[42] However, in both cases Parliament could have brought operations to a halt if a majority had been determined to do so.

Nevertheless, as the House of Lords committee suggested, it seems desirable to establish a convention that the government should seek Parliamentary approval, whenever possible, before it involves the country

in a major armed conflict and while it is preparing the armed forces for this prospect. Where Parliament could be strengthened is by laying down that it should be reconvened immediately whenever substantial conflict threatened to involve British forces, or when a certain number of MPs believed such a conflict impended. This would not, of course, protect the country from a government, which has a clear majority and was determined to go to war despite the weakness of the casus belli.[43] As we have seen, the United States, the country with the oldest written constitution laying down that Congress must vote before the country goes to war, has done so three times under false pretences. On each occasion Congress simply accepted the executive's view of the situation. Nor would radical proposals to abolish the House of Lords or to make it entirely elective increase the constitutional safeguards against the rush to war, quite the contrary. The Lords have been a more effective brake than the Commons on government impetuosity in recent years.[44] The House of Lords has the potential to reflect the modern era by becoming entirely a house of professional experts made up of lawyers, trades unionists, retired diplomats and military officers, medical specialists, representatives of the NGOs, churchmen, academics, industrialists and financiers – something which Tony Blair appears to have recognised in his final appearance before the Commons Liaison Committee as Prime Minister where he claimed that he had never believed in an elected second assembly.[45]

People appointed for their expertise are not beholden to the government in the same way as Members of the Commons. A reformed and renamed House of Experts or Notables, chosen for a limited period by representative bodies, such as the Confederation of British Industry, Trades Union Congress, the universities, NGOs or the Royal Society, would command attention by its intellectual calibre. Its example would encourage MPs to be less obsequious to the government in power than they have been in recent years or than members of Congress showed themselves to be when they went along with the three administration's spurious arguments for war in 1898, 1964 and 2003. Professionalism confers greater legitimacy today than election; television and radio stations summon scientists, diplomats or doctors to give their views on their field of expertise, not MPs, when they need to inform the public. Indeed, despite the growing sophistication of the debates on war held today in the Commons, MPs are unfortunately held in disrepute, if not contempt; it is the House of Commons which must struggle to affirm its competence when we have direct democracy through the televisions studios, opinion polls and referenda.

Intervention in Iraq cannot be blamed primarily on the British 'people'. As we saw in the previous chapter, in the weeks leading up to the war polls suggested that the vast majority of British people had opposed such an attack without additional UN authority. In February 2003, 57 per cent did not believe the government had made a convincing case for war, 62 per cent were against an attack without a further UN resolution and more than twice as many, 24 per cent, were against an attack under any circumstances as supported an attack without another UN resolution.[46] A further poll, published on 15 March 2003, found 67 per cent of Britons, 90 per cent of French, 86 per cent of Germans and 93 per cent of Spanish opposed to the war.[47] Britain was taken to war in March 2003 against the wishes of its people and the majority of Europeans.[48]

The majority of people are, however, to blame in one respect; their tendency to rally round the government once war begins. This was less unsatisfactory before the age of opinion polls but it means that the public can no longer act as a deterrent to a government which wants to go to war. Many MPs who spoke on 18 March shared these public feelings: as John Burnett, the MP for Torridge and West Devon, put it, 'I cannot vote against a motion that offers support to Her Majesty's forces who are now on duty in the Middle East.' As a result he abstained on the government's motion but such attitudes, however well-intentioned, weakened the restraints on government policy and could endanger the armed forces and, indeed, the nation itself.