11
Do Debates on War Matter?

Some would argue that it is not so much that governments deliberately ignore public debates, as the previous chapter suggested, but that they are irrelevant because policy is determined by deeper factors and that all ideas are simply a reflection of these. Others would agree that debates matter but suggest that the British debates are too moralistic, that the Wilberforce or 'Good Samaritan' tradition has come to dominate discussion, rather than the more cautious traditions reflected in the work of Cobden, Bloch, Angell and Wells. This explains Britain's propensity to elect to become involved in wars, allowing its critics, including those quoted at the beginning of this book, to be able to accuse Britain of being the most belligerent of the Great Powers.

Determinists of all hues deny that debates matter. Biological determinists, Marxists and many members of the realist school of international relations would argue that the ideas analysed in this book are superficial and that there are underlying factors which mandate governments' decisions. Leo Tolstoy, Edmund Wilson and Karl Marx took this position, although they all found difficulty in sustaining it throughout their writings or acting as though they believed it. Similarly Communist governments, which purported to agree with Marx that economic factors controlled how men behave, spent vast sums propagating their views during the Cold War, persecuting their citizens for their heterodox ideas and jamming Western television and radio stations to prevent subversive alien notions creeping into their territories. Up to 70,000 censors allegedly watched over Soviet publications, while 15,000 people were employed jamming Western broadcasts at a cost of $150 million each year.[1] But they could not prevent Soviet citizens learning that their standard of living was falling ever further behind the West and the 'Asian

tigers' and, by the end of the 1980s, this realisation had proved fatal to the communist cause.

Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore* is one of the most comprehensive examinations of the intellectual ferment evoked by any war in history. Its dissection of the voluminous writings of poets, novelists, politicians, generals and ordinary citizens before, during and after the American Civil War would be difficult to better, yet the American critic claimed that none of their ideas was fundamental:

> The wars fought by human beings are stimulated as a rule primarily by the same instincts as the voracity of the sea slug. . . . It is, however, of course, very difficult for us to recognise that we, too, are devourers, and that we, too, are talking cant.[2]

Yet *Patriotic Gore* suggested that *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the popular novel describing the sufferings of the slaves, published by Harriett Beecher Stowe in 1852, made war more likely by stiffening attitudes towards slavery on both sides of the North–South divide. At the same time, Sir Walter Scott's historical novels spread romantic ideas about warfare and Southern society amongst those living in the Confederacy and thus encouraged the Southern people to defend their values. Wilson also showed how Abraham Lincoln's ambitions and passionate belief in maintaining the Union clashed with the equally determined faith of Alexander Stephens, the vice-president of the Confederacy, that slavery was built into the US Constitution as, indeed, was the right of any part of that Union to secede.[3]

Marx and Tolstoy faced the same problems of consistency. However, much Marx might claim that economics rather than ideas shaped society he evidently thought it worthwhile to devote his life to propagating his ideas about economics and society, and appealing to the workers in the various countries to unite and support their interests.[4] Ironically, modern dermatologists have argued that Marx's own views were produced by the skin disease from which he suffered, covering him with boils and producing 'so much psychological distress . . . [which] explains his self-loathing and alienation, a response reflected by the alienation Marx developed in his writings'.[5] In the medical view, biological determinism caps economics.

War and Peace, Tolstoy's epic novel about Napoleon's invasion of Russia, published in 1869, purports to be deterministic; Napoleon thought he was making the key decisions but, in fact, like everyone else, he was being driven by deeper factors of which he was unaware. However,

Tolstoy became a Christian pacifist and he acted, wrote and spoke as though pacifists, acting together, would be able to stop governments driving their people to war. As he told the Swedish Peace Congress in 1909, governments 'have millions of money and millions of obedient soldiers; we have only one thing, but that is the most powerful thing in the world – Truth' and for Tolstoy the truth was that Christianity forbade murder and, therefore, condemned all wars. He called on the Congress to draw up an appeal pointing out that war 'is a criminal and shameful activity'.[6] The assumption that such a campaign could change governments' policies flatly contradicted the view expressed in *War and Peace* that 'it is altogether impossible to agree that intellectual activity has controlled the actions of mankind, for such phenomena as the brutal murders of the French revolution, which were the outcome of the doctrine of the equality of man, and the most wicked wars and executions resulting from the Gospel of Love belie this hypothesis'.[7] According to the novel, historians say ideas influence events because they deal in ideas and like to believe they are important, but they cannot prove that ideas have any effect.

Wilson, Tolstoy and Marx acted as though they had identified general tendencies rather than determinants. Such factors deeply influence but do not govern policy or the political debate – any more than Marx's boils determined the shape of his thought and writings. Most people accept that national culture, the balance of power, economic interests and social cohesion have very strong effects, while also believing that ideas and the debates they produce may rein in or exacerbate these tendencies. A balance of power has a major impact on politics, but that impact depends on the use which people choose to make of it and, in peacetime, on the estimates statesmen hold of it. In war the balance is put to one particular type of test. In peacetime statesmen are influenced by the impressions around them and the vague way in which countries are 'ranked' in the public mind. The figures, which economists produce of the domestic product and economic growth rate of a country, have become deeply influential since the Second World War. Thus, most people believe at the beginning of the 21st century that India has become much more powerful because of its rapid economic growth. This, in turn, affects politics; the United States has made a major effort to work with the Indian government and has tacitly decided to accept its nuclear weapons programme, which it had tried for years to prevent.[8] Similarly, the subsequent rise in oil and gas prices restored Russian morale, which had collapsed after the demise of the Soviet Union, and emboldened

Moscow to attack the Georgians in August 2008 to prove that they dominated the surrounding countries and that they were a power to be reckoned with.

The US propensity to use its military strength grew dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union undermined the balance of power. But this does not explain why Bush and Blair decided to attack Iraq rather than any other state in March 2003, or why they felt that they could replace the Iraqi government by another one more amenable to the West. As far as Iraqi reform was concerned, the memory of the over-throw of the Axis governments at the end of the Second World War and the successful democratisation of these countries seems to have played a part. Similarly, we can accept that economic considerations have an important effect on governmental policy without claiming that the lure of Iraqi oil was necessarily the only (or even the main) conscious or unconscious factor which persuaded George W. Bush to attack Iraq in March 2003,or Tony Blair to support him.

The so-called 'biological' factors, which impressed Edmund Wilson, are most influential after a government has taken the decision for war because it is then that many people behave in a herd-like fashion, aban-don any reservations they had and support their government. As Wilfred Trotter pointed out at the beginning of the 20th century, man is a 'gre-garious animal' and it is the tendencies which make it possible for him to associate with his immediate fellows that most endanger a foreign enemy in wartime:

> In a country at war all opinion is necessarily more or less subject to prejudice, and this liability to bias is a herd mechanism, and owes its vigour to that potent instinct.... A war apprehended as dangerous produces a more complete solution of the minor herds of society into the common body than does a war not so regarded.[9]

However, the fact that people 'apprehend' how great a threat the war is to their own country and that there have been domestic critics of every war Britain has waged show that men do not have to herd together in wartime, even if they feel both the need to do so themselves and strong pressure to conform from others. They are left with the power of choice.

If debates do matter, are British discussions too moralistic and indif-ferent to the country's interests? It was this tendency which the British

military historian Correlli Barnett blamed for *The Collapse of British Power* at the start of the Second World War:

> It came to be more and more generally felt [in the 19th Century] by public opinion that moral principle and moral purpose rather than strategy or mere interest alone should be the inspiration of English policy.... It is indeed in the transformation of the British character and outlook by this moral revolution that lies the first cause, from which all else was to spring, of the British plight in 1940.[10]

It is certainly true that domestic critics have often been infuriated by what they have seen as the failure of British governments to live up to their moral responsibilities. There has frequently been more debate in Britain about those occasions when the country did not intervene to protect another state than about those occasions when it did. Thus its decision not to protect the Abyssinians in 1935 against Italian attack, its neutrality during the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and, above all, its decision to abandon the Czechs at the Munich conference in 1938 rankled for years afterwards. Indeed the Munich agreement profoundly influenced Anglo-American policy for the next half century, any initiative which could be represented as appeasement during the Cold War was instantly damned.[11] In more recent times the general failures to prevent genocide in Rwanda in 1994 or to attack Serbia in response to its policies in Croatia and Bosnia have caused similar controversy, as we saw in Chapter 4.[12]

The moral pressures to intervene have not abated in recent years. As Chapter 3 showed, the urge to interfere is particularly strong amongst Western commentators, leader writers and NGOs. When a vast area of Myanmar was flooded in May 2008, NGOs were horrified that the Myanmar government was reluctant to accept their assistance. The generals who held power in Rangoon did not want the Burmese people to see them dependent on foreigners and distrusted Western countries, which had tried to isolate and overthrow them. A member of a French NGO was quoted as saying, 'it's a crime against humanity. It should be against the law. It's like they are taking a gun and shooting their own people.'[13] Commentators claimed that the West had the right to intervene to force the Myanmar government to accept aid. The French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner argued that countries had the responsibility to intervene and so protect victims of genocide.[14] Menacing reports suggested that US naval vessels and 11,000 troops were approaching the region.

A few weeks later the intimidation of voters in Zimbabwe by President Mugabe's government led to further calls from commentators for

intervention. On the other hand, retired officers stressed the practical military hurdles involved in an invasion while Britain was embroiled in the two continuing insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the problems involved in flying into a land-locked country.[15] President Mugabe's career was also a standing warning of the difficulties Western peoples have in understanding the politics of the Third World and evaluating attitudes towards human rights; in 1981 Mugabe was short-listed for the Nobel Peace Prize, although the awarding committee eventually gave it to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.[16] Mugabe was a hero amongst those who fought for independence in Zimbabwe, and his supporters ignored his subsequent decision to crush all opposition. Only if one argues that such repression was the sole way to maintain stability in the new country could one say that he ever did anything for 'peace'.

Attitudes to individual cases will differ but there remains a general consensus in Britain that the country could and should play an important part in the making of international security. It is not self-evident that it should do so. Much larger countries, including Brazil and Nigeria, or with stronger industrial bases like Germany and Japan, do not participate so actively. The English learnt from their history the importance of preventing the emergence of a dominant power in Europe which might build a great navy and launch an invasion across the Channel. Preserving the balance of power also protected small states such as the Netherlands against foreign attack. Thus the British came to see themselves as the guardians of such nations, Serbia, Belgium and Luxemburg in 1914, Poland in 1939. When they failed to defend weak states, such as Poland in the 18th century or Czechoslovakia in 1938, even if they had no military power to do anything else, they felt themselves morally weakened. As one of Neville Chamberlain's critics put it after the Munich agreement abandoning the Czechs:

> I doubt whether anyone can describe this as a peace based on negotiation, on reason, on justice. Will it figure in history as anything else than the greatest – and the cheapest – victory ever won by aggressive militarism?[17]

When they themselves were the conquerors in India and Africa, the British convinced themselves that the conquest was a minor matter and that they were the altruistic guardians of the peoples living there. As the 19th-century Cambridge historian, Sir John Seeley, put it:

> We are not really conquerors of India, and we cannot rule her as conquerors; if we undertook to do so, it is not necessary to inquire

whether we could succeed, for we should surely be ruined financially by the mere attempt.

The British could rule south of the Himalayas because, in his view, Indians had no sense of nationality at that time, were used to being ruled by foreigners and because they saw that British rule was beneficial.[18] Similarly, just before he became archbishop, Randall Davidson claimed that British power had 'not grown by the rude prowess of a conqueror's sword, but almost wholly by the spread of commerce and civilisation'. The Empire was not just for Britain's good but for the world's.[19] Seeley and Davidson would have deplored the conventional modern view that such colonialism was 'morally depraved' because it only benefited the British, and they would have thought it excessively pessimistic to accept that 'imperialism is a narcissistic enterprise, and narcissism is doomed to disillusion. Whatever other people want to be, they do not want to be forced to be us.'[20] Both would, however, have agreed that the British Raj would, and should, survive only if it benefited and was accepted by the Indians. When an aspect of imperial rule was clearly not beneficial, as slavery had been, then it had to be abolished; when the Indian National Congress began its campaign for independence then, as the historian had forecast, the only question was how soon and in what manner the British would leave. We now know from the 19th-century records that British ministers and civil servants in charge of the Empire had no overall plan, they simple responded day by day to events, although their 'judgements and actions in fact were heavily prejudiced by their beliefs about morals and politics, about the duties of government, the ordering of society and international relations'.[21]

Whether this supports the modern critics or the traditional supporters of imperialism, it is clear that, as Britain became more democratic so the need for its leaders to simplify the reasons for their decisions, to emphasise the country's benevolent ambitions and to demonise their opponents became more important. People will not, on the whole, risk their lives or their relatives' lives for grand strategic or general economic reasons. General David Barno, who commanded US forces in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005, recalled a conversation with a former European defence minister who told him, 'I can't go back to my population and tell him that [the war in] Afghanistan is about the strategic importance of the region, that's not why they agreed to go to Afghanistan – they went there for humanitarian reasons.'[22] This could make politicians totally cynical: in the words of the long-time editor of the *Westminster Gazette*, 'whatever their personal beliefs may be,

Kings and statesmen must at least pretend to be on the side of right against wrong'.[23] But most ministers probably believed what they said much of the time. No doubt, they were inconsistent and confused even about their own motives; the same Lord Palmerston, who, as we saw in Chapter 3, strongly supported the interdiction of the slave trade, was also the minister who presided in 1840 over the Opium War against China, thereby protecting a commerce which reduced addicts to walking corpses and was rightly described by its critics at the time as 'unjust and iniquitous'.[24]

If consistency is rare, so are policies which contradict a country's interests abroad; rare but not unknown. Ever since the Suez crisis in 1956, the Washington elite has supported Israel in its confrontation with the Arabs, while US material interests lie almost wholly with Israel's enemies because of US dependence on Arab oil. The Arabs are also able to buy far more US weapons than the Israelis and make more investments in US companies and government stocks. The US political elite's support for Israel overrides national interest and the opinion of the public who rank Israel below Egypt, Mexico and Brazil, and equal with Philippines and Taiwan in terms of their general sympathies.[25] Empathy for a democracy surrounded by more autocratic states, religious sympathy for the Jews, the memory of the Holocaust and understanding for a people who have dispossessed the original inhabitants as the Americans have done themselves, all appear to play their part in deciding policy, alongside the influence of Jewish voters in US elections.

Human actions invariably have mixed motives and this will obviously be more so when an international coalition influences decisions. The United States and its allies went to war in 1991 to protect the oil-rich state of Kuwait from Iraqi attack. According to one well-informed account:

> Bush, the former Texas oil man seemed horrified that Saddam might get Saudi Arabia . . . . Would Saddam withhold Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil? Or would he try to flood the world market? . . . . Higher oil prices would fuel inflation, worsening the gloomy condition of the US economy.[26]

Greater oil resources would also have enabled Saddam Hussein to buy more weapons and possibly threaten other states, such as Iran or Israel. He had already shown indifference to international law by attacking Iran in September 1980 and using chemical weapons against the Iranian army and against rebellious Kurds in Iraq in breach of the Geneva

Protocol. If Iraq had absorbed Kuwait this would have been the first time since the foundation of the United Nations that one country had conquered an independent state and incorporated it into its own territories in breach of the Charter. Thus, in her memoirs, Lady Thatcher stressed the illegal nature of the Iraqi occupation and the dangers of appeasing aggressors. As she put it in a lecture at the time: 'Iraq's invasion of Kuwait defies every principle for which the United Nations stands. If we let it succeed, no small country can ever feel safe again. The law of the jungle would take over from the rule of law.'[27] There were, therefore, legal, economic, political, military and moral reasons for coming to Kuwait's assistance. To these were added press reports about Iraqi mistreatment of the Kuwaitis which made, or were intended to make, the UN operation against Iraq more popular.

Similar combinations of motives operated equally in other cases. As we have seen, Pitt in 1793, Clarendon in 1854, Grey in 1914, Chamberlain in 1939, Thatcher in 1982 and 1990 and Blair in 2003 did not separate Britain's interests from what they perceived to be the common good. Domination of the continent by the French revolutionaries, Russia or Germany, seizure of the Falkland Islands by Argentina or of Kuwait by Iraq, possession of chemical and biological weapons by Saddam Hussein seemed both undesirable in themselves because of the nature of the governments involved and the methods they used, and against British interests. The objectives might be expressed in moral terms although they incorporated all the different motives. What separated Tony Blair from most of his predecessors was the combination of his idealism and his confidence that the world could be changed for the better by force.

The general public are more cautious, they understand well enough the potential dangers arising from military intervention. They see war now not from the point of view of the generals and politicians but from that of the ordinary civilians and soldiers. They are aware how a well-meaning politician can lead the country into a guerrilla war from which withdrawal is extremely difficult. While the memory of British defeats in Palestine, Cyprus and Aden may be fading, people recall the US debacle in Vietnam and the Soviets' humiliation in Afghanistan. They see the effects of bombing from day to day on their television screens and watch the wounded rushed to makeshift hospitals, which gives war an immediacy that it could never have had for most of our ancestors. They know instinctively about the 'law of unintended effects' which means that leaders' actions have consequences beyond their imaginings.

But, as the previous chapter showed, it was still possible in March 2003 for a tiny group of people at the head of the government to commit

the country to war despite the previous opposition of the vast majority of the public, as well as of many academics and diplomats who studied the Middle East, of the majority of British international lawyers and Churchmen, and without taking the cabinet into full confidence. The known propensity of the public to rally round a government drastically weakened their power and ability to act as a restraint. The public debate has widened over the last 200 years as the public have gained in confidence, but the governmental decision-making process has not improved to the same extent. The Committee of Imperial Defence was established by the government at the beginning of the 20th century to coordinate expertise on Britain's far-flung responsibilities, what is needed is an effort to utilise even more wide-ranging and varied expertise when crises threaten in the future. We now know how small groups of people, including governments, develop 'tunnel vision', the very opposite of the scientific approach in which general enquiry and argument advance the progress of knowledge. If the government is considering committing British forces to operations, and if time and military secrecy allows, all available information and expertise should be taken into account and as much of this as possible presented to Parliament and public. The country would be much safer from involvement in unwise conflicts, such as the Suez operation or the March 2003 attack, if the balance between government and people were changed, and the convention were established that, whether or not the leader writers and columnists are pressing for intervention, the armed forces would not be risked when the majority of people and military and civilian experts were opposed to the war.

Caution will be ever more necessary over the coming decades; the scope for Western intervention will be gradually reduced with the rise of Great Powers in Asia, and the increase in the ability of even the weakest of states to retaliate against Western targets through guerrilla warfare and terrorism. The emergence of new satellite television stations and websites increases the confidence of non-Western cultures and their determination to resist occidental influence. The violent opposition to Western intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan reaffirms the same lessons as the defeat of colonial forces in the two decades after the Second World War. Even if they make use of all the balanced theories that Robert Thompson and others deduced from colonial experiences, conventional forces have met their match in insurgency and no one who participates in debates about going to war in future should forget this.