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The Professional Military

On the evening of 31 March 1982 Prime Minister Thatcher was told by her Secretary of State for Defence John Nott that the Argentine fleet appeared to be on its way to attack the Falkland Islands, which were defended by a handful of Royal Marines, and that the islands could not, once fallen, be retaken. However, when the First Sea Lord Admiral Henry Leach finally reached the meeting, he informed the Prime Minister that a task force led by two aircraft carriers could be readied within 48 hours and that, if lost, the islands could be retaken, though at the cost of several ships. Apart from the failure of Intelligence and of coordination between departments before the Argentine attack,¹ the absence of the Chief of Defence Staff, who was in New Zealand, and the division of opinion between the Secretary of State and the First Sea Lord, the governmental system worked as most people would expect it to work. The Prime Minister wanted to recapture the islands, the senior military officer most directly involved informed her what was militarily practical and what the costs might be. The cabinet had then to decide whether to fight or whether the potential losses were too great, and Parliament confirmed the decision, though it could hardly be informed of the professional advice on the likely costs.² Many people would imagine this was how the governmental system normally worked.

But, in fact, the course of events in 1982 was unusual; there has rarely been a discussion of this sort between military leaders and ministers when war threatened over the last 200 years. British leaders have assumed that the country would eventually win and they have not wanted to hear the objections which military leaders might raise to the operations they have in mind. The editor of the *Westminster Gazette* J. A. Spender aptly described British diplomacy in the

19th century as 'an audacious game of bluff with a military force which was small, antiquated and quite unequal to the tasks proposed for it'. He described the consequences as 'splendidly reckless', citing the example of Palmerston's behaviour, as prime minister, during the Prussian attack on Denmark in 1864. The government admitted privately that Britain could only mobilise 20,000 ill-equipped men to face 200,000 or 300,000 well-armed Prussians, yet ministers boasted in the Parliament that the Danes would not fight alone against the Prussians and thereby implied that Britain would protect them. Palmerston appeared willing to act without considering the balance of military power and consequently faced the choice between public humiliation and military defeat when Bismarck called his bluff. Under pressure from wiser cabinet members, he chose humiliation.³

The memoirs by the Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, by the Lord President of the Council John Morley and other government ministers give the impression that in August 1914 senior officers were not asked for their assessment of the military implications of declaring war. One of the most influential officers at that time, General Henry Wilson claimed subsequently that he had to lobby hard to have the army's voice heard at all. Of course it might be said that the situation was different in 1914 from 1982 because plans had already been drawn up to send an expeditionary force to assist the French in the event of a German attack. The cabinet had only to decide whether to implement them. Argentine aggression against the Falklands was much less expected and, therefore, new plans had to be made and thus the government needed more extensive military advice. But this distinction between the two crises does not withstand examination. The majority of the cabinet were not aware of the detailed military plans in 1914 and their existence did not affect the nature of the discussion. In any case, the cabinet tried to change the plans fundamentally once war was declared. But British behaviour was not unusual in the Europe of 1914. According to the US historian Alfred Vagts:

It does not appear that to any leader was put that straight question which [the French Premier] Caillaux presented to [General] Joffre during the Agadir crisis of 1911: 'General, it is said that Napoleon only gave battle when he thought that he had at least a sixty percent chance of victory. Have we a seventy percent chance of victory if the situation drives us to war?' Joffre replied: 'No, I do not think we have it.' Caillaux: 'that's good. We shall then negotiate.'⁴

This lack of communication between civilian leaders and the responsible military officers was repeated in Britain in 1939. Many senior officers agreed with Liddell Hart that the guarantee given by the government to Poland in March 1939 made no strategic sense because it was impossible to send sufficient forces to protect Poland against a German attack or to deter such aggression by movements elsewhere. Critics included the former CIGS, Lord Milne, who wrote of the declaration of war:

It was said of Mr Pitt that the statesman responsible for declaring war is apt to be a little vague as to the military means of prosecuting it. If Lord Kitchener was alarmed at the fact that the government had entered into the First War without any provision for carrying it on, what will posterity say of Ministers who gave to a foreign power a guarantee the fulfilment of which was beyond the wit of man?⁵

Odd as it may appear, British constitutional practice was at one with advice from the most influential strategic writer on how military and political leaders should interact over the decision to go to war. The Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz had argued that statesmen should decide policy, and policy had to guide the use of military force. Statesmen determined the objective and armed forces fulfilled their will. He admitted that 'a certain grasp of military affairs is vital for those [statesmen] in charge of general policy', but suggested that they 'can always get the necessary military information somehow or other'. What statesmen needed was intellect and strength of character.⁶ In practice this advice was, and is, imprecise and dangerous. Politicians who had taken no interest in strategy were suddenly faced with the need to take decisions which might lead to the defeat and destruction of their country. At that moment, political judgement was insufficient. A realistic estimate of the chances of victory or defeat, and the likely human and financial costs, was vital and, to take an example from Clausewitz's own time, was not supplied to the British government during the Napoleonic Wars until the Duke of Wellington took control of the campaign in the Peninsula. Moreover, such an estimate has become increasingly difficult since that time.

Transformations in strategy and tactics have become more frequent, as the pace of change in technology and economics has grown. No one could have decided in a matter of hours or days how the evolution of railways, high explosives, submarines, aircraft, tanks, nuclear weapons or precision-guided munitions had affected strategy over the years in

advance of the various crises. Given the magnitude of the issues at stake, before going to war, national leaders should ideally take the advice not only of professional military men but also of a variety of other experts including scientists, industrialists, lawyers, armchair strategists, doctors, logistics specialists, experts on the potential campaign theatre, opinion pollsters and economists. Obtaining advice 'somehow or other', in Clausewitz's words, is by no means straightforward and the memoirs of British politicians and senior officers on decision making before the two World Wars hardly suggest that it was either systematic or professional. This would not have been so bad if there was evidence that the decision makers had taken an acute interest in the debates on warfare before 1939. But cabinet ministers are always distracted by the multitude of economic and political issues looming before them in peacetime. Thus, in the 1920s and 1930s, politicians might claim that war was too serious a business to entrust to military men, but most politicians, even if they had themselves served in the First World War, concentrated on domestic and economic issues. In Britain, Winston Churchill was almost alone amongst senior politicians in his interest in military affairs and he was regarded as some sort of anachronism or dangerous and untrustworthy curiosity precisely because he bestrode the strategic debates in Britain for much of the 20th century.

Against this background, politicians and senior military officers found communication between them even more difficult than usual. Field Marshal Ironside, who was appointed Chief of the Imperial General Staff on the day the Second World War began, recorded in his diary in August 1940, 'I have been pondering over the last few weeks, and it astonishes me more and more that [the Prime Minister, Neville] Chamberlain had the courage to declare war on Germany. He certainly didn't want to do so'. One reason, of course, although Ironside did not mention this, was that Parliament pushed the Prime Minister into upholding the guarantee he had given to Poland. Chamberlain might have fought still harder against this pressure if he had realised the military difficulties ahead. Ironside believed that the Prime Minister had no idea of the military strength of the Germans and shared the widespread faith in the French army. He did not know how long it took to manufacture military equipment or that armies had to train for months with new equipment before they could use it effectively. 'I am sure that the Cabinet did not ask the War Office if they thought they were ready for war . . . I am sure that the Cabinet did not ask any soldier's advice. *Mine certainly was never asked*' (italics added). Given that the very survival of the nation was at stake, it was an astounding recollection.⁷

Governments continued to avoid receiving candid military advice about pending operations after the Second World War. Before the Suez Operation in 1956 the chiefs of staff were asked to draw up various options for recapturing the Suez Canal, which had been nationalised by the Egyptians, and presented these to ministers.⁸ The problem was that this made them complicit and apparently supportive of the government's plans, and the momentum of events and structure of government left them little opportunity to make fundamental criticisms of the enterprise. Yet, according to his account, the First Sea Lord Louis Mountbatten harboured the gravest reservations. Above all, he observed what anybody familiar with events in Palestine, Kenya and Indo-China ought to have known, that, even if the British and French succeeded in recapturing the canal, they would have to protect it against constant guerrilla attacks from infuriated Egyptians. He prepared two letters alerting Anthony Eden, the prime minister, of the dangers but was stopped by the First Lord, Lord Cillcennin, who argued that it would be improper for a First Sea Lord to address the Prime Minister directly. Mountbatten could make his points in the Chiefs of Staff Committee but they could be, and were, ignored by the prime minister.⁹ The First Sea Lord was more successful at convincing the Minister of Defence Walter Monckton, who promised to protest against Eden's policy in the tightly knit Egypt Committee which Eden had established to deal with the Suez crisis, but Monckton's protests simply caused embarrassment rather than a change of course. Thus, one of Britain's most disastrous post-1945 military operations went ahead, thereby undermining the country's position in the Middle East and the wider world.

In Britain's next major action, the Falklands War, as we have seen, the system worked effectively, but Mrs Thatcher's memoirs do not give the impression that she consulted the chiefs of staff a decade later when she threw Britain's weight behind the US decision to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1990.¹⁰ At the time she was in the United States meeting President Bush and encouraging him to take a very strong line with the Iraqis. No doubt, she rightly believed it was obvious that the United States would emerge victorious if it committed itself to driving the Iraqis from Kuwait, but a formal assessment of the military situation by the chiefs of staff would still have been appropriate, particularly if the two governments at any time contemplated overthrowing the Iraqi government as well as liberating Kuwait.

But, let us suppose that governments had asked the leaders of the armed forces for their opinion of the prospects before the two World Wars; if Grey and Asquith had asked the military leaders in August 1914

what the war would cost in terms of casualties, it is inconceivable that the man appointed to command the expeditionary force to France, Field Marshal Sir John French would have predicted that Britain would see 730,000 of its men killed and that the Empire as a whole would lose 1 million, that the investments made over the last century would be dispersed and the country burdened with colossal debts to the United States. Field Marshal Viscount Kitchener, who became war minister in 1914, might have had a better understanding, given his high view of German power and his belief that the war would last several years, but even he might have flinched before admitting to himself, or others, what the cost might be. Similarly, it seems unlikely that Ironside or Sir John Gort, who commanded the expeditionary force to France in 1939, could have calculated the losses Britain was to suffer over the six years of the Second World War.

The constitutional system worked well in 1982 because the Falklands War was limited and conventional, but committing a country to a world war is like fugitives jumping into a great river in full spate to escape their pursuers. If they are powerful swimmers they may hope to land lower down, and if they are familiar with the river, they may know where the currents and eddies are likely to be, but they will still be at the mercy of unknown and, as the comments by Joffe, Milne, Ironside and others suggest, this encourages a note of caution. Even if the military factors were calculable in wartime, which they are not because troops and weaponry are frequently untested in combat, political events are often crucial; Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 and Japan's attack on the Western powers six months later largely determined the outcome of the Second World War because they brought US and Soviet power into the equation, but they could not have been foreseen when Britain went to war in 1939, and forecasting them was not, in any case, something to which military expertise could contribute.

Not only is it impossible to forecast the course of a great war, but serving officers are unlikely to be able to predict when a successful conventional intervention will turn into a prolonged war against guerrillas, this is determined by the political balance, mood and culture of a 'defeated' state. What they can say is that, if it were to do so, a successful struggle against insurgents would last a decade, at the very least, would be bloody, and unpopular at home and abroad. In 1945 many believed, because of the indomitable courage they had shown, that the Germans and Japanese would go on fighting as guerrillas once their conventional armies had been defeated; yet, in the event, they made virtually no resistance. As we saw in Chapter 4, in the early 1990s

British military leaders hesitated to embroil themselves with the Serbs because of their reputation for resisting the Nazis in the Second World War. The British army had been struggling against the IRA for two decades in a tedious war, which took more than 3000 lives and in which their behaviour was under intense international media scrutiny.¹¹ Senior American army officers were equally reluctant to involve themselves in 'another Vietnam'. After 9/11 because of his experiences in Vietnam, Colin Powell led the 'doves' in George W. Bush's administration, while those who had evaded service in the war, led by Bush himself, apparently believed that US forces would be universally welcomed in Iraq in March 2003.¹²

But none of this means that senior officers should not be asked for their views, any more than an expert swimmer should be ignored when considering swimming in a dangerous river. Over the last 200 years society has come to rely ever more extensively on specialists, and the military are the specialists in warfare. There have been specialists for thousands of years, including priests, apothecaries, shepherds, cowherds and, indeed, soldiers, but now there are far more professions and their knowledge is ever more voluminous and esoteric. Non-specialists rely on specialists although they also resent this dependence. Despite what was said above about the inability of senior officers to foresee all the horrors of the two World Wars, by and large specialists will be more pessimistic than non-specialists because they know what can go amiss. Economists and businessmen know what can go wrong with the economy; environmentalists fear man's impact on the earth's biosphere; astronomers fear that an asteroid may hit the earth. The Marquis of Salisbury expressed the point famously in a letter written in June 1877 when many of the professions were becoming more securely established:

No lesson seems to be so deeply inculcated by the experience of life as that you should never trust experts. If you believe the doctors, nothing is wholesome: if you believe the theologians, nothing is innocent: if you believe the soldiers, nothing is safe. They all require to have their strong wine diluted by a very large mixture of common sense.¹³

The financial demands of the professional soldier or sailor have to be 'diluted' in peacetime, because otherwise they would denude the national budget in order to insure against all military threats, but in preparing for war their caution is surely wise.¹⁴ Their anxieties may sometimes be exaggerated but they know how easy it is to become involved in conflicts and how difficult it is to extricate armies from those

which turn into disasters.¹⁵ If Britain had a written constitution, there would be a good deal to be said for laying down that a government *has* to consult the chiefs of staff and listen to their estimates of the costs and likely outcome of an impending conflict before committing the country to war. The Ministry of Defence is now far better organised than the Admiralty and War Office were when J. A. Spender was writing, but the chiefs of staff do not have as much influence as they ought to do when the lives of troops and sometimes even the future of the country depend upon the government making the right decision about overseas intervention.

The First World War was the first total conflict fought when the armed forces had become a distinct professional group. A century beforehand, the Napoleonic Wars had broken out before the War Office and Admiralty had begun their very slow transformation into effective bureaucracies. For more than a decade, the Prime Minister, the younger Pitt dominated British strategy and dispersed forces across the globe in an ineffective effort to halt the expansion of French power. It was not until after Pitt's death in January 1806, and when Wellington came to command the British army in the Iberian Peninsula in 1809, that Britain acquired a strategy worthy of the name which, by supporting the Spanish guerrillas, began the process which led to Napoleon's defeat.¹⁶ Wellington helped to protect the armed forces from public criticism in Britain because he stressed the importance of respecting the lives and property of the Portuguese and Spanish civilians amongst whom the war was fought, and winning them over in the struggle against the French. This was good military strategy but it was also highly attractive to the British elite. His published dispatches are full of warnings to his own and allied troops against looting. He was reluctant to take Spanish forces into France when he invaded enemy territory because he knew they would want revenge on the French people. When the allies placed him in charge of their occupation forces in France, he did his best to restrain the repression of the French people by the other allies and to end the occupation as quickly as possible. Furthermore, he took a thoroughly modern and instrumental attitude to warfare as a whole. He deplored casualties and regarded the romantic view, propagated by Napoleon, that wars are justified by the 'glory' they bring, as unmitigated nonsense.¹⁷ In sum, Wellington was the ideal commander of coalition forces supported by a democracy. He brought victories after years of defeats under Pitt but not at excessive cost.¹⁸

On the outbreak of the First World War, the British Expeditionary Force was dispatched to assist the French and Belgians hold the line

against the German advance in the crucial theatre of the war. As Bloch had forecast, the fighting bogged down into a vast siege, characterised by trenches, barbed wire, machine guns and heavy artillery. Most senior British officers believed that the only way to defeat the Germans was by concentrating the armies as they were raised in this decisive theatre and assisting the French to wear down their German counterparts. Politicians, worried about public opinion turning against the war and impatient with the explanations for delays put forward by senior officers, searched for some way of breaking the stalemate by attacking Germany via its Turkish or Balkan allies. They criticised professional military officers for what they saw as their conservatism and lack of imagination, and their waste of lives in frontal attacks on German trenches. We can now see that the professionals were right to oppose the frittering away of British forces in subsidiary theatres and to regard this as simply an attempt to repeat Pitt's failed strategy against France 100 years before. The politicians were correct to see that the officer corps were slow to grasp the revolutionary nature of the problem facing them, but they were not as conservative as they have often been painted. The First World War was technically highly innovative; at sea it saw the introduction of submarines and ships carrying aircraft; in the air it saw the first effective use of bombers, reconnaissance aircraft and fighters; and on the Western front, chemical weapons, tanks and flamethrowers were brought into service to try to break the stalemate. That these were not wholly effective simply demonstrated the overwhelming superiority of defensive over offensive technology at that period. A siege can only be ended successfully either by starving the besieged into surrender or by breaking through their defences.

After the war ended, the struggle to apportion blame for the losses on the Western Front was not just an argument about the past but a battle to influence the present and future between the armed forces and the politicians. Whoever coined the phrase, 'war is too serious a thing to be left to military men', it was from this period that the phrase became fashionable.¹⁹ On the other side of the Channel, Lloyd George continued his wartime struggle against the military through his memoirs which contain an extensive, though deeply biased, analysis of the civil-military tensions during the war. Of course, his criticisms were sometimes justified; the former prime minister was, for example, rightly scathing about the Royal Navy's reluctance to introduce convoys to prevent submarine attacks on shipping. It was not until the country had been brought almost to its knees that the Admiralty finally agreed

that convoys might solve the problem which, indeed, they very rapidly succeeded in doing.²⁰

According to Lloyd George's account, the War Office also seemed 'ever to be ... preparing, not for the next war ... but for the last one or the last but one They only remembered the lessons that were better forgotten because they were inapplicable, and forgot all the experiences by which they ought to have profited because they were a foretaste of the methods of future warfare'.²¹ Lloyd George claimed that the War Office and the commanders in the field like Douglas Haig dismissed the importance of machine guns and obstructed the development of tanks.²² In sum, as he put it towards the end of his memoirs:

They were not equipped with that superiority in brains or experience over an amateur steeped in the incidents and needs of war which would justify the attitude they struck and the note of assured past-mastership they adopted towards all criticism or suggestion from outside or below. The generals themselves were at least four-fifths amateur, hampered by the wrong training In the most crucial matters relating to their own profession our leading soldiers had to be helped out by the politician.²³

Lloyd George went on to argue that the politicians were too cautious in asserting their authority over an army command which had never attracted men of talent and which had suffered 'a long course of mental subservience and suppression'. Finally, he denigrated senior officers who had shown a 'solicitude' to avoid 'personal jeopardy' during the conflict by avoiding the battlefield altogether.

It was a formidable attack reflecting the bitterness between the government and the senior officers, and the desire to place responsibility for losses on the shoulders of the military. Lloyd George's view became the conventional wisdom in the inter-war period and it is still the opinion of a minority of those who have written about the Great War.²⁴ But many of the leading modern historians of the First World War, including Brian Bond and John Terraine, have not subscribed to this picture. For example, Terraine dismissed that Lloyd George's claim that the War Office obstructed the production of machine guns. The Ministry ordered all the machine guns that the Vickers company could produce, and extra factories had to be built or converted before production could increase substantially; Field Marshal Haig had been an enthusiast for these weapons since 1898, he always encouraged officers to train with them and tried to obtain as many as possible for the army. By the end

of the war, nearly 240,000 machine guns had been manufactured for the British army.²⁵ Terraine also disputed the criticisms by Lloyd George and others that the high command had wasted the advantages Britain should have gained from developing tanks before the Germans.²⁶ In fact, Haig and others wanted as many tanks as possible but production of such a wholly novel device was always slow, the first models were unreliable and they were vulnerable to armour piercing bullets, not just artillery. Useful as they were, they were not yet the war-winning weapons which Churchill and others hoped.

But, if Haig and some of his officers are now defended by historians, the attacks launched on them by Lloyd George and others in the 1920s were as effective politically as the politicians intended. They altered the terms of the political and strategic debates, reduced the influence of the armed forces in the 1920s and increased that of other institutions. The armed forces were deprived of funds very largely because of Britain's indebtedness after the war and the lack of immediate threats but, with scarce resources, their demands were hardly strengthened when they came to be regarded as incompetent and old fashioned.²⁷ It was not until the Second World War that the struggle for survival against the Nazis began to change the armed forces' public image.

In the inter-war years, there was a widespread, though erroneous, belief that soldiers were inherently belligerent. On the contrary, the man who was to control the British army as CIGS through most of the Second World War wrote in his diary, when it began, 'I find it impossible to realise. It is all too ghastly even to be a nightmare. The awful futility of it as proved by the last war! . . . I suppose that conflicts between Right and Wrong are still necessary and that we have still got to be taught more fully the futility of war.'²⁸ In this case, the military were not more cautious than the generality, Allenbrooke's comment exactly summarised the horror and resignation with which Britain went to war in 1939.

The Second World War produced no Wellington but neither did it produce a public display of civil-military antagonism as the First World War had done. The friction between Churchill and his military counterparts was intense but hidden within the government. Even before Allenbrooke had become CIGS he had a long disagreement with Churchill who wanted to keep British forces in Western France after the withdrawal from Belgium and Eastern France via Dunkirk. The general had been sent to command the remnant of the British forces which had been left behind to work with the French army even though their

allies were in a state of collapse. When Allenbrooke proposed falling back towards the Channel, Churchill told him by telephone:

I had been sent to France to make the French feel that we were supporting them. I replied that it was impossible to make a corpse feel Our talk lasted for half an hour, and on many occasions his arguments were so formed as to give me the impression that he considered I was suffering from 'cold feet' This was so infuriating that I was repeatedly on the verge of losing my temper.²⁹

Allenbrooke's diary entry illustrates perfectly the reasons for the civil-military clash. Politicians naturally emphasise political objectives rather than military means and in June 1940, if there were any ways of encouraging the French and keeping them in the war, this was obviously vitally important. But Allenbrooke had seen the demoralisation amongst the French soldiers and knew they would not go on fighting. He wanted to save the remainder of the British forces but he was in danger of being accused of cowardice or military incompetence by the prime minister who saw the larger picture, who had studied war but who was not aware of the latest developments in armoured warfare or of the actual situation on the battlefield.

Churchill's instinct was to behave as Pitt had done in the 1790s by launching attacks wherever opportunity appeared to offer except, in Churchill's case, directly across the Channel, where he foresaw that a premature attempt to invade might lead to a catastrophe similar to the landings in the Dardanelles during the First World War. The official naval historian Captain Stephen Roskill commented on the friction between Churchill and the admirals:

The admirals [he regarded with suspicion] were perhaps too outspoken in their criticisms of some of his ideas, and too forthright in their replies to his signals and letters; for Churchill never took kindly to servicemen who opposed him on any score – which was, no doubt, the result of his experiences during, and study of, the first war His erroneous strategic concepts, such as his blindness to the threat from Japan and his share in the responsibility for the disasters in Greece and Crete in 1941, brought very serious consequences in their train His addiction to the capture of widely scattered islands led to the dissipation of valuable resources.³⁰

As Roskill's quotation suggests, after the Second World War historical criticism often focused on Churchill and his strategic decisions and there was much less tendency to attack the British armed forces as a whole than there had been after the Armistice in 1918. The literature which emerged from the Second World War was very different from the war literature of the 1920s because the experience was so much more varied. The war fought by Fitzroy Maclean in support of Tito's partisans and the struggle for survival by Spencer Chapman and John Cross behind Japanese lines in Malaya were a world apart from the aerial combats in the Battle of Britain, which were just as great a contrast to the ground struggle in Burma.³¹ It was only the extensive literature describing the sufferings in the Japanese prisoner of war camps which acquired the quality of sameness that characterised the accounts of the trenches in the First World War.³² In both cases the reader comes to feel that he could write the story himself after he has read a dozen memoirs. In such circumstances the descriptions often have the identical air of bewildered, and furious, helplessness. But in the First World War the animus was against the officers and against war itself, in the Second World War it was against the enemy and sometimes also against the government which had contributed to their capture by failing to defend Singapore adequately.

Today, half a century later, the British army is now held in high esteem, higher indeed than any other major national institution and higher than any other West European army is held by its people.³³ Its reputation has survived decades of fighting in the most difficult circumstances against guerrillas in Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, Aden and Northern Ireland. As pointed out in the previous chapter, in such wars there is always the temptation to resort to the use of torture to extract information from suspects and to use excessive force against rioters and other civilians. No doubt, on many occasions army actions were open to criticism but there has not been such pervasive failure to maintain civilized standards as overcame French forces during the guerrilla wars in Indo-China and Algeria and United States' forces in Vietnam.³⁴

This at least makes it more likely that governments will listen to the views of the armed forces before and during wars. But the struggle to ensure that this is the case is continual and the armed forces are caught in a bind; if they are accused of failing their profession, as they were after the First World War, then their advice will be disparaged; if, on the contrary, they are too successful, there is an increased danger that governments will be tempted to intervene abroad without sufficient thought. In 1982 Admiral Leach told Mrs Thatcher what it would cost to

retake the Falkland Islands, subsequent successes in Bosnia and Kosovo encouraged the Blair government to ignore the defeats which guerrillas inflicted on conventional armies in Palestine, Indo-China, Afghanistan, Aden, Algeria and Vietnam; the consequences in Iraq and Afghanistan were all too evident.

Tensions between two very different professions – politician and soldier – are inevitable when they have to work closely together in particularly fraught and dangerous circumstances and over several years. Serving officers can appear as an obstacle to politicians' desire to go to war and an impediment to its rapid conclusion. Politicians are concerned with the ends to be achieved by warfare, serving officers are professionally involved with the means. Politicians want to finish the war as quickly as possible while public and foreign support lasts, officers have a better idea of the costs involved in pushing ahead too rapidly. Politicians have to judge whether senior officers' unwillingness to take a course of action is due to incompetence, conservatism, cowardice or prudent professional analysis. In the end, military commanders know that they and their fellow officers and men will pay the price for wrong strategic calculations.