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Parliament and War

The right to commit the country to war is part of the royal prerogative in Britain which has passed in practice from the Crown to the government. However, over the last 200 years, whenever the country has become involved in a major war, Parliament has debated the issue as though power resided with the legislative as well as the executive, which, in the end, it does. Had the government been defeated on any of these occasions then it would probably have had to resign. This has never happened. Moreover, before April 1982 open Parliamentary debates were almost entirely confined to discussing the cause for which the country was being asked to fight, during the Falklands War, MPs also began to discuss the means to be employed and the interaction between the two.

This revolution occurred when Mrs Thatcher's government openly told Parliament which ships and aircraft were being mobilised to overturn the Argentine seizure of the Falkland Islands.¹ A government had never openly supplied such information before, though the revolution was unappreciated then and later. Indeed there were complaints in the House of Lords at the time that not enough information had been given to them and absolutely no recognition that, on the last occasion when an imminent war had been debated, the intervention against Egypt in 1956, not a scrap of military information had been offered by the government to the two Houses. During the crucial debate on 2 August 1956, the Prime Minister Anthony Eden merely told MPs that he had been compelled 'to take certain precautionary measures of a military nature', including the movement of 'certain' Royal Navy, Army and RAF units.²

Government control over all military information had, in fact, been the norm. On 3 August 1914, the Foreign Secretary Edward Grey told the House that the French Fleet was stationed in the Mediterranean leaving their Channel ports exposed, though the Germans had promised not to

attack the ports if Britain pledged neutrality. He made the ludicrously inaccurate forecast that, if Britain came to the aid of the French against the German attack, 'for us with a powerful Fleet, which we believe will be able to protect our commerce, to protect our shores, and to protect our interests, if we are engaged in war, we shall suffer but little more than we shall suffer even if we stand aside'. Furthermore, he assured the members that 'the readiness and efficiency of [the] forces were never at a higher mark than they are today'. Otherwise they were left in ignorance of the government's strategy and intentions.³ Similarly on 29 August 1939, the Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax told the Lords only that, 'the air defence of the country is now in a state of instant readiness. The whole of our Fighting Fleet is ready at a moment's notice to take up the dispositions which would be necessary in war.' Preparations for the mobilisation of the Territorial and regular Army had been put in hand should this be necessary.⁴

Of course, there had been extensive debates over the previous years about naval and military policy in general, but such debates were confined to a minority of members and the final debates before war broke out were essentially political. Yet governments took daunting risks; in the French Wars British armies amounted to a small fraction of the great continental forces. London made up for this by subsidising its allies,⁵ but, until Wellington's army was sent to aid the Spanish, the allies suffered a series of defeats. Similarly, at the start of the First World War, Britain had only a tiny army, the Royal Navy might dominate the seas but it was hardly going to have much impact on Germany in a short war, and most, like Grey, assumed that a long war was impossible for economic reasons. Some might argue that there should have been a debate on this central issue, alongside the legal implications of the German invasion of Belgium or the significance of British obligations to France. What is the use of declaring war if you are impotent to affect its outcome? But public discussion of Britain's weakness would have demoralised Britain's troops and its allies, and thus, even if the conventions had been more permissive about public debate, MPs would have had to evade the central issue in their open discussions.

It was not just government spokesmen but all those who followed them in the debates on the onset of war who eschewed military issues. The debates in 1793 and 1914 are symptomatic. On 12 February 1793 William Pitt argued that Britain was not responsible for the French decision to declare war, it had not interfered in French politics, despite the chaos, which the revolution had brought since 1789, that, nevertheless, the French had threatened to try to set up republics and overthrow

existing governments everywhere. They had conquered Savoy, they had embargoed British merchants and they had started building up to 50 ships of the line. Thus 'secure and lasting peace' could only be achieved by war. For the Whigs, Charles James Fox replied that this was an ideological war, that it would involve the usual miseries inseparable from warfare, that it was being waged for the restoration of the French monarchy and that British diplomacy towards France had been inept and threatening. Edmund Burke then waded in to say that it was precisely because it was an ideological war that he supported it. The government were to be criticised not for going to war but for delaying too long so that the revolutionary menace had grown. There were a few asides on military affairs; Pitt referred to increases in French military expenditure, Fox to the sufferings of war and Burke emphasised the battle-hardened nature of Britain's enemies which would make the coming war one of the most dangerous on which Britain had embarked. But these *were* asides, the focus of debate was moral, legal and political.⁶

Anyone reading the debate of 3 August 1914 nearly 100 years later would think that it was moving strongly against the government as virtually all of the Liberal and Labour members, who spoke after Grey, disputed the wisdom of going to war. The MP for Burnley argued that there was no British obligation to France, that the Germans had agreed not to attack French ports and that Germany was not trying to annex Belgium, it only wanted to gain passage for its troops. Josiah Wedgwood took up Bloch's warning that thousands would be thrown out of work by the disruption to trade and this would bring about a revolution. Edmund Harvey advocated neutrality so that Britain could act as intermediary between the combatants; Keir Hardie doubted that the people were in favour of war and advocated compromise, while Arthur Ponsonby warned against war fever and against the horrors which war would bring. It was only then that Grey received some support when Sir A. Markham rose to throw doubt on the idea that Germany would evacuate Belgium at the end of the war. Markham admitted that the war was unpopular in the country but insisted that the House had to show that Britain could keep its word; Sir Albert Spicer called for more negotiations and Rowntree warned that Russia would prove a greater threat than Germany which had more in common with British civilisation; Molteno reverted to the frequent denials in the past by Asquith and other ministers that Britain was committed to sending an army to Europe. He deplored both the secret agreements, which Grey said made it a matter of honour to support France, and the notion that Britain was committed by open treaties to Belgium's defence. Llewelyn

Williams argued that no British interests were involved and no treaty obligations.⁷

And so the debate continued. It showed that many MPs did not share today's conventional wisdom that the war was popular. As we have seen in Chapter 6, the one-sided discussion was drawn to a close by Arthur Balfour speaking from the Conservative benches to warn that the interventions from the Liberal side might give foreign countries the wrong impression of the state of British feelings. 'What we have tonight are the very dregs and lees of the debate, in no sense representing the various views of the Members of the House.' This was, he said, 'an impotent and evil debate'. Colonel Seely rose to remonstrate with him, but the debate was effectively over. There had been references to the movement of the German army through Belgium, to the possibility of a German bombardment of the French coast, but, as in 1793, the military issues were peripheral.⁸

The 1793 and 1914 debates were not exceptional, on other occasions when Britain went to war in the past (in March 1854, February 1857, October 1899, September 1939, July 1950 and August 1956) there were extensive debates in Parliament about the political wisdom and morality of the course of action taken by the government.⁹ There was always opposition from some members of the two Houses. But overt hostility did not appear to be based on the unlikelihood of military success; the Whigs in 1793, the Cobdenites in 1854 and 1857, the radical Labour and Liberal MPs in 1914, the pacifists in 1939 argued that war was wrong, not that it would be unsuccessful.¹⁰ Some Whigs did indeed warn that it would be very difficult to defeat Napoleon before the Waterloo campaign in May 1815, but the emphasis they gave to this point was unusual.¹¹ It is also true that Churchill and his tiny band of followers had frequently called attention to the state of the armed forces in the 1930s and that there was a widespread public fear of bomber attacks.¹² But this was not the focus of debate in September 1939. All but a handful of MPs were by then determined that Britain should uphold its guarantee to Poland and, if necessary, go to war with Germany. The civil-military divide was complete, Parliament decided when to go to war, the armed forces had to weigh up how the battles were to be won.¹³

The widespread reluctance of MPs to demand more information from the government before war began and to discuss the impending campaign was, no doubt, based on reasonable fears of spreading anxiety about the military prospects, on confidence in Britain's ability ultimately to be victorious, on concern that military secrets might be revealed and enemies alerted to weakness, and on members' lack of

faith in their own competence to second guess the decisions of the military commanders. Finally, it might be considered less unpatriotic to attack the government's poor political decisions than to suggest that the country was too weak to undertake the task in hand. Governments naturally encouraged Parliamentary reticence; Pitt told the Commons in July 1794 that they would, 'of course', not want a debate on whether allied troops had been deployed in the most effective theatres.¹⁴ Moreover, a majority of the public accepted the need for caution about discussing military affairs; in October 1942, 46 per cent of the population said that they were against open discussion of the prospects for a second front to liberate Europe, while 37 per cent pronounced in favour of such a debate.¹⁵ And a discussion would indeed have been barren because ministers could hardly describe the military calculations on which the timing of the decision to launch such a front had to be based.

After wartime reverses, the ensuing Parliamentary debates show how restraint operated. To take a classic example, in November 1915, there were extensive controversies after disasters suffered by British forces in the Balkans and the Dardanelles. But the comments by MPs reflected the inhibitions they felt about openly discussing military problems on the floor of the House. George Barnes, the Labour MP for Glasgow, expressed the prevalent view when he admitted, 'with respect to the conduct of the war, I shall say little. . . . I am not a soldier'.¹⁶ Former officers elected to Parliament attacked the government for taking strictly military decisions, thus reinforcing the notion that, once war began, strategy was a matter for military men alone. In a veiled attack on the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, who was believed to be largely responsible for the Dardanelles campaign, Admiral Lord Charles Beresford claimed that 'politicians have been interfering with the Executive. Their business is to stick to the administrative and political situation. That interference was the cause of many disasters at the beginning of the war.' Other MPs immediately turned on him and argued that he was himself now interfering in strategy. As one put it, 'if private Members begin to discuss questions of high policy, it seems to me that it is extremely dangerous, and that no good can result'.¹⁷ Thus MPs censored themselves over strategic questions. Most of those who intervened worried about the danger of giving comfort or providing secrets to the enemy and their views were reiterated in the Parliamentary debates of the Second World War, the Korean War and beyond.¹⁸

What had changed by April 1982 which broke down the civil-military divide and made governments supply more information and Parliament much more willing to debate military questions in open sessions?

On 2 August 1956 there were already a few complaints by MPs that the government was not supplying them with the information they needed on which to base a proper debate about the impending Suez operation. Major Legge-Bourke expatiated on the military difficulties and Desmond Donnelly complained, 'I understand that we are talking about commissioning aircraft carriers and putting troops on them, but how many troops? Where are they to go?... At the very moment when the critical situation exists we have no information of any kind of this nature.'¹⁹ Thus, it was coming to seem increasingly anomalous to ignore information on issues relating to security, including force levels, military equipment and training, which was openly available in peacetime, and that discussions on the subject were broadening amongst civilians only to shut down in Parliament at the crucial moment when the government was meditating going to war.

Continued controversy over nuclear strategy, which was far more important than a limited conflict over Suez, increased scepticism about the wisdom of governments' policies and thus reduced the general willingness to leave security policy in their hands.²⁰ If the United States supplied most of the intellectual leadership in the nuclear debate, it was in Britain that the issue first evoked a passionate response from a wider public, leading, as Chapter 3 showed, to the mass protests of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Its supporters demanded the right to be heard when they saw that the issues concerned the very survival of the nation.²¹ Strategic debate could no longer be confined either to government in particular or to the elite in general, as the bitter divisions over the Vietnam War demonstrated very clearly during the second half of the 1960s. Whether the media played any part in US political difficulties during that war is still a matter of debate, but what is certain is that the military campaign was watched and pondered in homes across the Western world and that US leaders were widely criticised for their tactics and for the effect of their decisions on the people of Vietnam.²²

The widening of the defence debate may have been desirable or simply inevitable because of pressure from the media and public arising from nuclear issues and the Vietnam War, but successive British governments went with the tide by trying to inform the public and to convert it to their point of view. Until the election of the Blair government, annual *Defence White Papers* became ever longer, better presented and more detailed. While in the early 1950s such papers consisted of a handful of uninformative and uninviting pages, the *Statement on Defence Estimates* in 1983 ran to over 100 pages of well-illustrated and documented

information.²³ Tony Blair's government made much greater use of websites which provided less information than the White Papers but gave copies of speeches by ministers and had the advantage of being free. The increase in the information provided by governments went in parallel with the growth in information on military questions published by the Rand Corporation, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and numerous other unofficial bodies in Britain and particularly in the United States. The public in general were given information if they chose to buy and read it, and an increasingly vocal community of armchair strategists took the opportunity to do so. The media in Britain and elsewhere demanded information, and foreign journalists had also to be kept sympathetic to Britain's cause. That meant feeding them with ever more information.

When, therefore, Mrs Thatcher and her colleagues listed the British ships and aircraft heading for the Falkland Islands in April 1982, they were responding to a demand which could not easily have been resisted. In the event, the demand dovetailed with the government's hope that revelation of the size of the task force would persuade the Argentines to withdraw from the islands without fighting. When this hope proved forlorn, it was of no great consequence that the Argentine government knew the types of ships and aircraft approaching them. The fact is that Britain's enemies have always been aware of the general make-up of the country's forces. As the former correspondent of the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* put it in 1939:

We can count the warships and note the calibre of their guns. We can estimate the strategic value of Great Britain's naval bases. We know the number and kind of aeroplanes which make up her first-line strength. We know the equipment of her infantry battalions, and the arrangements she has made for anti-aircraft defence.²⁴

This was a slight exaggeration, radar was secret, as were the numbers of front-line aircraft and even ministers were not always aware of the strength, or rather weakness, of key bases such as Singapore, but, as in 1982, it was generally the detail which was hidden, the strength of battleship armour, the elevation of the guns, the speed and manoeuvrability of aircraft. In the Falklands War the Argentines deployed British-designed Type-42 destroyers and an aircraft carrier built in Britain, although they would not have known the details of the computer programs in the Type-42s which Britain also employed in the conflict. Military handbooks showed the general performance of the

British Seas Harrier aircraft, although not the number or mark of their Sidewinder air-to-air missiles.

The armed forces complained in 1982 about the release of operational secrets, rather than information on equipment. They feared that the Argentines might monitor the public speculations of retired officers about where forces might land in the Falklands. Such officers were no longer privy to military plans but they might have revealed general British propensities and attitudes. The Liberal Leader in the Lords, Frank Byers complained:

at the plethora of speculation in the press and the rest of the media on military tactics and operations available and in discussion of the minutest detail of the men and units of the task force, its equipment and its potential performance. I know that there is held a view that all this information is already in the hands of the Argentines. It may be, but I doubt it.²⁵

He went on to argue that Hitler would have benefited from such discussion in the Second World War, particularly during the preparations for the D-Day landings in Normandy. However, younger retired officers, who participated in the media debates, could see no point in trying to hide statistics which had long been published in the *Defence Estimates* and elsewhere. There were graver reasons to complain, not least that the plans for the attack on Argentine positions at Goose Green had been given before the advance was completed and, potentially much more seriously, the Ministry of Defence revealed that Argentine bombs were wrongly fused and were, consequently, not exploding when they hit British warships.²⁶ These mistakes showed the difficulty of deciding what information would help an enemy who was carefully monitoring the press. Of course, the government could afford to be more open because the issues at stake were incomparably less momentous than they had been in the great wars of 1793, 1914 or 1939, but Britain's prestige was at issue quite as much as it had been in the Crimean, Boer or Korean Wars, and the likely outcome of those campaigns was not the subject of Parliamentary debate when the crucial decision to go to war was openly discussed beforehand.²⁷ The most important change was then not in the significance of the issues at stake, but in the assumptions and demands made by the media, MPs and the public at large.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Mrs Thatcher followed the precedent she had set in 1982 and again informed Parliament of the British weapons being sent to the Gulf including 'a squadron of Tornado F3

air defence aircraft, a squadron of Tornado ground attack aircraft, and a squadron of Jaguar aircraft for ground support.... One Royal Navy destroyer and two frigates.... A second destroyer is on the way there, as are three mine clearance vessels.'²⁸ Two years later, following the collapse of Yugoslavia, the Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd told Parliament that Britain would send 1800 troops to Bosnia to help with convoy protection.²⁹ Although the Blair government was generally more reticent about providing information than its predecessors, seven years later still, George Robertson, the secretary of state for Defence, gave some details to Parliament of the British equipment involved in the initial attacks on Serbia following its refusal to bow to international pressure over Kosovo. He reported that the submarine HMS *Splendid* had fired its cruise missiles in anger for the first time and that Harriers had carried out attacks on ammunition dumps and other targets.³⁰

Following these revelations, on each occasion, the military strategy and tactics pursued have been extensively discussed by MPs, again in marked contrast to what had happened before 1982. During the Parliamentary debate in 1990, David Owen insisted that, in the event of war, 'there is little doubt that he [Saddam Hussein] will use gas'. Sir Peter Tapsell prophesied accurately that US air power would dominate the war and that the Iraqi tank force would then be powerless.³¹ The Secretary of State for Defence Tom King told Parliament that the government believed the Iraqis had 150,000 men, 1500 tanks and 700 artillery pieces in Kuwait, and went on to describe in detail the military forces assembling from all over the world to liberate the country.³²

In 1992, when Britain sent peacekeeping forces to try to stop massacres in Bosnia, Douglas Hurd introduced the Parliamentary debate by saying that the government rejected the idea of attacking the Serbs from the air, even though many believed that they were primarily responsible for the massacres. In contrast to his predecessors before 1982, Hurd focused on the military, not the moral issues, the difficulty of hitting Serb weapons, the way in which the combatants and civilians lived side by side and the likelihood that bombing would end the possibility of peacekeeping.³³ He was immediately put under pressure 'to do something about the situation', while backbenchers cautioned the government to make certain that the troops could be evacuated if necessary.³⁴ Altogether the debate showed considerable familiarity with the political *and* military problems and benefits of peacekeeping, as well as the anger aroused by the massacres shown on television, and the confidence of many members in the ability of the armed forces to improve the situation.

The debate over Kosovo seven years later echoed these considerations. Conservative speakers expressed anxiety that the air attacks being made on Serbia would have to be followed by ground action if Serb control of Kosovo was to be reduced and Alan Clark, who regarded himself as a military historian, suggested that half a million men would be necessary.³⁵ Tom Clarke, the MP for Coatbridge and Chryston, more presciently observed that it was 'ludicrous to suppose that all over Kosovo and Serbia, tanks are not being dispersed. They are hardly going to be left together in car parks for us to bomb. Of course the ideal place to park a tank is in the middle of a village in Kosovo.'³⁶ When the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan bogged down in civil war and insurgency, both Houses pressed the government not only for statements about their objectives but also for detailed responses to their criticisms about levels of equipment provided for the armed forces. In July 2006 Lord Garden urged the government to provide adequate transport helicopters and close air support aircraft.³⁷ In the Commons Liam Fox called for greater support in Afghanistan from Britain's NATO allies, and other MPs voiced anxiety about the pressure being put on the reserve forces.

No short description can begin to summarise adequately the breadth of debates on military operations from the Falklands to Afghanistan. They were characterised by reasoned arguments about the efficacy of military force, which were completely absent from the floor of the House before 1982. Given the uncertain outcome of any war, while many of the comments turned out to be prescient, others were completely erroneous. A modern MP would find 19th-century speeches verbose and flowery; a 19th-century MP would find the modern House noisy and abusive, and modern speakers lacking in good manners and verbal felicity. Modern debates lacked any tincture of the elegance of their predecessors in 1793 or 1854 and, most importantly, the focus on moral and political issues, but they are, consequently, far more comprehensive than any previous ones. Many MPs might be passionately committed to the liberation of Kuwait or the protection of the Bosnians and the inhabitants of Kosovo, but Parliament did not call on the government to launch into war without devoting attention to the military consequences.

Not only is the Parliamentary debate far more wide-ranging than in the past but the number of MPs who want to participate has grown in proportion. The speaker complained on 7 April 1982 that 80 MPs had indicated their wish to discuss the Falklands crisis including 14 Privy Councillors. In the great debate on the pivotal decision to go to war with revolutionary France in 1793, six MPs spoke after the prime minister, William Pitt had put the government's case. In the next debate

14 MPs spoke, while seven members of the House of Lords contributed. In the debate on the outbreak of the Crimean War on 31 March 1854, ten members of the House of Lords contributed and nine MPs spoke in the other Chamber. These were great rhetorical clashes between the parties' leading spokesmen Pitt, Fox, Burke and Sheridan in 1793, Bright, Russell, Palmerston and Disraeli in 1854. Speeches by government and opposition spokesmen do not appear from Hansard to have been widely interrupted. In contrast, Tony Blair was interrupted 20 times during the debate on Iraq on 18 March 2003.³⁸ In the 19th century and before, less prominent politicians kept quiet or intervened modestly and briefly, yet the summary of recent debates outlined above makes clear that, as in other areas of life, fame and wisdom are unrelated, unless inversely.

Whatever the quality of their speeches and interventions, MPs have rightly become increasingly sensitive to the way in which crucial debates now take place in radio and television studios rather than in the Houses of Parliament. Debates in Parliament were once reproduced verbatim in the broadsheets. Pitt could assert confidently in November 1800, 'with regard to the large and complicated question of peace and war, as on every other point of national interest, the eyes of the people are trained upon parliament'.³⁹ Now debates are hardly reported in the printed media and, although some are broadcast, they capture only a tiny audience. Governments have contributed to this indifference or, at least, tacitly, accepted it as a fact of life. As soon as Winston Churchill heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, he recalled Parliament because he felt that, 'it is indispensable to our system of government that Parliament should play its full part in the important acts of state and at all the crucial moments of the war'.⁴⁰ In August 1968, when the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia, Harold Wilson recalled Parliament within a week, although there was nothing that MPs could do about the invasion except voice their anger.⁴¹ It took Mrs Thatcher's government a month to recall Parliament in 1990 even though British forces were being sent to the Gulf. Tony Blair was bitterly attacked for treating Parliament with contempt over Kosovo by giving information to the media before it had been passed to Parliament.⁴² Subsequently, Blair tried to avoid debates on prospects for an Anglo-American attack on Iraq for as long as possible from 2002 to 2007, not least, no doubt, because he feared attacks from his own backbenches.⁴³ The law officers of the Crown failed to attend the most extensive debate ever held in the House of Lords on the legality of the use of force, much to the anger of many present. As Lord Goodhart commented, 'we . . . regret that the noble and

learned Lord the Attorney-General has not given us the opportunity to ask questions and to hear the answers'.⁴⁴ There was a striking contrast to the extensive apologies offered by Pitt when his colleagues absented themselves from even the most unexpected debates.⁴⁵

In the past the media were interested in Parliament, now Parliament is interested in the media.⁴⁶ Much of the debate takes place between the general public over the airwaves and MPs emphasise the importance of listening to their views. For example, one member warned during the debate on Kosovo in March 1999, 'on Radio Five this morning the airwaves were blocked with people of Serbian background and people of Albanian background phoning in. The hatred they felt for each other was so poisonous... that it would have given the most gung-ho supporter of the government's policy [of intervention in the war] second thoughts'.⁴⁷ In a discussion in Westminster Hall, Adam Price commented in October 2006, 'unfortunately, we learn more through leaks to the papers and odd, unscripted, off-the-cuff remarks from certain senior military figures than we ever do from the Government speaking on the floor of the House'.⁴⁸ In the same discussion Chris Bryant quoted John Humphry's comments on Radio Four, while Jeremy Corbyn and Paul Flynn quoted *The Lancet*. Plainly Parliament has been pushed to the margins by the debates going on elsewhere.⁴⁹

When Parliament was eventually recalled after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, speaker after speaker rose to applaud the move and to warn that the House was threatened with relegation to the sidelines. 'Can anyone doubt', Tony Benn asked, 'that it was right to recall the House of Commons so that we could debate the matter outside the television and radio studios and without relying on the mass media?' From the Conservative benches Sir Rhodes Boyson argued:

If the House does not meet, debate will be led by the media as if the House is redundant or even non-existent.... It was right to recall Parliament, because parliamentary democracy means that Ministers must be responsible to Parliament. The country would not understand if we did not debate the crisis here when it is debated outside.⁵⁰

Most references to the media were defensive of Parliament's rights and critical of the journalists. But the government alone has the power to recall Parliament, the media are with it always and involved from the start of any crisis. Like other Western states, Britain has moved some way

from a Parliamentary to a direct democracy; the 'voice of the people' reaches the government via public opinion polls and the media.

Just as complaints from MPs are natural and understandable, one might have expected that complaints from serving officers about the direct participation of so many people and institutions in strategic debates and their objections to the release of operational secrets during the Falklands War have already been quoted. But officers were unaware that strategic and tactical questions raised by a decision to go to war had previously been kept outside the public arena. Even if they had been aware of the change, they would generally have felt that it was no good protesting against the inevitable. In fact, the backlash often came from amongst the commentators themselves, a reflection of the guilt they felt about pontificating in the safety of studios, universities and assemblies on policies which consign young men and women to an early death. Older people have often felt guilty about sacrificing the young in war, but now the guilt was both more widespread and more frequently voiced.⁵¹

Thus 'armchair strategy' or 'armchair strategists' suddenly became a prevalent term of abuse amongst commentators and MPs in the 1980s and 1990s. The targets of these attacks were civilians, or those without responsibility and far from the battlefield, who pontificated on warfare. In the debate on 6 September 1990 about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown said he had 'heard talk about pre-emptive strikes and surgical wars. [But] I have learnt from bitter experience that when the armchair strategists and Whitehall generals start talking of a surgical war, it is time to start running for cover. A war is never surgical to those who have to fight it.' Denis Healey complimented Ashdown on his speech, adding 'nobody who has not fought in a war has much right to talk about what might happen if a war takes place'.⁵² In the Kosovo debate on 25 March 1999, Menzies Campbell warned that, 'in the comfort of the television studio or the safety of the House of Commons, it is all too easy to underestimate the unmitigated horrors of modern warfare', while Tony Benn referred sardonically to 'the most valiant chairborne warriors' on both sides of the House.⁵³ Outside Parliament there were similar complaints. *The Times'* columnist Matthew Parris attacked 'the armchair bombardiers of the *Daily Telegraph'*, while Jonathan Eyal, the East European expert at the Royal United Services Institution, dismissed the 'surgical strikes currently being weighed by every armchair strategist' and in December 2002 William Rees-Mogg, the former editor of *The Times*, grumbled, 'I have never had much sympathy for bellicose bishops or other armchair warriors'.⁵⁴

Such comments hark back to those by Lord Charles Beresford during the Dardanelles campaign and are part of the attempt to stifle discussion or to ridicule opponents. Healey expressed the idea most succinctly; only ex-military personnel, like himself, should talk about war, thus confining debate to the favoured few. Ironically, Healey had contributed greatly to the broadening of the defence debate by assisting in the foundation of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and, when he was secretary of state for Defence, establishing defence lectureships at British Universities. Nevertheless, he subsequently claimed that civilians were too aggressive, too fond of proposing that solutions could be found through war, whose course was bloodstained and whose outcome was always uncertain. He never forgot the fury he felt at Oxford before the Second World War when elderly dons encouraged the young to fight for their country.⁵⁵

In the 19th century and later former serving officers believed that they had to defend themselves in the House against the charge that it was they who were too aggressive and liked war for its own sake. When Captain Sir A. Acland-Hood supported the government's motion on the Boer War on 17 October 1899, he felt moved to add:

If there is a section of the House who most strongly oppose an unjust and unnecessary war, it is the military members, and especially those among us who have seen active service. Those of us who have seen what war really is... are the very last in this assembly to commit the country to war without very grave consideration.⁵⁶

Fifty one years later, the former Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, complained during the debate on the Korean War on 5 July 1950:

I do get a little riled... when I hear those who, for the most excellent reasons of their own, have never taken part in any conflict, constantly calling others warmongers. That is not true. We who have seen war loathe it, and that applies to hon. Members on the Government side of the House as well as those on this side of the House who have experienced it.⁵⁷

Today, as we have seen, former officers now serving as MPs are, if anything, even more vociferous at deploring the purported aggressiveness of their civilian colleagues. In reality, most people in Britain have become ever more sensitive to civilian and military casualties, not least because of the ubiquity of television cameras which can show the destructive

effect of US and British weapons as much as they show the devastation wrought by the enemy.⁵⁸ There had been no cameras to relay round the world the burning of Hamburg, Dresden and Tokyo during the Second World War.⁵⁹ Even if there is a great difference between actually being present when the maimed survivors and the decomposing bodies of the dead are brought from flattened buildings and seeing their images on television screens, films give some idea of the event. Nobody can today plead ignorance about the effect of military conflict.

If the widening of the defence debate has caused problems, they have been particularly fierce within the government of the most powerful country in the world, the United States. The Vietnam War evoked bitter and lasting antagonism between political leaders and the armed forces, not least because senior officers believed that politicians advised by armchair strategists from the Rand and other think tanks were interfering in military affairs, whilst political leaders, including President John Kennedy, echoed Lloyd George's belief that the armed forces were professionally incompetent.⁶⁰ The war brought a certain type of armchair strategist, the operational analyst, into contempt, while the autobiography of Colin Powell showed that the wounds left by the arguments over the war were still open three decades later.⁶¹

British officers often deplore the absence of military experience amongst politicians but US debates do not suggest that such experience reduces civil–military antagonism – quite the contrary. In his memoirs Admiral Holloway, the former US Chief of Naval Operations dismissed President Carter with contempt because of the lowly rank to which he had risen in the service yet, in the nature of things, politicians are unlikely to rise much higher.⁶² Civil–military antagonism had apparently died down by the early 1990s, only to revive again in 2002 over the debate on the threatened invasion of Iraq. Former military officers, led by Colin Powell, the secretary of state, were widely regarded as ‘doves’, while the President himself, who had evaded service in Vietnam, were seen as a ‘hawk’. Powell complained that Bush's colleagues devoted so much time meditating on military scenarios, that they give little attention to international politics.⁶³ It was a very far cry indeed from General Ironside's belief that Chamberlain never focused on military issues at the outset of the Second World War. What the US debate showed was the need to balance military, political, legal and moral considerations and that, if any of these were given predominance, governmental policy would be undermined.

The benefits of taking military action cannot be decided on moral and political grounds alone. The chances of victory, the likely casualties and

the economic costs of military action, have all to be weighed. This coincides, after all, with traditional idea of the just war under which the evil done by the conflict should be outweighed by the advantages. There must be omissions from the open debate, Mrs Thatcher did not tell Parliament in April 1982 that the First Sea Lord expected to lose warships when retaking the Falklands. The fear of demoralising the nation and armed forces or encouraging the enemy has to be balanced against the desire to keep the nation informed. There will be disadvantages; very occasionally military and political secrets will be revealed. But this price will have to be paid, just as we can no longer hide from our cameras, and thus from ourselves, the full impact on enemy peoples of our decision to intervene.