

# Introduction

Critics of British foreign policy have always focused on the contrast between its protestations of peaceful, benevolent intentions and the frequency with which it has chosen to intervene in other countries' affairs and go to war. In March 1939 one German headline read, 'Forty-Two Wars in Eighty Years: A Balance Sheet of British "Peacefulness"'.<sup>1</sup> The writer was part of a general Nazi campaign to expose British hypocrisy, highlighting the contrast between Britain's complaints about the German treatment of the Jews and its own repression of the Indians and Palestinians. Methodical, statistical studies have also shown that, whether or not Britain is the most belligerent country, it has certainly been involved in more wars than most.<sup>2</sup> This propensity still provides critics with plenty of ammunition; in the last quarter of a century Britain chose to fight against Argentina in 1982, against Iraq in 1991 and again from 2003, against Serbia in 1999, against the Taleban in Afghanistan from 2001, to say nothing of smaller UN peacekeeping or peacemaking operations.

After a millennium in which it was itself the victim of repeated invasions and occupations, England and its successor Great Britain learnt to protect themselves by maintaining a powerful navy and intervening on the European continent to sustain a balance between competing powers. They also found that trade and discovery brought increasing wealth and control of rich areas beyond Europe. After the battle of Trafalgar in 1805 the Royal Navy dominated the seas vastly enhancing Britain's ability to intervene abroad. The British justified these interventions to themselves and, often less effectively, to foreigners on the grounds that they were beneficial to other peoples, helping small European states to keep their independence, spreading Western civilisation beyond Europe and increasing the wealth of those who lived under

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their rule. As a British historian confidently asserted after the First World War,

A great part of the world's area is inhabited by peoples who are still in a condition of barbarism . . . . For such peoples the only chance of improvement was that they should pass under the dominion of more highly developed peoples; and to them a European Empire brought, for the first time, not merely law and justice, but even the rudiments of the only kind of liberty which is worth having, the liberty which rests upon law.<sup>3</sup>

Modern commentators often regard imperialism as racist but, as the historian's comments suggest, the official view was 'culturist' in the sense that Western, and particularly British, political culture was regarded as the ideal.

The moralistic tone of such pronouncements explains the reference in the subtitle of this book to William Wilberforce, the most famous of the Evangelicals who struggled to end the slave trade at the end of the 18th Century. The campaign against slavery was the first mass pressure group which set the pattern for the dozens of humanitarian pressure groups that were subsequently founded in Britain. It led to the use of British warships to interdict slave ships and to the establishment of Sierra Leone, the first British colony in Africa, where freed slaves were settled. The subtitle also refers to Tony Blair, the most idealistic of Britain's recent prime ministers, who believed firmly that armed force could and should be used after the end of the Cold War to correct wrongs and spread democracy.

Analysts have often commented on the stability of ideas; now we can measure this stability via opinion polls.<sup>4</sup> In the British case, so strong was the synergy between national self-interest and faith in the virtues of spreading national culture that it has survived through the transformations of British society brought by industrialisation and democratisation, through a series of world wars and the disappearance of the British Empire in the 1960s. If the post-Trafalgar era of British dominance passed away between 1914 and 1939, US military power provided Britain with an Indian summer in which it could continue to exercise influence in distant regions when this did not conflict with US policies.<sup>5</sup> The 1996 Defence White Paper rephrased the historian's comment quoted above in a more diplomatic language, according to which Britain wanted to promote:

An international framework that favours freedom and democratic institutions and open trading relationships, and that allows people everywhere to pursue and enhance their well-being, in the belief that this will not only be to our benefit, including our greater security, but also to the benefit of the international community as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

These sentiments were enthusiastically endorsed by Tony Blair's Labour government, which came into office in 1997, and explain why, at the beginning of 2008, under Blair's successor, Gordon Brown, 7398 British servicemen were operating in Afghanistan, 6371 in Iraq and nearly 3000 in Cyprus,<sup>7</sup> and why so many humanitarian Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) were founded in Britain and continue to be based there.

The First World War administered the most severe shock to this interventionist culture. In some ways this was surprising, Britain lost almost the same proportion of its population in the French Wars between 1793 and 1815 as in the First World War,<sup>8</sup> but the victories in the French Wars were commemorated in the names given to Trafalgar Square and Waterloo station, there was no annual day of mourning and few memorials scattered around the villages. The wars were followed by the greatest period of expansion in British history, when they conquered vast areas of Asia and Africa. Nevertheless, the perspective in Britain changed between 1815 and 1918. During these years Britain became less hierarchical so that for the first time the death of anyone, whatever their rank in society, was considered more important than it had been in the past, the peacetime mortality and birth rates declined, making the sudden deaths of large numbers of young people more shocking.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the spread of education, the growth of the media and the proximity of the battlefields made people aware of the nature of the fighting in the First World War. After the American Civil War in the 1860s writers had struggled to find an unromantic, graphic way of describing combat; this fundamental cultural change was completed between 1914 and 1918 so that it is no longer the accounts by national leaders or by generals which matter to the public as a whole, it accounts by civilians of their wartime struggles to survive and the soldier's view from the frontline.<sup>10</sup>

After the shock of that war the British elite re-examined their strategic culture and many became convinced that, in future, they should rely on the League of Nations to maintain peace, keep out of European affairs so that they could focus on imperial affairs and reduce their military spending so that war debts could be repaid.<sup>11</sup> This new synthesis fell apart in the 1930s under threats from the Axis, and after 1945

the country again contributed to maintaining the balance of power and what it believed was the common good through the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) alliance. But, as Britain now became more committed to European defence than it had ever been in peacetime, its propensity to intervene militarily outside Europe weakened in the face of a temporary loss of confidence and the growing demand for independence amongst the peoples of Asia and Africa.<sup>12</sup> As colonialism declined in moral and military authority, its demise encouraged an increase in the number of humanitarian NGOs; it was in these years that organisations like Oxfam, Amnesty International and a host of others grew up in Britain and were emulated elsewhere. Alongside the media, with which they have a symbiotic relationship, they have replaced colonialism as the spearhead of Western cultural interference overseas. Military interventionism, in the forms of peacekeeping or peacemaking, revived after the end of the Cold War when the UN Security Council was unfrozen and television brought pictures into homes of the chaos in the Third World. In 2008, despite the continuation of guerrilla operations mounted by Afghans and Iraqis against the presence of British and other Western forces in their countries, there is continued pressure from commentators in the media for Britain to intervene in Myanmar, Zimbabwe and Sudan and to impose Western political culture.

Because of the British propensity to send military forces overseas and the controversy that it has caused, the country has a particularly rich literature devoted to the subject. This is a study of the debates initiated by the pressure groups and people who have struggled to shape or weaken the interventionist culture over the last 200 years. It tries to modify the conventional wisdom by showing how open Parliamentary debates at the onset of war only began to include the military prospects during the Falklands campaign in 1982; how the emphasis in the media has moved from the heroism of the troops and the skill of the generals to the impact of conflict on civilians; how often governments have tried to avoid receiving professional military advice on the onset of war; how deeply divided the pressure groups have always been between the humanitarian and the anti-war movements and how prescient some of the poets, novelists and armchair strategists have been about the shape of future wars.

Above all, it shows how the pollsters and political analysts have revolutionised our view of public opinion and proved that the mass of people often show more understanding of what an impending war might mean than governments, media commentators and the chattering classes in general. The wider public are aware of both the problems in

other parts of the world which impel the government towards intervention and the increasing difficulties which military intervention of any sort is likely to encounter. Although the upper classes dismissed poorer groups as fickle and jingoistic before 1914, the public as a whole have shown before the Second World War, during the Suez Crisis in 1956 and again before the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, that their judgements are often as good or better than the government's and that, while they broadly accept the interventionist culture, their support is conditional.<sup>13</sup>

As the pace of change began to increase in the 19th Century, so people became more concerned about the future. Traditional utopias, which satirised existing policies towards war and peace, such as *Gulliver's Travels*, were supplemented by warnings, not only about existing practice, but also about what would happen if existing trends continued or the wrong policies were followed. Alfred Tennyson's hero in his poem 'Locksley Hall', published in 1842, foresaw not only aerial commerce and warfare and the use of chemical weapons but also, as a correction, the evolution of international organisations to hold the 'fretful realms' in awe. At the start of the 20th Century the popular novelist H. G. Wells forecast the development of tanks and nuclear weapons; Nevil Shute imagined the impact which aerial bombardment would have on ordinary British families in the 1930s and predicted in the 1950s that life would be destroyed in a nuclear war.

By 1900 civilian or armchair strategists had begun to analyse international security. Government ministers and senior officers could have learnt as much or more about what was impending from studying the *War of the Future* published by the Polish banker Ivan Bloch in 1898, *The Great Pacific War* written by the British journalist Hector Bywater in 1925 or *The Military Strength of the Powers* by the Russian economist Max Werner, published in 1939, as they would have done by poring over the most highly classified documents. In the 1920s the Royal Institute of International Affairs joined the earlier Royal United Services Institution as a 'think tank' studying international affairs, while the first professorships of International Relations were founded at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth and the London School of Economics. Their publications vastly increased the information available on the risks involved in each military intervention overseas and conversely the threats to which British isolationism would expose Europe and the rest of the world.

Even if the armed forces were discouraged by convention from participating in public debates, one would have expected their commanders to play a major part in a government's decision to go to war. However,

when the outbreak of a great war threatened, the leaders of the armed forces had to struggle to make their advice heard by ministers. In both 1914 and 1939 politicians tried to exclude military voices from deliberations because they were primarily concerned with their political objectives, they did not want to hear about the difficulty of achieving victory. But, once war broke out, the relative influence of the different institutions was transformed. Senior officers became more important, while politicians and civil servants receded into the background. The permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office confided in his diary during the Second World War that he might be more useful growing onions.<sup>14</sup> The power of ministers waned in comparison with that wielded by the commanders of the armed forces, though the authority of the prime minister shrank much less than others. The armed forces could no longer be moved around like chessman, as the younger Pitt had done so incompetently in the French Wars.<sup>15</sup> The new balance of power within the government inevitably produced friction. There were bitter arguments between Lloyd George and his military advisers in the First World War, and between Winston Churchill and the commanders of the armed forces two decades later.<sup>16</sup> Such friction can be creative, however, painful for those involved; strong wartime prime ministers sometimes forced the heads of the armed forces to rethink or, at least, to justify their strategic and tactical plans. After the war publicity about these arguments affected the standing and influence of the armed forces, and attitudes amongst the elite towards future interventions.<sup>17</sup>

The aristocrats who ruled Britain in the 19th Century gave ground reluctantly to interested groups and to popular demands for some say on how the country was run. They preferred a situation in which the masses could not influence debates because of their illiteracy and lack of knowledge about politics, war and foreign affairs. They also learnt during the anti-slavery campaign how powerful informed opinion could become when exercised about some moral issue and they had no interest in encouraging the emergence of such groups. Nevertheless, because of the strength of popular demands, the electorate was expanded to include the middle classes in 1832 and 1867 but it was only in the 1920s that universal adult suffrage was conceded. Although some 70 per cent of the population was illiterate or semi-literate, it was not until 1870 that the government made a real effort to educate the whole population. Governments were less repressive than they had been in previous centuries, but they still imposed taxes on newspapers to prevent the poor reading about politics. It was when the Advertisement Duty was dropped in 1853, the Newspaper Stamp Duty in 1855 and the Paper

Duty in 1861, and when higher speed presses were introduced that the mass circulation newspapers could blossom.<sup>18</sup>

Every time that another profession or group has begun to participate in the national debate on security in general and overseas intervention in particular, politicians have met their efforts with disdain. By and large Members of Parliament (MPs) have supported government attempts to retain control of the debate, after all, they could hope to become ministers themselves one day. It was not until the beginning of the Falklands War in 1982 that the government provided Parliament with information on the British forces being deployed and that MPs openly debated the interaction between strategy and politics. Before that, open Parliamentary debates at the onset of war had been almost entirely confined to politics and morality, and the revolution which occurred in the 1980s did not go unopposed; retired military officers now serving as MPs, led by Denis Healey and Paddy Ashdown, disputed the right and ability of other MPs without military experience to participate in subsequent debates. Healey solemnly told the House of Commons on 6th September 1990, 'nobody who has not fought in a war has much right to talk about what would happen if a war takes place.'<sup>19</sup> Rarely has the fear of democracy and discussion been more succinctly expressed.

Thus ministers and their supporters have derided and dismissed the challengers; during the Boer War radical commentators led by J. A. Hobson propagated the notion that the working classes were jingoistic xenophobes not to be trusted with high politics and particularly with decisions about going to war<sup>20</sup>; after the First World War the Prime Minister Lloyd George fostered the myth that the armed forces were led by half-witted aristocrats,<sup>21</sup> while other commentators attacked the intervention in strategic debates by the Anglican Church.<sup>22</sup> Many of these myths linger on; press commentators sometimes claim that less-educated people are naturally more interventionist than their better-educated compatriots, even when opinion polls suggest exactly the opposite<sup>23</sup>; the idea that all British generals of the First World War were peculiarly stupid is still the conventional wisdom.<sup>24</sup> The real issue was less the generals' competence, though this was certainly very mixed, but the intense pressure under which they laboured from public and politicians alike to break through the German lines and end the war quickly. They could only try to do so by staging great offensives and suffering heavy casualties. The alternative to these offensives on the Western Front was to remain on the defensive until the British naval blockade began to starve the Central Powers and to weaken their resolve. But that was politically unacceptable; Herbert Asquith, the first wartime

prime minister, was forced to resign for not pushing the war effort ahead more effectively. Wartime impatience is only too often followed by peacetime lamentations over the consequences.<sup>25</sup>

In recent years politicians have tried to start other hares. Once international lawyers began to participate more actively in debates on the onset of war, they also came under attack. On 17 March 2003, Lord Goodhart introduced a debate in the House of Lords on the legality of the pending attack by the United States and Britain on Iraq. This was the first time that the legality of a war had been publicly debated at such length in Parliament before the war began. On cue the representatives of the two main political parties – Baroness Ramsay and Lord Howell – stood up to disparage international law and lawyers, arguing that they always disagree amongst themselves and that they were just using a legal cover for their political prejudices.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the real problem with international law is that it is apolitical. Treaties apply equally to all parties but all countries do not represent the same threat to peace; Axis foreign policy was not comparable to democratic foreign policy in the 1930s. Status quo and non-status quo powers are fundamentally different.

This book concentrates mainly on pre-war debates because once great wars have begun, rational, wide-ranging discussions are rare.<sup>27</sup> The national 'herd' replaces many of the smaller groups because the public's instinct is to rally round the government. People become more cautious than they are in peacetime about openly criticising national policy because they are afraid of appearing unpatriotic and encouraging their country's foreign critics. Those who break this taboo are usually subject to vituperation. Asked in November 1944 whether they backed the use of chemical weapons against Japan, the very crude opinion polls available seemed to show that 71 per cent of Americans, who offered an opinion, turned the proposal down,<sup>28</sup> but once the incomparably more destructive nuclear weapons had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, defensiveness about their government's policy and overwhelming relief that the war had ended overcame such hesitations. In August 1945, 85 per cent of Americans and 72 per cent of Britons appeared to approve of dropping the bombs.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, because they were unsure about the justice of the cause, the great majority of Britons opposed an attack on Iraq without UN support in February 2003, but as soon as the government had launched its offensive, public opinion rallied to its support, though this backing eroded when the campaign bogged down in guerrilla warfare.<sup>30</sup> The tendency to endorse government policy in wartime is understandable and gratifying to the armed forces in the short term, because they want to feel that their sacrifices

are appreciated. But it has the grave, long-term disadvantage that it discourages wartime debates and politicians now know from opinion polls that they can rely on support, particularly from the educated classes, in a total war or a short, limited conflict. Thus, governments are much less afraid of public opinion today, when they intervene overseas, than they were in the 1930s.

Of course, by no means every section of opinion has accepted the interventionist consensus described above – thereby undermining the determinist views, discussed in Chapter 11, which maintain that biological or economic factors cause the outbreak of war. There has been opposition amongst the elite on political and ethical grounds to Britain's participation in every war for the last 200 years; from the Whigs led by Charles James Fox during the French Revolutionary Wars, from the Cobdenite liberals during the Crimean War, from much of the Liberal Party and the Nonconformist Churches during the Boer War, from sections of the Labour and Liberal parties during the First World War, from pacifists, like George Lansbury, in the Second World War and from radicals and communists during the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Thus, however narrow the number of participants, opponents of the war have always raised the questions whether it was justified, whether the means employed to achieve victory were proportionate and whether it has a reasonable chance of success.

In the 19th Century both pressure to exercise British power and criticism of war increased. The free traders argued that wars were not only wrong but wasteful and archaic, thus challenging the basis of the interventionist consensus. On the other side, enthusiastic imperial governors spread the frontiers of the empire across India and Africa, while the Social Darwinists propagated the notion that nations were not merely destined to fight but that they needed to do so in order to avoid decadence by ensuring that only the fittest survived.<sup>31</sup> This was much more radical, and belligerent, than the traditional British view that intervention in Europe was sometimes necessary to preserve the balance of power and that intervention elsewhere was of benefit to both Britain and the colonial peoples. The First World War largely eradicated Social Darwinist ideas from the British debate, partly because it was so obvious that, if death was not wholly random in the trenches, it was the brave who were more likely to be killed,<sup>32</sup> and partly because the League of Nations was established to replace the struggle for survival amongst the nations. When collective security failed in the 1930s, the elite reluctantly concluded that the country would have to reaffirm the interventionist ethic, ally with the French and persuade the United States to

emerge from isolation. During the Cold War the debate focused on the morality and efficacy of trying to deter the outbreak of an East–West war by the threat to employ nuclear weapons on a horrific scale. Once the Cold War ended with the collapse of Soviet power, the West was in a position to wage a series of conventional wars in former Yugoslavia, in Afghanistan and in Iraq, each of which opened a new debate on interventionism and led to increased reliance on the traditional *jus ad bellum* criteria for evaluating the justice of war.

This is then a study of the way in which British ideas about warfare and other forms of intervention have evolved over the last two centuries when Britain and then the United States have been the dominant world powers. It is also a study of how the various interested groups and the people as a whole have overcome political opposition and misunderstanding to establish their right and ability to participate responsibly in debates about whether Britain should intervene with military forces in Europe and elsewhere. Before the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 the debate covered the legitimacy of operating without a specific UN mandate, the ability of precision-guided munitions to minimise civilian casualties, the efficiency of allied forces at countering insurgency, the ability of US and British forces to re-establish an Iraqi government and the impact of the attack on Muslim opinion across the world. This was a much wider discussion than those held 200 years before about the French Revolution or of 100 years before about the Boer War in Southern Africa. However, there has been no similar widening within government and thus, as we shall see in Chapter 10, after the intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, a new debate began about the ways in which governmental authority to launch the country into war might be limited and the public debate given greater weight.