



Depending on the Right People

British Political-Military Relations, 2001–10

James de Waal

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About the Author

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Executive Summary

There is a widespread view that Britain's politicians should bear the main blame for the country's military difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan. In particular, they are accused of failing to heed professional military advice and of launching over-ambitious missions with insufficient resources. Recent evidence, including from the Iraq Inquiry, shows that this view is too simplistic. Instead, Britain seems to have suffered a wider failure of the government system, with politicians, senior military officers and civil servants all playing their part.

Faced with a challenging international and domestic political situation, policy-makers often acted with good intentions but variable results. Politicians and civil servants did not wish to be accused of interfering with military planning, and so did little to ensure that military action supported political aims. They were also apprehensive of the close relationship between the armed forces and the media, and were therefore reluctant to challenge military opinion. For their part, some senior officers showed little appreciation of the political impact of military action, while others felt their role was principally to support the institutional interests of their branch of the armed forces.

This led to decisions on the use of military force not being taken solely on the basis of national interest, but because of politicians' wish to maintain good relations with the armed forces. In 2002–03, Britain decided to make a ground force contribution to the invasion of Iraq, with implicit responsibility for post-war security in that country's southern provinces, primarily because politicians feared they would have problems with the British army if it was left out, and that these problems would find their way into the media. In 2009, Downing Street was not convinced of the military need to send reinforcements to Afghanistan, but agreed to do so because it wanted to prevent hostile press briefings by the military.

Some key military decisions were also taken with insufficient political oversight. In 2006, ministers took little interest in the military planning for the deployment of British forces to Helmand, and were not consulted when they moved into the north of the province, radically changing the nature of the military operation in Afghanistan.

These problems were the result of a situation in which there was no well-understood model for how ministers, senior military officers and civil servants should work together. All interpreted their roles in different ways, with effectiveness depending on the quality of individuals and the personal relationships between them. In the phrase of Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's chief of staff, good decisions depended on 'the right people' being involved and behaving in the right way.

Although in theory the British model could be flexible and fast-acting, it brought incoherence, inconsistency and opacity. It was not resilient enough to deal with the extraordinary pressures of the Iraq and Afghanistan crises. It contributed to a continuing breakdown of trust between politicians and senior military officers, and disunity and division of purpose within the government.

The ad hoc British approach to political-military relations contrasts strongly with US practice, which is based on a mixture of a formal legal framework, a lively public and specialist debate, and the continuing exercise of civilian authority over the armed forces, including through the dismissal of senior officers.

Britain must learn from US experience and from its own mistakes. Although there have been a number of recent reforms to strengthen government decision-making, notably the establishment of the National Security Council, there is a case for further change.

The present government remains committed to an active international role and may in the future have to deal with unexpected and dramatic crises. But, with smaller armed forces and a public that is sceptical of military intervention, it will have to improve its management and presentation of policy. It must ensure that its use of military force properly supports its political aims and is better integrated with the other levers of national power. It must satisfy the public appetite for full accountability, especially when popular support is lukewarm. It cannot afford the divisive internal struggles of the 2001–10 period, and must operate with better discipline and unity of purpose. It therefore cannot rely on an informal approach that just ‘depends on the right people’.

Instead, the government should make its decision-making process on the use of force subject to a formal code, approved by parliament. This code should define the process through which decisions are taken, and the roles and responsibilities of those involved. It would help preserve the political impartiality of the armed forces, underscoring that their advice must be based on their professional military assessment. It would also aid accountability by showing who gave what advice, when and why. And the code would improve the quality of decisions by providing a firm framework upon which policy-makers can rely when under pressure.

1 Introduction

‘Decisions are well made if the right people are in the room’

Jonathan Powell, prime minister’s chief of staff, 1997–2007¹

Despite all the difficulties and controversies of Britain’s recent military experience, one key element – the relationship between the country’s political and military leaders² – has been subject to little systematic study. Much of the debate about Britain’s engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and much of the blame for apparent failures, has been directed at politicians, in particular Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. A narrative has emerged that ascribes Britain’s military difficulties to a failure by politicians to follow the professional advice of objective military advisers in launching over-ambitious missions with insufficient resources – a modern British version of the *Dolchstosslegende*, the ‘stab-in-the-back myth’ through which the German army explained away its defeat in the First World War.³

Some of this criticism of political leaders appears justified. For example it seems reasonable to accuse Blair of poor judgment – at the very least – in overestimating both the threat from Saddam Hussein’s regime and the prospects of installing a viable replacement in Iraq. Moreover, by virtue of their office, the political leaders of a parliamentary democracy must shoulder ultimate responsibility for the successes and failures of military operations. But this formal, constitutional authority hides the reality of a more complex relationship that reflects the way in which warfare – like all areas of public policy – is a joint venture, with a variety of different political and military participants.

Examining this more complex reality is itself not straightforward, and a number of obstacles may have hampered more intense public scrutiny. In Britain, in particular, it is often difficult to take a critical attitude to the armed forces during a time of war, in part reflecting a modern public debate that does not draw a clear distinction between the armed forces as institutions and their individual members doing the fighting. This is in clear contrast with much of the 20th century, when the senior military officer caste was among the many parts of the British Establishment subject – fairly or unfairly – to criticism and satire. But this lack of scrutiny may also reflect a number of other more concrete issues, such as:

1 Powell, Jonathan (2010), *The New Machiavelli* (The Bodley Head), p. 60.

2 In this report I use the term ‘political-military’ to describe this relationship, rather than ‘civil-military’, which is often used in the academic literature, including by the father of this discipline, Samuel Huntington. This is partly to avoid confusion with the related study of the relationship within conflict zones between armed forces, civilian agencies such as local governments and NGOs, and individual civilians, and partly to underline the important role of domestic politics in this debate.

3 For example, in one influential commentator’s assessment that the ‘Army’s view is that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown committed our troops to fight wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, yet have always refused them the means they need to do the job’, in Hastings, Max (2009), ‘I have written about the army for 40 years but I’ve never known such bitterness’, *Daily Mail*, 13 July 2009.

- a shortage of authoritative source material on which to base an assessment, given that so much of the political-military relationship is inevitably (and often reasonably) conducted out of the public eye.
- the personal nature of much of the material that is available, often because it is in the form of first-person memoirs of politicians, officers and officials. This itself reflects the personal nature of much of the business of government, in which decisions are taken within a relatively small circle in Whitehall and Westminster, and based to a large degree on personal judgment and experience.
- the British tendency in the practice and study of military operations to focus on the local and specific, rather than the general and long-term (the difference between, for example: 'did political-military dysfunction explain what went wrong in Helmand?' and 'what does Helmand tell us about the British system of political-military relations?').

Recently, however, there have been signs of a wider inquiry into the reasons for Britain's military difficulties. Some parts of the press have started to examine the quality of decision-making at senior military levels, partly fuelled by criticism from younger mid-level officers liberated by their retirement from the forces and the moral authority provided by their operational experience.⁴ There has also been a growing academic study of the operational performance of the British forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, applying a sociological understanding of how institutions function to what has traditionally been a very empirical area of study.⁵

Perhaps most valuable is the evidence provided by formal public inquiries into the preparation and conduct of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, in particular the official inquiry into the Iraq war chaired by Sir John Chilcot.⁶ This has made available to the public a range of personal and documentary evidence that is unparalleled in quantity, scope, detail and confidentiality. It not only gives an extraordinary insight into the business of government at the time when decisions were made, but also allows a cross-checking and calibration of the personal testimony on which much previous study of policy-making had depended. At the time of writing the Iraq Inquiry has not published its report, so it is not known what conclusions it will reach, but much of value is already available in the evidence it has released.

Less exhaustive than the Iraq Inquiry, but nevertheless useful, has also been the series of inquiries into aspects of the war in Afghanistan conducted by the House of Commons Select Committee on Defence.⁷ These have been narrower in scope, and have had neither access to, nor authority to publish, large numbers of official documents. They have, however, been able to examine many of the senior decision-makers, both civilian and military, who have been involved in the campaign. In the conduct of their investigations members of the committee have also been able to draw on the advice of academics and retired public servants.

4 See, for example, Coghlan, Tom, Haynes, Deborah, Kiley, Sam and Loyd, Anthony, 'The officers' mess – Military chiefs blamed for blundering into Helmand with "eyes shut and fingers crossed"', *The Times*, 9 June 2010.

5 For example King, Anthony (2007), 'The Existence of Cohesion in the Armed Forces', *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 638–45; Farrell, Theo (2010), 'Improving in War: Military Adaptation and the British in Helmand, 2006–2009', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 567–94; Ucko, David (2010), 'Lessons from Basra: The Future of British Counter-insurgency', *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 4.

6 The Iraq Inquiry, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/>.

7 House of Commons Defence Committee, Fourth Report: 'Operations in Afghanistan', 8 July 2011, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/55402.htm>.

The Iraq and parliamentary inquiries provide evidence of shortcomings of vision and execution, not just within a small clique of political leaders, but fairly widely shared out across the whole government machine. Many of the principal problems seem to have occurred low down in the government machine, rather than at the top. On some of the issues where politicians have been most heavily attacked – for example, in failing to provide adequate military equipment – it seems that the principal reason for shortages was bottlenecks within the military supply chain rather than top-level parsimony.⁸ On other issues, such as the responsibility for some of the key decisions that have shaped Britain's military campaigns, the evidence indicates a governmental machine put under stress as much by friction among its institutional components as by the pressures of warfare.

8 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir Jock Stirrup, 1 February 2010, pp. 14–7, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/45320/20100201am-stirrup-final.pdf>.

2 Evidence of Failure

In principle, in a parliamentary democracy like Britain's, the relationship between political leaders and their military advisers has two main aims: to ensure that military force is used effectively and in the national interest, and to provide democratic control and accountability for the armed forces and for their actions. A successful relationship must be able to contend not only with the challenging demands of real-world problems, but also with the friction of the policy-making process, competing priorities for time and resources, and often highly divergent institutional interests within government. In Britain, the most prominent participants in this relationship are the prime minister and the Downing Street staff; the civilian ministers of the Ministry of Defence; and the members of the military Chiefs of Staffs Committee, principally the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The civilian officials from the Civil and Diplomatic Services in the Ministry of Defence (MOD), Cabinet Office, Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and other government departments have a less conspicuous and – as this report argues – often underrated role.

Although in the first decade of this century the British armed forces were engaged in a very wide range of operations at home and abroad, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been the most demanding, intense and high-profile. Both operations have been controversial – the one in Iraq highly so – and developed in ways that differed from the original expectations of policy-makers. Evidence suggests that in both cases some of the key decisions were taken by a poorly functioning political-military machine.

Iraq: the ground invasion

One of the issues considered by the Iraq Inquiry is the basis of the British decision to contribute a significant ground force to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In preparing for a possible conflict with Iraq, the government considered a number of military options to meet the prime minister's declared strategic aims – the immediate requirement to do something practical to remove a perceived security threat, and the longer-term objective of maintaining a close partnership with the United States.⁹ Military and civilian officials jointly worked up a series of plans using different elements of the armed forces available. In the British system this development of alternative options for ministers is one of the classic tasks of military or civilian advisers.

9 *Hansard*, Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons, 18 March 2003, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmhansrd/vo030318/debtext/30318-06.htm#30318-06_spm12.

Officials eventually settled on three principal alternatives, referred to as ‘packages’ of forces.¹⁰ ‘Package 1’ envisaged a small UK contribution to the US-dominated effort, largely comprising intelligence support, access to UK bases and limited numbers of special forces. ‘Package 2’ incorporated these elements, and added a naval and air contribution, a force of around ‘90 front-line aircraft and 20 warships, with 13,000 personnel all told’, largely operating around and over Iraq, but not significantly on the ground. ‘Package 3’ incorporated the elements of the other two, and added a significant ground invasion force of ‘over 300 tanks/armoured vehicles and 28,000 personnel’ for a total strength of around 41,000.¹¹

Package 3 was the option finally chosen.¹² The ground forces involved were originally intended to invade the north of Iraq from Turkey, entering via the areas already under the control of the anti-Saddam Kurds. However, when it became apparent that the Turkish government was not going to grant permission for the force to transit its country, the plan was changed to use the force for a southern attack into the areas around Basra.

In one respect, this decision was entirely logical. The 1998 Strategic Defence Review had redesigned the armed forces around a number of likely contingencies, and the Iraq crisis seemed precisely the sort of contingency for which a British capability to mount a Package 3-style ‘large-scale’ operation had been constructed.¹³ Nevertheless, what made sense in terms of military planning in 1998 was not automatically suited to the political requirements of 2002–03.

The Package 3 decision had several important consequences. It was a much more visible contribution to the US effort than Packages 1 or 2. It involved considerably more service personnel, at a time when they were already on standby to deal with a possible strike by firefighters. It implied a ‘much higher’ risk of casualties among British forces (though with the prospect of shortening the overall length of the campaign) and a considerably higher financial cost, roughly an extra £500 million to £1 billion.¹⁴

Importantly, by taking physical control of a significant proportion of southern Iraq, it gave the United Kingdom legal¹⁵ and moral responsibility for the welfare and security of its population. As then Cabinet Secretary Andrew Turnbull put it: ‘The military choice between option 2 and option 3 wasn’t simply a difference of adding a divisional force [...] it brought with it the responsibility of an occupying power.’¹⁶ The decision directly led to a significant change in the UK commitment to

10 Declassified (with redactions) document MO 8/17/15K ‘Iraq: UK Military Options’ of 15 October 2002, sent from the Defence Secretary to the Prime Minister, released by the Iraq Inquiry, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51205/HoontoBlair-IraqUKMilitaryOptions-dated15October2002.pdf>.

11 The three ‘Packages’ could also be described as ‘small-’, ‘medium-’ and ‘large-scale operations’, in accordance with the planning framework of the 1998 *Strategic Defence Review*; in addition they could be defined by the availability of the military forces, Packages 1 and 2 being based on UK forces already in the region, with ‘enhanced’ Package 3 relying on considerable reinforcement from elsewhere. Witnesses to the Iraq Inquiry including Michael Boyce (3 December 2009) and Rob Fry (16 December 2009) used all these terms. It is possible that this variety of terminology implies a variety of understandings within government about the characteristics and purposes of the different packages.

12 In the event, a peak number of 46,000 UK military personnel participated in the invasion of Iraq. UK Ministry of Defence: ‘Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures’, factsheet, undated, snapshot taken 3 December 2012, <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/FactSheets/OperationsFactsheets/OperationsInIraqFactsandFigures.htm>.

13 UK Ministry of Defence (1998), *Strategic Defence Review*. See especially paras 89–95, and supporting essay No. 6, para 5/table 6, ‘Regional Conflict Outside the NATO Area’.

14 Document MO 8/17/15K.

15 Including under the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 on the Laws and Customs of War on Land. Article 43 of the Annex to Convention IV of 1907 states, for example, that ‘The authority of the legitimate power having in fact passed into the hands of the occupant, the latter shall take all the measures in his power to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety, while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country.’

16 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Lord Turnbull, 13 January 2010, p. 38, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/44181/20100113pm-turnbull-final.pdf>.

Iraq, from the limited, if intense, conventional invasion that planners had foreseen to something completely different. Once pre-war assessments had proved hopelessly optimistic about the likely speed of Iraqi reconstruction, the willingness of international institutions and allies to contribute post-invasion reconstruction forces, and the level of internal violence, it became clear that UK forces would not be able to withdraw as speedily as planned. Instead they found themselves fighting an unexpected and costly six-year counter-insurgency campaign.

Why was a decision with such far-reaching consequences taken? Witness and documentary evidence from the Iraq Inquiry, and other personal accounts by those involved, provide a conflicting picture. The Prime Minister's Office, the centre of UK decision-making, seems to have been content that the country's strategic aims – in helping deal with Saddam and in keeping close to the United States – would be satisfied by contributing only the forces in Package 2, i.e. intelligence, basing rights and naval, air and special forces. In contrast, there seems to have been considerable pressure from the Ministry of Defence for Package 3.

This is clearly seen in declassified documents¹⁷ in which the Ministry of Defence pressed for a decision on Package 3 (then being considered for deployment through Turkey), arguing that it needed to get on with calling up the reservists needed to raise the force necessary, and also to keep in step with US military planning. Downing Street officials, on the other hand, appear to have been unconvinced, being concerned at the likely impact on domestic and international opinion of such a decision, and seeing no need yet to commit to this option.

On the surface, this seems a classic example of the system working well. The military put forward advice reflecting the specific demands of its profession – the need to raise the forces necessary, and to take part in the inter-allied planning process – while the higher Downing Street policy machinery added in its own professional perspective – the wider domestic and diplomatic interests. But it is clear from the Inquiry evidence that, beneath the surface, this apparently measured assessment of differing professional priorities also reflected a considerable degree of tension and distrust. Downing Street officials seem to have been highly sceptical both of the practical utility of a large ground force contribution and of the motives and tactics of those in the military and Ministry of Defence advocating it.

On a minute from the Ministry of Defence on 'Iraq: Military Options' dated 29 October 2002,¹⁸ the prime minister's chief foreign policy adviser, David Manning, commented to him:

Further pressure from MOD on Package 3. This is based on a military planning cycle [a section redacted] not the UN/political realities. There are huge uncertainties for us: (i) is the timing realistic anymore? (ii) would the Turks have us? (iii) could we backtrack if we gave a formal commitment? (iv) can we afford Package 3?

Jonathan Powell, the prime minister's chief of staff, voiced even more explicit suspicions, telling him: 'The military are making another effort to bounce you into a decision on option 3.'

Despite the strong reservations of these two top Downing Street advisers, the decision was eventually made for this option. It is still not entirely clear, from the evidence available, why this happened.

17 Notably declassified (with redactions) document MO 6/17/15C 'Iraq: Military Options' of 29 October 2002, sent by Peter Watkins (Private Secretary to the Defence Secretary) to David Manning (No. 10 Downing Street), released by the Iraq Inquiry, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/52021/2002-10-29-Watkins-to-Manning-Iraq-UK-military-options.pdf>; and document MO 8/17/15K.

18 Document MO 6/17/15C.

The Iraq Inquiry spent considerable time delving into this, especially the question of whether lobbying by the British Army played a significant part, as this was the only military option that gave it a significant role. Indeed it considered – without finding clear evidence – whether parts of the British Army had colluded with US military planners in order to stimulate US requests for British military support.¹⁹

This issue is covered not only in some testimony, including that of Manning (see below), but also in the declassified documents. In particular, the principal Ministry of Defence advice to the prime minister on ‘Iraq, UK Military Options’, dated 15 October 2002, lists among the arguments in favour of Package 3:

A further factor which cannot be entirely discounted is the negative reaction of many of our own military personnel – particularly in the Army – if we do not provide a land contribution. This could find its way into the media which would be quick to draw unfavourable comparisons between our contributions to the campaign and the Gulf conflict in 1990/91.

At the time, Manning wrote next to this paragraph that ‘CDS is anxious about this’.²⁰

As might be expected, the suggestion that army lobbying played a role in the Package 3 decision has been contested by ex-Ministry of Defence witnesses to the Inquiry, who argue that there were good practical reasons for this option. The head of the British Army at the time, Michael Walker, told the Inquiry that his concern was not whether or not the army was left out, but that the invasion plan should make operational sense: ‘I think the more important thing was to make sure that what came out of the plan [...] was what we called a winning concept.’²¹ His successor, Mike Jackson, suggested to the Inquiry that army discontent at being left out was an issue – ‘I think the army would have been, to put it mildly, rather disappointed’ – though less important than operational concerns.²²

The then chief of defence staff, Michael Boyce, suggested two further reasons for choosing Package 3:

*We felt that the advantage of that in particular would be that we would have more influence on the American plan. If we were producing something of a large-scale size as opposed to a small-scale or just medium-scale [...] Another aspect of our contribution, of course, is that, having something on a large-scale size would allow us, as it actually happened, to take over a region of the country rather than being integrated with the American force in the aftermath process, which is how we finished up with south eastern Iraq.*²³

19 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir David Manning, 24 June 2010, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/50168/manning2010-06-24-declassified.pdf>, p. 100.

SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Did you have a sense that the military were agitating in MOD, in Whitehall, but also in their contacts with CentCom and so on, to make sure that they did have a role?

SIR DAVID MANNING: I've got to be very careful about this because I did not see any papers suggesting any of this, and in fact they seemed to me to adopt different positions at different times.

20 Document MO/17/15K. This document also appears to provide further signs of suspicion in Downing Street that the military may have encouraged the US planners to expect or request a UK land contribution. Another manuscript note by Manning, apparently commenting on text regarding ‘our strategic relationship with the US’, reads ‘fuelled because MOD almost certainly aroused great expectations early on without political authority’. However, as the text referred to has been redacted, this cannot be taken as firm evidence.

21 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of General Lord Walker, 1 February 2010, p. 6, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/45534/100201-walker-final.pdf>.

22 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of General Sir Mike Jackson, 28 July 2010, p. 11, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/49380/20100728-jackson-final.pdf>.

23 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Admiral Lord Boyce, 3 December 2009, p. 26, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40465/20091203-final.pdf>.

The first of these arguments, the aspiration that by supporting the United States, Britain gains influence over its policy, has been a consistent theme in British international policy. It has a specific importance in defence policy, as some of the main British military capabilities are justified by their perceived value to US decision-makers.²⁴ The Iraq Inquiry examined some of the ways in which this influence might have been exercised on the US conduct of the military campaign and post-war administration of Iraq, on wider areas of US–British defence cooperation, on US policy on other international issues such as the search for Middle East peace, and on wider US policy on issues of importance to Britain, such as steel subsidies.²⁵

Boyce's argument on the issue of influence is not entirely convincing. For example, in his testimony he suggests that one of the pay-offs for a British ground force commitment in Iraq was the US commitment to try to resolve the issue of weapons of mass destruction, first through the United Nations. In fact the US agreement to attempt the UN route emerged over the summer of 2002 and was set out in President George W. Bush's speech to the UN General Assembly that September, some time before the first British decisions on Package 3 were taken in October.²⁶ Nor is there a record of any such linkage in the declassified official documents.

Other key witnesses, such as Manning, dispute Boyce's judgment that ground forces were a prerequisite for British influence on the United States:

*What the Americans wanted from us particularly, as I understand it [...] was the bases that we had, Cyprus and Diego Garcia, that they had huge admiration for our Special Forces, and we continued to supply an important component through what we were doing in the air. And [Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld, [a phrase redacted] had said we don't even need you.*²⁷

The second argument, that the ground force commitment brought with it a desired British role in southern Iraq, is even more contestable. There is no sign of this being presented as a desired aim in any of the documents released by the Iraq Inquiry, while in contrast there is plentiful evidence that the government saw this as a risk that it wanted to avoid.²⁸ Indeed the 'Iraq: UK Military Options' paper referred to above went so far as to argue that a land contribution to the invasion was necessary in order to avoid involvement in post-conflict reconstruction: 'If we do not contribute Package 3, we may be more vulnerable to a [word redacted] request to

24 Articulated clearly in the December 2003 Defence White Paper 'Delivering Security in a Changing World', para 3.5: 'The most demanding expeditionary operations, involving intervention against state adversaries, can only plausibly be conducted if US forces are engaged, either leading a coalition or in NATO. Where the UK chooses to be engaged, we will wish to be able to influence political and military decision making throughout the crisis, including during the post-conflict period. The significant military contribution the UK is able to make to such operations means that we secure an effective place in the political and military decision-making processes. To exploit this effectively, our Armed Forces will need to be interoperable with US command and control structures, match the US operational tempo and provide those capabilities that deliver the greatest impact when operating alongside the US.'

25 For example, Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir Anthony Brenton, 17 January 2011, pp. 24, 54–6, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/52474/brenton-2011-01-17-declassified.pdf>; and Testimony by Sir John Sawers, 10 December 2009, especially pp. 65–70, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40668/20091210amsawers-final.pdf>.

26 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Admiral Lord Boyce, 3 December 2009 pp. 38–42, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40465/20091203-final.pdf>.

27 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir David Manning, 24 June 2010, p. 99, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/50168/manning2010-06-24-declassified.pdf>.

28 For example declassified (with redactions) documents: 'Planning for the UK's role in Iraq after Saddam' by the FCO's Iraq Planning Unit, 5 March 2003, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/50763/Iraq-Planning-Unit-paper-5March2003.pdf>; and 'Iraq – the aftermath – military options' by John Dodds, Defence, Diplomacy and Intelligence Team, HM Treasury, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/47679/iraq-theaftermath-militaryoptions-4March2003.pdf>. Both these documents were drafted long after the British military force was deployed, but neither makes any reference to a putative government decision to justify Package 3 on the basis that it would lead to any specific post-war role for Britain.

provide a substantial force for this potentially open-ended task.²⁹ And in retrospect this British commitment to the Basra area can be seen as more of a burden than a reward.

It is possible that the United Kingdom might still have had a difficult and long-lasting combat role in Iraq even if it had not contributed ground forces to the invasion, for example if it had sent follow-up forces after the initial combat phase. This was in fact an option offered by Bush to Blair when it appeared the prime minister might not secure parliamentary support for the invasion.³⁰ But there is a difference between a definite decision to undertake this sort of commitment – a situation in which policy-makers have a reasonable degree of initiative and discretion – and what actually seems to have happened, which is that British forces found themselves by force of circumstance having to take on an unexpected and demanding role in Iraq.

From the point of view of the political-military relationship, the issue is not so much whether the arguments made by Boyce were correct or not, but the quality and process of decision-making in the run-up to war. Was a political leader's decision to use force taken on the basis of reliable and balanced professional military advice from the military leaders on matters within their area of responsibility? Was this advice seriously intended, and made by people in a position to make a good judgment? As Manning put it:

*it didn't seem to me that the reason for joining a land invasion of Iraq should be about whether or not the military would like to take part. It seemed to me that the decision should be for state reasons, for political reasons.*³¹

Manning's scepticism seems to have been warranted. The arguments on influence over the US and on Britain's post-war role in Iraq do not obviously appear to be areas central to the military's professional business, unlike, for example, reserve call-up timetables. Nor do they seem to be areas where the military is particularly well-placed to make a judgment – or at least so well-placed as to outweigh a foreign policy professional such as Manning, someone in daily contact with the US president's immediate staff and later to work as British ambassador to the United States.

It is still unclear why Manning's concerns did not carry the day, based as they were on an assessment of the United Kingdom's overall aims and a recognition of the costs involved. The decision for Package 3 seems to have been taken at a meeting on 31 October 2002 between the prime minister, the defence secretary, the foreign secretary and the chief of defence staff. The letter from the Downing Street private secretary recording this meeting is quite short, and the version released by the Iraq Inquiry is heavily redacted, so the basis for the decision is not entirely clear.³²

Moreover, the decision at this meeting was merely to 'tell the US that we were prepared to put Package 3 on the same basis as Package 2 for planning purposes, in order to keep the option open', rather than to make a clear choice between the two options. The Iraq Inquiry has not found (or at least has not released) any document recording when or whether there was any formal decision to choose Package 3 outright, the basis on which such a decision was made, or any sign that this decision was re-examined following the switch in invasion route from the north to the south in January 2003 and the change in military planning that followed.

29 Document MO 8/17/15K.

30 Woodward, Bob (2004), *Plan of Attack* (Pocket Books), p. 338.

31 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir David Manning, 24 June 2010, p. 99.

32 Declassified (with redactions) letter of 31 October 2002 from Anna Wechsberg (No. 10 Downing Street) to Peter Watkins (Private Secretary to the Defence Secretary), released by the Iraq Inquiry, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51247/WechsbergtoWatkins-IraqMilitaryOptions-31October2002.pdf>.

In his 2010 autobiography Tony Blair asserts that the government chose to take part in a ground invasion of Iraq in order to support relationships with the United States and with the British Army, and assigns to Boyce the foremost role in the debate, next to his own:

Mike Boyce [...] was clear that the optimum from the British perspective was package three. He said he would have a real problem with the army if they were not fully involved, and such involvement alone gave us far greater influence in shaping US thinking. This was also my own instinct.³³

But he says nothing about why he aligned himself with Boyce's views, rather than those of his principal political advisers, even on matters that he says had nothing to do with the military effectiveness of Package 3 – whether or not it contributed to a 'winning concept' – but everything to do with its political purposes.

Helmand: the move to the north

In the case of the contribution of ground forces to the invasion of Iraq, there is no doubt that a decision with such far-reaching consequences was taken by the proper authorities – the elected political leader of the country. In a separate case three years later, the decision to deploy British forces to the northern part of Afghanistan's Helmand province, there seems some doubt about the level of political supervision. Decision-making in this instance has been the subject of a detailed investigation by the House of Commons Defence Committee.³⁴

At issue was the decision in the summer of 2006 to accede to urgent requests by the governor of Helmand to redeploy UK forces from their planned operations around his relatively peaceful provincial capital, Lashkar Gar, to the much more challenging security environment around the town of Sangin in the north of the province. As a result, UK forces found themselves spread thinly in embattled 'Platoon Houses' across a larger area, and confronting a larger and much more hostile enemy. This led to heavier fighting, higher casualties and a UK response that inflated troop numbers, timescales, and human and financial costs far beyond original expectations. This redeployment seems in essence to have changed the sort of war Britain was waging from a relatively limited campaign to one of the most demanding operations conducted by its forces in the last 60 years – a change described as going from providing 'security in a small area to "fighting for their lives [...] in a series of Alamos"³⁵.

Again, the issue here is not the conduct of the campaign. Military experts can argue with some justification that little goes precisely according to plan in warfare, and that countries at war must be prepared to adjust their approach significantly over the course of the conflict. Likewise the question at stake is not the wisdom of the original decision to mount an operation in Helmand, which has been examined extensively elsewhere.³⁶ The issue is how a plan to perform one sort of military operation that had been agreed and implemented changed into a very different operation with wider political and military impact.

33 Blair, Tony (2010), *A Journey* (Hutchinson), p. 411.

34 House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan'.

35 *Ibid.*, para 45. 'Alamos' quotation is from testimony by General (Rtd) Sir Rob Fry.

36 For example in Clarke, Michael (ed.) (2011), *The Afghan Papers* (Royal United Services Institute), especially Chapter 1, 'The Helmand Decision'.

As in the example of the Iraq case, two quite separate assessments have emerged from the evidence provided to the Defence Committee in testimony by political and by military figures. Former defence secretary John Reid told the committee that in the spring of 2006 he was fully briefed on the original deployment around Lashkar Gar, and had formally given it the go-ahead. He said he saw his role as focusing on whether the full costs of the operation (at that point envisaged as involving some 3,000 troops) would be financed in full by the Treasury, whether other NATO allies would be deploying in concert in neighbouring provinces, and whether the Department for International Development (DFID) was able to commit sufficient resources to carry out development and reconstruction within the province.³⁷ Reid noted that he left the operational detail of the deployment – what the troops would actually do – to the military, receiving assurances that it was militarily practicable. He did not regard it as his role to interfere in such expert matters.

Reid was succeeded by Des Browne at the Ministry of Defence in early May 2006 as part of a wider government reshuffle. Shortly after Browne took office, the decision was made to redeploy forces to the north of Helmand, apparently without his involvement. According to Browne's testimony, 'it was all briefed to me retrospectively and it has been subsequently described by those who were in command in military terms as an operational decision and that is how I perceived it'.³⁸ Despite this, Browne told the committee that he took full responsibility for the decision and respected the freedom of action of the commander on the ground. Nevertheless he said he was unaware how the decision was taken or on what precise grounds – beyond a general desire to support an embattled and respected governor.³⁹

Military witnesses before the committee accepted that the campaign in Helmand had not gone according to plan, and that UK forces had made mistakes, for example in failing to acquire and use accurate intelligence on the conditions and enemy they would face. But they represented the redeployment decision as a military-operational one – 'I don't think it is fair to describe it as a change of mission. It was a change of tactics'⁴⁰ – well within the competence of the military commanders involved, and in itself not a change of policy requiring ministerial approval.

The Defence Committee appears to have treated these military arguments with a degree of scepticism – its report concludes that 'the operation clearly changed radically with the move into the north'.⁴¹ This view is supported by the actual UK experience in Helmand compared with the original estimates. In 2012, there were some 8,500 British troops in Helmand, nearly three times the original deployment, and they were expecting to withdraw in 2014 rather than in 2009 as originally anticipated.

Whatever the merits of the different arguments over whether this was an operational or a political decision – and a certain amount of caution must be applied to personal testimony not backed up by documents⁴² – it seems clear that one of the most far-reaching decisions of Britain's recent military history was taken at a time of considerable confusion and disagreement over key issues. In particular, there seems to have been confusion over when and on what issues ministers had to

37 Oral evidence to House of Commons Defence Committee, 8 February 2011, response to question 408, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/11020802.htm>.

38 Oral evidence to House of Commons Defence Committee, 29 March 2011, response to question 562. This and other Browne quotations available at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/11032901.htm>.

39 Oral evidence to House of Commons Defence Committee, 29 March 2011, response to question 574.

40 General Sir David Richards, Oral Evidence to House of Commons Defence Committee, 11 May 2011, response to question 676, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/11051102.htm>.

41 House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan', para 55.

42 Other accounts, for example, suggest Browne did in fact receive a briefing about plans for a move north during a hurried visit to Afghanistan on 18 May, though possibly he was not advised of its full significance. See Clarke, *The Afghan Papers*, p. 27.

be consulted, and how to construct a consultation process that allowed balanced and accountable decision-making under pressure.

This picture presents particular problems for the British system of government. The division between ministerial decision-takers and official advisers and implementers requires clarity on both sides over their respective roles and responsibilities. Individual ministers, even with strong personal staffs, have little chance of being aware of all the activities of the departments for which they are responsible: they therefore depend on a strong personal and institutional understanding throughout their departments of when issues must be drawn to their attention, and when their decision is needed to set or implement policy. And they must be able to trust their advisers.

Taking the Iraq and Afghanistan examples, a picture emerges of a policy process in which there is:

- a perception of lobbying by elements of the armed forces to support their institutional interests;
- a consequent lack of political confidence in military advice;
- a lack of clarity over which issues properly fall within the competence of military advisers and commanders, and which remain outside;
- a disconnect between the deployment of military force and the political aims it is supposed to serve; and
- considerable confusion over how some critical and far-reaching decisions were actually taken.

3 Systemic Failure or Absence of System?

How much are the failures listed in the previous chapter the result of a faulty system, rather than individual underperformance or excusable error?

A certain amount of confusion is perhaps inevitable in any democratic policy process. Perfection is not to be expected of any government decision-making, especially when dealing with a new and complex international situation and the uncertain fortunes of war. The Iraq Inquiry has yet to release its judgment, but much of the tone of the commentary on the Helmand case has been that failings were due to circumstance rather than system. The Defence Committee's report implied a series of poor individual decisions rather than a systemic problem. One authoritative academic analysis took a more systemic approach, but concluded nevertheless that the failure was one primarily of strategy-making and implementation, in which an opaque political-military relationship was one contributing element of friction.⁴³

On the other hand, the Helmand case was not the first occasion during the Blair government when there seems to have been confusion over what was an operational and what a political decision. According to the entertaining account by former Downing Street communications director Alastair Campbell,⁴⁴ in February 2001 the prime minister was taken by surprise when he heard that the Royal Air Force had joined US forces in bombing missions near Baghdad. Reportedly Blair had agreed to the attacks in principle (as part of a US-led operation) but had not been consulted or informed when the operation was actually launched. Campbell expressed concern related to presentation and personalities: 'the media was totally dominated by Iraq. What coverage there was of G[ordon] B[rown]'s [Labour Spring Conference] speech was OK but his disciples seemed to think we had deliberately bombed Iraq as a way of minimising coverage'. Setting aside such immediate political issues, it nevertheless seems odd that the prime minister had not been aware that British forces were going into action: 'clearly someone inside [the Ministry of Defence] had fucked up. Their political antennae were hopeless.'⁴⁵

The main problem in trying to decide whether these are isolated or systemic failures is that, in addition to the confusion surrounding how the British political-military relationship has functioned in practice, there is also considerable confusion about how it ought to function in theory. This means that there is only an uncertain benchmark against which to measure the individual performance of the participants in the relationship, and also whether the structure of the relationship itself is suited to the burdens placed upon it.

43 Clarke, Michael and Soria, Valentina (2011), 'Charging up the Valley: British Decisions in Afghanistan', *RUSI Journal*, August/September 2011, Vol. 156, No. 4, pp. 80–90.

44 Campbell, Alastair (2011), *Power and Responsibility: Diaries 1999-2001* (Arrow), pp. 523–24, entries for 16–17 February 2001.

45 'The only minister who knew the truth about how we too had been in the dark was Jack S[traw]. He had been on the phone to T[ony] B[lair] and had seen the news of the air strikes on TV. "How long is the bombing in Baghdad going on?" "What bombing?" "You are bombing Baghdad!"' Campbell, *Power and Responsibility*, p. 524.

This is not just a matter of assessing performance after the fact. A clear concept is also useful in improving government decision-making, by setting out what a relationship is supposed to achieve, and the principles it is supposed to apply. Possession of such a concept does not guarantee success, but it can help lay down a common set of assumptions about an issue, provide a guide to planning and action, and spread a common language to discuss key issues among the various different participants in the process. It can also encourage flexibility, in establishing a widely shared picture of current practice, which can then easily be weighed against changing circumstances and – if found wanting – modified accordingly.

One feature of the Iraq and Afghanistan Inquiries is the way in which many evidence sessions started with a request to the political or military witnesses to explain their respective roles and responsibilities. This reflects not only the reasonable wish by those outside government to have clarification on its bureaucratic intricacies, but also the way in which the respective roles of, for example, such significant figures as defence ministers and chiefs of defence staff are not formally spelt out in any widely accepted set of regulations. This is a characteristic feature of the British constitutional and legal system, in which basic principles are formulated, expressed and adjusted less through fundamental texts than through precedent, practice and (especially) process. Such institutions as parliament, the cabinet and the civil service can draw on fairly detailed codes governing both their principles and practice, as can the armed forces (especially on questions of discipline, set out, for example, in Queen's Regulations and the various Armed Forces Acts).

Some of the functions of senior military positions are quite rigorously fixed, such as (reportedly) their role in the command of nuclear weapons and their accounting responsibility for the government budgets they control.⁴⁶ Others are regulated through membership of the principal defence institutions and bodies – mainly committees – but with little indication of how they are supposed to function within these bodies. The closest Britain has come to setting out formally the role of its principal civilian and military defence functionaries is through the quasi-medieval terminology of the Royal Letters Patent establishing the membership of the Defence Council – but how the members of this body are expected in practice to carry out the instructions of the monarch to 'exercise on Our behalf the functions of Our Prerogative' is not spelt out.⁴⁷ Compared with the detailed and sometimes oppressive process governing financial matters, often subject to external audit, the business of making policy seems regulated less by a formal system than by the personalities and judgment of the individuals involved.

One clear example of this is provided by the experience of Richard Dannatt, the former chief of general staff. He is a controversial figure because of the degree of publicity surrounding his disagreements with the government he served and because of his personal character, including pronounced views on religion and British society (expressed clearly in his memoirs).⁴⁸ But, though it might be tempting to dismiss his case as more or less exceptional, it seems that it was as much a product of the general system as of particular personal relationships.

Dannatt is known in particular for his dispute with Downing Street over Iraq in 2006. This was as much about presentation as policy, reflecting the priorities of those involved and the interrelated nature of these issues in modern conflict. It arose in October 2006 when a *Daily Mail* interview

46 Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2010–2011, 'Statement on Internal Control' (HM Stationery Office).

47 Letters Patent constituting the Defence Council, <http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/079FF8D3-E131-47D1-BFF0-AE8EE0C65591/0/20090713DCLettersPatentU.pdf>.

48 Dannatt, Richard (2010), *Leading from the Front* (Bantam), pp. 260–61.

with Dannatt quoted him as saying that British forces should leave Iraq ‘sometime soon’ as their presence was exacerbating the security threat to Britain.⁴⁹ This ran directly counter to the government’s line that the military operation was in fact essential to Britain’s national security, and it prompted a furious reaction from Downing Street.

The reaction was undoubtedly in large part due to the way Dannatt’s remarks became such a big media story. This is something to which any prime minister would have been extremely sensitive, but was especially problematic in this case given the unpopularity of the Iraq war and its personal association in the public mind with Blair. But it also shows clear disagreements over the role of the chief of general staff. In the account of Downing Street’s then chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, Dannatt’s remarks were damaging not just because of the press reaction, or because he was breaking ranks with the government, but because they alarmed Britain’s allies and encouraged its adversaries – a series of wider political implications Powell obviously considers well outside Dannatt’s area of responsibility.⁵⁰

For his part, Dannatt claims to have been surprised by the way the *Daily Mail* presented his comments, but asserts that he spoke within the context of his responsibility, in particular the effectiveness and welfare of the British army.⁵¹ Certainly there seems to have been a wide degree of flexibility in how he interpreted his mandate, both in its scope and in the means he used to carry it out. His view of his job was to be both a government adviser and the representative head of his institution – its ‘tribal chief’. His concerns as tribal chief should be reflected in the actions he took as government adviser. So, for example, he should be free to express opinions in private and in public not only about his management of the army, but also on such larger issues as the proportion of the national budget that should be spent on defence, and the level of armed forces pay.⁵²

Dannatt himself accepts that ‘the tribal chief function inevitably sits at odds with a service chief’s more corporate functions’, and says these contradictions can only be resolved by ‘proper debate and discussion at high level, strong leadership at [Defence] Board level, and clear communication of matters decided’⁵³ – a recipe based on the personal performance of those involved rather than any formal structure, or any formal instructions as to how they were to exercise the Royal Prerogative.

In this respect, Dannatt actually agrees with his critics, notably Powell, who sees the general’s own personal attributes as an essential part of the problem. Of Dannatt’s performance at a meeting set up to clear the air in the aftermath of the *Daily Mail* controversy, Powell records that ‘after a few minutes it was quite clear to me that he was unsuited to his job’,⁵⁴ though he does not say how, or what he would have preferred instead. Powell treats the Blair government’s difficulties with Dannatt largely as the result of choosing the wrong candidate for the position,⁵⁵ rather than because of inadequate definition and enforcement of any formal constitutional structure governing political-military relations. His remark is particularly striking as it comes in a book that Powell intended to be a guide to and illustration of the modern practice of government (albeit informed by personal experience), a coda to Machiavelli’s guide to statecraft.

49 Sands, Sarah, ‘Sir Richard Dannatt: A Very Honest General’, *Daily Mail*, 12 October 2006.

50 Powell, *The New Machiavelli*, pp. 269–70.

51 Dannatt, *Leading from the Front* pp. 235–64.

52 *Ibid.*, pp. 250–1.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 247.

54 Powell, *The New Machiavelli*, p. 270.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

This story is typical of much British discussion of this issue, which tends towards the narrative, historical and institutional. For example, possibly the best examination of the British political-military relationship is in Hew Strachan's *The Politics of the British Army*,⁵⁶ a history stretching back to the foundation of the institution in the 17th century. Much material is otherwise to be found in political memoirs, such as Denis Healey's account⁵⁷ of his battles as defence secretary in the 1960s, or the rival accounts of their early 1980s confrontation by John Nott⁵⁸ and Henry Leach,⁵⁹ respectively defence secretary and head of the Royal Navy. The best-known study of the military chiefs of staff⁶⁰ is likewise a history, which largely plots the development of an institution through the varied personalities of the incumbents and the differing challenges they faced.

Perhaps the most notable example of this historical and empirical thinking is the continuing cult of Alan Brooke, Winston Churchill's military sparring partner as chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee from 1941 to 1945, whose statue confronts Downing Street across Whitehall from outside the Ministry of Defence, and who continues to act as a model for contemporary military leaders.⁶¹ But while study of the Churchill–Brooke relationship has value, it is limited both by its specific historical context and by its inevitable focus on the character and experience of the individuals involved.

As a result of this lack of native conceptual thinking, much British discussion of the issue looks to the United States, where different political, military and academic traditions have produced an alternative approach. An examination of US thinking in this area can help establish whether Britain has any coherent approach to its political-military relationship and whether this relationship is in fact well suited to its requirements.

US theory as a guide to British practice?

In contrast to Britain, in the United States there is a strong tradition of development, discussion and application of thinking on political-military relations. This contrast is in some ways surprising, as in general the US–UK military relationship is extremely close, thanks to a 70-year alliance, a recent history of intense and intimate cooperation, a similar assessment of international interests, and a number of shared values and habits of mind. To an extent, the British armed forces are a smaller version of the US military, with a range of similar but smaller-scale capabilities across all three services, capable of deployment far away from home. In some areas this structuring of the British military as a 'pocket superpower' is explicitly intended to enable its forces to work comfortably as part of a US-led operation. Fashionable American military thinking is often quickly picked up and echoed in Britain.

But despite this structural and operational coherence, the US experience of military governance is in some important respects very different from the situation in the United Kingdom. The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act and other legal instruments provide the US Congress with the basis for an intense scrutiny of military performance generally, and its role in government decision-making in particular. Dating back to the early years of the republic, a tradition of suspicion of an over-mighty executive and an improperly controlled

56 Strachan, Hew (1997), *The Politics of the British Army* (Clarendon Press).

57 Healey, Denis (1990), *The Time of My Life* (Penguin).

58 Nott, John (2002), *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* (Politico's).

59 Leach, Henry (1993), *Endure No Makeshifts* (Pen & Sword).

60 Jackson, Bill and Brammall, Edwin (1992), *The Chiefs* (Brassey's).

61 See for example Blitz, James, 'Richards chosen as head of military', *Financial Times*, 14 July 2010.

military provides a frame of reference for debate of these issues, underscored by the prominent role played by many retired military officers in national politics. Added to this is a recent history of controversy in political-military relations, including the contentious and autocratic tenure of Donald Rumsfeld as Defense Secretary, and the repeated high-profile dismissal of senior officers for failing to deliver administration policy effectively or, explicitly in the case of General Stanley McChrystal, for failing to express proper respect for the political leadership.⁶²

Perhaps the most important difference is the existence in the United States of a thriving and policy-relevant debate on the underlying principles, character and functioning of the political-military relationship. The US system of political appointees at the higher levels of government service guarantees a massed exchange of talent between academia, the private sector and government every time there is a change of administration and often at points in between. And the US armed forces have managed also to encourage a strong academic character among some of their most successful officers in recent years. The result has been the creation of a class of uniformed and civilian ‘defense intellectuals’, combining a theoretical and historical perspective on security issues with hands-on experience of policy formulation and delivery.

Among the more influential products of this class have been H. R. McMaster’s study of the failure of the US military chiefs of staff to provide objective and balanced advice in the run-up to the Vietnam War,⁶³ Samuel Huntington’s *The Soldier and the State*,⁶⁴ which in many ways established political-military relations as a field of academic study, and Eliot Cohen’s highly influential work *Supreme Command*, intended in part as a response to and updating of Huntington’s.⁶⁵ In contrast to the British experience, the ideas expressed in such studies are often integrated in the policy debate, partly because their authors are often themselves participants in government.

While McMaster’s book largely functions as a case study of institutional and personal failure, the works by Huntington and Cohen together provide a means of framing the question of the political-military relationship in a way that is also relevant to the British experience.

Huntington established what has since become known as the ‘normal’ theory of political-military relations. In very general terms, this implies that war is a discrete and supremely challenging area of human activity; that those chiefly engaged in this activity are a largely self-sufficient and distinct caste of professional experts (sometimes taking into temporary membership a larger segment of the general population); and that the role of the civilian political leadership is principally to muster national resources in support of the efforts of the armed forces, set them overall political objectives and allow them a wide-ranging freedom in how they choose to achieve these objectives. At the time of its writing (1957) this construct seemed to reflect well the contemporary view of the experience of the two World Wars and at least one potential scenario for future conventional conflict if the Cold War ever turned hot.

Cohen’s response, informed partly by the experience of Vietnam and other wars of the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, challenged this view. Drawing a series of historical vignettes from Abraham Lincoln to David Ben-Gurion (and including the Churchill–Brooke experience), Cohen argues that

62 For ‘conduct [which] does not meet the standard that should be set by a commanding general. It undermines the civilian control of the military that is at the core of our democratic system. And it erodes the trust that’s necessary for our team to work together to achieve our objectives in Afghanistan.’ President Barack Obama, ‘President Obama on Afghanistan, General McChrystal & General Petraeus’, 23 June 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/06/23/president-obama-afghanistan-general-mcchrystal-general-petraeus>.

63 McMaster, H.R. (1998), *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (HarperCollins).

64 Huntington, Samuel (1958), *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Belknap).

65 Cohen, Eliot (2002), *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (Random House).

the most effective model of the political-military relationship had been one in which the political leader took a close and critical interest in the detail of military operations. In this 'unequal dialogue' between civilian politicians and senior officers, Cohen's political leaders probed, questioned and at times overruled military advice when it appeared unrealistic or out of step with political aims. But once they had hammered out a military plan they approved, they then did not interfere with its execution, even when they had subsequent concerns about military performance.

Cohen's historical study reflects a number of theoretical judgments. He sees war not as a distinct and separate human activity but as an integrated political, economic and even cultural phenomenon. Likewise, as institutions, the armed forces are not entirely distinct bodies, separate from civilian society and acting in radically different ways from their civilian counterparts. Military advice and assessments are therefore the products as much of (conscious or unconscious) political attitudes and worldviews as of objective judgment, and hence must be subject to critical examination.

Cohen illustrates this by critically analysing what was at the time one of the most widely respected elements of US national security thinking, the so-called Weinberger-Powell Doctrine. An amalgam of the thinking of two of the most respected figures in US defence circles in the 1980s and 1990s, this doctrine argued that the United States should use military force in as great a preponderance of power over the enemy as possible, for vital and clearly defined military and political objectives, and only with the full backing of the country. This doctrine seemed to play to US military strengths, in its ability to project power overseas and its technological and numerical dominance; as well as to address the perceived lessons of defeat in Vietnam and to offer a blueprint for success for future military engagements.

In Cohen's analysis, the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine abrogated the responsibility of politicians for policy-making by seeking to establish fixed 'rules of thumb' for the use of force, while underrating the likely future need to pursue national security through more calibrated and open-ended commitments, where destructive or compulsive force was not the most effective lever and where objectives would inevitably be uncertain and shifting. Cohen also showed how the doctrine could be seen as a political statement couched as an objective assessment, although this may not have been the conscious intention of the framers. To the extent that the doctrine was a reaction to the US defeat in Vietnam, it implied that the defeat was the result not of an inadequate performance by the military or its inability to direct massive resources to productive ends, but rather of a failure of nerve and strategy by politicians, and the failure of American society to support the military effort.

A British approach?

Neither Huntington nor Cohen offers a perfect blueprint to apply to recent British experience. Both underplay the domestic political context in which national security decisions are taken. Both mainly consider situations in which countries act as great powers, rather than as junior partners of a superpower. And both have a wartime focus, rather neglecting the practice of the political-military relationship in time of peace or of persistent low-level conflict. This makes citing either as an authority for some 'correct' or ideal pattern for British practice something of a risk. For example, two recently retired senior British officials – a diplomat and a general – have cited Cohen in support of diametrically opposed conceptions of how the political-military relationship should function.⁶⁶

66 Melvin, Mungo (2012), 'Learning the Strategic Lessons from Afghanistan', *RUSI Journal*, April 2012, Vol. 157, No. 2, arguing for the 'normal' model and, supporting more critical political oversight; Cowper-Coles, Sherard (2011), *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign* (HarperPress), p. 282.

Nevertheless, together Huntington and Cohen offer a framework on which to hang the disparate elements of British practice in order to piece together something that could be described as a British approach. In particular, they provide a conceptual framework for discussion of the issue, seeing individual events and personalities as evidence of broader patterns of conduct that can be more or less successful. They also provide alternative models for how political and military leaders should conduct themselves.

Judged against this Huntington/Cohen framework, it seems that the British approach is something of a mixture. For a start, as outlined above, it is marked by its informality, absence of fixed regulation and dependence on mutual and personal understanding rather than doctrine. For sure, this informality brings some advantages, chiefly in its flexibility, its freedom from rigid procedure and its avoidance of the idea – common in some other government systems – that a strong process can entirely substitute for talent.

But informality also means that the process is often complex and opaque, and depends to a very high degree on strong personal judgments and personal relationships. It puts enormous importance, and enormous pressure, on the individuals involved, and its success or failure depends largely on their personal performance. The experience of the last 10 years suggests this cannot always be guaranteed. It is also especially vulnerable when many of the principal players are dealing with several very demanding conflicts in different places, as was the case for much of last decade, and often suffering from the consequent ‘factor of fatigue’;⁶⁷ when they are travelling away from London, as was the case at the time of Dannatt’s *Daily Mail* interview;⁶⁸ or when there is heavy turnover of key political and military staff, as was the case at the time of the move north in Helmand.⁶⁹

Moreover, it seems that in practice the conduct of British political and military leaders is more in line with Huntington’s conception than Cohen’s, with a clear differentiation of roles between political and military leaders.

The overall political direction for military operations has indeed been set by the political leadership. Tony Blair in particular interpreted his role very assertively in his advocacy of the use of British military power in specific circumstances in Iraq and Afghanistan (and earlier in the Balkans and Africa), and through his attempts to shape wider international thinking on the use of force, notably in his 1999 speech to the Chicago Council on World Affairs⁷⁰ arguing (among other things) for an international consensus on humanitarian intervention. Similarly, politicians have seen resourcing of military operations as within their field of responsibility – John Reid was explicit about this in his parliamentary testimony on Helmand (see above).

Once this overall direction had been set, the actual conduct of military operations seems to have been largely seen as a matter for the military professionals. The cases of Iraq and Helmand indicate a positive reluctance by politicians to second-guess or overrule military decision-making, even when their advisers may have doubts over the military’s motives. There is no sign in the politicians’

67 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir David Manning, 30 November 2009, p. 48, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40459/20091130pm-final.pdf>.

68 Powell, *The New Machiavelli*, p. 270.

69 Oral evidence to House of Commons Defence Committee, 29 March 2011, Des Browne’s response to question 568: ‘The Chief of the Defence Staff who served contemporaneously with me had been in post for only about two or three days before I became the Secretary of State for Defence, and he wasn’t the only change. The CinC Land became the CGS. The VCDS [Vice Chief of Defence Staff] changed as well at the same time, and he had particular responsibility for commitments.’

70 Blair, Tony, Speech to Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 23 April 2009, <http://www.tonyblairoffice.org/speeches/entry/tony-blair-speech-to-chicago-council-on-global-affairs/>.

evidence presented to the Iraq Inquiry that at the time they questioned military planning for the invasion, or indeed for the post-invasion follow-up, either in their minds or with others.

On a more impressionistic note, it seems that the British political class as a whole is reluctant to adopt as critical an attitude towards military figures as it does towards non-uniformed civil servants, or their analogues in other professions including healthcare, law and order, and transport. Alastair Campbell, normally no respecter of the Establishment and himself a master influencer, seems to have taken at face value a charm offensive mounted by the chief of defence staff:

Later, [Charles] Guthrie, out of uniform and wearing a very smart suit and the shiniest shoes I had seen for yonks, came over for a cup of tea and a chat. He said he sensed a like mind and wanted me to know the MoD had a lot of time for T[ony] B[lair], and for me, and he was happy to work closely with me on the media front. He knew the MoD had traditionally not done media well and if I needed help in changing attitudes, he would provide it. He invited me down to [the SAS headquarters in] Hereford.⁷¹

There is also often a degree of respect in the tone of questioning of military officers by parliamentary committees that is lacking in their approach to civilian officials.⁷²

Meanwhile there is plentiful evidence that, from their side, many senior military figures in the UK share this Huntingtonian conception. There is clear acceptance that decisions to use force, and to determine the overall aims for this, are matters for politicians. Likewise it is seen as the politicians' duty to provide sufficient resources to achieve the aims they have set. Beyond that, the actual conduct of military operations should be seen as something separate and in a different category from the usual current of politics. In this conception, the conduct of a military campaign should ideally be as free as possible of political or presentational issues, or resource constraints. It is the role of the political world to adapt itself to the requirements of the military campaign, not the other way around.

Evidence for this attitude can be seen in, for example, comments to the Iraq and Afghanistan Inquiries from military figures over

- the reluctance of politicians to accept that the country was 'at war' (and therefore to fulfil their Huntingtonian role in assigning to military operations the priority and resources considered necessary by the military practitioners);⁷³
- the need for 'strategic patience' in government to cope with a long war (and thus to subordinate domestic political concerns – over human and financial costs or apparent lack of progress – to the military's wish to run campaigns as they see fit);⁷⁴
- the view of 'legal and societal norms', such as human rights legislation and concern over civilian casualties as 'constraints' on UK military freedom of action (rather than seeing such issues as integral to the democratic way of warfare);⁷⁵ and

71 Campbell, Alastair (2011), *Power and the People: Diaries 1997–1999* (Arrow), p. 302, entry for 19 February 1998.

72 Compare, for example, House of Commons Defence Committee evidence sessions with Ministry of Defence Permanent Under Secretary, 9 February 2011, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmsselect/cmdfence/c760-i/c76001.htm> and with Generals Richards, Wall and Houghton, 11 May 2011, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmsselect/cmdfence/554/11051102.htm>.

73 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony by Lord Boyce, 27 January 2010, p. 96, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51818/20110127-Boyce.pdf>.

74 BBC Radio 4, Interview with Richard Dannatt, 27 June 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/andrew_marr_show/8766141.stm.

75 Ministry of Defence (2010), *Strategic Trends Programme: Future Character of Conflict*, p. 25.

- in general, a failure by politicians to understand and adapt themselves to the military, owing in part to their lack of personal military experience (rather than seeing it as the role of the armed forces, as public servants, to understand and adapt to the requirements of their political masters).⁷⁶

There are also many examples where the military has successfully found practical solutions to some of these issues. Senior officers can speak fluently, at length and with some justice, of the efforts the armed forces have made to satisfy domestic concerns over, for example, national and international human rights requirements, or over media access to their operations. But the cultural tone still seems more that such concerns are an obstacle to their real business, a set of issues distinct from warfare, rather than integral to the overall success of their operations.

76 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Lieutenant General Sir Freddie Viggers, 19 September 2009. 'Ministers, top civil servants in MoD, FCO, Treasury – any department that claims to have a role in the conduct of a campaign have to be trained. They have to understand our language'; <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/41882/20091209amviggers-figures-final.pdf>.

4 Problems and Inadequacies

There are a number of problems with this British approach. First, it is based on a presumption of balanced professional objectivity in military advice, planning and operations, although, as seen above, the armed forces are often believed to be pursuing their own institutional agendas.⁷⁷

Second, by allocating to the politicians the responsibility for resourcing, it implies that resource problems are principally related to the headline level of the defence budget, rather than on whether this budget is well allocated and managed.

Third, it puts the British system of ministerial accountability under a lot of strain, giving military commanders considerable freedom of action, while requiring the politicians to shoulder most of the responsibility before parliament and the public. This reflects standard British governmental practice over many years, whereby ministers are held formally responsible for all the actions of their departments. But it is additionally acute in the context of defence, as it also reflects the current British military orthodoxy of 'mission command',⁷⁸ in which commanders are allowed a high degree of flexibility in deciding how to achieve the aims set by their superiors.

The British 'mission command' approach has been cited not only as one of the reasons for the lack of ministerial oversight of the move to the north of Helmand (and for an apparent lack of involvement by senior military officers),⁷⁹ but also as a contributing factor seven years before in the rift between Mike Jackson, then British commander in Kosovo, and his NATO superior Wesley Clarke.⁸⁰

Fourth, it conceals the degree to which the authority of politicians over the military is based as much on their respective standing with the press and the public, as on their formal constitutional relationship.

This point is an especially important one, both because it explains some of the basis for recent British defence decision-making, and because it points to an alternative, perhaps more realistic, vision of the British political-military relationship, firmly grounded within the domestic political context, and where the battles are fought as much in Fleet Street as in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The apparent model of British political-military relationship, in which there is a formal hierarchy of authority and a clear division of responsibilities, understates the ability of politicians to impose

77 For perceptions of this in the field of procurement, see Ministry of Defence (2009), *Review of Acquisition for the Secretary of State for Defence. An independent report by Bernard Gray*, pp. 28–30.

78 Ministry of Defence (2011), *JDP 0-01: British Defence Doctrine* (4th edition), para 508.

79 Clarke and Soria, 'Charging up the Valley'.

80 Clark, Wesley (2001), *Waging Modern War*, (Public Affairs Ltd), p. 399. See also King, Anthony (2011), *The Transformation of Europe's Armed Forces* (Cambridge University Press), p. 79.

their views on the military, especially when the government is in political difficulties. For much of the last 10 years the military has enjoyed consistently high levels of public approval, while the political class in general, and the governments of Blair and Brown in particular, has not. In addition, the armed forces have had close links with a generally sympathetic press, which is likely to support the military in its disagreements with politicians in part because of the ammunition this provides for its naturally critical approach to government.

These close press-military links were originally encouraged by the Blair government, which co-opted respected and authoritative military figures in order to build press support for interventions in Iraq and the Balkans in the late 1990s, exploiting in particular its close and trusting relationship with the then chief of defence staff Charles Guthrie.⁸¹ Thus the government's principal military adviser became in addition one of the principal sources of military opinion for the press.

This shift seems to have been seen as a short-term tactic to deal with an immediate crisis of presentation. However, it also had long-term and perhaps unforeseen consequences, in making a permanent change in the role of the chief of defence staff. This seems to have happened without being examined and ratified through any formal constitutional process, an example perhaps of the way in which presentational concerns drive both the business and the mechanics of modern government. The shift seems to have caused few problems for Downing Street as long as it had a good relationship with a military establishment that shared its agenda; waged relatively uncontroversial wars; enjoyed reasonable public approval; and ran a powerful and efficient communications operation capable of stamping on any dissident military spin. But it spelt trouble when these circumstances changed.

This was particularly the case during Gordon Brown's embattled and disorderly administration when, according to Anthony Seldon's and Guy Lodge's well-sourced account,⁸² he acquiesced to the military's demands for additional forces in Afghanistan not because he was convinced by its professional advice but because 'he had simply been ground down by the media and public storm. Number 10 needed the military itself to be defending the strategy in Afghanistan, not attacking the prime minister in public and private meetings.' In this account, the standard assurance by the then chief of defence staff that 'of course we will do whatever you tell us to do' would have had limited real value if the determining factor in the decision was not the prime minister's formal position at the head of the chain of command, but his chances of political survival.

Crucial to this aspect of the relationship was the intense manner in which senior military officers participated in the British public debate on defence issues, and especially through their contacts with the press. The formal speeches, interviews, briefings and articles conducted by senior officers during this period were complemented by a range of informal activities, including military-hosted visits and social events for press contacts, and personal contact on the London social circuit. Senior officers spoke directly and informally to journalists, often on an off-the-record basis, exchanging personal mobile numbers, email addresses and text messages.⁸³ They also hosted journalists on trips to operational theatres. In all this they acted no differently from many ministers and their special advisers.

81 Campbell, *Power and the People*, p. 293, diary entry for 12 February 1998: 'I [...] said we needed cleverer material for coverage on Iraq because we were losing the media battle. The FCO and MoD briefings were useless. Guthrie said he would happily go up and do [media] stuff. He was definitely a man to go into the jungle with.'

82 Seldon, Anthony and Lodge, Guy (2010), *Brown at 10 (Biteback)*, p. 303.

83 Personal communication with the author.

While official contacts were and are subject to control and approval by the central, ministerially directed Ministry of Defence press office, there is also considerable evidence of unapproved contacts through leaks and briefings.⁸⁴ It is difficult to know who has been responsible for such leaks. There is no public evidence that any senior officer has ever been accused of leaking, and indeed it is not just the military that might be thought to have a motive. But what is important is the perception by policy-makers – as noted by Seldon and Lodge, and in the ‘Iraq: UK Military Options’ memo referred to above – that they have to take decisions against a background of public lobbying from others within government, sometimes supportive, sometimes less so.

The missing civilian link

Finally, this British approach underplays the role of professional civilian advisers on military matters, particular the contribution of civilian officials in the FCO and MOD. In the British system, these officials have a character that is distinct from the elected leaders they advise: they often work on issues of politics and policy, but do not exercise the same functions of control and accountability as ministers. They do not fit easily into the bipolar model of political-military relations set out by Huntington and Cohen, who largely neglect their contribution. Cohen, for example, quotes Norman Brook, a civilian Cabinet Office official, to provide evidence of Churchill’s attitude to the military, but does not investigate Brook’s own role in the joint military-civil policy process (at this point Brook was deputy secretary to the War Cabinet; he went on to become one of the most senior and influential public servants in mid-century Britain).

Like their equivalents in other governments, the FCO and MOD have distinct institutional identities, cultures and responsibilities. But in principle their civilian officials together have a number of functions relating to military action:

- a **bureaucratic function**, in ensuring that proper governmental procedures are followed, and in providing busy and sometimes inexperienced political leaders with the information and advice they need to make informed judgments;
- a **support function**, including managing the defence budget, equipping and supplying the armed forces, administering bases and other defence infrastructure, providing political intelligence, and securing foreign permissions for military access, basing and overflights;
- a **coordination function**, in ensuring the various different areas of national effort – diplomatic, economic, cultural, development etc. – are mutually supportive and operate in harmony, or at least without too much conflict; and
- an **integration function**, in ensuring that the planning and conduct of military operations are well matched to their political aims, and that expert uniformed judgment on the military effectiveness of military action is integrated with expert civilian judgment about its political and economic impact.

84 ‘[The Ministry of Defence] does seem to have had a bit of a problem with leaks’, David Cameron, Oral Evidence to the Liaison Committee, 18 November 2010, response to Question 27, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmliain/608/10111802.htm>. See also Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2010–2011: ‘Leaks from within the Department remain damaging and resource-intensive to manage; they reached new levels during SDSR and have continued at a high level ever since.’

In practice, in all these areas the staff undertaking these tasks are usually made up of both civilian and military officials in the ministries, operational headquarters and overseas offices such as embassies. But between 2001 and 2009 this joint institutional character did not always guarantee a balanced political-military output. While civilian officials were fully engaged in the first three functions, in the last – integration of political aims in the planning and conduct of military operations – it appears that the civilian voice was muted. Evidence from the Iraq Inquiry in particular suggests that this was less a result of the military excluding civilian influence than of civilian officials – like many of their political masters – not seeing the detail of military operations as part of their business.

This certainly seems the case with FCO witnesses to the Inquiry, who regularly disclaimed any military expertise or any wish to interfere in military planning.⁸⁵ Indeed the main focus of the FCO seems to have been on the periods before or after any combat phase. It had lead responsibility for trying to avoid the need for military action in the first place by attempting to resolve the issue through diplomatic action at the UN and elsewhere, and, with DFID, it was responsible for post-invasion planning.

The diplomatic effort seems to have required a great deal of time and talent. It had both an immediate aim – making the disarmament effort against Saddam more legitimate and effective – and a longer-term aim – strengthening a multilateral security system able and willing to act against other threats to international security.⁸⁶ This effort was described as a coordinated diplomatic-military exercise: ‘diplomacy backed by the threat of force’.⁸⁷ In reality, however, the pattern seems to have been one of parallel military and diplomatic efforts with some attempt to avoid conflict between them. In the words of one witness: ‘We didn’t discuss military planning as such. We discussed the implications of military planning for other departments’ activities.’⁸⁸ In practice there seems to have been considerable tension between the diplomacy and force elements of policy, in particular between a military planning schedule dominated by the United States, conditioned by its political timetable, and a diplomatic effort that required more time to build consensus at the UN.

Although some FCO witnesses complained to the Inquiry that this disconnect ‘let the military strategy wag the political and diplomatic strategy’,⁸⁹ they did so in terms that suggested they saw these as distinct activities, conducted by distinct cadres of specialists, rather than as part of an integrated whole with military and diplomatic means together serving political ends. They saw no problem with the idea of a military strategy conducted by the military, much as the diplomatic strategy was conducted by diplomats, and this implied no obvious FCO role in military planning (nor, presumably, any military role in diplomatic planning).

The Package 3 case suggests some of the shortcomings of this approach. As seen above, the decision to choose the ground force option was justified in part in terms of international relations, specifically the relationship with the United States. Many of the FCO witnesses to the

85 See, for example, Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir Anthony Brenton, 17 January 2011, pp. 23–24, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/52474/brenton-2011-01-17-declassified.pdf>.

86 Former UN permanent representative Jeremy Greenstock underlined the importance of UK diplomatic efforts in ‘preventing the collapse of the health of the international community’, and also described British policy towards Iraq as ‘trying to defend the United Nations from being eroded by successful non-compliance by a member state just as much as we were trying to deal with the threat posed by the Iraqi possession of dangerous weapons’: Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir Jeremy Greenstock, 27 November 2009, pp. 97 and 100, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40456/20091127am-final.pdf>.

87 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir Peter Ricketts, 1 December 2009, pp. 24–25, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40462/20091201am-final.pdf>.

88 Ibid., p. 20.

89 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir Christopher Meyer, 26 November 2009, p. 90, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40453/20091126am-final.pdf>.

Inquiry were in a good position to provide authoritative advice on this issue, and had clear *post facto* opinions,⁹⁰ but there is little sign that these views were reflected in the policy debate at the time. Notably, there was no sign of pressure from the British ambassador in Washington in favour of Package 3 and no sign that the military planners preparing it sought his opinion. To be clear, this is not to suggest that the ambassador or the military planners were negligent in their duties, but rather that the system did not require them to consult.

Moreover there seems to have been no attempt to design the various force options – with the FCO’s input – in a way that would support the government’s political strategy rather than the military’s requirements. There is no sign in testimony or declassified documents that there was any discussion of alternative force packages that did not require such large-scale deployments so far in advance. This would have allowed the government to escalate or de-escalate its military threat depending on the process of negotiations; or it would have allowed it to associate or distance itself from the United States, in order to underline to Washington that its support was not unconditional – two options that would have been less subject to the pressures of ‘military deployments [which] generate a momentum of their own and are subject to their own railway timetables’.⁹¹

This sort of carefully calibrated shaping of military force packages to support diplomacy would have been neither straightforward nor necessarily effective: Saddam’s misjudgments and misinterpretation of foreign messaging was notorious, the United Kingdom was constrained by its role as a junior member of the US-dominated coalition, and the diplomatic process was complex and fast-developing. The Blair government may also have believed there was little real chance of a peaceful resolution with Saddam and that it therefore should plan for an invasion as the likeliest outcome. Blair also seems to have been determined that the United Kingdom had a political and moral duty to stick with the United States, come what might. But nevertheless it is striking that no such political calibration of military options was even attempted, especially given the way in which military deployments have been used for diplomatic signalling on other occasions, such as during much of the Cold War and in the dispute with Argentina over the Falkland Islands.

The FCO was in many ways well-placed to advise in this area. Using military force in support of diplomacy depends on a good understanding of the thinking and interests of those the government might seek to influence in this way, in this case not only Saddam but also opinion in the UN and United States, and the FCO was better placed than many other actors in government to provide this understanding.⁹² But it seems that not only were the FCO’s principal officials largely engaged with other issues, but at the time the institution itself did not see one of its roles as being engaged in military planning. The 2003 White Paper ‘UK International Priorities: A Strategy for the FCO’, for example, makes no mention of a role for the FCO in planning or directing the use of force, though it devotes considerable space to its role in preventing and resolving conflict.⁹³

This lack of engagement denied the planners of combat operations the principal source of expertise on the political effects of their actions. It may also have contributed to incoherence in the British (and US) approach to Iraq by dividing the crisis into supposedly distinct ‘phases’ of

90 Ibid., p. 86.

91 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir David Omand, 20 January 2010, p. 57, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/44187/20100120pm-omand-final.pdf>.

92 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Lord Jay of Ewelme, 30 June 2010, pp. 6–9, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/47848/20100630-jay-final.pdf>.

93 Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2003), *Active Diplomacy for a Changing World: The UK’s International Priorities*.

diplomacy, combat and reconstruction, and artificially isolating the military-dominated invasion from the diplomatic and reconstruction effort.

Apart from the FCO, the other institution with the capability and potential primary responsibility for integrating military actions with political effects was the Ministry of Defence. One of its former officials, David Omand, gave the Iraq Inquiry an example of this sort of integrated political-military assessment, in his conceptual summary of the shortcomings of the British Iraq strategy. He cited the chess concept of *Zugzwang*, ‘where you force your opponent into a position where they have to move and every move they can make will worsen their position’, and showed how

*instead of putting Saddam in that position, we turned out to be in that position ourselves because we were forced to [...] get the [UN] inspectors to look for the smoking gun in double quick time before the window for invasion closed.*⁹⁴

In principle, the MOD is the logical institution to provide balanced political-military advice on military operations. It is a joint civil-military institution, managed by joint civilian and military professional heads (the permanent under secretary and the chief of defence staff), and led by a civilian secretary of state. Much of its structure consists of integrated civilian-military teams, in which military and political expertise can be merged to produce politically aware military advice. Most of its contribution to the government decision-making process is prepared or approved by civilians, including, for example, the documents circulated to ministers as the basis for the Package 3 decision. In theory, this integrated structure and process could produce political-military decision-making that is both effective – reflecting comprehensive cross-disciplinary judgment – and accountable – reflecting the civil service’s experience in serving and supporting ministers.

In the last decade, however, this integration does not always seem to have guaranteed balanced political-military advice and indeed may have become an impediment to it. The perception instead is one of a division of responsibilities as clear as the bipolar ‘diplomatic/military’ split affecting the FCO, with the senior military figures becoming accepted as the principal advisers on military operations, and their civilian equivalents being seen as focusing largely on the important and sometimes controversial supporting functions, in particular in dealing with the contentious and politically sensitive defence budget.

This view is apparent in much of the Iraq Inquiry evidence of decision-making in 2002–03, when senior MOD civilians do not seem to have been involved in some crucial meetings – the permanent under secretary, for example, does not seem to have enjoyed the same status or access as the chief of defence staff.⁹⁵ When, comparatively late in the day, an official-level policy process appears to have got under way, civilian officials seem mainly to have been involved in the coordination function, rather than in improving the quality or integration of advice on military operations.⁹⁶ Likewise, in the Seldon/Lodge account of Brown’s difficulties over Helmand policy, the protagonists are represented as Downing Street and the senior military officers, mainly the chief of defence staff, with no apparent role for civilian officials.⁹⁷

94 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir David Omand.

95 For example, the permanent under secretary was not invited to join the defence and foreign secretaries and CDS in discussing military options with the prime minister at the key meeting on 31 October. Letter of 31 October 2002 from Anna Wechsberg (No. 10 Downing Street) to Peter Watkins (Private Secretary to the Defence Secretary).

96 See discussion of role of the ‘Ad Hoc Group of Officials on Iraq’, Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Desmond Bowen, 7 December 2009, pp. 8–9, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/40474/20091207pmbowen-final.pdf>.

97 Seldon and Lodge, *Brown at 10*.

The Dannatt case, moreover, suggests an even greater disjunction, in implying that the military should both take the lead on matters of military effectiveness and also have a major role in such traditional civilian preserves as funding and administration of defence. Dannatt himself suggests that the armed forces should not merely have a separate view on these issues but also be free to lobby other parts of government, the MOD and the press in support of this view.⁹⁸

There are a number of possible explanations for this situation. Blair's tenure as prime minister was noted for the practice of decision-making in small circles of selected (and therefore supposedly tight-lipped) advisers – an approach condemned by, among others, the Butler Review of intelligence on weapons of mass destruction⁹⁹ and defended by Jonathan Powell.¹⁰⁰ Blair's team may have seen the MOD permanent under secretary as untrustworthy or – worse – irrelevant in terms of what he could bring to the discussion. It may also have thought he had enough on his plate already: Blair's government put a strong emphasis on the role of civil servants in ensuring strong financial control,¹⁰¹ service delivery and project management – areas that presented specific challenges for the MOD. Policy advice was only one among a number of priorities, and, until Iraq, rarely the one that captured press or public attention.

Changes in the wider security environment may also have undercut the MOD's role as a centre of civilian thinking on military matters. For much of the Cold War, the civilian-led parts of the MOD had a specific function in developing and pursuing policy on nuclear deterrence. Although military technical and operational nuclear matters were important, the weapons were mainly relevant for their international political (and ethical) relevance rather than their practical effect, which – it was hoped – would remain hypothetical rather than real. This was a discussion much more suited to civilian than military lead responsibility, and produced a corpus of thinking and knowledge largely dominated by civilian officials.¹⁰²

With the end of the Cold War, this expertise was less obviously relevant, and less central to the business of defence, which was now focused on actual rather than potential operations. Although civilian officials had been closely involved in many of the more tangible British military operations of the Cold War and withdrawal from empire, much of this expertise was outside the MOD in the colonial administrations and Northern Ireland Office. Those with the most visible impact on British post-Cold War operational thinking were the military 'men on the ground', rather than their civilian counterparts in Whitehall.¹⁰³

98 Dannatt, *Leading from the Front*, p. 251.

99 HM Stationery Office (2004), *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction, Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors*, conclusions para 67: 'we are concerned that the informality and circumscribed character of the Government's procedures which we saw in the context of policy-making towards Iraq risks reducing the scope for informed collective political judgement. Such risks are particularly significant in a field like the subject of our Review, where hard facts are inherently difficult to come by and the quality of judgement is accordingly all the more important.' The review was chaired by former Cabinet Secretary Sir Robin Butler; Sir John Chilcot was one of its members.

100 Powell's defence suggested the title for this report. Powell, *The New Machiavelli*, p. 60: 'Decisions are well made if the right people are in the room and they have all the available facts before them, on paper or orally, if those in the room feel free to challenge propositions and argue, and if the decisions are properly recorded and disseminated. Of course lots of other people would like to come to momentous discussions so that they can say they were in the room at the time, but much of my job was keeping out of the room those who had nothing to contribute other than rank.' Powell describes Butler as 'leader of the mandarin tendency'.

101 Iraq Inquiry, Testimony of Sir Kevin Tebbit, 3 February 2010, p. 4, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/45045/20100203-tebbit-final.pdf>.

102 For the most celebrated example, see Ogilvy-White, Tanya (2012), *On Nuclear Deterrence: The Correspondence of Sir Michael Quinlan* (Adelphi Papers/IISS).

103 For the most celebrated example, see Smith, Rupert (2005), *The Utility of Force* (Allen Lane). For a critique of the impact of this shift, see Simms, Brendan (2002), *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (Penguin), pp. 173–223.

Finally, the joint civil-military structure of the MOD may have worked to weaken civilian and strengthen military influence, rather than to balance and integrate the two. In theory, the MOD's 'three-legged stool' of equilateral political/military/civil service elements should have ensured balance and mutual control. In practice, the disproportionate political power of the military leg may have worked to unbalance the system, incidentally demonstrating how institutional restructuring in itself does not ensure effective performance. Unlike the armed forces, which were part of the joint system while retaining their separate institutional identities, civilian views were only represented within the joint system, in which the military was also a major shareholder.

Not muddling through

It is difficult to see much of a system or structure in the British political-military relationship of the last decade. To many of those involved, the traditional Huntingtonian model seems to have been the dominant mental vision, in particular in the notional separation of military and political spheres of responsibility. But this was nowhere expressed as formal doctrine. It was subject to a wide range of interpretations and responses, and did not take account of many of the real dynamics and pressures of modern decision-making.

In contrast to Huntington's clear-cut formulation, the overall impression of British practice is of disorder: incoherence, variation, informality and individuality. This seems more than just the inevitable contrast between academic theory and reality, but rather a reflection of how the British governmental machine was unsuited in a number of important ways to the challenges of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. Above all there is an impression of indiscipline, not so much in the sense of an absence of controlling authority – though this may have existed – but rather in the loss of that quality which allows a disparate group of individuals and institutions to achieve true unity of purpose, and which ensures trust in the motives and performance of others. Discipline is the fundamental military quality.¹⁰⁴

104 Slim, William (1956), *Defeat into Victory* (Cassell), Chapter 23, 'Afterthoughts'.

5 Conclusions

Lessons for the future

This report has been concerned with the recent past. Since the period under consideration, Britain has had a change of government and has also participated in what has generally been seen as a successful military campaign in Libya. Britain continues to be engaged in Helmand, but its operations there have changed considerably, in particular with the significant increases in allied, especially US, forces and the shift towards supporting Afghan security forces.

A National Security Council has been created, in part to improve the management and integration of defence and security issues. A new National Security Strategy and a Strategic Defence and Security Review have been published, a single process run largely from within central government rather than by individual ministries. Reforms have been introduced into the Ministry of Defence, including the Defence Reform Review,¹⁰⁵ which among other things reduces the role of the individual service chiefs in discussion of overall defence policy, while giving them more direct responsibility for the management of their services.

For its part, the FCO has strengthened its political-military role, reportedly taking the lead in directing military action against the Libyan regime's oil resources, establishing a higher-profile director of international security position, jointly drafting the government's new Building Stability Overseas and Defence Engagement strategies, and sending officials to the Joint Services Command and Staff courses.

It might seem that the issues set out in this report are therefore largely those of the past, related to circumstances that may not arise again, and involving a cast of characters who have either left the stage or are heading towards the wings. The recent governmental reforms may themselves provide the more structured approach that has been lacking in the past.

However, a number of considerations suggest it would be a mistake to treat this issue as of purely historical interest.

First, US theory and British practice indicate that, rather than being a product of circumstances, tensions in the political-military relationship are a perennial part of defence policy-making. Cohen's thinking, though marked by specific US concerns, draws on such a wide range of historical examples as to suggest the issues are universal. Likewise, a stable and successful relationship cannot necessarily be expected to endure: the difficult British military experience of the 2000s came after a period of successful mutual cooperation between political and military

¹⁰⁵ Ministry of Defence (2011), *Defence Reform: An Independent Report into the Structure and Management of the Ministry of Defence*, part 7.

leaders, notably over Kosovo, Macedonia and Sierra Leone, involving many of the same individuals and institutions. The circumstances of the later Blair and Brown years may be seen as exceptional, in the shocking impact of the 9/11 attacks and the severity of the US reaction, but there is no guarantee that similar security shocks will not occur again.

Moreover, it seems likely that the costs to Britain of any future political-military dysfunction may be even higher. The current government's view of Britain's coming security challenges envisages an 'Age of Uncertainty', in which the country must use its limited strength in a more integrated and sophisticated manner.¹⁰⁶ For the smaller armed forces envisaged in the future, there is to be less of a focus on combat operations and a renewed emphasis on more directly political activities, including 'upstream' work to prevent conflict, and efforts to strengthen alliances as a means of spreading risk. This approach puts a premium on accurate and comprehensive political judgment in order to use military resources in a way that is politically effective, to spot in good time any threats that might require the use of scarce combat power, and to assess how changing international circumstances will change the role and application of British military power. If such political judgment is not available, or not properly applied to military activities, there is little chance that Britain will be able to influence the future international situation as it wishes.

Second, the political pressures that afflicted the Blair and Brown governments, and that hampered their ability to exercise their formal responsibility over an actively engaged military lobby, were similar to those that had affected previous governments, and may be repeated in the future. Governments may follow different policies regarding the military's freedom to build independent relationships with the press, but it may be difficult to reverse the trend of the last few years entirely, even if this was thought desirable. The trend may in fact be towards a more formal independent role for senior military officers in the public debate, as some influential commentators have argued.¹⁰⁷

Third, there are signs of a shift in the traditional British model of ministerial responsibility, increasing the visibility and personal accountability of the civilian and uniformed officials who until now were shielded from view. In a number of recent high-profile cases, ministers and parliament have expressed frustration with their inability to hold to account those they consider primarily responsible for some particular policy decisions. The home secretary's views on the responsibility of officials for the decision to reduce border checks at UK airports in 2011 have received much coverage.¹⁰⁸ So too has the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee's attempt in 2012 to question a government lawyer under oath about advice he had given on a dispute between the government and Goldman Sachs.¹⁰⁹ The Public Accounts Committee has been particularly assertive of its right to question officials as well as ministers, including in the field of defence, and is strongly supported by the investigatory capacity of the National Audit Office.

At issue here is not just whether particular politicians or parliamentary committees are interpreting their roles in a new or controversial way. The question is a more general one of public policy: whether it is still possible adequately to hold a small number of ministers individually responsible for all the complex activities of large and varied government departments. The

106 HM Government (2010), *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*.

107 Strachan, Hew, 'Want to understand the war? Ask the generals', *The Times*, 17 March 2010.

108 Hansard, House of Commons debates, 9 November 2011, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm111109/debtext/111109-0002.htm#11110985001759>.

109 House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 14 December 2011, Sixty-First Report, HM Revenue & Customs 2010-11 Accounts: Tax Disputes, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpubacc/1531/153102.htm>.

breadth of ministerial portfolios, and the expert knowledge often needed fully to understand the issues involved, put an exceptional strain on ministers and on their parliamentary inquisitors.

This is certainly the case in the field of defence. Former diplomat Sherard Cowper-Coles notably recounts an unnamed minister's complaint that he did not know the difference between a Tornado (aircraft) and a torpedo, and cites this as a sign of the impossibility of expecting full ministerial vetting of military advice.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the dynamics of the British defence debate often put ministers in an impossible position, opening them to criticism either for failures to achieve military success or limit casualties – issues over which they may have limited direct control – or for 'interfering' unduly in military-operational matters.

Some ministers have accepted this situation with fortitude, as Des Browne did in the case of Helmand, telling the Defence Committee:

*I had responsibilities and I was determined to live up to them to the best of my ability, and it is up to people to judge whether that was good enough. It certainly wasn't to try to interfere with the chain of command or with military decisions but, once I had said that I would be Secretary of State for Defence, it was quite clearly to take responsibility at political and other levels for the decisions that these people made.*¹¹¹

Others have done so with less stoicism. For example, there was considerable anger in Downing Street in 2009 when Gordon Brown became 'the target of media and public blame' for high casualties during Operation Panther's Claw in Helmand, when the military 'had not alerted ministers to the probability of heavier casualties even though estimates existed'.¹¹²

This attitude suggests particular problems for the British system of public accountability. If ministers are unable or unwilling to examine military decision-making, yet remain responsible for this to parliament, how is the military actually to be held accountable to the public for actions taken in the latter's name and – it is assumed – for its benefit?

Linked to this questioning of traditional practices of ministerial accountability is a fourth potential trend, one of challenging public scrutiny of the principal institutions of the British state and society. The last 10 years have been notable not only for their difficult wars but also for a range of crises and apparent failures of major state institutions. The financial crisis has exposed, among other things, the shortcomings of government regulation of a powerful and assertive banking sector. The fallout from press phone-hacking has put a similar spotlight on the relationship between another powerful and assertive sector and the British government. The parliamentary expenses scandal likewise showed a picture of a major national institution functioning in a way that much of the public found unacceptable.

All these controversies have been marked not only by their gravity but also by the way in which the response has included a major public inquiry (and sometimes a series of inquiries) examining, among other things, the role of institutional culture in the failures of the institution concerned. This suggests that this sort of inquiry may become increasingly the norm, putting all public institutions under a similar scrutiny.

110 Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul*, p. 282.

111 Oral evidence to House of Commons Defence Committee, 29 March 2011, response to question 575.

112 Seldon and Lodge, *Brown at 10*, p. 301.

The British defence and security sector has not yet been subject to such a systematic inquiry into its culture and practices, though it is by no means certain to escape. But it has seen a number of very intrusive and controversial public investigations, including the Butler Inquiry into intelligence, the Hutton Inquiry into the death of defence scientist David Kelly, the long-running Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday, a series of investigations into alleged human rights abuses by British forces and intelligence agencies, and of course the Iraq and Afghanistan Inquiries discussed here.

This implies the growth of a new pattern of investigation of public policy distinct from the traditional pattern of ministerial accountability before parliament, a pattern in which the roles of individual officials as well as ministers are examined. The Iraq experience also suggests that it may become the norm for detailed inquiries to be conducted into all major British military operations, albeit after their conclusion. This means that those involved in making policy may begin to operate on the assumption that their role in decision-making will become public sooner than in the past, when the 30-year embargo on the release of sensitive public documents preserved anonymity for all but the longest-serving officials.

This trend, together with any potential adjustments of the model of ministerial responsibility before parliament, may require a significant readjustment of the British political-military relationship, leading perhaps to a shift in the division of responsibilities between political and military leaders, a new approach to the control and direction of military operations, and a new pattern of accountability. It suggests that the time may be ripe for a more intense public debate about how Britain's armed forces are directed.

A new model

This last section is intended as a contribution to such a debate, by proposing that government decision-making on the use of force should be formally codified, and that this code be approved by parliament.

Such a code would not address the government's 'war powers' – its legal power to use force, or the circumstances in which it may exercise these powers. It would be a definition of the process through which such decisions would be taken, and the responsibilities of those involved in taking them.

The aim would be, in general terms, to set out the relationship between elected politicians, senior military officers and civilian officials. More particularly, the intention should be to improve decision-making in the following five areas:

- **Effectiveness:** Making decision-making less dependent on personal relationships and personal interpretations of individual roles, and more robust in the face of personal fatigue and the pressure of events;
- **Balance:** Preserving the politically impartial character of professional military advice, while ensuring in turn that military action properly serves the political aims of a publicly accountable government;

- **Accountability:** Within government and to parliament, making it clear which people are responsible for particular elements of policy advice, and the reasoning through which they formulate this advice (in theory such accountability should also improve the quality of the advice);
- **Flexibility:** Establishing a common understanding in ministries and parliament of existing policy and process, which can then be assessed against changing circumstances and, if necessary, adjusted;
- **Stability:** Helping shape an enduring political, military and civil service approach to these issues, which can be the guide for formal training, and the basis for the general culture and behaviour of all these institutions.

In terms of content, the code should set out:

- the principles on which decisions to use military force should be taken (for what purposes, how it should be integrated with other levers of policy, the characteristics of a ‘winning plan’, what levels of risk, uncertainty and cost are acceptable in different circumstances, and how these levels should be assessed);
- who should be involved in making decisions, and their respective roles, responsibilities and place in the chain of command;
- how political leaders should exercise control over senior military and civilian officials (basis for selection, appointment, reward and/or dismissal);
- how senior military and civilian officials should develop and present advice for political leaders (basis for decisions, political impartiality, duty of confidentiality, scope for dissent/disagreement);
- accountability to parliament (level of transparency/confidentiality of decision-making, roles of military and civilian officials), aims and procedures for providing information to the press, role for private or public inquiries;
- provision for periodic reviews of both specific decisions, and of the decision-making process; and
- the process and structure by which these aims might be achieved.

The code need not be a wholesale change: much of the content may already be present in a variety of formal documents or patterns of behaviour. The advantage would be to bring coherence, comprehensibility and predictability to a rather scattered picture. But it would also offer government a mechanism to bring about reforms, if that is what it wanted, and for these reforms to be examined by parliament and the public.

The notion of a ‘code’ intentionally avoids suggesting that this should be set out in legislation. For one thing, the constitutional and legal implications of legislating on such issues require detailed and expert assessment, which this report is unable to cover. For another, there is probably too much content to include in a single piece of legislation – much would probably have to be hived off into separate documents on detail or implementation. Moreover, a

government's legislative programme is always overcrowded, and parliamentary time and political capital are subject to strong competing priorities. It might be necessary instead to articulate the code through a series of formal government orders, documents and associated presentational work.

Despite this, however, there are strong arguments for some form of parliamentary approval of a code, perhaps through the publication and parliamentary debate of a White Paper, to be followed by a limited piece of legislation on some key aspects. Parliamentary engagement is central to the requirement for accountability, and important for the other four elements of improved decision-making outlined above. Likewise, it confers a constitutional formality on the process, which is more likely to be transferred from one administration to another.

Moreover, the examples of the Overseas Development Act and the various Intelligence Services Acts, which together cover some but not all of the scope of the proposed code, point to the value of legislation that defines both the *raison d'être* and the most important processes of a government institution. The Overseas Development Act, for good or ill, has helped shape a self-assured Department for International Development, confident in its role and possessing a motivated and purposeful staff. Likewise, the emphasis in the Intelligence Services Acts on the necessity and procedures for gaining political approval for intelligence activity underscores how the self-contained intelligence agencies must support and respond to political direction.

This parliamentary approach also has potential risks and costs. Any government may be reluctant to open up a sensitive issue for discussion if there is no immediate need to do so, and when there is always the possibility that the debate could be diverted towards other, more contentious defence-related issues. However, as this report has argued, although the situation at the moment may seem better than in the last decade, future conditions may be less temperate.

Likewise, governments may be naturally reluctant to restrict their flexibility and freedom of action through legislation, and be wary of damaging currently harmonious political-military relations by any suggestion they are trying to control (or pass the buck to) a mutinous military. This caution would only be overcome if the issue is understood – and presented – not so much as one of control but as a way of enabling all involved to make better decisions, and to avoid the longer-term political or military damage of reflex responses to short-term pressures.

Finally, the alternatives to some form of codification do not look attractive. In view of the systemic weakness in the British approach identified in this report, continuing as things are seems risky. The argument that the issue is essentially about better leadership, made from their different perspectives by Richard Dannatt and Jonathan Powell, seems insufficient, given their own disagreement over the causes, responsibility and character of their dispute. Decision-making that depends on having the 'right people' in the room does not seem to work if they are not in fact the right people, or if they act in wrong ways.

Likewise, there are shortcomings in the argument – drawn from US experience – that the relationship can be shaped through the regular exercise by the executive of its power to dismiss military leaders. Firing a general may sometimes work *pour encourager les autres* in strengthening the authority of political leaders. But it seems foolish to wait for a component to fail before adjusting the government machine in this harsh way. In the US experience, it has also not always led to better policy, as in the case of Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's sidelining of those such as Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki who argued that the Iraq invasion plans were

flawed. In any case, as outlined above, the stronger tradition of political-military debate and a clear legislative framework give the United States assets in this area that are not yet available to the United Kingdom.

This report has largely dealt with failure, but it is not an attempt to assign blame. It would be a mistake to suggest – as has much of the reporting so far of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns – that any of the partners in the political-military relationship was uniquely or disproportionately at fault. The evidence suggests instead the general failure of a system or, perhaps more accurately, that the absence of a system contributed to a general failure of policy. It implies that responsibility for Britain's recent military difficulties is as much collective as personal, and not solely to be explained through the actions of particular politicians, officials or military officers. This is in many ways a less neat but more damning judgment than one that focuses on the deeds of individuals. It suggests that fixing the problem is not simply a matter of changing personnel or making a different set of judgments, but instead requires a more thorough and wide-ranging change in the way Britain decides why and how to go to war.



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