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Introduction

I

Military historians today generally hold that their subject involves not only the study of armies, weapons, supplies, clothing and tactics, but also issues of legitimacy (as the United States and British Governments are discovering in the Iraq crisis of 2003–4). Lack of legitimacy does not necessarily lose a war, but it makes it hard to win it, or to enjoy the fruits of victory. My method in writing this account of the Falklands War of 1982 is to try to combine what might be called the traditional (and vital) aspects on the conflict – arms and the men – with the kinds of values, national and international that in part (at least) shaped its outcome. I have therefore included many quotations from speeches, broadcasts, books, plays, poems and reports to illustrate the characterisation of the war. This is particularly important, given that the Argentine armed forces had never fought, except for engagement in security/repressive duties, and yet was given the momentous task of recovering the Malvinas and healing the wound of history; while the British, whose army had certainly experienced and was experiencing internal security conflict, had not engaged in ‘regular’ warfare between state and state since the Korean War of 1953, and (more ambiguously) the abortive Suez Campaign of 1956.

Behind the Argentine military expedition to recover the Malvinas lay a military junta which calculated rightly that its just war would arouse public support even in a country in which political opposition was suppressed by brute force. For the British the predicament was unusual. The Falklands certainly absorbed, from time to time, British Parliamentary attention; but there was no long-standing desire on the part of the nation to preserve the heritage of British nineteenth century expansion in the South Atlantic. Moreover, Professor Jeremy Black has pointed out that, in the contemporary world, there are places where ‘audiences as well as soldiers will

have to be “blooded””.¹ What was significant in 1982 was that the ‘blooding’ of their fathers’ generation in World War II resonated with the generation that confronted the Falklands crisis. Much was therefore expected from the British army, navy and air force; defeat was, as Mrs Thatcher the British Prime Minister put it, ‘unthinkable’. Words and phrases out of history were deployed again to the surprise of many and the disgust of some.² I have tried to encompass the varied dimensions of the Falklands War for it is my contention that words were as of as much significance as the bayonet of the soldier. Indeed this contention is itself flawed. Words in warfare are weapons; and weapons are words, because they shape public response to the legitimacy of a campaign: the expression ‘collateral damage’ is a good example of this interaction, summing up both the inevitable consequences of the use of air power in warfare, and the way in which its description has discredited its use. Fortunately for both sides, their efforts in the Falklands/Malvinas war reconciled words and weapons, with the exception for the British of the sinking of the Argentine warship, the *General Belgrano*, and enabled them to continue the conflict until victory should be won, or defeat acknowledged.

II

In her commemoration symposium, *Ten Years On: the British Army in the Falklands War*, Linda Washington described the campaign as ‘a war that the British took very personally’. [223, p. 95] No other conflict in which the British armed forces have been engaged since the Second World War – not even the internal war with the Irish Republican Army; not even what was regarded as the seminal Gulf War of 1991 – had the same impact. This helps explain the ‘personal’ character of the Falklands War: the Northern Ireland conflict was perceived, from the beginning, as one of great complexity. The politics of the province, the Civil Rights issue, the Unionist-Nationalist confrontation, the way in which the British Government and its armed forces were drawn into the crisis, all deprived the long-drawn out struggle of a clear moral foundation on which the British response could be based. The Gulf War saw British forces engag-

1. Jeremy Black, ‘Determinisms and Other Issues’, in *Journal of military History*, 68 (Oct. 2004), pp. 1217–32, at p. 1232.

2. See Chapter 9.

ing a clearly defined foe in regular battle; but as part of a wider coalition assembled by the United States of America. The Falklands War, by contrast, saw the British armed forces (albeit with international diplomatic and intelligence support – as well as some opposition) engage a regular army in what appeared to the bulk of political and public opinion as a ‘just war’.

It was this that set the Falklands conflict apart from these other contemporary or near contemporary military campaigns. The war can be set in another, less ‘just’ context: that of imperial retreat, of the war as a kind of last gasp of British imperial policing; only this time the result was not a piece of imperial retreating, but of imperial reassertion, since the Falkland Islands were, as a result of the war, not given away, but retained. The Suez crisis, to which politicians engaged in the Falklands crisis referred on occasion, seems nearer to the Falklands War, raising as it did questions of Britain’s own character and her position in the world. But even here the comparison was not quite exact: the Middle East was, as the then Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin put it, ‘In peace and war...an area of cardinal importance to the United Kingdom, second only to the United Kingdom itself’. [122, p. 109] It was for this reason that, in 1956, the Conservative Government of Sir Anthony Eden embarked on a military intervention to retain the British hold on the Suez Canal and the Egyptian oil industry. This intervention was regarded by the British as a strategic and economic necessity; but by the world as a colonial military adventure. It proved divisive both at home and abroad; and it never attained the ‘just war’ status that the Falklands achieved – for most British people at any rate.

The various wars of imperial withdrawal did not strike the chord that the Falklands War sounded. It may well have been, as one senior soldier put it, that the counter-insurgency wars in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, Aden and the like turned ‘the gormless young man...from a comic-strip reading callow youth into a self-reliant, tough, useful member of a military society’; [122, p. 143] but, although the press in particular stressed that the British Army was engaged in fighting a cruel and ruthless enemy, these ‘brush-fire’ campaigns did not catch the public imagination. The whole idea of empire, as well as the British presence in these far off regions, was in decline; indeed, it was almost something of an embarrassment. It might be suggested that the Rhodesian affair, when Ian Smith declared unilateral independence rather than hand power over to the African majority, has some resemblance to the Falklands question: a ‘British people’ was making a stand

against loss of power. But no-one could describe Ian Smith's adversaries – the African people of Rhodesia – as an alien, unwanted invader; some preferred to ascribe this more appropriately to the white Rhodesian minority. And in any case the Labour Government of Harold Wilson was determined not to send a single soldier to Rhodesia on anyone's side; though he was prepared to close his eyes to 'sanction-busting' efforts by oil companies.

The Korean War of 1950–1953 might have been expected to arouse great public engagement. Here was a military intervention characterised as the free world making its stand against the spread of communism and tyranny. The Labour Government despatched a 'Commonwealth Brigade' to the Peninsula, and the fighting saw heroic 'last stands', for example by the Gloucester Regiment at the battle of the Imjin River in April 1951. But as the war then reached a stalemate, it lost its impact, and, even in the United States of America, ended with the heartfelt desire to end the war and 'bring the boys back home'. Britain defended the sovereignty of the newly emerging state of Malaysia; but this, though pursued with determination and success, did not engage the British public with the same intensity as the Falklands, whose people were seen as British, kith and kin of the home nation, speaking in familiar accents; moreover there was (to coin a phrase) no selfish economic or strategic British interest in the Falklands as there were in other colonial lands. This was reflected in the orientation of British defence policy in the years before the crisis became acute. The Labour Defence Secretary, Roy Mason, concluded in his pamphlet *Our Contribution to the Price of Peace* (1975) that 'Britain's security...is indivisible from that of the NATO Alliance'. [122, p. 257] The Conservative Defence Secretary, John Nott, reflected Mason's thinking when in 1981, in his *The Way Forward*, he outlined Britain's four main defence roles: 'an independent element of strategic and theatre nuclear forces committed to the (NATO) Alliance; the direct defence of the United Kingdom homeland; a major land and air contribution on the European mainland; and a major maritime effort in the Eastern Atlantic and Channel'. [122, pp. 257–8] None of these roles could be said to include a military campaign in the South Atlantic for what President Ronald Reagan called an 'ice-cold bunch of land'. [90, p. 154]

The Falklands War engaged parliament, the media, the public with a surprising intensity. This could be explained in terms of political theory. As Peter Calvert put it in his quickly written, but incisive analysis *The Falklands War: the Rights and the Wrongs*, 'the

Falklands crisis is first and foremost a dispute about sovereignty. Sovereignty is the fundamental concept on which the entire world order of the twentieth century is based'. [36, p. 1] But the sovereignty of what is arguably an integral part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland, never aroused political or public involvement, except, perhaps, as to the best means of ridding the Kingdom of this troublesome region.

Explanations for the 'very personal' nature of the Falklands War must be sought elsewhere. They are not monolithic: personal political ambition (and survival); pressures from the Falkland Islanders themselves; the desire of Service chiefs to show that their particular arm was still indispensable to the nation (and more importantly to the politicians), all played their part. But underlying these, and at times driving them, was a strong and sustained public surge, one that drew upon notions of national pride, obligation, history, tradition and – at times – xenophobia. Some claimed that the British people had at last rediscovered themselves, redefined themselves after decades of defeat, decline and disappointment. The very lack of a clearly discernible economic or for that matter strategic advantage to be gained from going to war seemed not to lessen the intense public involvement, but rather to enhance it.

There were, of course, dissenting voices. The *Guardian* denied that the issues were clear-cut, that this was a just war. It saw what it called the 'deep emotional hiatus' between 'the vision of the great ships steaming south and the fine bargaining about the small type of withdrawals, condominiums, referendums', a history that 'made it all the more difficult to risk hundreds of lives in so muddled a case'. [78, p. 189] The doubts that surfaced during the war were to reappear in more deeply critical and even savage form in the decade after the war's end, when playwrights, novelists, poets, cartoonists, a plethora of dissident voices condemned the war as exemplifying all the worst aspects of what they characterised as 'Thatcher's Britain'.

But this was later; the war was launched, pursued and won, and all within a context of the most complex diplomatic manoeuvrings and initiatives, involving shuttle diplomacy, United Nations' resolutions, the poring over the small type of possible compromises, and – not least important – hard fighting and risky military choices. Even the Task Force – especially the Task Force – anticipated a negotiated settlement rather than actual war, and some soldiers, sailors and airmen could hardly believe that the crisis would end in shooting. [208, p. 167] The experience of war – what the great military analyst, Carl von Clausewitz called

the 'friction' of war – would also play its central role in interacting with diplomacy and public opinion: for there was that 'remarkable trinity'

of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind force of nature; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and the element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.

For Clausewitz, 'the first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government'. The 'passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope which the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the commander and the army; but the political aims are the business of government alone. [48, p. 27]

This 'trinity' of violence, chance and reason emerged as the significant directors of the Falklands War. But it is their inter-relationship that gives each conflict, including the Falklands War, its special, if not unique, character. It is not only generals who fight the last war; historians do so as well. And the search of themes, patterns and the like, which are the historian's business, must always be subject to an awareness of contingency. For example, the way in which British losses occurred; their description and justification; their timing, all might have been different and might have provoked a speedy disillusionment for the war. Public opinion remained supportive of the war; but it was not unconditional, and 'chance' and 'reason' played their part in sustaining 'violence'.

The war was also very personal for Argentina; it was an attempt to end the 'illegal occupation' of Argentine sovereign territory. The military junta and armed forces were transformed into the heroes of the hour. But the most surprising aspect of the war remains its resonance with the British public and politicians: British children were not taught (as were Argentine children) that the islands were rightfully theirs. It seemed indeed to be a special kind of war. Hugo Young described the war an 'an impressive, if appalling, spectacle'. [78, p. 42] That this 'spectacle' took place for far off and under-populated islands raises the question of what Colin S. Gray has called 'the geography of space, distance, time terrain, and weather'. [101, p. 162] These factors all warned against a British military expedition to recover possession of the Falkland Islands. But there is also the 'geography of the imagination'. Physical geography places the British Isles 'unambiguously' in

the column of European terrain and European politics; but ‘within those British Isles, however, “Europe” is a continental phenomenon, “over there” beyond the moat’. This contrast between the geography and space, distance, time, terrain and weather, and the geography of the mind, helps explain why the British Government’s confident assumption that it had closed down the world-wide imperial theatre of military commitment and operations, was misjudged. The Falklands was both a war imagined and a real, violent and destructive experience. To explain why these two did not cancel out, but, rather, reinforced each other is the primary purpose of this book. To understand why they were, a few years, presented as inimical to each other is the second purpose. Both explorations, it is hoped, will help explain why the British saw the Falklands War as one the British took ‘very personally’, and why what was by most standards a very small war raised and raises profoundly significant features of what Trevor Wilson calls the ‘myriad faces of war’. [232]

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