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The Gulf Conflict and the British Way in Warfare

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The whole of the valley was being swept with machine gun fire and hammered with shells. We got the men organized as best we could - those of us who were left. So many gone, and we'd never even got past our own front-line trench. And then we found we couldn't get back. The trenches were indescribable! We were simply treading on the dead.¹

This is how Captain Arthur Agius of the City of London Regiment recalled 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. This is just one of many accounts of that day's murderous events which have together come to form a cumulative, haunting, compelling image of war at its most brutal and futile. The statistic of 56,000 British and Empire casualties, 19,000 of them fatalities, still staggers.

By way of contrast less than 250 members of coalition forces were killed during the campaign to liberate Kuwait, which concluded on 28 February 1991, almost 75 years later. Listen to a US marine, passing through what had been expected to be the most dangerous segment of the Iraqi lines. It was like a 'nature hike. The Iraqi soldiers jump up like squirrels to surrender'.² In the immediate aftermath of the war some snap assessments put Iraqi casualties at Somme-type levels.³ However, these largely reflected the absence of sufficient surrendering troops to make up the difference with the grossly exaggerated pre-war estimates of Iraqi strength.

Superficial comparisons between the land campaigns of 1916 and 1991 can be made. In both the Somme and the Gulf the defending forces were well dug in and hoping to trap their opponents in a killing zone. In both cases the attacking side sought to demoralise and disrupt the defence by subjecting it to intense bombardment prior to a land assault. The central feature of the 'softening up' process in the Somme was a prolonged artillery barrage. Artillery was used in the Gulf but here the dominant role was taken by persistent air strikes.

In the Somme the German defence survived and was ready for the land attack when it came. By the time the coalition assault came in the Gulf the Iraqi lines were ready to crumble. They had been under-manned from the start and were now subject to massive desertion. This was not the only difference with 1916. The allied offensive in 1991 did not depend on breaking through enemy fortifications at their most elaborate points. It was based instead upon their circumvention by taking full advantage of the availability of open spaces and a superior capacity for manoeuvre.

What Haig might have achieved with the airpower and mobility available to Schwarzkopf or what Schwarzkopf would have done if he had been facing Germans on the western Front are questions with which students might be teased in coming years. In respect of the interests at stake, the balance of power, the levels of technology and the nature of the terrain a comparison which suggests that the two battles could be distinguished largely through the quality of the strategy chosen would be ludicrous.

Nonetheless a comparison of sorts was made prior to the Gulf War. If, as many suspected, a frontal offensive against well-defended positions was unavoidable then the allies were setting themselves up for a contemporary equivalent of the Somme, in a political context far less tolerant of casualties.

Even those aware that a frontal assault was unlikely still estimated thousands of allied soldiers killed or permanently maimed.⁴ In Britain Marjorie Thompson, leading the anti-war movement, reflected the views of her American counterparts when she explained how 'As casualties start to rise, there will be a groundswell of opinion, and we will be the natural recipients of that concern.'⁵

This was not simply a matter of casualties but also foreign policy. Whenever the costs of waging war are confronted the critical question is 'to what end?'. When the very future of the country is at stake, as was supposed in 1916, then supreme sacrifice becomes acceptable. When the objectives are more limited then the level of tolerable sacrifice becomes much more questionable. In the run-up to the Gulf War sustaining public support appeared at times to depend on whether the issue appeared as one of maintaining an essential principle of international law, cutting down to size a dangerous dictator and his military power, defending a friendly though not very democratic state, or, crudely, protecting oil supplies and keeping prices down. Those opposing the war did not only warn of high casualties but they also sought to stress that this would be in pursuit of an ignoble cause - 'blood for oil'.

The strategic issues as ever revolved around the relationship between likely costs and prospective gains. There was no doubt that Iraq could be beaten so long as the allies had the staying power. Those designing the coalition campaign were aware that the political will to prosecute the war until essential objectives were met could falter in the face of heavy casualties. Strategy was shaped by recollections of Vietnam, a seminal experience for most of the senior commanders involved. In the intervening years they had been part of an effort to revive the American Army by focusing hard on the core tasks, and in particular the NATO role, and by returning to classical traditions of warfare. They discovered kindred spirits in the writings of those who, in their surprise to find that they had survived the Great War, set about ensuring that there would never again be a repeat performance. Along with Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, reference to the works of Basil Liddell Hart became *de rigueur* for the aspiring theorist.⁶

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Basil Liddell Hart was gassed and wounded during the Battle of the Somme. Like many of his generation the more he reflected on his own encounter with war the more he became convinced that such folly must not be repeated and, lacking the pacifist's faith in the power of good example, that any answers would only be found in transforming the very conduct of war.

With equal conviction he believed that he had hit upon some answers. These appeared as general principles of strategy - the 'indirect approach' - and a particular policy for his own country - 'limited liability'. He claimed that he was doing little more than distilling the essence of a long-standing national approach - 'the British Way in Warfare' - from which this country deviated at its peril, as it had done from 1914-1918.

The *British Way in Warfare* was the title of a book published in 1932,⁷ but this was an elaboration of ideas first propounded a year earlier in a celebrated lecture on 'Economic Pressure or Continental Victories' to the Royal United Services Institute. According to Liddell Hart, 'A romantic habit has led us to hide, and even hidden from us, our essentially businesslike tradition in the conduct of war', which had at its heart 'economic pressure exercised through sea-power'.⁸ The British sought naturally to gain advantage through 'mobility and surprise'. Unfortunately in 1914 they had been seduced by 'Continental fashions' which encouraged adoption of a 'fight-to-a-finish formula', with the disastrous view that victory could only come through the direct assault by one mass army upon another.

Much of the original lecture was taken up with describing the development of this practice from the 'awakening' in the Elizabethan Age onward. It is not my intention now to address the question of the historical validity of this thesis. As Michael Howard,⁹ Brian Bond¹⁰ and others have shown it does not long survive careful scrutiny. In his own recent search for a British way in warfare, David French observes that the only valid generalization reflects the essentially adaptive character of British strategic policy.

Policy-makers pursued policies which seemed to be calculated to achieve their dominant policy aims at minimum cost. British defence policy was consistent only in its *apparent* inconsistency.¹¹

Many will have sympathy with Lord Slim's observation that the only two common characteristics of the battles fought by the British are that 'they are always fought uphill and always at the junction of two or more map sheets'.¹²

The question at the heart of the 'British way in warfare' was really one of grand strategy. To what extent should Britain, as a tolerably defensible island, involve itself in the politics of mainland Europe? As with all theorists of restraint, Liddell Hart's own healthy preoccupation with the peace that might follow a war only worked so long as the adversary could also imagine a return to 'normal relations' and was not out to transform the old order. For limited ends, limited means might be adequate, but Liddell Hart strained to go further in using limited means for total ends.

If Europe came to be dominated by a single power then - with access to the resources of a whole continent - this power would be well able to withstand any pressure that Britain could

impose and would eventually build up its own ability to project its strength across the Channel. This has been the enduring nightmare of British grand strategy.

Here was the real tension at the heart of Liddell Hart's theory. His argument for 'limited liability' depended on Britain's interests being looked after by continental states who were in no position to define limits to their involvement. Within this framework, 'limited liability' could only refer to the boundaries imposed by Britain on its contribution to alliance. 'We were tied to them both in policy and strategy as never before', he grumbled of 1914. 'We became one with them and subordinated our policy to theirs. Some would say that we were not even co-equal with them, save in so far as it was by the free will of our leaders that we were committed to following the dictates of a Continental strategy which drew us willy-nilly into a policy foreign to our traditions.'¹³ Similarities with contributions to the current debate on the Maastricht Treaty from the more sceptical side of the argument may not be wholly coincidental.

But then as now Britain's liability to events on the continent were *not* limited. If its interests were bound up with the balance of power on the continent then it was unrealistic to suppose that actions designed to sustain a favourable balance could be undertaken without concession to the sufferings and sensitivities of those closest to the front line. Thus, as Michael Howard observed so trenchantly,

a commitment of support to a Continental ally in the nearest available theatre, on the largest scale that contemporary resources could afford, so far from being alien to traditional British strategy was absolutely central to it. The flexibility provided by sea power certainly made possible other activities as well: colonial conquest, trade war, help to allies in Central Europe, minor amphibious operations: but these were ancillary to the great decisions by land, and they continued to be so throughout two world wars.¹⁴

It is not my intention in this lecture to rehearse the arguments over how the First World War should have been fought, let alone Liddell Hart's singular reading of Clausewitz as the source of the Continental distortion or the relevance of his version of the 'British way' to the conduct of the Second World War. My interest lies in the underlying themes of Liddell Hart's work which are timeless. The question of how states might employ force without accepting pain disproportionate to any objectives which they might hope to achieve is now as relevant as ever.

I will argue that it is the United States, alone in its superpower status, is now in a position to follow what Liddell Hart once claimed to be the British way in warfare. The British, for their part, have come to conduct their conventional wars in such a manner as to maximize their influence over American conduct. The Gulf War brought these two tendencies together in what might come to be seen in retrospect as the apogee of the indirect approach. However, this approach still has profound limits: at times the central objectives of war can only be achieved by taking the direct route. This may be so in the type of conflicts that have come to the fore since the Gulf War. Nor will alliance with the United States necessarily provide a way out for a British government anxious to limit its own liabilities.

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Is it possible to win a war without fighting battles? The argument that this is so much wishful thinking goes as follows. When nations go to war they accept that their differences can only be resolved through a test of their relative power. If the result of that test could be known in advance then battle would not be joined because few states enter wars they are certain to lose. This after all is the basis of theories of deterrence. Wars tend to be fought when the outcome cannot be known with any confidence. This suggests that the true balance of power will only be revealed through battle.

But, says the advocate of an indirect approach, this supposes that power simply reflects physical strength. Good strategy depends on the intelligence of the high command as much as the forces at its disposal. In any intelligence test a headlong rush into battle is unlikely to score highly. Rather the opponent's weakest points should be identified as the most appropriate targets for the application of strength. If the enemy can be caught off balance, his surrender might come as he realises that any coming battle is to be fought on hopelessly unfavourable terms.

The ideal *indirect* strategy, one might say, creates conditions in which the enemy is forced to the inescapable conclusion that defeat has become inevitable before battle has been joined. It achieves its result through the intelligent manoeuvre of forces to create a relationship which, had it been apparent in the first place, would have encouraged the adversary to be more conciliatory. Even if the enemy still accepts battle the costs of victory will be kept within tolerable limits. An indirect strategy nears perfection when the enemy is denied the possibility of battle as a result of his strength being drained through attacks on its source. At a minimum this means the morale and logistical system of the armed forces; at most the underlying economic and social structure which sustains the state.

The natural methods of an indirect strategy directed against an adversary's state are blockade or bombardment. Persistent air raids against great centres of population might soon bring even a great power to its knees: an effective blockade might deprive it of fuel and basic supplies, and even starve it into submission. Should land warfare be necessary the key elements of an indirect approach must be mobility and surprise - anything to avoid a direct clash.

Liddell Hart invested hope in all potential forms of indirect warfare at different stages in his career but his enthusiasm waxed and waned. His flirtation with strategic air-power was quite short.¹⁵ Despite his proclamation of sea-power as being central to the British way in warfare he had lost confidence in that by the mid-1930s. In neither case could Britain - independently or with its allies - achieve sufficient supremacy to make the strategy work.

Most controversially his ideas on the feasibility of the indirect approach on land depended upon his analysis of the impact of mechanization. Here too he concluded on the eve of the Second World War that the potential of a well-organized defence was probably more potent than that of a manoeuvring offensive and hoped that this would reduce the likely aggressor's readiness and ability to disrupt the status quo.

Thus despite his enthusiasm for the indirect approach, Liddell Hart came up constantly against the very real constraints on its implementation, especially when confronting an opponent of equivalent - let alone greater - raw power and tactical intelligence. The history of this century suggests that an indirect approach can only be followed in very special circumstances. Societies and their armies can prove to be extremely resilient. Getting in a

position to mount sustained pressure in a resolute manner requires effective military dominance - be this at sea or in the air or on land. This in turn is likely to require very direct and decisive contact with enemy forces.

This last requirement was not in itself problematic to the United States as it contemplated war in the Gulf. There was no doubting its superior military power. What was doubted was its strategic intelligence. Memories of Vietnam were still powerful, as were those of a series of half-baked operations such as the 1980 rescue mission of the hostages in Teheran, the 1983-4 'peace-keeping' force in Beirut, the semi-farcical affairs in Grenada and Panama when US forces seemed to be making a meal of the most straightforward missions. Such memories dictated a strategy geared to minimizing casualties and compensating in advance for potential lapses of military judgement and technique. In practice they obscured - to Saddam Hussein as much as to many sceptical observers in the West - the very real changes which had taken place in the professionalism of the American military and the full implications of the creation of an option for a land offensive, announced by President Bush on 8 November 1990.

This announcement prompted a short, sharp debate which focused on the relative merits of strategies which could have been characterized readily, in the language of 1931, as 'Economic Pressure or Continental Victories'. The coalition's command of the seas and its capacity to gain command of the skies led naturally to calls to rely on air and maritime power rather than land battle to expel Iraqi from Kuwait. Critics claimed that effective economic pressure, leading Saddam to seek a diplomatic settlement, could be achieved through a sustained blockade of Iraq, given the country's isolation and dependence for income on a single product, oil. The administration warned how Kuwait could be dismantled and Iraqi rule consolidated while waiting for sanctions to bite, and how an inconclusive settlement would leave Saddam Hussein with his military power intact.¹⁶

The 'victory through air power school' had a number of variants, mainly geared to steadily eliminating the sources of Iraqi military power, making the pain of intransigence in the face of international demands for withdrawal from Kuwait unbearable and undermining the effort to sustain occupation forces in the Emirate. In rejecting such options, General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, provided a classic critique. The 'fundamental flaw,' of proposals for 'surgical air strikes or perhaps a sustained air strike' and other 'nice, tidy, alleged low-cost incremental, may-work options,' he argued, was to leave the initiative with the Iraqi president. 'He makes the decision as to whether or not he will or will not withdraw. He decides whether he has been punished enough so that it is now necessary for him to reverse his direction and take a new political tack.' No account was taken of Saddam's demonstrable willingness and ability 'to absorb punishment, to callously expend Iraqi lives and to care not a whit about what happens to the citizens of his country.' Powell did not doubt 'the competence and ability of our United States Air Force to inflict terrible punishment.' However:

One can hunker down. One can dig in. One can disperse to try to ride out such a single dimensioned attack. Recognizing that such attack will do grievous damage to the defenders after such strategy has been executed, the decision is still in the hands of the defender to decide whether or not he has had enough punishment.

Part of Powell's critique was to dismiss as caricature the representations of the alternative strategy for a land offensive. There was no interest, he insisted, in a strategy of 'cannon fodder,' in which 'we are just going to run into fortifications without thinking our way

through this'.¹⁷ Thus, despite allegations that they were indifferent to the risks of a direct approach, those who planned Desert Storm were committed to a truly indirect strategy using 'mobility and surprise'. In fact all the alternative strategies came into the indirect category, precisely because of the determination to avoid high casualties. In the end the land campaign succeeded in large measure because Iraq had been previously weakened by economic blockade and then battered by air bombardment.

It is important to stress here that - despite the incentives to reduce the risks to its serving men and women - the United States understood from the start of the Gulf conflict that what mattered was the balance of forces on the ground and the control of territory. It is also important to recall that the balance was tipped by an expenditure of resources which would in itself have become a hot political issue were it not for what was known at the time as the 'tin-cup exercise', that is asking non-combatant allies for financial support. Britain did the same.¹⁸

The full exploitation of superiority in all departments wherever and whenever possible has always represented the American Way in Warfare. The principle of 'economy of force' has never seemed a natural part of its strategic philosophy. However an abundance of resources can stifle the imagination and allow casual attitudes to planning if in the end a stubborn enemy can always be overwhelmed. The impressive feature of Desert Storm was that, because of the imperative to keep losses to a minimum, the United States used its abundance to leave nothing to chance.

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For the British this came as something of a relief. The Falklands campaign of 1982 - Operation Corporate - had been fought at the end of a stretched supply line with insufficient airpower and allies providing no more than material and moral support. The Gulf campaign - Operation Granby - was altogether more satisfactory. The main burden of the combat was accepted by the United States according to a design which minimized the risks for all those fighting by its side.

As suggested earlier the British Way in Warfare has always been influenced by its principal ally. This was Liddell Hart's complaint over 1914. He was not alone - then or since - in finding the entente a mixed blessing. Shared concerns over German power in central Europe had been qualified by colonial rivalry elsewhere and memories of the Napoleonic era. Neither country wholly trusted the other's motives and staying power. Prior to both 1914 and 1939 question marks against the British continental commitment undermined whatever deterrent effect the entente might have achieved.

The Second World War confirmed that continental allies were not enough. As an extra-continental ally, the United States was less involved naturally but its sheer power commanded respect. From the moment it found itself alone in 1940 Britain's grand strategy was to draw in the United States. Churchill's relief at Pearl Harbour is well recorded.

Silly people - and there were many, not only in enemy countries - might discount the force of the United States. Some said they were soft, others that they would never be united. They would fool around at a distance. They would never come to grips. They would never stand blood-letting.

These are comments we have heard since. Churchill himself was reminded of a remark by Edward Grey who had observed how the United States is like

a gigantic boiler. Once the fire is lighted under it there is no limit to the power it can generate.¹⁹

After the war the preoccupation of Britain's leaders was to cement the alliance with the United States, in part to sustain Britain's own residual position in the world, but mainly as the only credible means to counter Soviet power. Throughout the cold war period Britain's security policy revolved around the need to keep the United States wholly committed to the defence of its NATO allies.

In this way the British way in warfare became tied to the American just as in 1914 it had become tied to the French. Not all found this comfortable. Many judged American strategic thinking to be extraordinarily crude, especially when it came to nuclear weapons. The logic of nuclear deterrence, and the risk of mass destruction on an unimaginable scale, was regularly denounced as a transatlantic perversion in similar terms to which Liddell Hart had condemned the continental perversion of throwing together mass armies. Moreover, this time the inequality in the relationship was beyond doubt. The terms of cooperation were set by the Americans.

Sheer power and self-sufficiency, as well as the Atlantic Ocean, meant that a limited liability policy when it came to European affairs was a far more realistic option for Washington than it had ever been for London. Those countries that depended on the United States accepting an effectively unlimited liability, for that was the real logic of nuclear deterrence, had to make the case that they were worth the commitment.²⁰

British strategy came to depend upon two key propositions. First, no serious international objective could be met independently of the United States. Therefore the primary requirement of policy was to persuade the United States to recognize its wider obligations. Second, nonetheless the United States could not be wholly trusted to fulfil these obligations in a sensible and effective manner. Therefore Britain must strive to influence American strategy to provide it with the benefit of its wisdom and experience. This in turn required playing an active part in policy implementation. Britain's contribution would be shaped as much by the credit to be gained with Washington as narrowly operational considerations.

There was an element of circularity in this approach. The exercise of influence required an independent capacity for action. However, this in itself was problematic given the reduced circumstances of post-war Britain. If it was assumed that a British voice at the 'top table' would work to the general benefit of international peace and stability then it did not seem unreasonable to expect that some of its influence be used to gain assistance in the effort to preserve the attributes of a great power. Not surprisingly the attachment to this status often appeared as an end in itself rather than simply a means to a higher end.

Moreover, Britain's relative decline encouraged the view that its contributions to the defence of the West and international political norms should be pooled with those of its continental allies in a collective European contribution, which in effect risked dependence upon France rather than the United States as the primary ally. This led to a debate that has been so central to much post-war security policy. How can Britain participate in a collective European defence entity in such a way as to avoid even hinting at the possibility of managing without

the United States and without losing opportunities for exploiting its 'special relationship' and a distinctive role in international affairs?

The delicacy of these issues meant that pronouncements on British defence policy came to be habitually couched in terms of the requirements of alliance. When setting the level of forces - from troops in Germany to Trident submarines - the key factor so often appears to have been to find the minimum point at which the effort will appear credible and worthwhile to the United States, as the price of admission to American policy-making. This fits in with David French's stress on the continuity in British strategy on a calculus designed to achieve 'dominant policy aims at minimum cost'.

The broad contours of this approach and its problems have been well documented in the nuclear sphere. British policy-makers got themselves in a terrible tangle whenever asked to explain the circumstances in which the national nuclear strike capability might be used when American forces were being held back. This was because, despite convoluted official rationales, the purpose of Britain's nuclear capability was less to deter the Russians directly, let alone take them on in a nuclear exchange, than to influence the general conduct of American cold war strategy. Of particular importance, of course, was to convince the Americans that an essential part of this strategy was to sustain an independent British force.

The manifold ambiguities of nuclear deterrence provided a certain latitude when it came to structuring forces to maximize their political input. The key institutional focus was NATO for the security of western Europe was the primary strategic objective. The policy was also followed, but with more difficulty, in crises outside of Europe.

Even when there were doubts over the wisdom of American military actions, if Washington wanted more than mere moral support, the British always tried to come up with something. This might just be a token offering - enough to allow the Americans to say that they were acting as part of a broad international coalition. Hence the contingent of barely 100 men sent to the Multi-National Force in Beirut in 1983-84 and, though this was more substantial, the extra ships to police the Gulf waters during the later stages of the Iran-Iraq War.

Certainly when Britain refused to cooperate - in Vietnam in 1965 and then over the operation in Grenada in 1983 - there were crises in the special relationship. Equally when Britain went into battle without the United States the degree of American support was critical to the outcome. When it was withdrawn in 1956 in Suez it was fatal; the 1982 Falklands campaign succeeded in part because of American supplies to the task force.

In two cases both the stakes and the British contribution were of a higher order: Korea in 1950 and the Gulf. In both the tendency to gear forces and operations to gain an entrée into American policy-making was evident. The decision to send ground forces into Korea in the summer of 1950 came at a time when senior British policy-makers were preoccupied with the thought that the country's days as a great power were numbered and that they could only be prolonged by the recreation of the war-time special relationship.

The initial contribution was naval. The Foreign Office and the Chiefs of Staff were wary of American pressure for the despatch of some ground forces. There were the standard concerns with regard to over-stretch, with Malaya and Hong Kong posing their own demands, and little desire to reverse the process of post-war demobilization. Even accepting that the aggression by the North against South Korea warned of a general Communist offensive, there were

worries that the effort required to liberate the South - and incidentally return to power a not very impressive regime - would weaken the West's ability to cope with aggression elsewhere in more important places, notably Europe.

As the issue came to a head in July 1950 fears were expressed that American forces were heading for a Dunkirk-type evacuation from the remaining redoubt at Pusan. The Chiefs of Staff even contemplated pushing an air campaign based on a form of graduated pressure until North Korea agreed to withdraw.²¹ The key advantage of this - in the spirit of limited liability - was that it could be implemented by American Air Force without requiring a greater British contribution. The problem with this scheme was that the Americans were already actually committed to a land campaign. To suggest that they should adopt an alternative course presumed that they would be driven out of Korea. To push this option would appear, correctly, as a defeatist rationale for British passivity.

In fact the Americans were becoming confident of their ability to hold Pusan, were injecting into it substantial numbers of troops and were looking ahead to pushing the North Koreans right back and securing 'a rapid and decisive result'. The pressure grew for an early announcement of a substantial British land contribution. From Washington, Ambassador Oliver Franks warned in a letter to Prime Minister Attlee on 15 July that at stake was not enhanced British influence if it acted, but more negatively decline if it took only the role of spectator. Then any advice it had to offer would come to be resented and disregarded.²²

Acknowledging the logic of the situation the Chiefs of Staff overcame their initial reluctance. Sending ground troops was still 'militarily unsound' but the strong 'political arguments' were recognized. These required nothing 'less than a Brigade Group'. Cabinet minutes record that the decision to send the ground troops to Korea was its 'valuable effect' on American public opinion. Afterwards Franks wrote enthusiastically from Washington how 'underneath the thoughts and emotions engendered at times by difficulties and disagreements between us and them there is a steady and unquestioning assumption that we are the only dependable ally and partner'.²³

A similar set of pressures can be detected at work in the summer of 1990 following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had been in the United States when the crisis broke and had immediate talks with President Bush. It has been suggested that at this point she injected into the American stance some backbone that would otherwise have been lacking. This I believe to be exaggerated. It seems more that the two leaders - of a similar generation and mind-set - reinforced each others' predispositions to take a tough line in the face of blatant aggression. Mrs Thatcher does however appear to have taken the crisis as an opportunity to reassert the 'special' Anglo-American relationship which had taken a battering with the retirement of Ronald Reagan and the apparent inclination of the Bush Administration to focus on Germany, as the ascendant European power. As France and Germany equivocated British officials spared little time in pointing out to their American counterparts who their real friends were when it came to the crunch.

The Persian Gulf was an area in which Britain could claim long connections and expertise. In 1961 British troops had shielded Kuwait against an Iraqi threat to its newly-gained independence. Close relations were maintained thereafter and Kuwaiti investments played a significant part in the British economy. One commentator observed 'For the British ... intervening East of Suez is like riding a bike: you never lose the knack.'²⁴

Yet despite all of this the initial British inclination was to attempt to limit its liability. Merely eight days before the invasion, Defence Secretary Tom King had announced the outlines of a programme of defence cuts - *Options for Change* - following the end of the cold war. There was concern in Whitehall that an 'out of area' crisis might be used to obstruct these cuts.

So, as with Korea, the first move was maritime - in this case strengthening the existing patrol in the Gulf which had been underway since 1980.²⁵ The next move, taken as soon as the Prime Minister returned from the United States and initially offered as Britain's main contribution to the multi-national force gathering to protect Saudi Arabia, was to send aircraft - most notably Tornado F3 air defence fighters and Jaguar ground attack aircraft. These could be presented as being largely defensive in character.

Such a contribution promised the maximum political profile with the minimum of risk, but in practice it was too small to be truly significant. Initially more aircraft were sent - the GR3 strike version of the Tornado. The more daring nature of this deployment did not generate much excitement. By September it was apparent that ground troops would have to be sent if a serious commitment was to be demonstrated. A range of options were considered. Might the point be made by a token garrison in Bahrain to protect Tornado squadrons? Probably not, as the main signal would be a desire to stay as far a way from likely action as possible. Would a lightly-armed airborne brigade suffice? Not necessarily as there were already plenty of light forces. What the Americans wanted was more tanks.

The Prime Minister recognized the virtue of responding to a real operational requirement, especially if a substantial military input might achieve a greater influence over the policy output. Even so she was nervous as to a possibly negative public reaction and, as serious, that British tanks might send a signal of quite the wrong sort if they disgraced themselves with constant breakdowns. Engine troubles were embarrassing enough in exercises in Germany: they would be catastrophic in actual war. It would be pointless to send less than a full armoured brigade. Fortunately the recent collapse of the Warsaw Pact meant that the risk of cannibalising the remain tanks left in Germany to ensure that those in the Gulf remained serviceable was acceptable. Mrs Thatcher was reassured. Thus on 14 September it was decided to send the 7th Armoured Brigade.

On 22 November it was decided to increase further the British land forces to an armoured division, with extra ships and aircraft.²⁶ General Sir Peter de la Billiere's account of how this came about is intriguing, especially in the opportunity it provided for him to press for British forces to fight with the VII Army Corps rather than under the US marines. This affair provides a fascinating insight into the interaction of military and political factors, and on the balance between seeking a degree of autonomy from a generally dominant ally and then using this autonomy to exercise influence over the ally's conduct.²⁷

As it became apparent, in early November 1990, that the United States intended to double its forces the case for British reinforcements was strengthened. Without them 'our own contribution to the Coalition would begin to look very small'. A division, de la Billiere observed, 'would both increase our prestige in theatre and give us more influence in the shaping of policy'.²⁸ This argument he put to the Secretary of State for Defence, Tom King, on 10 November. 'To go in with half-hearted measures ... would do nothing for our national credibility.' However, it should be noted that his concern was not only to enhance British influence with the Americans, but to use this influence to fight 'the war we wanted to fight, and in the way we wanted to fight it'.²⁹

He was worried that a contribution restricted to brigade strength would have a severely restricted freedom of manoeuvre as it would have to fight under an American divisional commander, with whose tactical plan it would have to conform. By contrast, a division would be allowed to work to its own plan in the area allocated to it for its operations.

De la Billiere refers to an 'unhappy incident in the Korean War when a British brigade had fought under an American command'.³⁰ He does not elaborate but he must be referring to the battle of Imjin in April 1951 when 29 Brigade attempted to hold a hopeless position in the face of a massive Chinese offensive. Despite being left isolated and without proper support, they did in fact succeed in slowing the offensive, but at the cost of 1,000 casualties - a quarter of the British front-line strength. Of the 850 men of the Gloucesters only 169 could be mustered after the battle. The bulk had been taken prisoner. Max Hastings has commented how many of those involved with Imjin 'believed that it revealed the fatal disadvantages of committing an independent national brigade group in a major war'. To illustrate the point he cites one officer's observation that when Brigadier Tom Brodie told the largely American Corps headquarters 'that his position was "a bit sticky", they simply did not grasp that in British Army parlance, that meant "critical"'.³¹

De la Billiere, who had begun his own active service in Korea not long after Imjin, was determined that his forces should not suffer the same fate. As he assessed the position in late 1990 this essentially meant *not* fighting beside the American marines. There were both positive and negative reasons for this. The positive, upon which he chose to make his case with General Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander-in-Chief of American forces, was that the terrain in which the Marines were preparing to fight was full of obstacles and would leave a British armoured division contained and unable to fight the sort of far-ranging, fire-and-manoeuve tactics in which they specialized. He was aware that Schwarzkopf was planning a 'left hook' against the Iraqi forces, that is the grand encirclement manoeuvre which would cut off the Iraqi lines of retreat and take on Saddam Hussein's Republican Guards. While this was going on, the job of the Marines would be essentially diversionary, to pin down Iraqi forces on the Kuwaiti-Saudi border, where their commanders expected the main coalition attack to develop. De la Billiere took the view that the British should be part of the main thrust, and working with the US Army with whom they shared basic NATO procedures. The size of the commitment meant that 'we must at least be given a chance to show what our armour could do in an environment which suited it.'³²

There was a less heroic side to this argument. Precisely because the Iraqis were expecting the coalition offensive to originate from the sector occupied by the Marines, their own positions were heavily fortified. The 'left hook' promised to take the Iraqis by surprise in a classic example of an 'indirect approach'. Even though they were not expected to progress far the Marines were geared to the direct assault. Moreover, their reputation had gone before them. This was, noted de la Billiere, one of 'being exceptionally gung-ho'. Adding to his anxiety was a suspicion that the Marines' concern about their own future would lead them to make their case against cuts in the US defence review by attempting to 'win the war against Saddam on their own'.³³ He noted official casualty estimates of as high as seventeen per cent. 'I was damned if I would allow the British, having put so much into the Gulf conflict, to take casualties out of all proportion to their numbers'.

With Tom King, de la Billiere pressed the point that reinforcements, by making resubordination possible, could possibly mean *less* casualties. Such thoughts, however, were not shared with General Schwarzkopf. The British Commander did not want to be considered

'chicken' and he considered the positive case for resubordination to VII Army Corps strong enough. His plan was greeted with considerable US hostility. It was only agreed following a demonstration that the British could provide their own logistic support to a division operating independently in the desert. 'I knew I had spent much of my credit forcing through this major decision, but I also knew that the breakthrough was many times worthwhile.'³⁴

Here again, the British had used the influence gained by making a significant contribution to a multi-national effort to ensure maximum freedom of manoeuvre. De la Billiere's concern to avoid unnecessary sacrifice and his preference for an indirect strategy - in the form of the 'left hook' - would have been applauded by Liddell Hart. However, it is worth noting that the campaign fought by the Marines was neither as costly nor as marginal as de la Billiere feared. Indeed so weak was the resistance shown by the Iraqi front-line that the Marines found themselves moving rapidly towards Kuwait City - so that they reached the outskirts before anyone else and then had to kick their heels waiting for the Arab armies to catch up to play their assigned role of liberating the City.

* * *

I have argued that in two key respects the Gulf War provided a realisation of Liddell Hart's vision of 60 years ago. The British hit upon a Way of Warfare that combined prominence with influence at a manageable cost. This was made possible because its key ally, the United States, was able to assume the greater part of the burden of the campaign and had adapted its own traditional way of warfare to demands to keep casualties to a minimum.

The basis for this was a commonality of political purpose and the availability of an indirect strategy which could meet that purpose. Desert Storm could be understood within the same political framework which had helped forge Anglo-American cooperation in dealing with Nazi and Communist threats: a clear case of aggression led by a suitably demonic figure requiring a concerted response from the western democracies.

Since then, however, the political context has become much more confused. The close cooperation of the Gulf War may not be so easy to replicate in the future. The United States and Britain are still constrained to work together in international crisis management, largely these days because of the enhanced role of the UN Security Council which was so important in shaping and legitimising the response to Iraqi aggression. The very processes of getting a resolution through the Council ensures that Britain and the United States are likely to be following the same essential policy.

As it is difficult to vote for UN initiatives and then refuse to contribute to them, Britain's Permanent membership of the Council probably carries with it far greater responsibility than ever before, making as much claim on defence policy as NATO or a general need to keep the Americans sweet. Yet none of the current crop of conflicts involve *direct* threats to British security and it is not surprising to find ministers fretting about the economic and military burdens of a series of new commitments, of interventions undertaken for short-term expedience, perhaps reflecting media pressure, turning into long-term obligations.

The conflicts to which the Security Council is asked to respond tend, by definition, to be those whose viciousness is matched only by their inherent intractability. Indeed, over the past two years, starting with the support for the Kurds in northern Iraq, the United Nations has

come to accept that its responsibilities extend beyond violations of national sovereignty to the treatment of minority groups and the resolution of civil wars.

These conflicts revolve less around classic aggression and more around some fracture in the local political system. With both physical control over territory is the key, but in the latter case the relationship between contending forces and the local population is likely to be much more complex. The precise objectives to which military planners like to work are hard to define and so it becomes difficult to establish the boundaries to military liability. Because the critical issues revolve around local territorial control, strategies which skirt around this may be of only slight consequence.

Yet even though broader political objectives have been accepted at the United Nations, western states have shown themselves reluctant to commit ground troops. They adopt indirect strategies though these do not allow them to get a grip on the conflicts. Simply because of western superiority in air power it is very tempting to concentrate on measures such as no-fly zones, as in Iraq and Bosnia. While they are not without some practical significance, in reality the main struggle for power goes on beneath the no-fly zones on the ground - where there has been less success in establishing no-artillery zones and no-ethnic cleansing zones.

Ground troops have been inserted into conflicts. The US has intervened in Somalia but on the assumption that it would not face serious military opposition and an optimistic expectations that it would be possible to enter and exit in short order. Britain has put ground forces into Bosnia, here in the optimistic belief that duties restricted to the humanitarian would avoid them being seen as being partial in the local civil war. Unfortunately the basic lesson of the Gulf War still applies - the most effective indirect strategies, which limit casualties while achieving basic objectives, require local superiority. You do not limit risk by inserting only limited forces. Nor can you stabilise the local situation. It was the refusal to have anything to do with the post-Desert Storm Iraqi civil war which allowed Saddam Hussein to survive. Few believe that a return to anarchy in Somalia can be avoided unless the Americans prepare for a long haul.

It is no longer so easy for the British to take their cues from the United States. There are so many conflicts to choose from these days, that intervention has developed an element of pick and mix. Working with the Americans to minimize British liabilities is not necessarily always an option. Nor, with British forces so stretched, is it so easy to find a contingent to demonstrate political support for American action.

Thus in December 1992 the Americans were unimpressed with Britain's response to a request for support for the Somali operation, which was met by a barely noticed despatch of transport aircraft. Meanwhile London became alarmed at the toughening of Washington's line over Bosnia, and in particular the determination to enforce the no-fly zone. British troops would be most likely to be on the receiving end of Serbian retaliation. American troops were being kept safely out of harm's way.

British military policy is thus moving into a curious phase. On the one hand the direct threats to national security have, at least for the moment, been eliminated. On the other hand, the indirect obligations have expanded dramatically as a result of a general presumption that the western states, and especially permanent members of the Security Council, have broad responsibility for international order. On the one hand the west has unassailable military superiority when fighting on its own terms. On the other hand few conflicts are fought on

western terms. The Gulf War was surely unrepresentative in this. More than ever globalist aspirations rest uneasily with a determination to avoid direct approaches and to keep military liabilities to a minimum.

What then is the future of the British way in warfare? The strategic environment has changed dramatically over the past three years. It is not simply a question of the demise of a particular threat but of a whole type of threat, most especially that of the emergence of a domineering power on the European Continent. Though, outside of Europe, the Iraqi threat was a recognizable version of this type. Such threats always required alliance and it was natural that strategic policy was geared to identifying the minimum necessary to make any given alliance work. Now it is not only the typical threat which is unclear, but also the seriousness of individual challenges and by extension the demands that they can be allowed to make on national resources and the identity and interests of potential allies. We will not be able to assess the character of Britain's future way of warfare until we get a clearer picture of the shape of Britain's future wars.

NOTES

- ¹ Macdonald, Lyn. *Somme*. London: Michael Joseph, 1983. pp. 66-7.
- ² *The Times*, 27 February 1991.
- ³ There were estimates of up to 100,000 dead. See Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* London: Faber, 1993, p.408
- ⁴ See testimony of Edward Luttwak to Senate Armed Services Committee. *Crisis in the Persian Gulf Region: U.S. Policy Options and Implications*. US Congress, 1990, p. 318.
- ⁵ *Times*, January 23 1991.
- ⁶ Thus two American Lieutenant Colonels responsible for the development of Field Manual 100-5 noted that they had drawn heavily on the writings of Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Fuller, Liddell Hart, Milschke and Willoughby. De Czege, Lt. Col. Huba Wass, and Lt. Col. L.D. Holder. "The New FM 100-5." *The Military Review* July (1982): 53. p.70. In practice they appear to have taken his ideas of the 'expanding torrent' from the days when he was writing the post first world war British field manual. The citation is from a collection of readings. *English, J. A., ed. A Perspective on Infantry*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981. John Mearsheimer's critique was in part motivated by his disquiet at the influence of Liddell Hart on contemporary military theorising. Mearsheimer, John. *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*. London: Brassey's, 1988.
- ⁷ Liddell Hart, Basil. *The British Way in Warfare*. London: Faber, 1932.
- ⁸ Through the centuries sea-power had been used for two purposes:
 one financial, which embraced subsidizing and military provisioning of allies; the other
 military, which embraced seaborne expeditions against the enemy's vulnerable extremities.
 Liddell Hart, Basil. "Continental Victories or Economic Pressure." *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* (1931), p. 500.
- ⁹ Howard, Michael. "The British Way in Warfare: A Reappraisal." *The Causes of Wars*. Ed. Michael Howard. London: Temple Smith, 1983.
- ¹⁰ Bond, Brian. *Liddell Hart: A Study of his Military Thought*. London: Cassell, 1977.
- ¹¹ French, David. *The British Way in Warfare, 1688-2000*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1990, p. 232.
- ¹² Field Marshal Viscount Slim *Unofficial History*, London: Cassell, 1959.
- ¹³ Liddell Hart, 1931, pp. 487-8.
- ¹⁴ Howard, 1983.
- ¹⁵ Liddell Hart, Basil. *Paris, or the Future of War*. London: Kegan Paul, 1925.
- ¹⁶ Note Julian Corbett's warning of eighty year's earlier that unaided, naval pressure can only work by a process of exhaustion. Its effects must always be slow, and do galling to both our commercial community and to neutrals and the tendency is always to accept terms of peace that are from conclusive. For a firm decision, a quicker and more drastic form of pressure is needed. Corbett, quoted in Howard, 1983 p.174.
- ¹⁷ *Senate Armed Services Committee*, pp. 662-3, p.664.

- ¹⁸ In both cases there was suspicion - at least from donors - that creative accounting was needed to avoid the appearance of a small profit.
- ¹⁹ Churchill, Winston S. *The Second World War, Vol. 3, The Grant Alliance*. 1948-1953. pp.607-8. See Cohen, Eliot. "Churchill and Coalition Strategy in World War II." *Grant Strategies in War and Peace*. Ed. Paul Kennedy. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- ²⁰ See Freedman, Lawrence. "Limited War: Unlimited Protest." *The Nuclear Freeze Debate*. Ed. Paul Cole and William J. Taylor. Boulder, Colo: Westview, 1983. Reprinted in Freedman, Lawrence. *The Price of Peace: Living with the Nuclear Dilemma*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1986.
- ²¹ See for example Sir John Slessor's proposal at a meeting of the Chiefs on July 17. Farrar-Hockley, Anthony. *The British part in the Korean War, vol I, A Distant Obligation*. London: HMSO, 1990. pp. 100-101.
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Too often in the past we have taken our time to make a decision with the result that often, when we have done what was in line with American ideas, we have got no credit or approval for it; the decision has followed upon and seemed to be extracted from us by the massive discussion, criticism and pressure that has been build up in the United States.

Farrar-Hockley, p.103
- ²³ *Ibid*, p.103. Jong-yil, Ra. "Special Relationship at War: The Anglo-American Relationship during the Korean War." *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol 7 September 1984, pp. 309-310.
- ²⁴ John Sullivan in *Independent on Sunday*, 2 September 1990.
- ²⁵ Now the one frigate in the Gulf, off Dubai, was to be supported by a frigate from Mombassa and another which had been in Malaysia.
- ²⁶ The British role is described in Secretary of State for Defence, *Statement on the Defence Estimates: Britain's Defence in the 90s*, Volume 1, (cmd 1559-I, July 1991); House of Commons Tenth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1990-91, *Preliminary Lessons of Operation Granby*, (August 1991).
- ²⁷ De La Billiere, General Sir Peter. *Storm Command: A Personal account of the Gulf War* London: Harper Collins, 1992.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 82-3.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 99.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 81.
- ³¹ Hastings, Max. *The Korean War*. London: 1987. pp. 260-261.
- ³² De La Billiere, p. 93.
- ³³ *Ibid*, p. 93.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 153.