

Soldiers & Society

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Centre for Military Archives

Annual lecture

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10 May 2006

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My opening point is a simple one. At no time since the long peace that followed Waterloo has the British army, at just over 100,000 regular officers and men, been so small. It reached its nadir at 88,000 in 1838, but was well over 120,000 ten years later. And at no time since the early 17th Century have its members and their immediate families constituted such a small proportion of British society. Never, in modern history, have so few members of the population had a family member serving in the armed forces. I might almost paraphrase Winston Churchill: ‘never have so many known so little about so few.’

Sir Max Hastings, a journalist and military historian with an insider’s take, has argued that ‘today there is one important, and very dangerous, novelty about political and public attitudes to defence: indifference.’ He goes on to suggest that ‘staff defence correspondents in media organisations are nowadays low down the pecking order, and find it incredibly difficult to get an airing for stories, in competition about the latest hot news about Posh and Becks.’ Had he written that after the March 2006 budget he might have added that defence did not make the headlines there either.

Max is too shrewd a commentator, however, to realise that it is not that simple. We can all think of real-front page army news over the past year: Private Johson Beharry’s VC at one extreme, and the video of British soldiers beating up civilians at the other. And there are those ‘observational documentaries’ on the TV, fashionable, at the moment, like redecoration or make-over programmes, but often little more than moving wallpaper between drinks and dinner. Then come the instant soundbites: in March I watched a reporter, standing in front of a darkened MOD, talking about ‘crumbling British army morale’ as if the backcloth somehow lent credibility to his words.

Sometimes it suits journalists to flick the spotlight on. A Daily Telegraph editorial recently accused the government of ‘administrative vandalism’ in forcing through a series of regimental amalgamations. The writer left unilluminated the fact that the army officers at Staff College in 2004 had written an open letter to the Chief of the General Staff, requesting a regimental structure which would be realistic, flexible and operationally viable. They were emphatically not demanding the retention of the system as it then was. My subject tonight, the real British army, is all too often lit up by these occasional flashes of lightning which bathe it briefly in a lurid glare that casts long and often deceptive shadows. But few of us know the subject well enough to realise just how poorly they illuminate it.

And does this matter? Why yes, it does: I will spend the next forty-five minutes trying to say why it matters and what we might do about it. You need to know,

at the outset, where, as they say, I am coming from. My personal political views put me slap in the sticky centre of politics today, just as likely to vote Labour as Conservative. I have spent most of my working life as a military historian, so naturally my talk reflects this. But I was also a Territorial for 36 years, starting as a private and finishing up as a brigadier on the MOD central staff. More recently, as Colonel of a regiment with two Regular battalions and one Territorial battalion, I have seen a good deal of British soldiers on operations in Ireland, the Balkans and Iraq. I have a shared responsibility for recruiting officers and soldiers for the regiment. When they leave early, I want to know why. I share their triumphs and their disasters, and if they are killed on operations, then I am there at RAF Brize Norton to see them decently home.

Lastly, as an experienced small-town magistrate I see a good deal of young men who have grown up without any stabilising male influence, yielded to the wrong sort of peer group pressure, and loped, with the wolf-pack of their mates straight into the dock. I am not going to harrumph that a bit of time in uniform would do them good (although it might). But I have to say that the brave and self-controlled young men that I have seen on operations recently are the shining reverse of this ugly medal, and the army, at its best, has a particular knack for making folk feel valued and valuable.

It is not my purpose to talk about strategy, defence policy or military organisation. I shall not argue that the army is the wrong size, or configured and equipped in the wrong way, for the operations it might be expected to undertake. That might be a different lecture on a different occasion. Instead, I want to address what I see as the real core of the army's problem, which has far less to do with structure, equipment or doctrine than with that most fundamental of all issues: its relationship with the society from which it springs, and which it exists to defend. I will do this in four parts. First, I will take a quick canter through history. Then I will deal with three distinct but intimately-related issues: how there has come to be a gap between the army's ethos and the mores of society in general; the particular points of conflict between these two, and lastly the way in which this conflict might be ameliorated.

Of course the relationship between Britain and her army is an old one, which predates the birth of the Regular Army in 1660. On 23 June 1647 the New Model Army proclaimed that:

We were not a mere mercenary army, hired to serve any arbitrary power of state, but called forth and conjured by the several declarations of Parliament to the defence of its own and the peoples' rights and liberties.

It declined to disband until it obtained satisfaction for the past (by which it meant arrears of pay) and security for the future (by which it meant some satisfactory form of government, easier to demand than to define).

I would not suggest for a moment that there are many comparisons between today's army and the disaffected troopers of the New Model, although its commander Sir Thomas Fairfax (like today's CGS) *was* a rather saturnine officer. But the New Model's remonstrances made two fundamental points. One related to the material well-being of soldiers, who deserved fair dealing even though their business lay in the cannon's mouth. The other emphasised that soldiers were not like other men: they plied their dangerous trade not simply because they were paid for doing so, but because they belonged to an organisation whose quintessentially moral purpose set it apart from others.

These two issues have twisted and twined over the years, like skeins in a piece of rope. For much of the past three and a half centuries the army was held in suspicion by the nation. The Georgian soldier, Thomas Lobster, was contrasted unfavourably with his saucy naval companion, Jack Tar, partly because the former was (often rather noisily) at home, while the latter (rather more quietly) was abroad. The folk-memory of Cromwell's 'Rule of the Major Generals' lingered on. Whig and radical politicians saw the army as a threat to civil liberties, and economists complained that expenditure on the army would bankrupt the nation. Respectable householders wanted soldiers anywhere but nearby, where they posed such a threat to the sobriety of sons and the virtue of wives and daughters. And many observers querulously asked themselves, like Daniel Defoe in 1726:

What kind of poverty and distress were necessary to bring a poor Man to take Arms, and list in the Army, and run the risk of Life and Limb, for so mean a Consideration as a Red Coat and 3 shillings a week?

I have seen traces of all these arguments in the columns of the press over the past couple of years: some things never change.

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars – wars of necessity, not of choice, in today's parlance – briefly went some way towards changing these views. The army, at about a quarter of a million Regulars in 1815, was not to be as big again for another century. Alongside it stood the Militia, embodied for full-time service. One of Jane Austen's brothers was a captain in the militia and another was naval officer, and her heroines were well aware of the relative seniority of, say post-captains and lieutenant colonels. They knew what ensigncies cost and what Light Dragoons did, for this was a reluctantly militarised society. Of course sailors still

enjoyed pride of place, not simply as guardians of the 'moat defensive' but because they were, financially, a better bet, as one of those Portsmouth ladies, unkindly known as 'the Fireships of the Sally-Port,' tells us:

Sailors they get all the Money,
Soldiers they get nought but Brass.
Sailors they make better lovers,
Soldiers you may kiss my Arse.

The defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo saw the apogee of national gratitude to its army: those present at the battle received the first generally-issued military campaign medal (the navy already had ones for the Nile and Trafalgar). Naturally the enthusiasm did not last long, and the post-war run-down saw the heroes of Waterloo consigned to a society with more workers than jobs.

The army of the Nineteenth Century was much concerned with garrisoning the Empire: India, for instance, consumed about one-quarter of regular infantry battalions at any time. When it was home the army raised familiar suspicions. The middle-class volunteers who took up arms in response to the French invasion threat of the 1860s wore grey rather than red, and, with their jaunty kepis and baggy trousers, looked more like the French chasseurs they trained to fight than the redcoated regulars on their own side.

When Edward Cardwell, Secretary of State for War from 1868 to 1874, undertook his reform of the army, he tried to align the army with the nation. He brought engagements down to six or seven years to make enlistment less daunting. He abolished the purchase of commissions, compelling all officers to train at Sandhurst. Branding was abolished in 1871 and flogging, even on active service, ten years later. One of the prime motives behind the creation of the 1881 regimental system, which combined numbered regiments to form county regiments, was the desire to improve recruiting by bringing the army closer to the community. It would, as Cardwell put it, 'improve and popularise the army.' Regimental depots would be in recruiting areas, and militia and volunteers would have firm regular links.

However, it was at best a qualified success. As Professor David's French's wonderful book *Military Identities* demonstrates, only three infantry regiments – the Warwicks, the Suffolks and the Hampshires – drew more than 70% of their recruits from their regimental catchment areas. The majority recruited between 25 and 40% of their men from 'their' areas and no less than sixteen, seven of them Scots, found less than a quarter of their men from the area they represented. I mention this not

to be churlish to the Scots, but over the last century and a half there has been a direct relationship between demography and recruiting, and no distinguished battle honours or elegant tartan can alter the fact.

On the eve of the First World War the army was predominantly recruited from the urban working class, and about 70% of soldiers, like Baldrick's dad in the *Blackadder* series, gave their occupation as 'none.' Those regiments with large towns in their areas did well. The Warwicks recruited primarily from Birmingham (which also sent so many men into The Royal Welch Fusiliers that the latter was often known as the Brummagem Fusiliers). And the Hampshires, for all their regimental march of *A Farmer's Boy*, drew most of their soldiers from the streets of Portsmouth, that nursery – then as now – of tough infantry soldiers.

The army that went to war in 1914 would have been perfectly recognisable, in its social composition, to the Duke of Wellington, who had died half a century before. It was essentially an army of poor men officered by rather richer ones. Some of its practices, like No.1 Field Punishment, which left the offender tied to a fixed object for two hours a day for a prescribed period, were hangover from a darker past, wholly inappropriate for the citizen soldiers – volunteers and conscripts, in all nearly six million of them – of the First World War.

After the war the army reverted to type, shrinking rapidly, and recruiting most of its soldiers from the urban working class and most of its officers from public schools. For the Second World War it swelled again, though on nothing like the same scale, and afterwards the enduring continental commitment linked to a slow withdrawal from empire meant that voluntary recruiting would not keep it up to strength. Conscription, under the name of National Service, survived until the early sixties. For twenty years following the end of the Second World War a large Regular army and a huge Territorial army ensured that the army, one way or another, was very much in the public eye, because it was the public.

As a private soldier I used to hitch-hike in uniform, and it helped me get lifts, because most lorry-drivers were ex-soldiers. Cabinet ministers, journalists, barristers, teachers, taxi-drivers... they had all served in the forces. Arthur, the long-suffering plasterer for whom I navvied in 1964, told me more about soldiering than almost anyone else. I grew up in a society that knew the difference between a brigadier and a bombardier, a battalion and a brigade, and could put lieutenant colonel, lieutenant commander and flight lieutenant in the right order. This does not mean for a moment that everyone had relished their military service, although a surprising number had. Or that they always agreed with the use to which armed

force was put: if you think that Iraq has split the nation, have another look at Suez. There was certainly no assumption that officers were chinless and voted Conservative. Clem Attlee, the labour leader I came to admire very much during my recent work on Churchill, had served in Gallipoli as an infantry officer, and Dennis Healey first campaigned for Parliament dressed as a major in the Royal Engineers.

What happened over the next forty years was that society changed perhaps more quickly than at any other time in history. It became more questioning and less deferential, more aware of individual rights than collective duties, more egalitarian and more litigious, and latterly became muffled in Health and Safety and cinched in by Human Rights. The process was probably inevitable and, as it happens, I do not regret quite a lot of it. But it did lead to tension between some of the underlying, essentially collectivist assumptions of service life and the increasingly individualistic mores of civilian society. This is especially true as far as young potential recruits are concerned. Charles Kirke – a regular lieutenant colonel with a PhD – suggested in 2003 that:

The organisational culture of the British army is entirely alien to...youth culture. Where this youth culture lacks any idea of solid structure, contains an assumption that all aspects are ephemeral, and values feelings and experience over external standards, British army organisational culture is highly structured, based on clear shared rules...and contains a constant assumption of hierarchy.

None of this is new, for the army has always sought to change some of the attitudes of those it recruited. There was a recognition that while, as General Sir John Hackett might have put it in this very lecture theatre, the army was indeed a mirror of society, it could not hold the mirror full-frontal and reflect everything it saw. We all know that Wellington said that his soldiers were ‘the scum of the earth, enlisted for drink or for having got bastard children.’ We sometimes forget that he then went on to say that it was incredible to see what fine fellows they had become. Good armies never simply *reflect* society. They are deliberately angled not only to reflect but also to refract: they must deflect some things but magnify others. This process forms the basis of what some call the army’s ‘right to be different’ but I prefer to see as a *duty* to be different. There are many aspects of military life, even comparatively important ones, like saluting, a carefully-graduated hierarchy, medals, different messes for different ranks, and even a zero-tolerance policy on drug-taking, which are arguably not fundamental. They are what a theologian might call

'things indifferent' to belief, matters of symbol rather than substance. For example, the lifting of the ban on homosexuals serving in the armed forces did not cause the world to end: it was not central to the real issues of military life. What are not things indifferent are those qualities that the current edition of British Defence Doctrine sums up as:

Training, confidence in equipment, firm and fair discipline, self-respect...a personal commitment to an idea, a sense of purpose, and a feeling of belonging... a profoundly deep commitment to one's comrades, one's unit, one's country, and the cause for which one is fighting.

These are non-negotiable, and apply whether one is engaged in conventional big-arrows-on-small-maps operations at one extreme or the small change of what General Sir Rupert Smith has christened 'war amongst the people' at the other. The firepower revolution a century ago meant that, as one officer then put it, 'cohesion no longer has the sanction of mutual surveillance.' So too the decreasing density of troops on operations, where a lance-corporal on a street corner can do something which will be news headlines an hour later, actually makes individual standards more, not less important. It is harder to supervise, less realistic to expect to control. It is more important, therefore, that soldiers should know not simply what to do in a tactical sense, but know how they should behave to one another and, for that matter – though I develop this point more fully later – to their enemies too.

So let this be the first of my waymarks. Soldiers do things, which are inherently different to those done by the rest of society, though I would certainly give the police and the fire service at least a look-in here. As Shan Hackett observed, they have an unlimited liability contract which takes them into the jaws of death. To do this they need particular qualities and a particular ethos, and there is a 'necessary gap' between their organisation and behaviour and that of almost any other social group. They must, in the final analysis, be value-dominated, not interest-dominated. No army can take this for granted, for it needs to argue its case, and the wider this necessary gap the more effectively it must argue.

Next, I want to look at some specific areas of conflict between the way that the army behaves and the values of wider society. These clashes easy to find, because they generate some of the brightest of those flashes of lightning that I mentioned earlier on. On the one hand there are regular bullying scandals with, most recently, well-publicised controversy about the deaths of soldiers in training at Deepcut. On the other there are lapses in behaviour on operations, with the video-clip showing

soldiers, apparently of 1st Battalion The Light Infantry, beating up civilians in Al Amarah. Incidents like these have led Professor Joanna Bourke to suggest that there is a culture in the army in which 'sensitivity, understanding and compassion are routinely derided.' She detects a solid line connecting Deepcut to Basra. Excesses in training and over-reaction on operations are, in her view, symptoms of the same: a military culture which is out of control, and which shows that my necessary gap has become an unbridgeable gulf.

Professor Bourke is a distinguished historian, and her comments are too astute to be brushed lightly aside. Where I disagree with her it is less on the detail of her specific points (it is always a waste of breath to defend the indefensible) than on the conclusions that she draws from them. I would argue that the character of military life makes soldiers especially vulnerable to particular sorts of lapse, just as, say, some bank-clerks or club secretaries find minor peculation easier than the rest of us. For instance, being armed in the presence of an opponent who cannot be assailed by legal means gives the soldier particular temptation. I know that in mid-2005 the soldiers of C Company of my own 1st Battalion felt like 'meting out some retribution' when Sergeant Adam Llewellyn was appallingly burnt by a petrol-bomb thrown by a teenager who he had refrained from shooting. The spectacle of the brave and popular Llewellyn stumbling through the blazing heat of an Iraqi summer with his clothes burnt away and curtains of smoking skin hanging from his body shocked many of those who saw it. A hard-headed company commander, backed by a well-respected company sergeant major (a perfect example of this distinctive chemistry working so well together) made it absolutely clear to the boys that no lapses would be tolerated. But, believe me, it would not have taken much of a blind eye or subtle wink for there to have been split lips, broken heads or worse.

There are certainly times when the eye of authority is less sharp, or the dispersion of troops on the ground means that control lies in the hands of someone who is comparatively junior, and who may perhaps lack the moral courage to make his writ run. Nevertheless, the surprising thing about incidents like those we have just seen in Al Amarah is not how often they occur, but how rarely. In September 2005, when over 80,000 British soldiers had served in Iraq, there had been 184 complaints of illegal behaviour, of which 100 related to shooting incidents, largely alleged breaches of the Rules of Engagement during contacts with insurgents. Of the total, 162 were dismissed, with no further action taken. The rest had a variety of outcomes, from guilty findings and custodial sentences on the one hand to outright dismissal of the charge on the other. Given the zeal with which the Military

Police operate (for the first two years of the war they investigated *all* shooting incidents, requiring soldiers to demonstrate that they had acted within the Rules of Engagement), this represents not a tidal wave of cases, but a trickle. Remember, there are some things that I make no attempt to justify – but there is nothing here that a reasonable observer might legitimately term a pattern of illegal violence.

But that is not the end of the matter. The fact that the Military Police *have* been so active in Iraq has itself caused irritation within the army and amongst its friends outside, and I have no doubt that very prescriptive Rules of Engagement have at times made it difficult for soldiers to do their jobs. In Iraq you cannot legitimately shoot someone who shoots at you but then tosses his weapon to someone else. And you have to ensure that your response is very strictly proportionate. One young officer intercepted a lorry with a mortar on the back and shot out its tyres with his rifle, but believed that engaging it with his 30mm Rarden cannon (with gratifying and conclusive consequences) would have breached the Rules of Engagement. He had the chagrin of seeing it lurch, with a shower of sparks, into a hostile estate where he could not follow, to mortar again another day.

Some specific cases, like that of Trooper Williams, prosecuted by the civil power after his Commanding Officer had already found that under military law there was no case to answer, have caused significant disquiet. They are, I think, the one area where soldiers believe that they have not been adequately supported by the chain of command. Of course the logic is simple enough. Even an early edition of *The Manual of Military Law* affirm that:

troops...are also as citizens subject to the ordinary civil law of England to the same extent as if they were not soldiers...a soldier who commits an offence against the ordinary criminal law can be tried and punished as if he were a civilian...

The soldier is in jeopardy, which is both *wider* than that risked by his fellow citizen, and is *doubled* by the fact that he is subject to two legal codes. On the one hand, he is subject to military law for offences which may not exist in civil law. If I have a row with my boss and swear never to darken his doors again he cannot pursue me for insubordination or desertion. When I was a soldier my Commanding Officer might have taken a different view. The very existence of military law and of the means used to enforce it have become increasingly contentious, but it seems to me that its fount and origin must lie in that necessary gap to which I keep referring. I can see good sense in making summary dealings (CO's orders to those of my

generation) more transparently fair than was once the case. There was indeed sometimes more than a whiff of ‘march in the guilty bastard, particularly on active service, are far more likely to receive justice from a court-martial than a Crown Court.’

The soldier runs another risk. If his commanding officer, the summary court in military law, decides that there is no case to answer, that is not necessarily the end of the matter. The civil power can still pursue him, and there is nothing that the military authorities (however much they may sympathise) can do to protect him. This is what happened in the case of Trooper Williams. The army’s high command was vilified for not saving him from the civil power, but in all conscience it is hard to see what it might have done: the problem was judicial and not military. And there is, at least in theory, another layer of jeopardy. British servicemen can be brought before the International Criminal Court. This has not happened so far, and we are assured by the government that it is unlikely to happen in the future. But it is a discouraging prospect for a young man in danger of his life to reflect upon the tiers of justice that bear down upon him, ready to punish a lapse which will, no doubt, seem clearer in a court-room than it does at midnight in a burning town.

So far I have argued in favour of military law and the means used to enforce it, and have suggested that a combination of prescriptive Rules of Engagement, zealous investigation and double (in theory triple) jeopardy leave soldiers feeling exposed. And yet I do not share the view, so vigorously championed by both the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Spectator* that the army, already wobbly in the defence of its soldiers, has now wholly lost the plot. In a shocking failure of moral courage – runs the argument – it has permitted the Army Prosecuting Authority (the army’s equivalent of the Crown Prosecution Service) to prosecute a senior, decorated and well-regarded officer for actions carried out by troops under his command contrary to his orders.

I have two problems with this argument. At the simplest level, if soldiers fail we are surely entitled to ask what officers were doing about it. Simply telling them what the rules are and then leaving it to their good judgement is simply not enough. After the Second World War the Allies prosecuted numerous German and Japanese officers, not for carrying out war crimes, not even for failing to prevent crimes of which they had cognisance, but of *not knowing* about such crimes when it was clearly their duty, as commanders, to have known. This is by no means an apposite precedent, but I do believe that officers exercise a high degree of moral responsibility for the activities of their men. Next, I am not sure quite what the

Chief of the General Staff is supposed to do when the APA takes the view that there is a case to answer. We would complain bitterly if the Prime Minister told the CPS what view it should take of a particular incident, muttering about arbitrary power or cronyism, and we ought be no less concerned to see a CGS dictating to the APA.

Yet this does not mean things are right as they stand. Read Colonel Tim Collins' *Rules of Engagement* to see just how exasperating it is to be accused of what was, at best, a minor transgression, and to receive so little support from the chain of command. Under such circumstances the system needs to proceed with all due despatch, and to accord the suspect, at all times, the presumption of innocence, ensuring that his career progresses without interruption unless and until there is a guilty verdict. And surely the right tribunal to deliver a just verdict must be a court-martial, whose members will understand exactly how things work, and will themselves be wearing the same campaign ribbons as the accused.

All of this section of my talk is overshadowed by the fact that the British presence in Iraq has become increasingly unpopular. This has inevitably rubbed off onto the army. Some officers and men had some moral scruples about going to Iraq in the first place, but a combination of the desire to do what they had trained for (never, ever, underestimate that) and the abundant evidence of the shocking nature of Saddam's regime persuaded most who did the initial invasion that they were right to be there. That was certainly the view when I was in Al Amarah even in mid-2005: 1 PWRR was full of guys who really wanted to make a difference, and still thought they could.

I am not sure that it is the case any more, and the shift in opinion has been caused by a number of things. First is the situation in Iraq itself has persuaded many soldiers that there is a mismatch between the endstate of a democratic Iraq initially envisaged for the campaign, and the lowest common denominator that can now realistically be achieved. We were always going to withdraw – the question was not if, but when – but I think most people hoped for a clearer sense of the time being right and the course clearly apparent.

And yet, oddly enough, I don't think this is the real reason for soldiers' change of heart. Over the past three years public attitudes to Iraq have changed as well. There was a majority in favour of the original invasion. Since then that consensus has been eroded in all sorts of ways. First come doubts about American performance, sharpened by the disgrace of Abu Ghraib and the injustice of Guantanamo – and I fear that it will not end there. However much I applaud

Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster's article in the US Army's *Military Review*, hearing that our major coalition partner 'is weighed down by bureaucracy, a stifflingly hierarchical outlook, a predisposition to offensive operations and a sense that duty required all issues to be confronted head on' does not make me ooze confidence.

Then there is Iraqi failure to come up with a government of national unity; growing despair (however selective and media-led) at the apparent anarchy which prevails in parts of Iraq; a steady drain of British casualties and bad news like that in the 1 LI video. All of this has sapped public confidence in the war, and this, in turn, makes it harder for the army to retain what British Defence Doctrine calls 'the conviction that our purpose is morally and ethically sound.'

These are not doubts confined to the British army: in February 2006 a study found that 72% of US troops thought that America should leave Iraq within a year, and 42% had no clear sense of mission. The sharp and experienced US Lieutenant General David Petraeus, formerly a divisional commander in Iraq and now commander of the Combined Arms Centre at Fort Leavenworth observed that:

Armies of Liberation have half-lives. Every Army of Liberation has a half-life beyond which it turns into an Army of Occupation. Good work by us all may lengthen that half-life, but ultimately it is a race against the clock.

In the British army the effects of this are already perceptible. Recruiting has fallen off, especially in the infantry, largely, I think, because the 'gatekeepers' – parents, careers teachers and the like – see the army as a poor prospect. Join the army, runs their argument, and you will get bullied in training and then be sent to Iraq where you risk prosecution for doing your job or being blown up by a mindless fanatic. Retention, too, seems to be suffering, at least in some key areas. Make no mistake, most soldiers enjoy going on operations: it is what they joined for. But sequences of operational deployments that are exciting for unmarried twenty year olds grow more wearing to older marrieds. Work-life balance is a top priority for most employers, but many of the policies which help achieve it – flexibility in time worked, flexibility in work location, and many aspects of situational support – are simply not practical for the army. I know a corporal who recently left the service. He was ready for promotion to sergeant and had done well on his first Iraq tour. It wasn't that he wasn't up for another, but he couldn't stand what it was doing to his wife and kids, and all for a purpose that now seemed increasingly remote. It takes ten years and much hard work to grow men like that, and the structural damage that their premature disappearance does the army is long lasting.

This damage is exacerbated by the fact the supply of 'bright, adventurous 18-year olds' will be reduced by changing demographics. The average age of recruits will be pushed up as more and more people undertake tertiary education, and the competition for the best graduates will become intense.

Professor Christopher Coker recently wrote that:

A society that cannot produce heroes is one that does not readily appreciate the heroic in life, or... cannot invest the death of its soldiers with the force of sacrifice freely undertaken. Conversely, the soldier whose sacrifice is likely to be dismissed even by his parents as a waste of life is one who will find his own death – or risk of it – difficult to find meaningful.

Many of the relatives of soldiers killed in Iraq are to the fore in demands for rapid withdrawal, and the precedent is profoundly discouraging for serving soldiers embarking on their second or third tour in Iraq. In contrast, in February 2006 an International Crisis Group study concluded that:

The insurgency is increasingly optimistic about victory. Such self-confidence was not there when the war was conceived as an open-ended jihad against an occupier they believed was determined to stay. Optimism stems from a conviction that the legitimacy of the jihad is now beyond doubt, institutions established under the occupation are fragile and irreparably illegitimate, and the war of attrition against US forces is succeeding.

None of this means that the army is dying on its feet or is about to experience some sudden catastrophic failure of morale. It will not be buckled by casualties: Northern Ireland, at its worst, killed soldiers on as bad a scale, and did so for longer. It will go on doing what it is told with, I judge, a good degree of tactical success. But it has less spring in its step and less confidence in the political judgements which have put it where it is. I know of no British general who thought that the disbandment of the Iraqi army was anything other than a grave mistake, but that made no difference. Even Thomas White, then US Assistant Secretary of Defence at the time (and, wholly predictably, fired shortly afterwards), called it 'a terrible decision, that immediately made a bad situation a lot worse.' You do not need to go far to find officers who quote Clausewitz at you:

The first and most far-reaching judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something which is alien to its nature.

Sir Lawrence Freedman made much the same point after receiving the RUSI's Chesney Gold Medal in January 2006.

The lessons of Iraq are likely to be political. Don't go to war on the basis of intelligence claims unless you are very sure they are accurate; don't go to war if public opinion and allies are divided unless you are very sure of your cause and expect them to be eventually won over... don't get all of the above wrong and expect to be forgiven.

There are many in the army who would agree with the Prime Minister that we are indeed in for a 'long haul' against Islamist terrorism. And it is precisely in the context of this long war that the damage being done by Iraq is most serious. A long war will demand staying power, slick inter-agency cooperation, and the ability to strike at the enemy's centre of gravity while defending our own. Armies will be relevant to only part of the struggle, and I am encouraged to see that British deployment to Helmand province in Afghanistan embodies government agencies that were conspicuous by their scarcity in Iraq. But ultimately this long war, like all others, will be won or lost by public resolve, and that resolve will directly influence the way the army thinks and behaves.

So, last of all, what should we do about all this? First we have got to reduce the gulf between army and society to constitute that 'necessary gap,' no more and no less, that I spoke of early on. A 2003 study suggested that while the armed forces had done much to modernise their professional practices, 'little attempt has been made to address the cultural and moral changes taking place in society.' It may mean that the army will have to pistol the occasional sacred cow, and it will certainly need to be better at explaining why it behaves the way it does.

Next, the army will need to overhaul the mechanism it uses to put its view across. I am a great fan of the Army Presentation Team, but it often preaches to the converted. I agree with Max Hastings that the services have suffered hugely by losing their individual one-star Directors of Corporate Communications. I can see why this happened. There was a perceived risk amongst some ministers that these individuals – and I think of my own past dealings with heavyweights like Sam Cowan, Willie Rous and David Ramsbottom – would be off-message and might even brief against their political masters. But certainly the cure has proved infinitely worse than the disease. I cannot imagine that we would have seen the media laceration of the Chief of the General Staff, largely over issues to which he had a good but unarticulated defence, ten years ago. The change has helped

stifle informed debate about defence. You can find a GP or surgeon, headmaster or primary teacher to give you an honest professional opinion about the state of the NHS or education on air. Yet you cannot find a general who is able to speak with the same freedom while he is serving. The minute he has retired and can enter the fray he is written off by spin-doctors as yesterday's man, a dear old soldier, but no longer quite the thing.

Communication, in the age of the information revolution, is of the essence. The US forces, recognising the damage that hostile bloggers are doing them, has a 600-man 'engagement team' of its own bloggers, largely made up of computer-literate reservists. One of them recently said:

Repeatedly we hear from people who tell us they would never have heard this story in the mainstream media. People really are interested in what soldiers are doing. Blogs are individual statements. They're way of understanding the war on a very human level.

There are some things that soldiers know perfectly well are wrong but nobody in authority seems able to speak out about. Until recently radios were a disgrace. One captain told me: 'The sun is hot, the rain is wet, and comms are crap' as if it was an immovable fact of nature. Conversely, the re-engineered rifle is jolly good, and its swiftly-procured cousins the Minimi Light Machine Gun and the Underslung Grenade Launcher are terrific – but nobody has heard that either. Money is regularly shaved off the budget by delaying or cancelling the maintenance of buildings, in the hope that nobody will notice. The folk that live in them most certainly do. A soldier living in Tern Hill Barracks pointed across the field to the nearby Young Offender's Institution. 'If I lived there,' he said, 'I'd have my own basin and loo. Instead,' he gestured to his own Spartan accommodation, 'I get this. Tell me, Sir, where did I go wrong?' It can take two years to be issued with the medal for service in Iraq: some soldiers have been there three times before it catches up with them. This, apparently, is because the Army Medal Office has been reorganised. Oh, so that's all right then: for a moment I thought that we valued people's service. The essence of a good army is that its members feel valued and valuable, and while there is sometimes a perverse pleasure in making old equipment work or getting by in sub-standard accommodation, the message that we are currently sending is clear. I'm sorry, but Great Britain PLC has better things than you to spend its money on.

The existence of a whole litany of Truths That Dare Not Speak Their Name irritates soldiers. If we cannot allow serving personnel to speak, unsupervised, about them – and I cannot see government, this or the next, whatever that may be, changing the rules – then we need to devise some mechanism which enables a military view to be properly articulated. I am not a prime mover in the embryo Armed Forces Federation, but I do believe that it exists to meet a discernable need, and I wish it well.

This is where we came in. The army does not communicate well with society. Good news often goes unreported, and bad news is as frequently allowed to pass without comment: John Reid's recent speech after the 1 LI incident is a praiseworthy exception. There is a risk that an unpopular war in Iraq will make the army, which is fighting it pretty well, seem unpopular too. And there is the certainty that the decline of popular support for the war will not only sap the morale of those still serving, but will lay up a store of psychiatric casualties of the future. 'We heal psychic wounds when we are able to give meaning to our experiences,' writes Christopher Coker.

It behoves our political leaders to ponder not simply the strategic imperative for any war, but the degree to which it can be linked with the mainstream of our national aspiration. Of course I would like better accommodation and medals which arrived promptly. And it is imperative that military justice is seen as measured and impartial: above all that it is properly explained. But in the long run – and, believe me, this will be a long run through a very long war – we need to go back to those psalm-singing troopers of the New Model. 'We are not a mere mercenary army, hired to serve any arbitrary power of state, but called forth and conjured by the several declarations of Parliament, to the defence of our own and the people's just rights and liberties.' We need, in short, an army which is understood and valued by the society it serves.

