



Australian
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The Influences on British Strategic Decision-Making in the Iraq War, 2003 - 2009

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author's knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

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To all those of the British military who fought in Iraq, and especially to those who made the ultimate sacrifice. I have conducted this study as I stood amongst you, and I wanted to know why. As R.G. Collingwood once said, 'Man, who desires to know everything, desires to know himself'. Whatever is said within this thesis, know that you fought with honour, and with the desire to defend your country. No society can ask for more from its soldiers, sailors, aviators, and civil servants. I am proud to have served with you all.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the influences on British strategic decision-making in the Iraq war from 2003 to 2009. It makes three inter-related arguments. First, it argues that the influences on British strategic decision-making in Iraq were highly unpredictable, interacting with each other in tense reciprocal relationships as strategy in theory iterated with strategy in practice. There was no 'principal influence' (as in 'first in the order of importance'). Second, it argues that this unpredictability was driven by the presence of 'war' in Iraq's strategic environment, with war simply defined as 'collective killing for some collective purpose'. The endemic failure of British decision-makers to take this unpredictability into account – to understand the nature of war, and its reciprocity with strategy – was at the centre of British strategic failures in Iraq.

Third, the thesis argues that British outcomes in Iraq were constrained by the use of traditional concepts of strategy that overly focused on military force (i.e. what might be called 'military strategy'). The war instead demanded a far broader concept of strategy that aligned all tools of national power in the achievement of British national goals: one more akin to Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman's 'art of creating power'. Finally, this thesis also makes a historical contribution, particularly to our understanding of the middle and latter phases of the war from 2006 to 2009.

The thesis builds this argument through the comparative study of five chronological strategic decisions undertaken by the British between 2003 and 2009. These span the whole surface area of the war, from the decision to join the US-led invasion in March 2003 through to the eventual decision to end the British operation in June 2009. It uses as its primary archive the evidence of the Iraq Inquiry, released in 2016 – inclusive of over 4,000 declassified documents and the transcripts of 184 witness sessions. Grounded in the disciplines of history and the study of strategy, the thesis ends with a series of observations on what can be learned about policy, strategy and the nature and character of war from the British experience in Iraq.

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Introduction, Context and Literature Review:
Operation τέλος (TELIC) and a ‘Purposeful or Defined
Action’

'If you had told me on that bright May morning as I first went blinking into Downing Street that during my time in office I would commit Britain to fight four wars, I would have been bewildered and horrified. That's the way it is'.

Prime Minister Tony Blair

A Journey, 2010¹

Between 18 March 2003 and 28 June 2009 the United Kingdom (UK) was at war in Iraq, the fourth war fought by the British military in the thirteen years of the Labour Government of 1997 to 2010. This war, conducted as a junior partner to the United States (US) and in coalition with other nations, was broad and varied. It took part in many phases, and against many protagonists: ranging from a conventional invasion, through a 'joint occupation', and to a vicious fight against a complex insurgency in the context of a sectarian civil war. So different were these phases that both British and American decision-makers alike struggled to identify the kind of war they had embarked on, and its character. But if the war was at times unclear, the outcome was not. The Iraq war was a damaging and degrading failure of British strategy.

The cost was high, both financially and in terms of human life. The British Treasury estimated before the invasion in 2002 that the bill for the Iraq war was likely to be £3.4 billion over three years, with a further £1 billion in the first year after the conflict for reconstruction. This estimation – the only one made throughout the war – proved to be considerably optimistic.² The eventual cost, as calculated in 2016 rates, was £11.83 billion.³ One hundred and seventy-nine British soldiers and three UK Government civilians lost their lives.⁴ There are no agreed calculations of Iraqi deaths in the six years of occupation and civil war, but the number is certainly in the tens of thousands.⁵

In 2009 Prime Minister Gordon Brown commissioned a formal public inquiry into the Iraq war. The Iraq Inquiry (as it became known) also lasted six years. Its final conclusions, published in 2016, were unequivocal and broadly critical of British decision-making. The panel of Privy Councillors found that in terms of the legitimacy of the initial invasion, 'the diplomatic options had not [in March 2003]

¹ Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life* (London: Vintage, 2011), p. 224.

² Iraq Inquiry, Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Vol. 13.2, para 13.

³ Iraq Inquiry, Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Vol. 13.2, para 2

⁴ Ministry of Defence, *Operations in Iraq: Fatalities* found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

⁵ The Iraq Body Count NGO seeks to track and quantify civilian deaths in Iraq. They estimate that between 187,000 and 210,000 civilians died violently in the period of the Iraq war. Even if this is an over-estimation, civilian deaths are clearly in the tens of thousands. See Iraq Body Count website, *Iraq Body Count* found at [link](#) (accessed 24 Jun 24).

been exhausted. Military action was therefore not a last resort'.⁶ They concluded that, 'although the coalition achieved the removal of a brutal regime ... it failed to achieve the goals it had set for a new Iraq'.⁷ UK planning and preparations for the post-invasion phase were 'wholly inadequate'.⁸ In the aftermath of the invasion, 'over optimistic assessments led to bad decisions', and 'US and UK strategies for Iraq began to diverge almost immediately after the conflict'.⁹ Investment was systemically unbalanced across the tools of national power: in total, 89% of the funds spent on Iraq were spent on military operations.¹⁰

The Iraq war casts a long shadow. It cut deep into the dynamics of British power, leaving a wound that has had a profound impact in the years that followed. Gordon Brown's Labour Government was not able to salvage public trust from its legacy, and it lost the 2010 election (and then the subsequent three elections after).¹¹ Trust in any British Government to use military force was scarred, evidenced most notably in the Conservative Government's failure to gain Parliamentary support for military action in Syria in 2013. Iraq was mentioned over thirty times in the Parliamentary debate around this action – in telling terms of 'concern', 'scepticism', 'misled' and 'damage to public confidence'. 'One thing is indisputable', Prime Minister David Cameron concluded to the Commons, 'the well of public opinion was well and truly poisoned by the Iraq episode'.¹²

Public opinion on Iraq remains negative twenty years later, with 2023 polling indicating that 41% of British people think the Iraq war left the world a less safe place (compared to 8% for the opposite), only 8% believed it had improved the lives of ordinary Iraqis, and 54% believed it had increased the terrorist threat to Britain.¹³ On the international stage, the British decision to support the US in disregarding UN collective authority shifted the azimuth on the use of force; establishing a moral equivalency that has been used most recently by Russian President Putin (and his supporters) as part of the justification for the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.¹⁴ The degradation to UN authority – and cohesion in the Security Council – continues to echo today. These outcomes place the British war in Iraq as one of the most consequential and damaging decisions for the country so far in the 21st Century. It is an event worthy of reflection and study.

⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Executive Summary, para 20.

⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Executive Summary, para 5.

⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Executive Summary, para 814.

⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Executive Summary, para 863 and 816.

¹⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 13.2, para 3.

¹¹ House of Commons Library, *UK Election Statistic: 1918 – 2023: A Century of Elections* found at [link](#) (accessed 24 Jun 24).

¹² Hansard Record of Parliamentary Debate, 29 Aug 13, found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

¹³ YouGov Online, *Iraq War: 20 Years Later, What do Britons Think About the Conflict?* found at [link](#) (accessed 24 Jun 24).

¹⁴ In his speech announcing the invasion of Ukraine, President Putin uses the case study of the Iraq invasion to establish moral relativism between the US and his actions in Ukraine. See Atlantic Council Markup, *Our Experts Decode the Putin Speech that Launched Russia's Invasion of Ukraine* found at [link](#) (accessed 24 Jun 24).

The Central Argument, Research Question, and Motivation for the Study. This thesis examines British strategic decision-making through this consequential war. It particularly focuses on what influenced decisions. The thesis makes three inter-related arguments. First, it argues that influences on British strategic decision-making in Iraq were highly unpredictable, interacting with each other in tense reciprocal relationships as strategy in theory iterated with strategy in practice. While prominent influences can be identified, there was no ‘principal’ influence (as in ‘first in the order of importance’, one that is dominant over others throughout the whole surface-area of the war).

Second, the thesis argues that this unpredictability was driven by the presence of ‘war’ in Iraq’s strategic environment, with war simply defined as ‘collective killing for some collective purpose’.¹⁵ There are few identifiable patterns within the influences on decision-making. This was a result of war’s violent nature, which makes it inherently unpredictable. British decision-makers failed to take this unpredictability into account: to understand the nature of war, and its reciprocity with strategy. It was only when ‘collective killing’ declined in 2008 and 2009 that coherence in strategy was able to follow. The inability to recognise or acknowledge war’s nature – and to adjust strategy accordingly – was at the centre of British strategic failures in Iraq.

Third, the thesis argues that British outcomes in Iraq were constrained by the use of traditional concepts of strategy that focused on military force (i.e. what might be called ‘military strategy’). The war demanded a far broader concept of strategy that aligned all tools of national power in the achievement of British national goals (what Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman refers to as ‘the art of creating power’).¹⁶ Indeed, the institutional separation of these tools in the UK system of government limited their ability to apply strategy in practice. That being said, the Iraq experience also makes it clear that the presence of war continues to have a unique impact in a given situation, in terms of the challenges of unpredictability. The idea of strategy as being intrinsically linked to war and therefore distinct from other forms of national policy must continue to carry weight.

The thesis began in 2016 with a single research question: *what were the principal influences on UK strategic decision-making prior to, at the commencement of, and during the war in Iraq from 2003 to 2009*. The motivations for exploring this question were personal and professional. I was training at

¹⁵ General Sir John Keegan isolated this simple and concise definition of war in his work *War and our World* (London: Vintage Books, 2011). It captures the instrumental violence inherent in war’s nature, which makes war highly unpredictable.

¹⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: a History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xii.

the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst on 11 September 2001. Just over five hundred and fifty days later I took part in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a young tank officer, part of the 7th Armoured Brigade (the ‘Desert Rats’) who seized Basra on 6 April. I was, one might say, present at the declaration.

Over the following thirteen years I watched as British strategy in Iraq evolved, and as the outcomes of the war emerged. I became determined to understand what influenced British strategic decisions in the war, for good and for ill. The release of the Iraq Inquiry archive in 2016, inclusive of nearly 4,000 declassified documents and the transcript of 184 witness sessions, provided the opportunity to explore this question in width, depth and context.

It is clear that the British sought for their war in Iraq to be strategic in nature: a deliberate decision to try and use military force – and then later other tools – as a ‘true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means’.¹⁷ It may be a coincidence that the codename of the British operation – TELIC – has its roots in the ancient Greek τέλος, meaning ‘a purposeful or defined action’. Coincidence or not, this is instructive. Ultimately though the war was a failure. None of the UK’s political aims – at least not those outlined in the original *Execute Directive* for the invasion – were achieved by 2009.¹⁸ Nor were British decision-makers able to effectively adjust those political aims as the war progressed; to allow them to reciprocate and evolve with the war as the war itself evolved. The result was bad strategy; a failure to use the tools of national power (including military force) to connect Government policy with effective tactics to achieve benefit for the nation.

Strategy is an elusive concept, one that defies an agreed upon, singular definition. It has changed much in meaning over the last two thousand years. The best place to start this thesis, therefore, is to review the literature related to the state of British strategic thought at the turn of the 20th Century. This sets the context within which Prime Minister Tony Blair and his New Labour Government sought to grapple with the challenges of 9/11 and the Iraq war.

Context and Literature Review: the State of British Strategic Thought at the Turn of the 20th

Century. British concepts of strategy are firmly grounded in a Western tradition of strategic thought that stretches back two and a half millennia to the Ancient Greeks and the Peloponnesian Wars. As

¹⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 28.

¹⁸ Her Majesty’s Government’s Objectives for Operation TELIC can be read at para 3 of Minute CDS to CJO, 18 March 2003, ‘Op TELIC: Authorisation for Military Operations in Iraq’ from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

Williamson Murray asserts, the work of Thucydides ‘helps to clarify not only the events of the [Peloponnesian] war but also fundamental, theoretical truths about the nature and consequences of human conflict, truths as relevant today as they were late in the fifth century BC’.¹⁹ The idea that war has an enduring human nature sets the foundation for modern British strategic thinking.

Classical roots acknowledged, however, the definition of strategy as understood in Britain at the end of the 20th Century has a shorter history. The literature broadly agrees that the word ‘strategy’ re-entered the modern lexicon in 1771 in Paul Gedeon Joly de Maizeroy’s translations of the writings of Byzantine emperor Leo VI. De Maizeroy defined ‘*la stratégique*’ as ‘the art of the commander, to wield and employ appropriately and with adroitness all the means of the general in his hand, to move all the parts that are subordinate to him, and to apply them successfully’.²⁰ Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman tells us that this modern concept of strategy – and the lexicon attached to it – caught on rapidly in Britain in the 19th Century, even so far as being used by Prime Minister William Gladstone in a reference to absolute obedience within an army.²¹

Strategy from Joly de Maizeroy’s time was clearly related from the outset to military matters: the ‘art of the commander-in-chief’ or the ‘business of the general’. It was de Maizeroy who provided the vocabulary, but Napoleon then provided the weight of evidence for the development of both theory and practice. His focus on the decisive battle, the art of war, the intuition of the commander, and the complete destruction of the enemy as a route to a political outcome set the stage for nearly a hundred years of Western strategic thought.²²

The experiences of the Napoleonic age were the inspiration for the two most prominent theorists of war in the 19th Century: Carl von Clausewitz and Henri de Jomini. Their definitions of strategy as the ‘use of an engagement for the purpose of the war’ and the ‘art of making war upon the map’

¹⁹ Williamson Murray, ‘Thucydides: Theorist of War’, *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2013, Vol. 66, No. 4, p. 31.

²⁰ Beatrice Heuser makes this conclusion in *The Strategy Maker: Thoughts on War and Society from Machiavelli to Clausewitz* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009) and in *The Evolution of Strategy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Freedman adopts Heuser’s conclusions in his *Strategy: a History* (see pp. 73 – 75). Colin Gray concurs with the 1771 timeline in *The Strategy Bridge* (see Colin Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 4). Strachan defers de Maizeroy’s definition of strategy to 1777, but the root source remains fundamentally the same (see Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 28).

²¹ Freedman, *Strategy: a History*, p. 73.

²² For Napoleon’s contribution to the evolution of strategic thoughts, see Freedman, *Strategy: a History*, pp. 75 – 78, and Beatrice Heuser and Lawrence Freedman, ‘Strategy’ in Lawrence Freedman (Ed.), *War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 191.

respectively were artful, and representative of the age.²³ While ostensibly focused on military matters, both men recognised that strategy and war at their highest form were dominated by politics. Connecting politics, strategy and war was, for them, a matter for military professionals; a theme most fully internalised in the late 1800s by Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke and the Prussian General Staff, who believed that strategy must be ‘fully independent of policy’ in order to give the military commander the freest of hands to achieve tactical victory.²⁴ Strategy in the mid-19th Century looked firmly down towards the tactics of the battlefield, rather than up to the policies of the court, the cabinet or the parliament.

This conventional wisdom was challenged in Britain in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. David Morgan-Owen tells us of a revolution in government in Great Britain in the mid-19th Century: a product of new methods of communications that increasingly allowed the disparate British Empire to be seen as a single entity requiring coordinated protection. Clausewitz and Jomini’s focus on strategy in continental land warfare seemed insufficient for the maritime challenges of ‘Imperial defence’. The ‘unique position of global, financial and maritime power’ of the British Empire demanded broader concepts. Starting with Julian Corbett, and continuing with Basil Liddell Hart and J.F.C. Fuller, British thinkers therefore explored ideas of ‘grand’, ‘major’ or ‘national’ strategy throughout the first half of the 20th Century. They extended strategy from a purely wartime concern of generals to a practice that required application in both peace and war; a logical step in the context of Empire.²⁵ This extension drew the gaze of strategy in Britain away from the battlefield, and towards the realm of policy and politics.

The First and Second World Wars – truly national endeavours in every sense – continued and accelerated this trend. The further advent of new technologies, including the remarkable expansion of road and railway and the birth of air power, removed the limitations of geography: bringing political violence across continents and direct to the polities of nations. The near-ideological belief in the sanctity of offensive spirit (what the French termed ‘*élan*’) and the ‘decisive battle’, so dominant in the pre-war plans of the early 20th Century, suddenly vanished: subsumed in the mass mobilisation of millions, and the endless armouries of death produced by the militarisation of the industrial

²³ See Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 133 and Baron Antoine-Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. Captain G.H. Mendell and Lieutenant W.P. Craighill (Philadelphia, PA: J.P. Lippincott, 1862), p. 38.

²⁴ Von Moltke’s views on strategy and war are well outlined by Antulio J. Echevarria in his article ‘Moltke and the German Military Tradition: His Theories and Legacies’ in *Parameters*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 91 - 99.

²⁵ David Morgan-Owen, ‘History and the Perils of Grand Strategy’, *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 92, Ed. 2 (2020), pp. 351 - 385.

revolution.²⁶ Strategy was forced to evolve in these unprecedented circumstances, as the business of governments and statesmen became wholly dominated by the exigencies of war. As Professor Sir Hew Strachan put it, 'definitions of strategy broadened because of the ambiguity between the categories of war and of politics which world war generated'.²⁷ Strategy and policy were increasingly conflated as a result, and matters of the battlefield and the general became distant.

The collapse of the Empire in the aftermath of the Second World War reduced the demands for British 'grand strategy', but the advent of nuclear weapons ensured that strategy continued to be drawn towards policy and further away from the battlefield. Strategy in the nuclear age was no longer about how one applied war in practice for political ends, but about how one threatened nuclear war in theory to deter mutually assured destruction. Deterrence became the province of the politician, the policy-maker and the academic (amalgamated together into what Hedley Bull referred to as the 'strategic man'²⁸), rather than that of the military general. Strategy had to be total as nuclear war would be total: relevant in war and peace, and engaged through all tools of national power.²⁹

With no precedence to rely on, decision-makers in the nuclear age turned from the art of the commander to the science of systems analysis; from the intuition of the *coup d'oeil* to the rationality of game theory. Nuclear war was never tested, but after four decades of *détente* strategy became dominated by the theoretical. The muscle memory of executing strategy in practice suffered a commensurate decline. For the duration of the Cold War the British military stood mostly as a theoretical deterrent, poised for a major war with the Soviet Union. The application of British military force in practice was confined to long-duration, limited campaigns against insurgencies of the likes of the Malaya Emergency and the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. Bar perhaps the Falklands War in 1982, there was little in the latter part of the 20th Century that demanded or drove clarity between strategy, policy, and the execution of war.

²⁶ For the impact of rail, road transport and air power on geopolitics and war, see Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, p. 121 – 129. For an examination of the 'centrality of the battle' and the 'universal cult of the offensive' in the pre-World War period, see Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 142 – 151.

²⁷ Hew Strachan, 'The Lost Meaning of Strategy', *Survival*, Vol. 47:3 (2005), p. 43.

²⁸ Hedley Bull outlines the 'strategic man' in his article 'Strategic Studies and its Critics', *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Jul 1968), pp. 593 – 605.

²⁹ For a brief summary of the history of strategy in the nuclear age, see Lawrence Freedman's chapter 'Strategy: the History of an Idea' in Hal Brands (Ed.), *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World to the Digital Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), pp. 36 – 39.

The end of the Cold War exacerbated rather than solved this issue. The language of nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction suddenly declined in relevance, but without this logic strategy became so broad as to defy instrumentality. Both the British and American militaries compounded the issue in the 1980s through the creation of the 'operational level of war'; a new conceptual domain that sat between tactics, strategy, and policy. This created a space where the 'art of the commander' could once again find its agency, a clear jurisdiction for the military professional to be applied (based on an increasingly-dogmatic doctrine of 'manoeuvre').³⁰ This operational level of war did indeed create a space for the development of expertise, but at its worst (and as we will see later in this thesis) it became Von Moltkian in its simplicity.³¹

The operational level created a 'politics-free zone' that did nothing but further the separation between tactics, strategy and policy. New interpretations of Clausewitz exacerbated this trend, tethering the primordial nature of war to a 'secondary trinity' and creating firm hierarchies and controls that could not allow for a passionate military or a logical people.³² At the highest tiers of policy even the decision to go to war, and how the war should be fought, became less and less under the control of national capitals. The normalisation of the United Nations Charter and the growth of supranational, standing coalitions like NATO further blurred the distinctions and connections between policy, strategy, and war.

By the 1990s even the foundational link between strategy and the use of force was under question. Adherents to classical strategy in the late 20th Century sought to reinforce this vital connection; as Professor Michael Howard argued in the mid-1970s, 'the 'strategic approach' is one which takes account of the part which is played by force, or the threat of force, in the international system'.³³ Others, however, began to argue that traditional war – and therefore strategy traditionally-defined – was obsolete in the post-Cold War era.³⁴ The concept of strategy widened in an era of 'securitisation' to include almost any aspect of a state's wellbeing; becoming so broad as to defy definition. If

³⁰ For a history and critique of the operational level of war, see Justin Kelly and Michael J. Brennan, 'The Leavenworth Heresy and the Perversion of Operational Art', *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 56, 1st Quarter (2010), pp. 61 – 63 and Gray, *The Strategy Bridge*, p. 21.

³¹ I will show in Part One how General Tommy Franks as Commander CENTCOM asserted that the operational level of war should be (as Von Moltke advised) 'fully independent of policy', with Franks using phrases such as 'keep Washington focused on policy and strategy ... leave me the hell alone to run the war'. See Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 217 – 218.

³² Brands (Ed.), *The New Makers of Modern Strategy*, pp. 133 – 134.

³³ Michael Howard, 'The Strategic Approach to International Relations', *British Journal of International Studies*, No. 1 (1976): 67 found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

³⁴ Drawn from Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 42. Strachan uses as examples of this assertion the works of Martin van Creveld, *On Future War* (London: Brassey's Ltd, 1991), John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Vintage, 1993), and Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

everything was strategy, then nothing was strategy. Even the traditional lexicon of war became diluted, replaced by terms like ‘international armed conflict’, ‘humanitarian intervention’, ‘peacekeeping’, ‘peace-enforcement’, and ‘wars of choice’. By the turn of the millennium the concept of strategy had, as Strachan argues, profoundly lost its meaning.³⁵

This was the context into which Prime Minister Tony Blair and his party of ‘New Labour’ stepped into Government in a landslide victory in the 1997 general election. It sets the tone for our understanding of how New Labour – the first Labour Government in eighteen years – set out to consider and execute strategy in their first years in office.

British Strategic Decision-Making in the New Labour Government: the Theory. In his 2019 essay *Strategy in Theory; Strategy in Practice*, Strachan proposes three questions as a way of approaching the problem of strategy. These are, ‘first, who thinks about strategy? Second, who decides strategy? Third, who does strategy?’.³⁶ These provide a useful frame for examining British strategic decision-making in the early New Labour years.

The Iraq Inquiry invests an early volume (Volume Two) in seeking to examine these questions.³⁷ The theoretical answers in 1997 were deep-set in the constitutional conventions of the Westminster system. In essence, the British Government’s routine approach was to develop strategy through committee. The body responsible for making decisions concerning ‘major issues of policy’ or issues ‘of critical importance to the public’ was formally the British Cabinet; a Committee of the Privy Council, supported by the system of Ministerial Committees. Decisions around going to war, and how to fight once at war, clearly fell into these categories.³⁸ In theory, the Committees thought about strategy and developed options, and then the Cabinet decided together – indeed the first principle of the Ministerial Code in 2001 was for Cabinet Ministers to ‘uphold the principle of collective responsibility’. The Prime Minister held overall responsibility for the Ministerial Code, for calling Ministers to the Cabinet, and for assuring standards of adherence and behaviour.³⁹

For over thirty years the Ministerial Committee responsible for the consideration of traditional strategy had been the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (DOP). This was formed in 1963 with

³⁵ Strachan, *The Lost Meaning of Strategy*.

³⁶ Hew Strachan, ‘Strategy in Theory; Strategy in Practice’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 42:2 (2019), pp. 171 – 190.

³⁷ See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 2.

³⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 2, para 3.

³⁹ Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code: A Code of Conduct and Guidance for Ministers on Procedure* (2001) found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

the mandate to 'keep under review the Government's defence and overseas policy'.⁴⁰ Chaired by the Prime Minister, and bringing together the Ministers responsible for the various facets of national power that could be applied in the defence of the nation, DOP could rightly be considered the highest formal forum for thinking about traditional strategy in the British constitutional system.⁴¹

Ministers have authority for Government Departments, which is where strategy is in theory 'done' in Britain. Traditionally three Departments have wielded the resources of national power required to achieve strategic ends: the Ministry of Defence (MoD) (in terms of military or hard power), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) (in terms of diplomatic or soft power, and international development), and the Treasury (in terms of funding as the life-blood of any strategy). Each Minister is supported by a non-political civil servant in the Permanent Under Secretary (PUS); the critical continuity that bridges Ministerial reshuffles, political turmoil, and elections. The MoD is then unique in that it contains the structures of both the civil / military relationship and the profession of arms: a diarchy where the PUS and the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) (as the professional head of the Armed Forces) work together to advise the Minister on the gravest matters pertaining to war. This is where – in theory – policy and tactics for the use of military force are drawn together for planning and execution.⁴²

The simple conception of constitutional convention above of course conceals layer upon layer of complexity: a sometimes-dizzying maze of positions, ranks, civil servants, committees and traditions. But in the most basic terms the theory is clear. Cabinet Committees think about strategy, based on expert advice from across and outside the Government. The Cabinet then makes decisions on strategy, formally carrying the burden of collective responsibility. Individual Ministers holding the portfolios of Government Departments are then responsible for executing and reporting on strategy once decided. This was the system presented to the Blair Government on arrival in 1997. It was a system designed to be applied to the consideration of any potential war, no matter its scope or character. Whether this system was underpinned by a coherent set of ideas about strategy, with a lexicon to match, is a question that I will examine throughout this thesis.

⁴⁰ See background description on the DOP as part of the Cabinet Office *Defence and Overseas Policy Committees and Sub-Committees: Minutes and Papers Archive* found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

⁴¹ Membership of DOP included (at various times), the first Secretary of State, the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for International Development, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Home Secretary, the Commonwealth or / and Colonial Secretary, and the Minister or Secretary of State for Defence.

⁴² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 2, paras 86 - 107.

There is one final element of this system, sometimes overlooked: the British citizenry – as represented by the elected members of the British Parliament. The Ministerial Code in 2001 was clear that the Cabinet Ministers had the ‘duty to Parliament to account, and to be held to account, for the policies, decisions and actions of their departments’. This requirement included a number of detailed conditions. It was of ‘paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament’. Ministers must be ‘as open as possible with Parliament and the public’. Any Minister breaching these conditions would be ‘expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister’.⁴³ The Iraq experience would thoroughly test these principals, with (as we will see) mixed performance from Ministers as the unpredictable nature of war was applied.

It is of note, however, that the final decision to go to war was not one for Parliament or the people to make, at least not in 1997. The long-standing convention was that decisions related to the ‘deployment and use of the armed forces overseas, including involvement in armed conflict, or the declaration of war’ rested solely with Ministers as part of their executive powers (held within the ‘principal royal prerogative’). This was an area in which the Labour Government had expressed considerable concern in opposition, from as early as 1989 to their election in 1997.⁴⁴ It became increasingly cogent once they came into power, and as they grappled with both the aftermath of the Cold War and the turmoil following the attacks of 11 September 2001.

British Strategic Decision-Making in the New Labour Government: the Practice. Having examined the theory, I now turn to how the New Labour Government sought to apply strategy in practice. Elected with a landslide 179-seat majority, it was clear that they arrived in power determined to use this huge parliamentary authority for a revisionist agenda. The bold moves started immediately. On just their third day in office New Labour created the Department for International Development (DFID), a long-held aspiration that separated international and reconstruction aid from the FCO and created (in Blair’s own words) ‘a non-governmental organisation inside government’.⁴⁵ Considerations of strategy were suddenly split from the three traditional Departmental interlocutors to four: a decision that (as I will show) would later prove to have significant implications for post-invasion Iraq.

⁴³ Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code* found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

⁴⁴ For analysis of the ‘principal royal prerogative’ (including Labour’s views in opposition) see House of Commons, ‘Taming the Prerogative: Strengthening Ministerial Accountability to Parliament’, *Public Administration Select Committee Forth Report of Session 2003 – 2004* found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

⁴⁵ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 24.

The style of Tony Blair's government itself has gained an air of stereotype, framed around terms like 'sofa government' and 'spin'. Some of this is justified, but certainly not all. Simple statistics defy the most lurid descriptions of centralisation. The number of Cabinet Committees in fact grew in New Labour's first two terms, from twenty-seven in January 1998 to fifty-nine in November 2004. Blair also increased his personal involvement in such committees in his first two terms as Prime Minister, doubling the number of committees of which he was the chair from five to ten. Cabinet itself continued to play a significant role in policy decision-making, with particular focus on trying to grapple with 'cross-cutting, cross-departmental issues'.⁴⁶

Myths put to one side, it is however also fair to say that Blair's No.10 office sought increasingly centralised control on the most sensitive national issues of defence and the use of the military. Blair established a number of unique political positions to support him directly in considerations of strategy. These included the appointment of Jonathan Powell as the inaugural Chief of Staff of No. 10. Powell was given unusual special powers of authority over civil servants through a Civil Service (Amendment) Order, as was Alastair Campbell as the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary.⁴⁷ Powell, who had 'a politics that was completely and naturally New Labour' would later play a central role in the development of British strategic options for Iraq.⁴⁸

Blair further centralised advice through the creation of a new 'Security and Intelligence Co-ordinator' (who sat apart from Cabinet and the Cabinet Secretariat), and through appointing Sir David Manning (his personal Foreign Policy Advisor) in a dual role as the Head of DOP.⁴⁹ Lord Wilson, the Cabinet Secretary from 1998 to 2002, was clear that these appointments reflected Blair's desire to have his senior people providing advice directly to him. 'He had his own team', Wilson told the Inquiry, 'that is, to be honest, how we liked to work'.⁵⁰ Jonathan Powell took this a step further, reportedly briefing civil servants in 2001 that these moves were part of a broader approach to central governance, and that they should expect a change under New Labour from 'a feudal system of barons to a more Napoleonic system'.⁵¹

New Labour's 1997 election manifesto promised such a 'radical' Government, but the manifesto itself was light on defence and foreign policy, and Blair had been quiet on his views while in

⁴⁶ Anthony Seldon, *Blair's Britain: 1997 – 2007* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 99.

⁴⁷ Buckingham Palace, *Civil Service Amendment Order dated 3rd May 1997* found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

⁴⁸ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 20.

⁴⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 2, para 43.

⁵⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 2, para 44.

⁵¹ Anthony Seldon, *Blair* (London: the Free Press, 2004), p. 437.

opposition.⁵² As the opening quote to this introduction suggests, even Blair would not have predicted how activist he would become on the world stage, and how quickly. From a standing start in 1997 the New Labour Government – under Blair’s leadership – rapidly applied military force for the first time in Iraq in 1998, in Kosovo and East Timor in 1999, in Sierra Leone in 2000, and in Afghanistan in 2001. Blair’s *doctrine of the international community* speech in Chicago in 1999 (discussed in detail in Part One) solidified New Labour’s intentions to continue this activist trend.⁵³ Blair’s government sought to apply traditional strategy with a directness not seen in decades: a clear determination to use force instrumentally for ambitious ends of national and alliance policy. As Strachan highlights, such a view was anachronistic in Europe by the late 1990s.⁵⁴ For most Europeans, war was a ghost of a bygone age, a spectre to be feared, not a tool to be applied.

Blair and his team found the traditional conventions of the Cabinet structures (i.e. strategy by committee) too cumbersome and unwieldy for the sudden needs of this dynamic and fast-moving defence and foreign policy agenda. The bombing campaign in Iraq in 1998 (Operation DESERT FOX) was agreed through a meeting of DOP⁵⁵, but after that point the Cabinet Committee became increasingly side-lined in favour of ‘Ad-Hoc Committees’ (both formal and informal), so-called ‘War Cabinets’, and wholly informal groups who often met in the Prime Minister’s office or ‘den’. The DOP, for example, did not discuss Iraq after the initial bombing campaign in 1999 or 2000, and indeed did not meet at all between 2002 and October 2003 (throughout the final planning and initial execution of the Iraq war).⁵⁶ The growth of ‘denocracy’ (as Anthony Seldon dubbed it⁵⁷) was particularly prevalent in considerations of military force, with strategy in the Kosovo campaign (for example) being executed through daily, small group meetings in the ‘den’.⁵⁸

Such a circumscribed approach to strategy development was not unusual in the history of British politics, *per se*, but it set the stage for the challenges in decision-making that I will examine throughout this thesis. By late-2002, as the pace and sensitivity of the Iraq crisis built, the instinct

⁵² New Labour Manifesto, *New Labour: Because Britain Deserves Better* (1997) found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

⁵³ For a complete transcript of Blair’s speech outlining the ‘*doctrine of the international community*’ see National Archives, *Doctrine of the International Community [24/2/1999]* found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18). For discussion in Part One, see pp. 42 – 44.

⁵⁴ Hew Strachan, ‘Making Strategy: Civil-Military Relations After Iraq’, *Survival, Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol 48, Issue 3, 2006, p. 73.

⁵⁵ Paul Williams, ‘Who’s Making UK Foreign Policy?’, *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Oct 2004, Vol. 80, No. 5 (Oct 2004), p. 911 – 929.

⁵⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 2, paras 139 – 141.

⁵⁷ Seldon, *Blair*, p. 692.

⁵⁸ The Kosovo bombing campaign was overseen through daily, small-group meetings in the No. 10 Downing Street study. Attendance was reportedly limited to the Secretary of State for Defence, the Foreign Secretary, the CDS, and a small group of trusted officials. See The Guardian, *Commander Blair Goes it Alone*, Apr 1999 found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

towards 'denocracy' and away from the scrutiny and rigour of Cabinet became acute. When presented in September 2002 with options to set up Ministerial Sub-Committees of DOP and ad-hoc officials groups to deal with the escalating Iraq crisis, Blair approved the officials groups but deliberately held off from engaging Cabinet, directing his team to 'wait before setting up a key Cabinet group'.⁵⁹ Such a group did not commence meeting until the invasion commenced on the 19 March 2003.⁶⁰ The theory of Cabinet Committee discourse increasingly had little role in New Labour's strategy in practice, especially in relation to Iraq.

This reliance on ad hoc, small groups and personal relationships typified the strategic approach of the Prime Minister and his team in office: what I will refer to later as the *doctrine of the individual*. Blair never changed his belief on the benefits of this approach. In his memoirs, published in 2010, he stated decisively that, 'you can't take decisions by vast committees of people ... it just doesn't work'.⁶¹ After the failure of attempts in 2003 to negotiate a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Americans around 'Joint Occupation' of Iraq (discussed in Part Two of this thesis), Blair told the Inquiry, 'look, you could have agreed some formal memorandum with the Americans. That wouldn't have been what made it work. What would have made it work was my relationship with the President, Jack's relationship and so on'.⁶² I will show that such an approach had some strengths, but these were offset by dangerous weaknesses.

New Labour also found themselves on a steep learning curve in the field of civil / military relations. Labour had a weak reputation on defence in general, and after eighteen years in opposition there was little muscle memory of working with the military, or in the practicalities of wielding the military instrument of national power. None of the prominent members of Blair's Cabinet had any experience in uniform: not a guaranteed drawback in strategic decision-making, but certainly a limitation in terms of understanding the language and culture of the military, and in exposure to the realities of war.⁶³ Blair himself had no background in defence or foreign policy; a fact that he is open about in his memoir.⁶⁴ New Labour first big civil / military decision was to commit to conducting a Strategic Defence Review (SDR) if elected, part of a corrective against this weak reputation, but also one tied to genuine aspirations for a values-based approach to foreign and defence policy (best

⁵⁹ Minute Manning to Blair, 'Iraq', 12 Sep 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

⁶⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 2, para 163.

⁶¹ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 447.

⁶² Transcript of Public Hearing, Tony Blair, 21 Jan 101, pp. 140 - 141 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20). For discussion in Part Two, see p. 105.

⁶³ Seldon, *Blair's Britain*, p. 619.

⁶⁴ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 224.

encapsulated in Foreign Secretary Robin Cook's commitment that 'our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension').⁶⁵

The 1998 SDR, conducted under the auspices of George Robertson as Labour's initial Secretary of State for Defence, was therefore their first serious inject into civil / military relations. Again labelled as 'radical' and designed to be 'foreign-policy led'⁶⁶, the SDR committed the British Armed Forces to becoming a 'force for good' in the post-Cold War world. 'We must', it concluded, be prepared to go to the crisis rather than have the crisis come to us'. This 'massive agenda for change' (reinforced by the 'New Chapter' that followed it after 9/11) established both the motivation and the strategic means of expeditionary and high-readiness forces that the Government would eventually commit to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁶⁷

The British military itself arrived into the arms of Blair and his team institutionally and ideologically committed to the idea of 'jointery' and immersed in the coalition doctrines of the operational level of war. Both of these aspects went on to play important roles in British strategic decision-making around Iraq. Centralisation had also played its role. The MoD itself had been on a journey of command and control concentration from 1959, starting with the appointment of Earl Mountbatten as the first Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS)⁶⁸, and then with the steady absorption of the separate Service Ministries into the single MoD between 1963 and 1971.⁶⁹ By the late 1990s this process was, on paper, near completion. The CDS held a firm position as senior advisor to the Secretary of State and the Government on military matters, sitting as the only uniform officer regularly invited to Cabinet Sub-Committees like DOP, and supported by his own dedicated planning staff of Deputy Chiefs of the Defence Staff (DCDSs).

This structure ensured that the Prime Minister and Ministers heard a unified 'joint' voice on military matters. But it also narrowed the number of views that Ministers were exposed to: a risky outcome for as uncertain and unpredictable activity as war. Some British Chiefs of Staff would later report that they felt entirely excluded from strategic decision-making in the New Labour Government.

⁶⁵ For the background of Labour's new internationalist approach to foreign policy, see Stephen Deakin, 'Britain's Defence and Cosmopolitan Ideals', Sandhurst Occasional Papers, No. 3 (2010), p. 7.

⁶⁶ New Labour Manifesto, *New Labour: Because Britain Deserves Better* (1997) found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

⁶⁷ Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review* (London: Ministry of Defence, 1998) found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018), para 201.

⁶⁸ See background information to National Archives, Cabinet Office Records, *Records of the Ministry of Defence* found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

⁶⁹ Ministry of Defence, *History of the Ministry of Defence and the Old War Office* found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

Admiral Sir Alan West, the First Sea Lord, asserted that 'I never knew what went on between the CDS and the Prime Minister and I never felt I was included in the strategic decision-making apparatus for these wars. I did not feel I was part of the inner Cabinet where decisions were made'.⁷⁰

Centralisation and 'jointery' reinforced the predilection of Blair and his team to the *doctrine of the individual*, with the effectiveness of military advice reliant on personal relationships. Blair held a strong relationship with General Sir Charles Guthrie as his first CDS from 1997 to early 2001, with evident dividends for the outcomes of Kosovo, Sierra Leone and the initial phases of Afghanistan. But he was far less comfortable with Admiral Sir Michael Boyce as Guthrie's successor, an outcome which would play its own role in the decision-making around Iraq.

The establishment of the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) in 1996, and the creation of the role of Chief of Joint Operations (CJO), was another key evolution. This isolated operational command and control (C2) in a single location, geographically separated from both the MoD and the Service Headquarters. The 1998 SDR reinforced this model, providing additional authority to the CJO, including as a Top Level Budget Holder in the role's own right.⁷¹ The distance between Whitehall and Northwood is only fifty minutes by road, but I will show how this isolated operational level of C2 was central to the escalating commitment of British forces to the Iraq invasion.

Overall, New Labour's strategy in practice from their entry into government in 1997 to the Iraq crisis in 2003 can be described in five ways: assertive, framed by values rather than interests, centralised, reliant on a *doctrine of the individual*, and increasingly confident. Assertive, in that it far exceeded even their own expectations before they were elected. Framed by values rather than interests, in that they sought to use the British military as a 'force for good' rather than for narrowly-defined national defence. Centralised, in that discussions of strategy were increasingly conducted by small, selected groups in ad hoc structures and settings. Reliant on a *doctrine of the individual*, in that Blair and his team placed principal weight on personal relationships, both foreign and domestic. And increasingly confident in that their rapid succession of military actions seemed markedly successful. As Strachan puts it, Blair and his team (and indeed the British electorate) quickly came to believe that 'war was indeed a reliable and malleable instrument of policy'.⁷² As we shall see, the Iraq war came to test the effectiveness of their approach, and the fine line between confidence and hubris.

⁷⁰ Christopher Elliott, *High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 171.

⁷¹ Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review* (London: Ministry of Defence, 1998) found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018).

⁷² Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 14.

Influences on Strategy in the Iraq War: The Current Literature. Four influences dominate the current historiography around the Iraq war, most of which focuses on the initial decision to invade. The first is the ideology argument, which states that Britain went to war as a result of the momentum of New Labour's ethical foreign policy, and the collective belief in a related set of ideas. The second is the individuals argument, which places the onus firmly at the feet of Blair as the Prime Minister, on his inner circle, and with a centralised and 'hyperactive' premiership.⁷³ Third is the alliance argument, which states that UK decision-making was principally influenced by the nation's long-standing alliance with the US. Finally there is the military argument, which attributes the war to an enthusiastic MoD seeking purpose in the post-Cold War world. The publication of the Iraq Inquiry in 2016 dramatically opened the aperture on classified, primary source evidence for the Iraq war, and it is therefore reasonable to split analysis of the current literature into two phases: after the publication of the Inquiry, and before.

Analysis of the influences on British strategic decision-making since the publication of the Iraq Inquiry remains relatively light. The ideology argument is prominent in the most fulsome accounts, particularly in examinations of the initial decision to go to war. Dr Patrick Porter makes the strongest case for ideology in his 2018 book *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq*, which he describes as a 'work of "international history", or the historical study of international politics'. Porter argues that British decision-makers held a series of embedded ideas (an 'ideology') related to security, alliances, influence, and regime-change that – when unchallenged – led them to commit to the invasion in 2003. He concludes that the Iraq war could have been avoided by a greater focus on the theories of traditional realism within international relations. He then constructs counter-factual outcomes based on what he sees as different available paths.⁷⁴

Porter's work is complemented most recently by Dr William D. James, who uses the decision to invade Iraq as one of three case studies in his 2024 work *British Grand Strategy in the Age of American Hegemony*. James also makes a strong argument for ideological influences, but he intrinsically ties these to individual political decision-makers, and particularly to Blair. Of note, James makes a firm rejection of the 'alliance' view, arguing that those who purport to this approach understate the agency that the British Government held in deciding the scope and scale of their contribution to the invasion, and how much ideology drove these decisions.⁷⁵

⁷³ Paul Fawcett and R. A. W. Rhodes describe the Blair and New Labour premiership as 'hyperactive' in Seldon, *Blair's Britain*, p. 79. This is reinforced by a Conservative Democracy Task Force paper entitled *An End to Sofa Government: Better Working of Prime Minister and Cabinet*, found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018), p. 2.

⁷⁴ Patrick Porter, *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷⁵ William D. James, *British Grand Strategy in the Age of American Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

Porter and James's work is fair and rigorous (although Porter's use of counterfactuals carries obvious risks), but their conclusions are limited, isolated as they are only on the first decision to invade. Comparison with later decisions shows that their emphasis on both ideology and the impact of individuals does not endure throughout the war; indeed both factors decline significantly in influence during the second half of the British campaign, and especially under the Prime Ministership of Gordon Brown. Their analysis is therefore useful, but too narrow to be comprehensive.

The only other period subject to rigorous study since the publication of the Iraq Inquiry in 2016 is that of the British reaction to the US 'surge' between 2006 and 2008. Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman and Professor Dan Marston have both examined this period. Freedman, who sat on the Iraq Inquiry as a Privy Councillor and therefore has an unparalleled understanding of the evidence, tells the 'tale of two surges' in his 2022 book *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*.⁷⁶ Marston, who was in Iraq advising the British military throughout much of the 'surge' period, analyses British strategy from an alliance partnership and coalition warfare perspective in his 2021 article *Operation TELIC VIII to XI: Difficulties of twenty-first-century command*. Both paint a deleterious picture of British strategy, with Marston describing what he saw as 'an almost total collapse of strategic coherence'.⁷⁷

In terms of influence, Freedman briefly summarises the broader context of British strategy pre-invasion, focused on Blair's personal impact in his application of what I will later describe as a *strategy of influence* with President George Bush, and the issues of an isolated operational level of war. He then focuses particularly on the alliance lens, placing British strategy alongside the US 'surge' to highlight how the allies diverged. Of note is Freedman's emphasis on the decline of individual influence in the latter phases of the Blair Government, and his highlighting of the impact of an 'extraordinary turnover of leadership in the Ministry of Defence'. He concludes that, in 2006 and 2007, 'the military, in the end, set the policy'.⁷⁸ Marston also focuses on the alliance lens, examining how the US 'surge' decision 'tested the willingness and relationship between the two core allies'. Marston also lays the weight of influence at the feet of the military in 2006 - 2008, arguing that both

⁷⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *Command: the Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (London: Penguin, 2022), pp. 426 - 459.

⁷⁷ Daniel Marston, 'Operation TELIC VIII to XI: Difficulties of Twenty-First Century Command', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 44:1, 2021, p. 64.

⁷⁸ Freedman, *Command*, p. 460.

the British Army and the US military needed to understand their 'own fundamental role in changing strategy, policy, and ultimately the final outcome'.⁷⁹

Freedman and Marston's analyses complement each other, and are persuasive, but they are again limited in scope, and constrained by their examination of a single period of the war. This thesis deepens and expands their analysis, particularly in areas such as the isolation of the British from US strategy in the pre-surge period in late 2006, and the impact of the 2006 'changing of the guard' in the MoD highlighted by Freedman. Overall, the relatively light suite of post-2016 analysis provides some useful pieces of the puzzle, but each piece must be looked at in the context of the ebb and flow of influences across the full surface-area of the war. Only by looking at each phase of decision-making in the context of the others can we gain a proper understanding of the prominent influences.

Analysis of the British experience in the Iraq war pre-2016 is far more prolific, but it is intrinsically limited by its lack of access to the Inquiry archive. A full history with the benefit of the primary source documents of this archive, for example, is yet to be attempted. Two histories of the campaign from the British perspective exist from the pre-Inquiry period, with only very minor examinations of the UK experience in the international histories of the war.⁸⁰ The first focused work is journalist Jack Fairweather's 2012 history in *A War of Choice: the British in Iraq 2003 – 2009*. Fairweather's work, based on over three hundred interviews, is reasonable, but it lacks documentary primary sources and holds a journalistic tone that sometimes impacts its academic and analytical value (Fairweather, for example, describes British General Richard Shirreff as a man who 'commanded a room like a lion on the veld').⁸¹ Fairweather's analysis on the influences on decision-making is incidental, but he sits firmly in the individual and military camp. It is, Fairweather contends, 'easy to blame Tony Blair', but he equally argues this view underplays the impact of the poor advice given by British military leaders throughout the campaign.⁸²

⁷⁹ Marston, *Operation TELIC VIII to XI*, p. 88.

⁸⁰ John Keegan wrote a history of the conflict in 2004, but the single chapter that focuses on the British barely scratches the surface (see John Keegan, *The Iraq War* (London: Hutchinson, 2004). For the British element, see Chapter 7, Loc Cit 2762 – 3030), there is only a single chapter on the UK experience in Williamson Murray and Robert Scales's military history of the Iraq War (see Williamson Murray and Robert H. Scales Jr, *The Iraq War: A Military History* (Harvard: Harvard College, 2005). For the British element, see Chapter 4, pp. 129 – 153), Charles Tripp's detailed and well-regarded *A History of Iraq* was revised in 2010 to take into account the post 9/11 events, but the British receive scant mention (see Tripp, *A History of Iraq*. In terms of the invasion, the UK's contribution receives brief attention as an ally of the United States at pp. 273 – 277. The British experience in Basra receives the direct attention of a single paragraph on p. 312).

⁸¹ See Jack Fairweather, *A War of Choice: Honour, Hubris and Sacrifice - The British in Iraq 2003* (London, Vintage Books, 2012). For an example of the journalistic feel, Fairweather describes British General Richard Shirreff as a man who 'commanded a room like a lion on the veld'. See p. 261.

⁸² Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, p. 345.

The second history is from Tim Ripley, a correspondent for Jane's Defence Weekly, who completed a detailed study of the British military experience in 2014 in his book *Operation TELIC: the British Campaign in Iraq 2003 – 2009*. Ripley provides a detailed narrative of the military's experience in the Iraq war, built not only on interviews with senior commanders but also on the Regimental journals of the Battlegroups and Brigades through the campaign. This is a rich record at the tactical level. Ripley (perhaps naturally given his lens) also finds a strong case for the influence of the military, arguing that 'the role of senior British officers in the decision to go war and subsequent prosecution of the occupation has largely gone unexamined'. They, Ripley concludes, 'were not hapless bystanders to a car crash but key players in Whitehall debates and eventual decision making in the field'.⁸³ Referring back to the First Sea Lord Admiral Henry Leach in the Falklands campaign, Ripley argues that there should have been a 'Leach' moment of honesty and foresight before the invasion, but that this never happened.⁸⁴ Fairweather and Ripley represent a broader trend in the pre-Inquiry analysis of a heavy emphasis on the military influence.

This assertion is contested by the personal records of the senior officers who undertook the campaign, particularly the soldier-scholars. Many (such as Major General Jonathan Bailey in the excellent collection of essays found in *British Generals in Blair's Wars*) argue that there was a fundamental mismatch in 'ends, ways and means', with the onus of influence laying with the politician and their policies. Bailey opens *British Generals* with observations on 'ideological tides' in New Labour, and then states decisively that 'the key factor in the decisions to launch the campaigns that form the major part of this study was the Prime Minister of the day'.⁸⁵ Major General Christopher Elliot, another retired senior officer, seeks a more balanced view in his work *High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars*. Elliot attributes much to the British system of developing strategy: from 'defence politicians', to 'service tribes', and to the machinations of the Whitehall bureaucracies. It is the sum total of this 'strategic system', Elliot argues, that principally influenced both the decision to go to war, and those that followed after.⁸⁶ It was, Elliot argues, strategy by committee itself that was influential.

Taken all together, each of the four prominent influences (ideologies, individuals, alliances, and the military) has a solid foundation. No single argument, however, is conclusive: there is no authoritative

⁸³ Tim Ripley, *Operation TELIC: the British Campaign in Iraq 2003 – 2009* (Lancaster: Telic-Herrick Publications, 2014), Loc Cit 10033.

⁸⁴ Ripley, *Operation TELIC*, Loc Cit 10040.

⁸⁵ Jonathan Bailey, Richard Iron and Hew Strachan (Ed.), *British Generals in Blair's Wars* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 5 – 26.

⁸⁶ Elliott, *High Command*, pp. 43 – 54.

agreement on the principal influences on decision-making. Most of the conclusions are based on analysis prior to the publication of the Inquiry archive (therefore requiring reconsideration and revision).

There is also one additional area of inquiry that is understudied: the influence on decision-making of war as a phenomenon in itself. This is the facet that Strachan focuses on in his 2013 work *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective*. Strachan seeks to place the Iraq campaign in the context of the logic of war's nature, examining how strategy (in terms of the process of linking policy with tactics) is affected by the reciprocity inherent in war's violent clash of wills.⁸⁷ He argues that the failure to acknowledge war's nature – to engage overly-dominant theories of strategy with the reality of war in practice – was central to British shortcomings in Iraq. Strachan makes a compelling case (which is echoed in part by Marston, Freedman, retired Brigadier Ben Barry⁸⁸, and General Sir Rupert Smith⁸⁹), but even his analysis was conducted without the benefit of the Inquiry archive. There is considerable scope to expand and refine Strachan's argument.

This thesis will use the Iraq Inquiry archive to test and refine the broad conclusions in the current literature on decision-making. It will, however, particularly focus on this last facet: the influence of war itself, in terms of the unpredictability and reciprocity of its enduring nature, the impact of its specific character in Iraq, and war's impact on both strategy in theory and strategy in practice.

Sources: The Value of the Iraq Inquiry. The evidence used in this thesis is drawn primarily from the Iraq Inquiry, one of the most substantial and thorough inquiries in British political history.

Announced by Gordon Brown on 15 June 2009, the Inquiry was carefully designed from the outset to maximise transparency. It deliberately consisted of Privy Councillors, allowing the Inquiry to be formed up under the convention of 'Privy Council Terms' that allowed unfettered access to classified information.⁹⁰ The Prime Minister made his intentions for transparency clear from his first address on the matter to Parliament. The inquiry was to be 'unprecedented', he told them. It was to have 'access to all Government papers, and the ability to call any witnesses'. Brown was explicit that he had 'asked the members of the committee to ensure that the final report will be able to disclose all but the most sensitive information – that is, all information except that which is essential to our national security'.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 265.

⁸⁸ Ben Barry, *Harsh Lessons: Iraq, Afghanistan and the Changing Character of War* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁸⁹ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: the Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane 2005).

⁹⁰ See the Privy Council, *Frequently Asked Questions* at [link](#) (accessed 31 Mar 25).

⁹¹ See Hansard Record of Parliamentary Debate, 15 Jun 09, found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Mar 25).

The Privy Councillors took this charge for transparency seriously, indeed perhaps beyond Brown's initial conception. They worked under Sir John Chilcot's chairmanship to reduce any unreasonable barrier to disclosure. While Brown's initial assertions were that evidence would be given 'in private', the committee pushed for as many of the proceedings to be conducted in full view of the public as possible.⁹² The due-process system of 'Maxwellisation' was leveraged (as it is in most public inquiries) to allow the Inquiry to be critical of individuals and their actions where the evidence warranted. Most significantly, the Inquiry engaged in detail with successive Cabinet Secretaries to ensure that the maximum amount of relevant documentation could be declassified and published alongside the final report, including private correspondence between British Prime Ministers and American Presidents.⁹³

These actions delayed the publication of the Inquiry Report by a number of years, but the rewards of this passionate determination for transparency are evident: a digitised archive of nearly 4,000 formally-declassified British documents⁹⁴, supported by the verbatim transcripts of the 184 politicians, civil servants, military officers and experts who gave evidence to the Inquiry.⁹⁵ The documentation includes many examples declassified from the highest levels of TOP SECRET and SECRET, just seven years after the end of the British operation in Iraq. The twelve volumes of the report of the Iraq Inquiry, which in total contain 2.6 million words, then provide thematic, chronological and analytical structure to this evidence.⁹⁶

Access to this archive allows this thesis to make a significant contribution to the history of the British war in Iraq. Notable examples include: the role of civil / military relations in Lord Goldsmith's decision to give a 'better view' on the legality of the war in March 2003; the impact of the in-fighting between British Government departments in the aftermath of the invasion; the reciprocal interaction in strategy and decision-making between the Afghanistan and Iraq theatres in 2006; the wholesale isolation of the British from President Bush's 'surge' decision in 2007; and, the influence of Gordon Brown in the final decisions to withdraw and end the British operation in 2008 / 2009. This historical

⁹² On 29 Oct 2009 the Iraq Inquiry and Her Majesty's Government agreed the protocols on the treatment of sensitive written and electronic evidence. The considerations can be found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

⁹³ For information on the process of 'Maxwellisation', and the interactions between the Privy Councillors and the Cabinet Secretaries on declassifying documents, see House of Lords, *Iraq Inquiry (Chilcot): Timeline of Principal Developments* found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Mar 25).

⁹⁴ The access point for all declassified and digitised evidence published by the Iraq Inquiry is via the archived Iraq Inquiry website found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

⁹⁵ The full list of witnesses (including access to videos and transcripts) is within Iraq Inquiry, *Witness List* found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

⁹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, published in twelve volumes on 16 Jul 16, found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

contribution underpins the three inter-related arguments of the thesis, enhancing its overall academic value.

To achieve this historical contribution, the thesis focuses on selecting and analysing documents of high-quality and significant gravity. Contemporaneous, primary-source documents are therefore given the greatest weight, particularly those that expose the 'private voice' and instinctive / deeply-held opinions of key protagonists. The twenty-nine private notes written by Blair to President Bush (which were mostly personally drafted and none of which were consulted with Cabinet colleagues) understandably play a prominent role in terms of understanding Blair's personal influence⁹⁷, as does private correspondence between senior decision-makers and advisors (such as Blair's minute to Jonathan Powell of 17 March 2002 where he discusses being 'gung ho' on regime change).⁹⁸ Handwritten notations on documents, which often show the instinctive perspective of the author, are given due weight; they add important colour in terms of private opinion or directed action.⁹⁹ Staff-level records of conversations, particularly at Prime Ministerial and Cabinet levels, are also important: while taken by a third party, they seek to capture strategic discourse and narrative as it develops.¹⁰⁰

Key strategic documents are then used to examine the development of strategy: from concepts, to options, and finally to decision. By tracking such documents through the various echelons of the military to political fora, the thesis gains an understanding of how strategy evolved from theory into execution. A prominent example of this is the MoD's 'Options for Future UK Force Posture in Iraq' from 14 June 2005, which can be traced from Ministry strategic guidance down the development of force options at PJHQ and then up to DOP for Ministerial consideration and decision.¹⁰¹ All of this analysis is underpinned by the narrative understanding of the war provided by the TOP SECRET reports of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). These are prolifically-declassified, providing key insights into the progression of the campaign.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ A prime example is the crucial note from Tony Blair to George Bush where he began with '*I will be with you, whatever*' (Note Blair to Bush, 'Note on Iraq', 28 Jul 02, from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17)).

⁹⁸ Minute Prime Minister to Powell, 'Iraq', 17 Mar 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

⁹⁹ An example of civilian / military tension can be seen in the handwritten commentary from Jonathan Powell (Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister) to Tony Blair, where he advises that the military are trying to '*bounce*' the Prime Minister into a decision on a divisional package, when they don't have to decide yet. See handwritten note 'Iraq Troops' on Letter Watkins to Manning, 29 Oct 02, 'Iraq: UK Military Options' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

¹⁰⁰ See example of the recording of 'telephone diplomacy' in Letter McDonald to Manning, 11 Mar 03, 'Foreign Secretary's Conversation with US Secretary of State' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

¹⁰¹ See Paper Reid, 14 June 2005, 'Options for future UK force posture in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

¹⁰² For example, all TOP SECRET JIC assessments for the critical two months prior to the invasion have been declassified and released. See JIC Assessment, 29 Jan 03, 'Iraq: the Emerging View from Baghdad' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#)

Wherever possible, the thesis relies on the original, digitised copy of the document rather than using the summaries or analysis provided within the Iraq Inquiry report. These original documents (accessed through the National Archives) are hyperlinked in the footnotes. Where a document is referenced by the Inquiry report but is not provided as a digitised copy of the original, the Inquiry analysis is used with the relevant paragraph referenced. The transcripts of witness evidence provided to the Inquiry are comprehensive and often used, but with due recognition of the ‘public voice’ nature of this evidence, and the impact of time and evolving memory.

The evidence of the Iraq Inquiry is most comprehensive, but the thesis further relies on the four other inquiries conducted into the Iraq war since 2003. These are, in chronological order, the 2003 *Foreign Affairs Committee Report into the Decision to go to War in Iraq*¹⁰³, the 2004 *Iraq Survey Group Report* (into the failure to find Weapons of Mass Destruction)¹⁰⁴, the 2004 judicial inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly (also known as the ‘Hutton Inquiry’)¹⁰⁵, and the 2004 *Review on Intelligence of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (also known as the ‘Butler Review’).¹⁰⁶ This thesis relies on primary evidence from all of these inquiries, as well as extensive analysis and testimony from Parliamentary Defence Select Committee investigations conducted during the war.

There are naturally some limitations. The Government refused to release to the Inquiry some of the most sensitive Cabinet proceedings, including (for example) the final deliberations prior to the Parliamentary vote on 18 March 2003.¹⁰⁷ The weight of digitised original evidence declines in general towards the end of the campaign: where this is the case, the thesis relies on the analysis of the Inquiry report. Personal biographies of the protagonists are prolific, but their value must always be questioned given the inherent bias of a personal record.¹⁰⁸ The interplay between the Iraq and

and JIC Assessment, 10 Feb 03, ‘International Terrorism: War with Iraq’ from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

¹⁰³ House of Commons, *Ninth Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee*, 3 Jul 03, found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

¹⁰⁴ Central Intelligence Agency Library, *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq WMD*, 30 Sep 04, found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17). This was a joint US / UK investigation.

¹⁰⁵ House of Commons, *Report of the Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of Dr David Kelly CMG by Lord Hutton*, 28 Jan 04, found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

¹⁰⁶ House of Commons, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction by Lord Brockwell*, 14 Jul 04, found at [link](#) (accessed 18 Oct 17).

¹⁰⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 2, paras 11 – 14.

¹⁰⁸ See Blair, *A Journey*, Paul L. Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: the Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2005), George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Broadway, 2010), Richard Dannatt, *Leading from the Front: an Autobiography* (London: Bantam Press, 2010), Charles Duelfer, *Hide and Seek: The Search for Truth in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), Tommy Franks, *American Soldier* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), Robert Gates, Robert, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), Jeremy Greenstock, *Iraq: the Cost of War* (London: William Heinemann, 2016), Mike Jackson, *Soldier: the Autobiography* (London: Corgi Books, 2008), Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of my Years in Washington* (New York: Broadway, 2011), Sky, *The Unravelling*, Stewart, *Occupational*

Afghanistan theatres is a key influence on Iraq strategy from 2006 onwards, but with no *Afghanistan Inquiry* there are challenges in laying the two wars side-by-side (mitigated by relying on the evidence provided to Defence Select Committee investigations). The examination of allied or coalition perspectives is also challenging at times; the Inquiry is rightly careful not to examine the perspectives of other nations, nor to expose their equities. There has not been a similar release of classified evidence from a US or Iraqi perspective. Fortunately there is high-quality secondary source analysis that can be relied upon, such as the oral history of the US 'surge' found in *The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush's Decision to Surge in Iraq*.¹⁰⁹

Challenges acknowledged, the range of evidence available – both primary and secondary – is ample to allow a rich and thorough analysis of the influences on British strategic decision-making throughout the campaign.

The Thesis Structure and Chapter Outline. This thesis answers the research question through a structured, comparative study of five sets of strategic decisions taken by British decision-makers in the Iraq war between 2003 and 2009.¹¹⁰ I examine the decisions chronologically, establishing five 'Parts' to the thesis. I isolate the principal influences on decision-making in each Part, examining each period through a series of 'turning points': pivotal junctures where key decisions had to be made. I progressively draw out the comparative strength of different influences in each Part through sub-conclusions, identifying patterns prior to reaching final conclusions at the end of the thesis. The selected decisions are outlined below.

Part One: The Decision to Turn to Other Means (3 January to 18 March 2003). The first part examines the decision to invade Iraq. It isolates when military action became the British Government's primary strategy, and then examines the pathways to the final vote in the British Parliament on 18 March 2003.

Part Two: 'Joint Occupying Powers' (7 April 2003 to 28 June 2004). The second part examines the fourteen-month period after the invasion where the UK decided to accept the role of a 'Joint

Hazards, Hilary Synnott, *Bad Days in Basra: My Turbulent Time as Britain's Man in Southern Iraq* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹⁰⁹ Hal Brands, Jeffrey A. Engel, William Inboden, and Timothy Andrews Sayle (eds), *The Last Card: Inside George W Bush's Decision to Surge in Iraq* (Cornell University Press: London, 2019), p. 9.

¹¹⁰ For the method of structured, focussed comparison, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2005), Ch 3, pp. 67 - 72.

Occupying Power' in Iraq alongside the US. It ends with the dissolution of the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in June 2004.

Part Three: The Golden Mosque, the Shadow of Afghanistan, and Operation SINBAD (22 February to 7 November 2006). The third part examines the challenging period of 2006 following the bombing by al-Qaeda of the al-Askari mosque in Samarra. It examines the UK decision to expand the NATO mission in Afghanistan, and the implications this had in Iraq. It covers Operation SALAMANCA/SINBAD, the British operation that sought to defeat Shi'a militias in Basra. It ends with the US mid-term elections in November 2006.

Part Four: Resisting the 'Surge' (13 December 2006 to 16 December 2007). The fourth part examines the British decisions around the US 'surge' in 2007. It covers the transition period between Blair and Brown as the British Prime Minister. It examines the decisions around the controversial 'deal' with Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM): the pre-eminent Shi'a militia in Basra. It ends with the transition of Basra Province to 'Provincial Iraqi Control' (PIC).

Part Five: *Saulat al-Fursan* (Charge of the Knights), and Extraction (19 February to 28 June 2009). The fifth and final part examines the British reactions to the decision by Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki to execute Operation *Saulat al-Fursan* or *Charge of the Knights*. It then examines the final decision to cease major operations in Iraq, and the normalisation of relations.

Conclusion. The final chapter employs comparative analysis from across the five decisions to conclude the three, inter-related arguments: that influences interacted with each other in unpredictable, reciprocal relationships throughout the war (vice there being a 'principal' influence); that this unpredictability was driven by the very presence of 'war' in Iraq's strategic environment (something that British decision-makers failed to take into account); and that the use of traditional concepts of strategy (those that focused principally on the use of military force) inhibited British outcomes in Iraq. The thesis will end with a brief retrospective on the lessons that might be learned from the British experience.

Part One

The Decision to Turn to Other Means

3 January to 18 March 2003

On 18 March 2003 the British Parliament voted overwhelmingly to commit the largest British military force formed in decades to an open-ended, unpopular war in the Middle East.¹¹¹ Part One analyses this first, most impactful decision. In terms of the selection of cases for study this is perhaps the easiest: a seminal moment in all that followed. It was at this point that British strategists decided that they had to turn to a ‘policy conducted by fighting battles rather than by sending diplomatic notes’.¹¹² Their injection of the ‘blind natural force’ of war into the strategic environment set the fundamental conditions for the decisions that followed.¹¹³ From the occupation of Basra to the eventual withdrawal, each would be contingent on – and shaped by – this first choice.

The first decision will be examined in three stages. First, every study needs a start point, so I will bound the decision in time – justifying where to start and end analysis. While the military order to cross Iraq’s border can be traced to the *Execute Order for Operation TELIC* signed on 18 March 2003 by Admiral Boyce as the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), this cannot be said to represent the strategic decision to use force.¹¹⁴ Both by law and convention Boyce lacked the authority to unilaterally direct the invasion of another nation.¹¹⁵ Instead this quintessentially political choice has to be traced further back. While the start of the process could certainly be mapped as far back as 11 September 2001, and potentially far further, I will argue that 3 January 2003 is a suitable marker for the start of analysis.

Second, as outlined in the method, I will then analyse the decision through three ‘turning points’; pivotal junctures in the course of the decision being made. For the first decision, these will be: the point where the use of military force became New Labour’s principal strategy, the point where a British division was deployed for operations in the south of Iraq, and the point where the invasion was deemed legal. I will draw out the comparative strength of different influences at each stage of this steady entrapment to war. I will then draw interim conclusions on what influenced British decision-makers in this first decision, allowing me to compare it against later decisions as the war evolved.

¹¹¹ The motion that ‘the United Kingdom should use all means necessary to ensure the disarmament of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction’ was passed by 412 to 149 votes; a result later referred to by President George Bush as a ‘landslide’. See Alastair Campbell, *The Burden of Power: Countdown to Iraq, The Alastair Campbell Diaries, Vol 4* (London: Hutchinson, 2012), Loc Cit 10059.

¹¹² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 255.

¹¹³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 30.

¹¹⁴ Minute CDS to CJO, 18 Mar 03, ‘Op TELIC: Authorisation for Military Operations in Iraq’ from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹¹⁵ Joint Consultation Paper Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Justice, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *War Powers and Treaties: Limiting Executive Powers* (London: Whitehall, 2007) found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018).

Bounding the First Decision in Time

How far back must one go to understand the UK's decision to invade Iraq? The modern history of the British use of violence in Iraq did not start in March 2003. The UK had maintained a relatively constant capacity for military action in the country since the 1991 Gulf War.¹¹⁶ The Government used force in Iraq often in the decade that followed.¹¹⁷ Do these uses of force need to be considered as part of the strategic decision-making process for the 2003 invasion?

I say not. While this history provides context to 2003, the air strikes of the 1990s were part of a fundamentally different strategic phase. The key discriminator is the intended instrumentality of the use of force. From 1991 onwards the UK had maintained a *strategy of containment* of Saddam's regime. The desired 'ends' were limited to preventing the development of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Force was not the primary method. Instead a mixed suite of instruments were used: from diplomatic pressure, to sanctions, and finally in extremis to bombing campaigns.¹¹⁸ The strategy was never designed to produce a change in the Iraqi leadership. When asked at the height of DESERT FOX (a 1998 bombing campaign) whether the objective was to remove Saddam, Blair stated 'the answer is: it cannot be ... removing Saddam through military action would require the insertion of ground troops on a massive scale – hundreds of thousands. I cannot make that commitment responsibly'.¹¹⁹ The use of force in this period played a fundamentally different strategic role to 2003, and it does not sit comfortably in an analysis of the first decision.

The Attacks of 11 September 2001: a Suitable Marker? The next reference point is the attack of 11th September 2001. Does this mark a suitable start point? Here the choice is harder. Blair's view is that 9/11 was indeed where it began. He stated to the Inquiry that 'if September 11th hadn't

¹¹⁶ British combat aircraft, alongside allies, had maintained an overflight presence in the two 'no-fly zones' in the north and south of the country since 10 April 1991 (commencing in the north just seven days after the signing of the ceasefire). For excellent, first-hand descriptions of the first Gulf War, see Peter de la Billiere, 'The Gulf Conflict: Planning and Execution', *The RUSI Journal*, 136:4 (1991), p. 7 – 12 and Rupert Smith, 'The Gulf War: the Land Battle', *The RUSI Journal*, 137:1 (1992), p. 1 – 5.

¹¹⁷ In January 1993, in response to Iraqi incursions into the demilitarised zone between Iraq and Kuwait, the UK and her allies carried out air and missile attacks against Iraqi military establishments (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 1,1, para 171). Five years later, in November and then December 1998 and in response to Iraq's ejection of weapons inspectors, the UK and US launched Operation DESERT FOX – an intensive campaign of air strikes designed (as Blair himself put it) to 'degrade the ability of Saddam Hussein to build and use weapons of mass destruction ... and to diminish the threat that [he] poses to his neighbours' (see Hansard record of Parliamentary Debate, 17 Dec 98, at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18)).

¹¹⁸ For a solid background of UK policy towards Iraq in the build up to Operation DESERT FOX in 1998, see House of Commons, *Research Paper 99/13: Iraq: 'Desert Fox' and Policy Development*, published 10 Feb 1999 found at [link](#) (accessed 19 Jan 25).

¹¹⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 1,1, para 699.

happened, our assessment of the risk of allowing Saddam any possibility of him reconstituting his programmes would not have been the same'.¹²⁰ For Blair personally, the aftermath of 9/11 was when he made the choice that the UK should collaborate with the US in a strategy against terrorism – including in Iraq – no matter what. He was remarkably consistent in this view, in public and in private. Immediately after the attacks he affirmed that the UK would stand 'shoulder to shoulder with our American friends ... and that we, like them, will not rest until this evil is driven from our world'.¹²¹ After US attention had demonstrably turned to Iraq in mid-2002 he wrote in a now infamous private note to President Bush, 'I will be with you, whatever'.¹²² For Blair at least, 9/11 was the turning point – the start of the strategic journey to invasion.

How persuasive is this view? In my introduction I described how New Labour, more unconsciously than deliberately, spent their initial years in office executing a traditional approach to strategy that focused on the use of military force to achieve political ends. With this in mind, it is difficult to establish 9/11 as a suitable start-point marker. The UK's risk calculus towards Iraq certainly changed at 9/11, but it would be many more months before the critical alignment between policy and a preference for force followed suite. Multiple branches existed on the pathway between 11 September 2001 and 18 March 2003 that might have seen different outcomes. Had regime change in Afghanistan been less successful, the UK and US might not have had the confidence to pursue a 'second phase' in the war against terror. A one-sentence difference in the diplomatic language of Resolution 1441, which provided the UK's legal basis for the invasion, might have carved a markedly different path.¹²³

One cannot mark a suitable start point for the decision to invade Iraq until policy, strategy and tactics were all aligned to make the use of military force the most likely tool for the achievement of a political outcome; and, importantly, that this was broadly accepted by the UK's strategic decision-makers. Only then did the true deliberations start.

The Alignment of the Strategic Environment. These planets aligned on 3 January 2003. This is where to start. It is worth reviewing a snapshot of the time. Internationally, two decisions began to

¹²⁰ Transcript of Public Hearing, Tony Blair, 29 Jan 10, p. 11 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

¹²¹ For a complete transcript of Blair's speech in the aftermath of 9/11, see British Broadcasting Corporation Archive, *Blair's Statement in Full*, found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

¹²² Note Blair to Bush, 'Note on Iraq', 28 Jul 02, from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

¹²³ Operative Paragraph 12 of Resolution 1441 calls for the Security Council to convene to 'consider' the situation of a further material by Iraq. Had this read 'decide', as many nations had argued for, the invasion of Iraq would likely have been explicitly illegal. See United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1441 (2002)* found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

open the gateways for war. On 8 November 2002 the UN Security Council signed Resolution 1441, providing what would become the UK's legal basis.¹²⁴ This came less than a month after the US Congress had endorsed the *Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Iraq on 16th October 2002*, removing any domestic legal barriers for the Bush administration to execute their own strategy of force.¹²⁵ Given the UK's strategic subordination to the US (which I will discuss throughout this thesis), this was an important moment. The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau once proposed (and I paraphrase) that 'war occurs because there is nothing to prevent it'.¹²⁶ By January 2003 even those minor international barriers designed to restrain the use of force between nations began to fall.

Within the UK political system, conditions were similarly becoming set for a decision-making endgame. Cross-party consensus for military action was growing. At the Conservative Party Conference in October 2002 Iain Duncan Smith, leading the opposition, committed to war, stating 'no one should ever contemplate war without thinking of the ultimate price that individual servicemen and their families might be called on to pay. But there can be only one calculation we should be making. Is it right to move against Iraq's arsenal now? The answer has to be yes'.¹²⁷ Cross-bench support became key in softening the blow of a Labour rebellion in the final vote.

Other uncertainties also evaporated in late 2002. On the intelligence front consensus was growing that the Iraqis continued to conceal WMD. Sir Jeremy Greenstock, the UK's ambassador to the UN, wrote that 'in January 2003 barely anyone was prepared to say with any conviction that there was nothing to be found'.¹²⁸ In the military sphere what had been a hazy plan for the invasion finally coalesced into an accepted reality. On 31 October 2002 Blair agreed with Geoff Hoon as his Secretary of State for Defence that the US military should plan on the inclusion of a UK package of forces, consisting of 'a Divisional HQ with its personnel, with one armoured brigade, and significant logistics support; some 28,000 personnel in total'.¹²⁹ This was the commitment taken by UK planners into Exercise INTERNAL LOOK 03, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) wargame of the invasion of Iraq held in December 2002. As General Franks records in his memoirs, it was here that the British role in the plan for the invasion – OPLAN 1003V – was confirmed.¹³⁰

¹²⁴ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1441 (2002)* found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹²⁵ 107th Congress of the United States of America, *H.J.Res.114 – Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002* found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹²⁶ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 188.

¹²⁷ For a complete transcript of Iain Duncan Smith's speech to the 2002 Conservative Party Conference, see The Guardian Newspaper Archive, *Full Text of Iain Duncan Smith's Speech*, found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

¹²⁸ Greenstock, *Iraq: The Cost of War*, p. 155.

¹²⁹ Letter Hoon to Blair, 'Iraq: UK Land Contribution', 16 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹³⁰ Franks, *American Soldier*, p. 415.

By mid-December the British military were theoretically committed, pending final political approval. Specifics were increasingly set in stone. On 12 December 2002 the MoD agreed with Blair's office to commit (in principle) a British Amphibious Task Group to seize the Um Qasr/Al Faw peninsula.¹³¹ Troops began to deploy to theatre, becoming (as the Americans called it) 'cocked and locked'.¹³² The ticking clock for their use began applying incremental pressure to the British government.¹³³

The final factor, however, that marks 3 January 2003 as the best start date for the first decision is a human one. It was at this point that Blair made his own final judgement. He writes in his memoirs that by the turn of 2002 he could see that 'barring something unanticipated, the likelihood was war'.¹³⁴ He used his holiday over Christmas to sit at Chequers (his country residence) to 'work out what was the right thing to do'. In or out? 'In', he concluded, and 'if in, better in fully and not partly'.¹³⁵ From the start of 2003 Blair attacked this certainty with gusto. In a twenty-five page memo sent to his staff on 4 January, he wrote that the 'truth is removing Saddam is right; he is a threat; and WMD has to be countered'. He then set out an eight-step pathway to achieving the 'big job of persuasion'.¹³⁶

His renewed determination is reflected in Alastair Campbell's diaries. 'TB (Tony Blair) called ... said he was really fit, full of energy and ready for the fray', Campbell records for 4 January. Attending the meeting where Blair briefed his memo to his staff, Campbell writes 'on Iraq, pretty much everyone was emphasising how little support there was ... but [Blair] was in a pretty defiant mood on that too'. He 'seemed much more relaxed after his break' and was 'clearer than ever'.¹³⁷ While Campbell's diaries must be approached with caution due to later editing, they support the picture that (at this seminal point) Blair had decided. How important his leadership was as an instrumental factor, and how much real influence he had, is key in the analysis below.

3 January 2003 marks the point that the UK entered the final, truly strategic stage of the decision to invade Iraq. This process ended on 18 March 2003 with the decisive vote in Parliament. This is the

¹³¹ For the commitment of the Amphibious Task Group as early as 12 Dec 02, see Letter Williams to Manning, 'Iraq: UK Land Contribution', 8 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹³² Minute MA/DCJO(Ops) to MA/CJO, 'Briefing to Prime Minister' attaching Briefing [unattributed and undated], 'Brief to PM – 1715 Wed 15 Jan' and slide presentation' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018).

¹³³ I will examine from page 45 onwards how the UK's military role, and force package, expanded remarkably in the following weeks.

¹³⁴ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 412.

¹³⁵ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 413.

¹³⁶ Note Blair to No.10 officials, 'Extract Iraq', 4 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹³⁷ Campbell, *Burden of Power*, Loc Cit 8135 – 8161.

period for study of the first decision. I will now begin to examine this decision in detail through the first of three 'turning points': the point where military force became New Labour's principal strategy.

Turning Point: Military Force Becomes New Labour's Principal Strategy

In early 2003 New Labour's principal strategy for Iraq became the use of military force. This is not to say that this was guaranteed to happen. It is, however, fair to say that it became *the* plan of what had previously been a number of plans. This turning point was seminal in the weeks leading up to the invasion, enabling a creeping acceptance of the need for military action, and driving the interaction between political and military decision-making.

Blair was the prominent influence in the alignment behind a military solution to the Iraq problem. His 4 January minute to his staff, mentioned above, was explicit in both language and intent. The objective verb to be applied to Saddam was set in simple, moral terms: his 'removal' was 'right', and was the 'immediate task'.¹³⁸ While Blair was not happy about it, his personal belief was clear; the invasion was coming, the UK should take part, and the battle moving forward was now one of persuasion. He reinforced this view in a meeting with senior military staff on 15 January, where he said that the military plan was 'the best chance we have got', and that 'we wouldn't be looking much past the end of February before seeing this take place'.¹³⁹ Why did Blair adopt such a categorical view? This seems to have come from two influences: his personal realisation that the Americans were intent on war, and an internal re-affirmation of his own *doctrine of the international community*.

Blair and the US Commitment to War. Blair's belief that the US were committed to war was reasonable, but not universally shared. The American tone was certainly becoming more bellicose by the end of 2002. On 16 October Congress had passed the *Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002*, authorising the President to use force in support of the *Iraq Liberation Act of 1998*.¹⁴⁰ On 7 December 2002 the Iraqi Government, having agreed to submit to Resolution 1441, presented an 11,800 page declaration of its WMD residual stocks as part of

¹³⁸ Note Blair to No.10 officials, 'Extract Iraq', 4 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹³⁹ Minute MA/DCJO(Ops) to MA/CJO, 'Briefing to Prime Minister' attaching Briefing [unattributed and undated], 'Brief to PM – 1715 Wed 15 Jan' and slide presentation' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018).

¹⁴⁰ 107th Congress of the United States of America, *H.J.Res.114 – Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002* found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

‘unconditional cooperation’ with the UN inspectors.¹⁴¹ Even before most UN missions had read the document, the US was insisting that it was full of lies and evasions, representing a further material breach of 1441, and justifying military action.¹⁴² On 11 December Sir David Manning, the Prime Minister’s Foreign Policy Advisor and conduit to US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, wrote to Blair to summarise American intentions. Rice, he said, ‘made no effort to hide the fact that the Administration would now be looking to build the case for early military action against Saddam (probably mid/late February), and that ‘on present form [the US] look intent on military action’.¹⁴³ With these statements lying heavily in his in-tray, it is not surprising that Blair saw invasion on the horizon.

Other senior decision-makers, however, drew different views. Greenstock records in his memoirs that ‘there were few indications coming to London that the United States was contemplating precipitate military action’.¹⁴⁴ Foreign Secretary Jack Straw expressed similar doubts. In an originally unattributed quote, Straw stated that the odds of war were 60 to 40 against. When asked by the Inquiry as to why he felt this was the case, he responded ‘it was a sense that, if we kept up the pressure, since [Saddam] complied [on the declaration of 7 December 2002], the inspectors had moved in very quickly, that they would be able to do their job. So that was why I was optimistic’.¹⁴⁵ This was not just a private view: indeed he wrote to Blair to express his differing perspective.¹⁴⁶

So, Blair’s belief at the start of 2003 that the US were set for war was fair, if not categorical. This does not, however, explain why he then committed so wholeheartedly to the invasion. Many options, ranging from a sharp about-turn against the war through to the provision of niche military capability only, remained open in early 2003.¹⁴⁷ So why choose invasion so emphatically? Some of the pressure Blair felt was likely to be personal. For over a year he had been unwavering in his own

¹⁴¹ International Atomic Energy Agency Press Office, *Preliminary Analysis of the Nuclear-Related “Currently Accurate, Full and Complete” Declaration (CAFGD) Submitted by Iraq*, 19 Dec 2002, found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹⁴² Greenstock, *Iraq: The Cost of War*, p. 150.

¹⁴³ Minute Manning to Prime Minister, ‘Iraq’, 11 Dec 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁴⁴ Greenstock, *Iraq: The Cost of War*, p. 154.

¹⁴⁵ Transcript of Public Hearing, Jack Straw, 21 Jan 10, p. 72 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁴⁶ On 3 January 2003 Straw wrote a detailed minute to the Prime Minister entitled ‘Iraq – Plan B’, urging that the Government needed to ‘urgently lower public expectations, here and abroad, that military action against Iraq is inevitable’ and that the message should be that the UK’s ‘preferred strategy continues to be Iraq’s WMD disarmament by peaceful means, through the UN system’ (see Minute Straw to Prime Minister, ‘Iraq - Plan B’, 3 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18)). It is perhaps ironic, or even tragic, that Straw’s note was signed the same day that Blair was sat drafting his own categorical statement to his staff that Saddam needed to be ‘removed’. Blair did not see Straw’s minute before issuing his own, but the evidence suggests that it wouldn’t have made much difference. By that stage Blair himself was convinced the Americans were going to invade, and that the UK should align. The influence of his personal conviction in terms of defining and shaping British strategy proved to be considerable.

¹⁴⁷ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 412.

alignment to Bush, right from his initial note in December 2001 offering to collaborate on a 'second phase'¹⁴⁸, and through to his 'I will be with you, whatever' note.¹⁴⁹ To pull the UK in a different strategic direction, against these commitments, would have come at considerable personal cost.¹⁵⁰ Personal pressure was important, but it is also insufficient. To fully understand Blair's commitment, one needs to go deeper into his (and New Labour's) political philosophy, and the role of his *doctrine of the international community*.

New Labour, Internationalism and the *Doctrine of the International Community*. The re-definition of British foreign policy for an approaching 'age of internationalism' was an important pillar of New Labour. In a marked break from the Conservative 'trend towards splendid isolation', the incoming Government made a clear commitment in 1997 to accept 'moral responsibility for our response ... to human tragedy in distant lands'.¹⁵¹ The initial devotee of this policy, ironically given his later resignation over the invasion, was former-Foreign Secretary Robin Cook - who famously stated early in his tenure that 'our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension' (what became known as Cook's 'memorable phrase').¹⁵² This pillar of an ethical foreign policy rapidly became the foundation of New Labour's theory of strategy. The 1998 Strategic Defence Review concluded that 'our forces must ... be able to back up our influence as a leading force for good in the world ... by helping to prevent or manage crises'.¹⁵³ Blair was an enthusiastic supporter of this foundational theory of New Labour, the inspiration behind his rapid commitment of British forces to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Kosovo in 1998.

It was during Kosovo that Blair took the principle of an 'ethical foreign policy' and evolved it into a theory that matched his own ambitious, if more politically pragmatic, aims. Blair laid out what became known as his *doctrine of the international community* in a 1999 speech in Chicago. The ethical elements of Cook's vision were tempered with a harder-nosed pragmatism, but a core of internationalism and liberal interventionism remained central. Blair's speech explicitly rejected

¹⁴⁸ Paper Blair to Bush, 'The War against Terrorism: The Second Phase', 4 Dec 01 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁴⁹ Note Blair to Bush, 'Note on Iraq', 28 Jul 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁵⁰ This would be a generally held view amongst senior officials. See the categorical view of Sir Kevin Tebbitt, Permanent Undersecretary of the MoD at Minute Tebbitt to Hoon, 'Iraq: What If?', 14 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁵¹ Jack Holland, 'Blair's War on Terror: Selling Intervention to Middle England', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol 14, Issue 1 (2011), p. 78.

¹⁵² For the background of Labour's new internationalist approach to foreign policy, see Stephen Deakin, 'Britain's Defence and Cosmopolitan Ideals', Sandhurst Occasional Papers, No. 3 (2010), p. 7.

¹⁵³ United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, Strategic Defence Review (London: Ministry of Defence, 1998) found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018), para 201.

isolationism. 'No longer is our existence as states under threat', he stated, 'now our actions are guided by a more subtle blend of mutual self-interest and moral purpose in defending the values we cherish. In the end values and interests merge ... the spread of our values makes us safer'. Blair advocated for a qualification to the principle of non-interference in the international order, stating that 'the most pressing foreign policy problem we face is to identify the circumstances in which we should get actively involved in other people's conflicts'.¹⁵⁴

This was not rhetoric. Blair operationalised his concept in the speech, defining five considerations for intervention: surety of case; exhaustion of all diplomatic options; sensible and prudent military operations; preparation for the long term; and involvement of national interests. In this he sought to help with the transition from strategy in theory to strategy in practice. This doctrine encouraged Blair to rapidly intervene in Sierra Leone, East Timor and Afghanistan over the following two years. Three of these interventions (Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan) involved the conduct of successful regime changes; a fact that must have had an impact on Blair's views. It is of no surprise that, in terms of Iraq, the Prime Minister was always more content with regime change than most.¹⁵⁵

Blair's doctrine became his own foreign policy philosophy, deeply believed in and consistently applied. These fundamental views did not change as the Iraq crisis developed. Writing privately to his Foreign Policy Advisor in March 2002, Blair expressed surprise at the negative domestic view on intervention. 'The case should be obvious', he wrote, 'a political philosophy that does care about other nations – e.g. Kosovo, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone – and is prepared to change regimes on merits, should be gung-ho on Saddam. We do intervene – as per the Chicago speech. We have no inhibitions – where we reasonably can – about nation-building'.¹⁵⁶ Blair's confidence in his philosophy went deep.

In 2006 Stephen Dyson analysed Blair's fundamental philosophical and instrumental world view. Dyson argued that Blair's personality reflected a series of core traits. They were: a high belief in his ability to control events, a tendency towards low conceptual complexity (i.e. a need to view problems in binary schemes of 'good and evil'), and a high need for power.¹⁵⁷ Caught in a genuine

¹⁵⁴ For a complete transcript of Blair's speech outlining the '*doctrine of the international community*' see National Archives, *Doctrine of the International Community* [24/2/1999] found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

¹⁵⁵ Campbell, *Burden of Power*, location 4057.

¹⁵⁶ Minute Prime Minister to Powell, 'Iraq', 17 Mar 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁵⁷ See Dyson, *Personality and Foreign Policy: Tony Blair's Iraq Decisions*.

foreign policy crisis¹⁵⁸, Blair reverted to these individual beliefs to develop his solution to the Iraq problem, bearing out Dyson's analysis. Low conceptual complexity was particularly prevalent in Blair's language. Ridding the international system of Saddam's 'brutal and inhumane'¹⁵⁹ regime was the 'right' thing to do, and that meant standing shoulder to shoulder with the Americans. This evidence refutes accusations of the invasion of Iraq as a realpolitik choice, with Blair bowing to pressure to align with US pressure. Instead it suggests that Blair's decision was based heavily on his belief in his *doctrine of the international community*.

Peter Mandelson, New Labour's 1997 election campaign manager, was once recorded as saying 'Blair never panics ... he thinks of two things ... what is the right thing to do and what is the best way to communicate it'.¹⁶⁰ Having made his decision in January 2003 to commit the UK to a US-led invasion, if it came to it, Blair and his inner circle then moved out to communicate and enact that decision. This led to the next turning point: the deployment of a British division for operations in the south of Iraq.

Turning Point: The Deployment of a British Division to the South

The US and the UK first discussed the provision of a British military package for Iraq in June 2002. The initial American scoping of a UK contribution was small, consisting of just the use of basing in Cyprus and Diego Garcia, and niche capabilities like surveillance aircraft and special forces.¹⁶¹ In January 2003, less than seven months later, the UK agreed to deploy a scale of forces that can only be described as spectacular. The final package, briefed to Blair on 15 January, is worth listing in full. It consisted of 68 combat and 41 support aircraft, an amphibious task group of five ships (including the aircraft carrier HMS ARK ROYAL), the 3rd Commando Brigade, six destroyers, five support ships, a submarine package, six mine counter-measure ships, HQ 1st UK Armoured Division, the 7th Armoured Brigade, 16 Air Assault Brigade, 102 Logistics Brigade, 111 support helicopters, and special forces. 46,000 troops in total. With 19,000 soldiers ring-fenced for a potential fire service strike (known as

¹⁵⁸ Bertjan Verbeek's study into decision-making in the Suez crisis identifies a 'foreign policy crisis' as a point where a political decision maker believes core values are at threat, where time is short, and where the likelihood of military hostilities are highly probable. By January 2003 all three of these factors were in place. See Verbeek, *Decision-Making in Great Britain During the Suez Crisis*, pp. 18 – 19.

¹⁵⁹ Blair would consistently describe the Hussein regime as brutal and inhuman. For examples from his private voice, see Note Blair to Bush, 'Note on Iraq', 28 Jul 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18) and Note Blair to No.10 officials, 'Extract Iraq', 4 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁶⁰ As reported in Holland, *Blair's War on Terror*, p. 75.

¹⁶¹ Transcript of Public Hearing, Sir David Manning, 24 Jun 10, p. 32 - 35 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

Operation FRESCO), and in addition to standing commitments, the invasion of Iraq put more than 50% of the British military on operations. In terms of Defence Planning Assumptions, as outlined in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, this was undoubtedly a 'large scale' commitment; a one-shot capability that could not be deployed for more than six months. Importantly it could also not be sustained at readiness for long, and could not be regenerated rapidly.¹⁶² The proposed commitment placed New Labour's strategy for Iraq at the very highest end of feasibility.

This change in the scope and scale of the force package is of great note. Why did the UK's theoretical strategy for Iraq evolve so quickly, and why did they deploy such an extreme size of force? Scale is, however, not the only change that demands examination. Until December 2002 the framework American operational plan saw a far smaller UK divisional-framework (of just a single medium-scale UK brigade) invading Iraq from the north via Turkey.¹⁶³ Between January and March 2003 this plan changed fundamentally, evolving into the commitment of a UK division-plus entering Iraq from the south. This change not only expanded the scope of the UK force package, but also fundamentally shaped the UK's role post-invasion. In turn, it set the contingent conditions for the UK's custodianship of Basra and the southern Iraqi provinces for the next six years.

To understand what drove the composition of the final UK military force package, we need to briefly cast back to the initial considerations of military options in April and May 2002 in the time following Blair's meeting with Bush in Crawford, Texas on 5 – 7 April. It was after Crawford that the Ministry first began to look seriously at what force package the UK might provide. Initial scoping came from Simon Webb, the MoD's policy director, in a 'think piece' solicited by Hoon. This paper is an important piece of evidence. Considering that 'one might argue that the Prime Minister has effectively committed us' in Texas, Webb gave a first pitch on the UK contribution. He wrote 'the fundamental building block for a major US ground force operation is a division. Only on that scale ... would the UK have significant influence over how the operation was developed and conducted'. 'A wing of 60 aircraft with supporting packages', he continued, 'is the minimum component of a US force. The naval component would similarly need to include a CVS (aircraft carrier) with Harriers and supporting group; TLAM submarines; and an amphibious group; probably eight major warships in all'.¹⁶⁴ Webb's initial pitch set the tone for the months of discourse that followed, and bore a clear

¹⁶² Minute MA/DCJO(Ops) to MA/CJO, 'Briefing to Prime Minister' attaching Briefing [unattributed and undated], 'Brief to PM – 1715 Wed 15 Jan' and slide presentation' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018).

¹⁶³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Executive Summary, para 811.

¹⁶⁴ Minute Webb to PS/Secretary of State (MoD), 'Bush and the War on Terrorism', 12 Apr 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

resemblance to what was finally deployed. It is therefore important to understand where he drew it from, and then how this view interacted within the British civilian/military structures.

The Divisional Package: History Shapes Strategy in Theory. The first influence hovering over Webb's analysis was one of historical context: the scope of the UK's commitment to the 1990/91 Gulf War. The divisional size of the British force in the First Gulf War set an operational benchmark for all genuine considerations of a military commitment for the 2003 invasion. Interestingly, the start point for this was in fact the 1998 SDR, which also used the 1991 conflict as its benchmark for considerations of force packaging.¹⁶⁵ Webb certainly channelled the first Gulf conflict when he stated that any smaller contribution than a divisional package would 'be adversely contrasted with Britain's contribution during the [1991] Gulf War'.¹⁶⁶

Webb was not alone in adopting this historical aiming point. As UK planners began to interact with their operational-level counterparts at CENTCOM HQ in Tampa, the First Gulf War became a natural common language for options. In May 2002, Hoon became aware from Manning that the UK military team collocated at CENTCOM had 'said that the UK would provide an armoured division'.¹⁶⁷ Horrified at this early commitment, CDS's office replied that 'we can only assume that this is speculation based on UK's contribution to the Gulf War 1991 which has been misinterpreted'.¹⁶⁸ Attempts to suppress the use of the 1991 campaign as the default comparison, however, were doomed to failure. Hoon himself admitted in advice to Blair in May 2002 that 'we have looked at what the UK might be able to contribute ... along the line of that assembled for Operation DESERT STORM' and later, 'for the UK to have influence ... our own analysis indicates that this would have to be at division level for land forces'.¹⁶⁹ I will return later to the fact that 'influence' became the core strategic driver for force package deliberations.

The divisional package was therefore an instinctive, default response from the British civil / military bureaucracies. Historical decisions set the context for strategy in theory. Faced with a highly uncertain situation and, as we shall see below, loose framing of the desired political outcome, the

¹⁶⁵ United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, Strategic Defence Review (London: Ministry of Defence, 1998) available at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018), p. 136.

¹⁶⁶ Minute Webb to PS/Secretary of State (MoD), 'Bush and the War on Terrorism', 12 Apr 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁶⁷ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, 'David Manning's Visit to Washington, 17 May: Iraq', 18 May 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁶⁸ Minute Shirreff to APS/Secretary of State MoD, 'David Mannings Visit to Washington 17 May – Iraq', 21 May 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁶⁹ Minute Hoon to Prime Minister, 'Iraq', 31 May 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

MoD reverted to learned behaviour. The divisional package was the natural answer to the question of 'what could the UK provide as a substantial contribution to a US operation'. After all, the division had been the doctrinal mainstay of organised militaries for over 200 years.¹⁷⁰ It was also, as the British would find out to their cost, eminently scalable; consisting of anything from a Divisional HQ and a single Brigade up to a HQ and three Brigades. This scalability, initially attractive, would prove to be a curse. By January 2003 the unpredictability of war, and the vagaries of the international system, were applying deep pressure on OPLAN 1003V. The UK was eventually asked to commit more and more forces within the flexible construct of their single division.

Defining Objectives: Influence and the Military Instrument. The second influence on the scale of the military package can be traced to the vital strategic practice of defining objectives. Strachan tells us that 'strategy is a profoundly pragmatic business: it is ... an attempt to make concrete a set of objectives through the application of military force to a particular case'.¹⁷¹ In his *Little Book on Big Strategy*, Harry R. Yarger agrees that 'objectives are the true focus of strategy formulation and, if not properly selected and articulated, a proposed strategy is fundamentally flawed and cannot be effective'.¹⁷² Gray concurs, stating that 'Yarger has penetrated to the heart of the matter'.¹⁷³ The definition of clear strategic objectives is the start point in engaging the instrumentality of strategy. The Inquiry archive shows that the strategic objective for the British in the build up to the invasion was far better defined than has become broadly accepted. It did not, however, garner sufficient logic to link worthwhile policy aims with reasonable resources employing suitable tactics. Nor was it what one might expect.

Initial attempts to define the strategic objectives of a UK military operation in Iraq were encouragingly cross-departmental. Webb's initial advice (which drew its political guidance from nothing more than a single line in a post-Crawford speech by Blair) was followed by the formation of an ad-hoc Strategic Planning Group (SPG) under Lieutenant General Pigott. This 'Pigott Group' was

¹⁷⁰ The concept of the 'Division' was initially developed by the French during and after the War of the Austrian Succession in the 1740s, where large armies were organised into self-sufficient units of up to 12,000 combined arms troops under a single commander. The divisional structure was adopted by the British and used extensively during the Revolutionary, Napoleonic, Crimean, Zulu, Boer and First and Second World Wars. While it had somewhat ebbed during the static era of the British Army on the Rhine (BAOR), it remained the mainstay formation for major warfighting. It was the only doctrinal formation that the UK had used in major, modern warfighting since the Falklands War, and therefore what they knew best. Critically, and in terms of military efficacy and interoperability, it was the formation that fitted neatest into a US Corps construct - both able to fight independently and maintain its own command and control under national lines. See Ashley Jackson, 'The Evolution of the Division in British Military History', *RUSI Journal*, 152:6 (2007), p. 76 – 81.

¹⁷¹ Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 12.

¹⁷² Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: the Little Book on Big Strategy* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), p. 49.

¹⁷³ Gray, *The Strategy Bridge*, p. 169.

drawn from a triad of the MoD, the FCO, and the intelligence community. One of its key tasks was the initial framing of the theoretical strategic objectives for any military operation. This came in two parts: an overall aim, and then the military role within this.

The overall aim was mostly divorced from the use of force, reflective of the context of its FCO proposer, Peter Ricketts. It was expressed as an ‘endstate’ of ‘a stable and law-abiding Iraq, within its present borders, cooperating with the international community, no longer posing a threat to global security or to its neighbours, and abiding by its international obligations on control of its WMD’.¹⁷⁴ Politically uncontroversial, and reflective of international law, this objective proved remarkably sticky, surviving in almost exactly the same form through to the *Execute Order for Operation TELIC of March 2003* and indeed for years beyond. Rickett’s proposal, however, gave almost no guidance on the relationship between policy and tactics. How was the UK to actually use military force to achieve this goal? The Pigott Group’s answer to this question was clear, but strategically troubling. It would prove just as sticky. The UK would formally use its military to achieve one principal effect: ‘strategic influence’ with the US.

The idea that ‘influence’ with the US was the guiding principle for British military involvement began with the first formal findings of Pigott’s SPG on 24 May 2002. The SPG concluded that the UK should scale its force to ‘make a meaningful difference to a coalition effort’ and should ‘always seek to achieve strategic influence across the three environments’. It was explicit that the potential for ‘influence’ should drive the scale of the UK military package. While one of the SPG’s tasks was to ‘judge what the UK’s maximum level of commitment could be’, it quickly dismissed that anything less than a divisional package would be a ‘token contribution that attracts no influence’.¹⁷⁵

The theory of ‘influence’ as a strategic objective, and the need for a significant military package to achieve it, rapidly gained traction at the highest levels. Hoon linked mass with influence in a minute to Blair in June 2002, writing ‘for the UK to have influence on detailed planning, the US would require a significant contribution to any large-scale operation. Our own analysis indicates that this would have to be at division level for land forces’.¹⁷⁶ The SPG highlighted in September 2002 the need to ‘demonstrate that the UK is an active, determined and capable nation making an operationally

¹⁷⁴ Minute Ricketts to Private Secretary FCO, ‘Iraq: Contingency Planning’, 25 Apr 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁷⁵ Minute DCDS(C) to PS/Secretary of State MoD, ‘Iraq’, 24 May 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁷⁶ Minute Hoon to Prime Minister, ‘Iraq’, 31 May 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

significant contribution', and placed as the first UK strategic objective to 'stand alongside the US as a junior partner sharing both the strategic and operational risks and burdens'. Actually removing any threat posed by Iraq to UK national interests was secondary.¹⁷⁷ Even in January 2003, as the operational plan began to collapse and the UK's role expanded as a 'lynchpin' in the south, senior planners remained focussed on achieving a 'high profile role for UK ground forces'.¹⁷⁸ It is worth remembering that this benchmark of a division-level contribution, designed to achieve influence, was entirely self-generated. The Americans never asked for it, but naturally welcomed it with open arms.

Civilian/Military Interaction: Turning Influence into a Strategy in Itself. The language of 'influence' was certainly one Blair understood. Indeed, using the military instrument of national power in this way nested neatly with his own developing strategy for Iraq. Blair and New Labour adopted in the first half of 2002 what I would term a *strategy of influence* in their approach to the US. Blair perceived early that the Americans were determined to depose the Hussein regime. Building on the success over Afghanistan, he and his team chose to apply a series of tools in an attempt to influence the US – and particularly Bush – towards an internationalist (i.e. UN) pathway in line with the *doctrine of the international community*. While Blair himself is not explicit about this in his evidence to the Inquiry, it was certainly the belief of his senior staff. Manning gives a detailed account of Blair's *influence* approach: a deliberate program of personal notes, telephone calls and visits conducted over many months.¹⁷⁹

This *strategy of influence* was ultimately partially successful. Against the advice of the powerful neo-conservative lobby in his Government, and against his own instinct, Bush eventually elected to invest significant effort seeking a UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) in an attempt to force Saddam to capitulate before force was required: a path which was achieved, but then exhausted, through Resolution 1441. British influence played a major role in persuading Bush down this path.¹⁸⁰ In order to secure this influence, however, Blair was required to expend strategic capital. While Blair's

¹⁷⁷ Paper SPG, 'UK Military Strategic Thinking on Iraq', 4 Sep 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁷⁸ Letter Williams to Manning, 'Iraq: UK Land Contribution', 8 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁷⁹ Transcript of Public Hearing, Sir David Manning, 24 Jun 10, p. 10 – 35 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18)

¹⁸⁰ Bush confirms that it was Blair who first raised the idea of a UNSCR ultimatum as a way of coercing Saddam Hussein. See Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 232. At the final meeting of Cabinet on 17 March, Jack Straw asserted 'the Prime Minister had persuaded President Bush of the United States to go down the United Nations route in order to achieve the maximum authority for the disarmament of Iraq'. See Cabinet Conclusions, 'Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet', 17 Mar 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

personal commitment was important, the scale of the military package rapidly became the most obvious representation of the UK's steadfastness.

The certainty of a substantial UK military commitment to war was a card that Blair and his team guarded with exceptional care. Decision-makers from No 10 assert that between May 2002 and March 2003 there was no explicit pre-commitment of a military package, and the evidence broadly supports this. What is equally clear, however, is that at no stage did Blair curtail the MoD's bent towards an expanding, divisional-level package. The US belief that the UK would take (as Blair said explicitly to Bush on 7 September 2002) a 'significant military role'¹⁸¹ was central to New Labour's *strategy of influence*. They ruthlessly protected this belief. They concealed, for example, the pressures of the potential UK fire service strike from the US.¹⁸² Even when Bush, as early as September 2002, stated that he had been briefed that the UK would lead a divisional-level assault into Iraq from the north, Blair did not rein in this expectation.¹⁸³

Little seemed to be able to break through the Prime Minister's personal determination to maintain this key tool of influence. When both his Foreign Policy Advisor and the FCO expressed scepticism in October 2002 about the divisional-level package¹⁸⁴, Blair refused to temper US expectations.¹⁸⁵ Robust debate was not encouraged, and the standard approach to British strategy-making was bypassed: the British Cabinet, in a pattern that would become familiar, was not consulted in detail about the scale of the military package.¹⁸⁶ The New Labour inner-circle kept these decisions in an exceptionally tight circle.

The *strategy of influence* became the cornerstone of New Labour's approach to the Iraq problem; their strategic 'big idea'. The experience of Kosovo and Afghanistan had taught them that the military instrument was a key strategic lever. Such a strategy, however, came with implicit risks that soon manifested. New Labour's refusal to set strategic limits to MoD contingency planning, and their determination to maintain the constant perception of a 'significant' UK military contribution, led to

¹⁸¹ Minute Manning to Prime Minister, 8 September 2002, 'Your Visit to Camp David on 7 September: Conversation with President Bush'. No digital version available.

¹⁸² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.1, para 573.

¹⁸³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.1, para 626.

¹⁸⁴ For Sir David Manning's concerns, see manuscript comment from Manning to Powell on Minute Hoon to Prime Minister, 'Iraq: UK Military Options', 15 Oct 02 attaching Paper Ministry of Defence, 'Iraq: UK Contingency Planning', 14 Oct 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18). For concerns from the FCO see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.1, paras 809 – 813.

¹⁸⁵ Letter Rycroft to Watkins, 'Iraq: UK Military Options', 17 Oct 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁸⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.1, paras 711 – 712.

an unexpected effect: an unconstrained operational level of command. Combined with the Ministry's own institutional momentum, and their initial division-level benchmark, this became a dangerous combination. How dangerous only became fully clear in January 2003.

A Dangerous Combination: an Unconstrained Operational Level of Command and the 'Lynchpin Effect'. The British were not politically pledged to war in early 2003. The sheer scale of diplomatic effort still being invested into the UN is clear evidence that invasion was not a *fait accompli*. The same however cannot be said for the military at the operational level of war.¹⁸⁷ By January 2003 the British military was irrecoverably entangled in OPLAN 1003V. There was no escape from this web. In political terms this entanglement restricted the UK's options as the diplomatic pathway collapsed and war became more likely. In early 2003 it became increasingly clear that the Turkish government would not allow access to northern Iraq, and therefore CENTCOM's plan began to morph. The UK had little choice but to follow: eventually becoming the 'lynchpin' of the revised plan to invade from the south. How did the UK find itself in such an unenviable position? The answer lies in the existence of the operational level of command, the lack of robust British political control applied over it, and the resulting subordination of UK strategy to the US.

The history of the operational level of command is well established. Its effectiveness, however, is far more debatable. The doctrine has come into sharp criticism in recent years. Gray has argued that 'to postulate an operational level of warfare intervening between strategy and tactics is to accept risks that are easy to overlook ... operational art may substitute inappropriately for overall military strategy'.¹⁸⁸ In their article *Alien: How Operational Art Devoured Strategy*, Justin Kelly and Michael J. Brennan align with Gray, arguing that 'the creation of an "Operational Level of War" has led to an independent layer of command that has usurped the role of strategy and thereby resisted the role that the civilian leadership should play in campaign planning'.¹⁸⁹ These concerns became manifest in

¹⁸⁷ The existence of an operational level of war first entered the US military lexicon in 1982, as part of the re-orientation of the force towards the defence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). A revised version of Field Manual 100-5 introduced how 'the Operational Level of War involves planning and conducting campaigns ... sustained operations designed to defeat an enemy force in a specified time and place with simultaneous and sequential battles'. As is often the case, a new conceptual concept required new organisational structures, as form followed function. In the US this led to the establishment of the combatant commanders in an operation level of command that sought to directly connect campaigns with the President through the Secretary of Defence, bypassing multiple levels of bureaucracy. The intent was for strategy to connect political ends with tactical actions through campaign design. With the US military dominant over NATO, the concept of the operational level of war spread quickly, and within a handful of years the capstone doctrines of British, Canadian and Australian partners reflected FM 100-5 almost word for word. The operational level of war, and an accompanying operational level of command, has been one of the central themes of allied doctrine ever since. For the best summary of this history, see Justin Kelly and Michael J. Brennan, 'The Leavenworth Heresy and the Perversion of Operational Art', *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 56, 1st Quarter (2010), pp. 61 – 63.

¹⁸⁸ Gray, *The Strategy Bridge*, p. 21.

¹⁸⁹ Kelly and Brennan, *The Leavenworth Heresy*, p. 63.

the invasion of Iraq for both the US and the British: the US by their own design, and the British by capitulation to US strategy.

The operational level of command found its nadir in 2003 in the authority of General Franks as Commander CENTCOM. Working under the direct control of Rumsfeld, Franks was the architect of OPLAN 1003V. The performances of Franks and Rumsfeld as a strategic coupling came under sharp criticism from Strachan in the aftermath of the conflict. Strachan writes 'there was no strategy that united the military and the civilian, the operational with the political, with the result that the operational level of war also became the de facto strategy'. Of Franks particularly, Strachan highlights that 'in his now famous phrase of "keep Washington focused on policy and strategy ... leave me the hell alone to run the war" ... Franks was stressing his desire to focus on the operational level of war, his professional comfort zone; he did not want to be concerned with strategy, precisely because it lay at the civil-military interface'.¹⁹⁰ This was strategy applied with Von Moltkian simplicity.

The results were not good. Franks developed an operational plan optimised towards the technological capabilities of the US military, but divorced from the social realities of Iraq. It saw an invasion of roughly two-fifths the size of the 1991 campaign. It was a plan driven by the application of limited and highly-tailored resources to achieve a limited aim: the destruction of the Iraqi armed forces and the overthrow of the regime. But this is where the plan ran out. In neither form nor function was OPLAN 1003V prepared for the aftermath of the invasion. In Clausewitzian terms it was a plan designed to win a single battle, but without achieving the purposes of the war.¹⁹¹

Franks received top cover in this endeavour from Rumsfeld. The limitations of Franks' plan were clearly expressed to Congress by US Army Chief of Staff General Shinseki in February 2003, when he highlighted that the invasion force would be clearly insufficient for the aftermath, and that a force of 'several hundred thousand' soldiers would be required. Shinseki, however, was publicly rebuked by Paul Wolfowitz (Rumsfeld's deputy), who asserted that within a few months US troop levels in Iraq could fall to thirty-four thousand.¹⁹² The operational level of command, well and truly isolated, dominated. Franks was to have his hubristic 'true revolution in warfare'.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Strachan, *Direction of War*, p. 217 – 218.

¹⁹¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 177.

¹⁹² Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 96 – 97.

¹⁹³ Franks, *American Soldier*, p. 416.

It was into this environment that the UK plugged in its own, interoperable, and equally-isolated operational level of command, found in Lieutenant General John Reith (the CJO) and the PJHQ at Northwood. PJHQ was created in 1995 (as the operational level of war was bedding into British doctrine), as part of the fostering of a culture of ‘jointness’ within the British military. Commanded by a 3* ‘joint’ officer, and working explicitly within the doctrine of the US-designed operational level of war, PJHQ was (and remains) responsible for the delivery of the MoD’s contribution to strategy through the execution of operations.¹⁹⁴ The CJO and PJHQ became the central nexus in 2002 and 2003 that linked the British and American operational levels of command. Operating without explicit political constraint, and within what it perceived to be the intent of the *strategy of influence*, Reith and PJHQ acted as the gateway that led the British military down the path of reciprocal entanglement into OPLAN 1003V.

The civilian/military interaction that led to this entanglement is clearly traceable in the evidence, as strategy in theory began to interact between allies. On 2 July 2002 the first six-man PJHQ planning team was embedded in CENTCOM HQ, creating a physical interface. The gateway was open. On 23 July 2002, just prior to the first formal PJHQ inject into CENTCOM planning in early August, Blair, CDS and senior planners met to discuss the UK position. In a pattern that was to become familiar, no firm political guidance was given. Instead PJHQ were instructed to approach CENTCOM using the assumption that the UK would take part in military action. The military options to be briefed as ‘being considered’ represented the maximum possible UK contribution.¹⁹⁵ On 28 July, knowing that Franks was about to brief the President, Blair wrote to Bush suggesting a build-up of military forces in the Gulf, and stating ‘we would support in any way we can’.¹⁹⁶ In early August Reith met with Franks, where Franks expressed his strong desire to see the UK employ a significant force into the north of Iraq from Turkey. The MoD’s guidance to Reith following this was to be ‘as positive as possible, but without implying premature political commitment’.¹⁹⁷

Reciprocal interaction followed reciprocal interaction at the operational level, unrestrained by political or policy restraint. By mid-August the perception was well embedded at CENTCOM that the UK would contribute a division to 1003V, leading on a northern axis from Turkey; indeed Bush briefed as much to Blair in their September meeting, following Franks’ assurances that this would be

¹⁹⁴ Elliott, *High Command*, p. 175 – 178.

¹⁹⁵ Letter Rycroft to McDonald, ‘Iraq Prime Minister’s Meeting, 23 July: Follow Up’, 23 Jul 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁹⁶ Note Blair [to Bush], ‘Note on Iraq’, 28 Jul 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹⁹⁷ Minute Pigott to Reith and others, ‘Updated Guidance for Possible Military Operations (Iraq)’, 8 Aug 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

the case. Blair emphasised that, while caution should be taken about CENTCOM's assumption, the UK would indeed take 'a significant military role'.¹⁹⁸ The gateways remained open. Acting within what he perceived to be his highest commander's intent, Reith worked hard to produce the maximum military option that was feasible, even as the threat of the fire service strike began to bite. In mid-September Reith strongly recommended committing in principle to a larger, divisional-sized 'Package 3', noting that it would be 'easier, militarily, to ratchet down rather than ratchet up any forces offered'.¹⁹⁹ Reith's team were then critical in keeping Blair's options for a larger UK package alive in the thinking of the Americans. They did their job well. By Exercise INTERNAL LOOK 03 in December 2002 the entanglement was complete.²⁰⁰ The cost of pulling out at that stage, politically and organisationally, would be extreme. The die was cast.

The depth of the UK's operational level entanglement became truly clear in January 2003. As Strachan has pointed out, Franks' plan was deeply isolated from the political realities that framed it. In early January 2003 the assumption that Turkey would accede to the use of their territory abruptly collapsed, with the Turkish government refused to play any role in the unpopular war. Franks acted fast. He requested the UK switch their divisional-level commitment to the south, relying on his operational-level relationships, political top-cover, and a sense of momentum now almost seven months strong.²⁰¹

This change, presented with little warning, represented a fundamental strategic adjustment for British forces. The British division suddenly became the 'lynchpin' of the invasion²⁰², a marked change from their previous role in the north as a useful – but ultimately optional – addition. The MoD enthusiastically lobbied for this role, despite deep concerns over the sufficiency of post-invasion planning. It particularly spoke, they asserted, to the *strategy of influence*, in that it would give the military a 'significant voice in decision-making'.²⁰³ In a key failure of transitioning strategy in theory to strategy in practice, comparative risks and gains were never formally reassessed.

¹⁹⁸ Minute Manning to Prime Minister, 8 September 2002, 'Your Visit to Camp David on 7 September: Conversation with President Bush'. No digital version available.

¹⁹⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.1, para 674.

²⁰⁰ Letter Wechsberg to Watkins, 'Iraq: Military Options', 31 Oct 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

²⁰¹ Letter Williams to Manning, 'Iraq: UK Land Contribution', 8 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018).

²⁰² Minute MA/DCJO(Ops) to MA/CJO, 'Briefing to Prime Minister' attaching Briefing [unattributed and undated], 'Brief to PM – 1715 Wed 15 Jan' and slide presentation' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018).

²⁰³ Letter Williams to Manning, 'Iraq: UK Land Contribution', 8 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018).

On 15 January 2003, just ten days after the initial request and on the recommendations of the MoD and PJHQ, Blair demonstrated his mettle and approved the deployment of the division in the south. Over the next two months the scale of UK commitment to 1003V grew and grew – eventually going as far as to scope the immediate deployment of the UK's Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (AARC) HQ as a final offering. The path for war, for the over-commitment of British forces, and for the eventual occupation of Basra - an outcome highly unlikely with the northern axis - was set. Planning for war, it seemed, could be almost as unpredictable as war itself.

Epitaph: The Prime Minister, CDS, and a Failure of Strategic Dialogue. The epitaph for these events goes to the relationship between Blair and Boyce, and to a failure of strategic dialogue. In 2006 Strachan reviewed civil / military relations after the Iraq invasion. He concluded that 'effective civil-military relations in practice rely on a dialogue'.²⁰⁴ The need for such a dialogue becomes acute at certain decisive moments in a developing strategy (the 'Leach moment' in the Falklands, for example). The decision to deploy a division was one of these moments. In my introduction I highlighted the prominence of the CDS in the late 1990s as the principal strategic advisor to the Government, and ultimately to the Prime Minister. With the Chiefs of the Services disempowered, a particularly heavy burden sat on the CDS to speak truth to power about the unpredictability of war. The prominence of the CDS also placed the onus on the Prime Minister to both give clear guidance, and to interrogate the advice he was receiving. In New Labour's *doctrine of the individual*, dialogue relied heavily on a strong personal relationship between Blair and Boyce. There was little opportunity for dissenting views from other military professionals.

Such a dialogue was almost entirely absent in the considerations of the scope and scale of the UK's military contribution. Indeed, the opposite was the case. Focused on the *strategy of influence*, Blair consistently failed to give clear, instrumental guidance to the military, opening up considerable scope for misinterpretation. Deep, probing investigations of the operational plan by the political level in return were also lacking. Blair instead seems to have eventually taken a reductionist approach – bringing the civil-military dialogue to a simple, binary question of 'will the US military plan work'? A 'yes' from the CDS appears to have been a satisfactory answer.²⁰⁵ Whether this referred to whether the plan would work for the Americans (in terms of regime change), the British (in terms of influence) or the Iraqis (in terms of freedom) is less clear. The simplicity of both the question and the answer belies the truly unpredictable nature of war.

²⁰⁴ Strachan, *Making Strategy*, p.67.

²⁰⁵ Minute SECCOS to PS/Secretary of State MoD, 'Record of the Meeting Between the Prime Minister and Chiefs of Staff to Discuss Op TELIC: 15 Jan 03', 22 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

By 1 March 2003 the stage was set. In a six-week marvel of strategic mobility, the UK deployed armoured forces to Kuwait and had them poised to take part in the operationally-excellent but strategically-flawed OPLAN 1003V; a plan superbly designed to win a battle, but one that would struggle to use that battle for the purposes of a war. All that remained for the British Government was one final turning point: the determination of whether the war was legal.

Turning Point: The Advice that the Invasion was Legal

On 7 and then 17 March Lord Goldsmith, the Attorney General, gave his advice that an invasion would be legal in international law. This was a truly signature moment, for one simple reason: it was legality that was the final arbiter in the parliamentary decision to go to war. While Blair and his team were rightly concerned regarding a Labour rebellion, cross-party consensus made it clear that they had a more-than-reasonable chance of winning a vote on a legal war. This was not the case had Goldsmith declared the war illegal. As Duncan Smith put it in his own speech to Parliament on 18 March 2003, 'a political party surely cannot simultaneously argue that military action is illegal but none the less be supported'.²⁰⁶ Nor would such a commitment likely have been executed: as we will see below, the CDS himself might have refused to give the execution order for an illegal war.

Goldsmith's judgement was a foundational influence in carrying the vote for war. It also had a lasting, contingent effect on the war *writ large*. Issues of legality and legitimacy haunted the campaign when no significant stocks of WMD were able to be located after the invasion, fatally undermining the *casus belli*. To understand this turning point we need to ask three questions: why was the international legality of the invasion so important to the British government, what influenced Goldsmith's advice, and what were the strategic outcomes?

International Legality of the use of Force and its Importance to the British. The British placed a far higher premium on the international legality of the invasion than the Americans. Indeed the Bush administration never painted a coherent or consistent argument as to why they considered the war to be legal. Legality was not a prominent issue domestically in the US.²⁰⁷ This was not the case in the

²⁰⁶ See Hansard Record of Parliamentary Debate, 18 Mar 03, column 774 at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

²⁰⁷ After the invasion itself, the US did chose to align behind the same argument as the UK: the revival of UNSC Resolution 678 (from 1990) via Resolution 1441. On 20 March 2003 the Permanent Representative of the US wrote to the Security Council to those ends, stating that 'the Government of Iraq decided not to avail itself of its final opportunity under resolution 1441 (2002) and has clearly committed additional violations. In view of Iraq's material breaches, the basis for the ceasefire has been removed and use of force is authorised under resolution 678 (1990)' (see United Nations Security

UK, where the international legality of the invasion was the critical pressure point against the New Labour government.

In terms of public opinion, polling just prior to the invasion showed a remarkable forty-eight percent swing in favour of the invasion if the UN Security Council authorised it (26% to 74% percent).²⁰⁸ The importance of international legality was as weighty within the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) as it was with the public. Straw, as Foreign Secretary, made his views abundantly clear to Blair on 5 March 2003, when he said, 'if you go next Wednesday with Bush, and without a second resolution, the only regime change that will be taking place is in this room'.²⁰⁹ Unlike the US, the British government never seriously sought to argue any alternate legal case (such as anticipatory or pre-emptive self-defence). The legality vested in the authority of the UN was paramount.

Why was international law so comparatively important an influence on the British? The British Government certainly had more to fear from an illegal war in terms of reprisals than the US, deeply enmeshed as they were in International Humanitarian Law (IHL). The UK had taken considerable steps within international law in the previous five years that exposed them to independent sanction over Iraq.²¹⁰ The US did not share this problem: their approach to the Rome Statute in 2002 (for example) was both timely and telling, with the US declining to subject themselves to scrutiny by the International Criminal Court (ICC).²¹¹ Such a move was prescient of the invasion. By 2003 the US had

Council, S/2003/351, 'Letter dated 20 March 2003 from the Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council' found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18)). This categorical statement may well represent the official US view to the international community, but it was not represented in this manner domestically. The US Congress actually declared the use of force to be legal on 16 October 2002, two weeks prior to the signing of Resolution 1441. In *Public Law 107-243: Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002*, Congress justified the use of force through an argument far more focussed on pre-emptive self-defence. The principal reason the President was being granted authority to use force was to 'defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq' given the 'risk that the current Iraqi regime will employ ... weapons [of mass destruction] to launch a surprise attack against the United States or its Armed Forces or provide them to international terrorism who would do so'. This doctrine of pre-emptive self-defence, explicitly born out of the post-9/11 National Security Strategy of 2002, showed little deference to the authority of the UN (the United States National Security Strategy of 2002 stated at Part V that 'to forestall or prevent ... hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively'. See The White House, George W. Bush Archives, *National Security Strategy 2002*, Sep 2002, found at [link](#) (accessed 9 Jan 24)). This lack of deference was reflected in public opinion. In polling just prior to the conflict, the discriminator of UN authorisation for war represented just a seven per cent swing in public support for the invasion (see USA Today Archive, *Poll: Most Back War, but Want UN Support*, 16 Mar 03 found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18)). The voice of international law was not echoing loudly in America in early 2003.

²⁰⁸ IPSOS MORI, *Iraq: The Last Pre-War Polls*, 21 Mar 03 found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²⁰⁹ Campbell, *Burden of Power*, Loc Cit 9387.

²¹⁰ In 1998 the British Parliament had endorsed the *Human Rights Act 1998 (UK)* - incorporating into law the *European Convention on Human Rights* and submitting UK actions to the scrutiny of the Council of Europe and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. In July 2002 the UK took an even greater leap, ratifying the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and subjecting themselves to the jurisdiction of the ICC.

²¹¹ Just as the UK was ratifying the Statute, and increasing the potential costs to themselves of an illegal war, John Bolton (the hawkish American Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security) was writing to the Secretary General of the UN, stating that, despite originally signing the Rome Statute, 'the United States does not intend to become a

little to fear in terms of reprisals from the international community. British decision-makers, however, faced significant consequence, ranging from potential personal sanction in the ICC and through to the ejection of the UK from the Council of Europe. For Blair and his team, fear of consequence lent prominence to law in their decision-making.

Considerably more prominent to fear, however, was honour (or, as Gray has argued, the modern version of honour: culture).²¹² The societal drive for the UK to act as a responsible international citizen ran deep in British and New Labour culture. Historically, the UK had played a key role in the construction of the rules-based international order in the aftermath of the Second World War.²¹³ Over the following sixty years, the British government helped develop a thicket of international laws that turned IHL principles into a system. From the creation of the UN in 1945, through the *Geneva Conventions* in 1949, and to the 1984 *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, twelve successive British governments remained committed to this liberal internationalist view. By dint of tradition, investment, and the scars of the World Wars, British honour had become explicitly linked to being a 'good citizen' in the international order.

This role was central to New Labour's political philosophy, underpinned by the idea of the '*Third Way*'. Enshrined in Anthony Giddens's 1998 instructional book, *The Third Way: the Renewal of Social Democracy*, this approach saw a re-alignment of traditional social democratic principles to a more centrist, globalist approach. Core precepts of the '*Third Way*' rejected realist principles in search of a more internationalist view. 'The world is vastly more interconnected than ever before', wrote Giddens, and 'against this backdrop it is no longer utopian to connect issues of national and global governance ... 'ubi societas, ibi ius' ... 'whenever there is society, there should be laws'.²¹⁴ This internationalist view ran deep in New Labour. It played a prominent role in their winning manifesto of 1997, suggesting a categorical defeat of Thatcherite conservatism.²¹⁵ It proved successful as a guiding principle for the Government's successful interventions in the late 1990s - all of which arguably increased Britain's standing in the international community. As a cultural influence, it goes a considerable way in explaining the prominence of international law in British priorities.

party to the treaty. Accordingly, the United States has no legal obligations arising from its signature on December 31, 2000'. See United States Department of State Archive, *International Criminal Court: Letter to the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan*, 6 May 02 found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²¹² Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, p. 280.

²¹³ In 1941 Winston Churchill worked alongside US President Franklin Roosevelt to articulate the Atlantic Charter; a far-sighted and far-reaching articulation of eight common principles that they felt would lead to a better future for the world. See Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, *Text of the Atlantic Charter*, 14 Aug 41 found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²¹⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), Loc Cit 1790 – 1803.

²¹⁵ New Labour Manifesto, *New Labour: Because Britain Deserves Better* (1997) found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

This prominence created a tension within British strategic decision-making, found in a core friction between international legality and national interests. The conflict that erupted in 2003 between Cook and Blair illustrates this. Philosophically, both Cook and Blair agreed in the explicit link between New Labour's internationalist worldview and the UK's national interests – what might be termed as an approach of enlightened self-interest. Cook's 'ethical foreign policy' and Blair's *doctrine of the international community* were initially complementary theories of strategy. Cook's 1997 mission statement for the FCO reflected this - directing his staff to 'promote the national interests of the UK and to contribute to a strong world community'.²¹⁶ Blair echoed this sentiment in Chicago, stating that 'in the end values and interests merge. If we can establish and spread the values of liberty, the rule of law, human rights and an open society then that is in our interests too'.²¹⁷ International legality, as a tool of international legitimacy, was a vital pillar of this foreign policy outlook.

Theory, however, diverged in practice. Cook's beliefs manifested principally in a focus on human rights, arms control and international institutions. Blair's vision on the other hand focused on a strategic balancing of morality with Britain's traditional national interests. Blair certainly believed passionately in the concept of an international community (as he said at the Labour Party Conference post 9/11, 'it's worse than you think ... I really do believe in it'²¹⁸), but he equally believed that such a community would only succeed if it was guaranteed by power and strong leadership. To Blair, this meant that American engagement was vital. This was not unreasonable. Azar Gat argued persuasively in 2017 that US predominance in the twentieth century was a decisive factor in the victories of democracies over non-democratic great powers. 'If any factor gave the liberal democracies their edge', Gat writes, 'it was above all the actual existence and continental size of the US rather than any inherent advantage'.²¹⁹ Blair, seeing the explicit value of the UK's 'special relationship' with the US, sought to balance moralism with realism.

This balance, roundly achievable alongside President Clinton, became a strategic dilemma in 2003. The election of a neo-conservative Republican administration, combined with 9/11, saw the Americans turn towards unilateral self-protection.²²⁰ If the international community could not protect the US, they would do so themselves – regardless of international laws and norms. Faced

²¹⁶ Jonathan Gilmore, 'The Uncertain Merger of Values and Interests in UK Foreign Policy', *International Affairs*, Vol 90, No. 3 (2014), p. 543.

²¹⁷ National Archives, *Doctrine of the International Community* [24/2/1999] found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²¹⁸ See The Guardian Archives, *Full Text: Tony Blair's Speech (Part One) Labour Party Conference*, 2 Oct 01 found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²¹⁹ Azar Gat, *The Causes of War and the Spread of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 197.

²²⁰ For an example of an influential, neo-conservative agenda, see Project for a New American Century, *Statement of Principles of the Project for a New American Century* found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Jul 18).

with a stark strategic tension in his core beliefs, what was Blair to do? As we have already heard, ‘in’, he concluded, and ‘if in, better in fully and not partly’.²²¹ Cook fundamentally disagreed – to the extent that he resigned from Government to vote against the invasion. Cook stated in his resignation speech that ‘our interests are best protected not by unilateral action but by multilateral agreement and a world order governed by rules’.²²² In March 2003, in the post 9/11 world, finding the balance between international values and national interests represented a true strategic dilemma.

The legality and legitimacy of the war was at the centre of the British national debate. It became the most critical factor in the decision to invade: the arbitrating element between resounding Parliamentary support and a vote of no confidence. Unrecognised at the time, it also set the weak foundations of moral authority for a long, violent campaign in the following years. The weight of this judgement eventually fell to the shoulders of a single individual: Lord Goldsmith as the Chief Legal Advisor to the British Crown and its Government.

From Equivocal to Unequivocal in Ten Days: the Advice of Goldsmith. The Attorney General spent five months considering the legality of military action, a process he began in November 2002. The decisive action, however, took place in a short period of time – the ten days between 7 and 17 March 2003. It was here, in the aftermath of the failure to secure a second UN resolution, that Goldsmith’s opinion became the fulcrum of UK decision-making. His advice came in two parts. On 7 March he provided thirteen pages of formal advice to Blair that concluded that a ‘reasonable case’ could be made that an invasion of Iraq was legal under Resolution 1441’s revival of Resolution 678 – the 1990 resolution that authorised force in the First Gulf War (known as the ‘revival argument’).²²³ On 17 March, he then provided far shorter advice to Cabinet and Parliament that the ‘better view’ was that an invasion was unequivocally legal in international law.²²⁴ The influences on the formation of his first advice, and the passage from equivocation to certainty in the second, are central to the first decision.

It is important to note that Goldsmith was not actually being asked to analyse the threat from Iraq, *per se*. His strategic analysis was instead far more theoretical: focussed on the diplomatic machinations of the *system* of the UN, and the implications of the use of language. The aims of the

²²¹ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 412 – 413.

²²² The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), *Robin Cook’s Resignation Speech 17th Mar 03* found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

²²³ Minute Goldsmith to Prime Minister, ‘Iraq: Resolution 1441’, 7 Mar 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²²⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 5, para 933.

UN Charter were ambitious when it was first signed in 1941. The listed first purpose of the UN was 'to maintain international peace and security', and all members agreed to 'refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state'.²²⁵ It sought to fundamentally control the aggressive use of political violence between nations. This founding principle was categorical.

The UN, however, was never designed to be pacifistic. Chapters V and VII established a systemic approach to the use of force, creating councils, committees, and standing forces to allow the UN to act as a single authority on political violence.²²⁶ A stick was needed, but only the UN was to wield it. The challenge was how to wield this stick in a diverse world. The UN bureaucracy constructed its own bespoke language as the medium for discourse on the utility of war, for an international discussion on strategy. Phrases such as 'all necessary means' and 'all necessary measures' became central to this application: gateways through a UN Charter that was fundamentally restrictive by design.²²⁷ Goldsmith was examining this system, not Iraqi behaviour. His task was to identify if sufficient operative language lined up to conclude that an invasion of Iraq would not breach the Charter. As with the *strategy of influence*, Goldsmith's analysis was disconnected from the instrumentality of strategy in practice.

The legal position argued by Blair and Straw was one that spoke to the old ways, not the new. They could not rely on the presence of language that explicitly permitted the use of force. The critical phrase of 'all necessary means' was conspicuously absent in 1441. Paradoxically instead the Government relied strongly on the absence of language that explicitly forbade the use of force, or demanded a further Security Council decision. The crux of their argument was that the French and Russian governments had attempted to place such language into 1441, had failed, and yet had still voted for the resolution. It was, the UK and US argued, this very acceptance of failure that implicitly granted their coalition the right to make their own judgements.²²⁸ The British and Americans sought to use vagaries of language to overcome the UN's core principles; to manipulate the flaws of the UN system to leverage it to their own ends. This was an exceptionally fine diplomatic line to tread.

²²⁵ United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, 19 Aug 41 found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²²⁶ United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, 19 Aug 41, Chapters V and VII found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²²⁷ For a summary of the use of 'all necessary means' see website of the United Nations Security Council, *Frequently Asked Questions*, para 14 found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²²⁸ In his evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, Lord Goldsmith makes this argument repeatedly. 'The French' he says, 'in their explanations of the vote, the French, the Russians and the Chinese in their statement afterwards, could have said, "This means the Security Council has to decide", and they didn't, and I regard that as significant'. See Transcript of Public Hearing, Admiral Boyce, 3 Dec 09, p. 49 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

Goldsmith eventually agreed on 7 March that such a case was ‘reasonable’, but no more than that. ‘Having regard to ... the negotiating history’, he wrote, ‘I accept that a reasonable case can be made that resolution 1441 is capable in principle of reviving the authorisation in 678 without a second resolution’. But his response was explicitly equivocal. ‘A “reasonable case”’, he continued, ‘does not mean that if the matter ever came before a court I would be confident that a court would agree with this view’.²²⁹ Even this equivocal view did not garner broad consensus. Sir Michael Wood, the FCO’s senior legal advisor, stated that he ‘considered that the use of force against Iraq in March 2003 was contrary to international law’.²³⁰ Elizabeth Wilmshurst, his deputy, resigned in protest.²³¹

Agreeable or not, Goldsmith’s initial equivocal answer on 7 March represented a balanced legal argument. So why, just ten days later, did he provide a different, unequivocal ‘better view’? A central influence seems to have come from an unexpected direction: the British civil-military relationship. Goldsmith’s thirteen-page formal advice reached CDS and the Chiefs of Staff immediately after its delivery to Blair. It raised significant concerns. Some of this was purely legal. General Mike Jackson, the Chief of the General Staff (CGS), wrote in his memoirs that ‘there was at least the theoretical – and worrying – possibility that a British soldier might find himself being tried by the ICC’.²³² Concerns, however, went far deeper. Boyce, framing his words in curiously constitutional language, told the Inquiry that ‘this was an important issue, particularly because of the speculation in the press about the legality or otherwise and, as far as I was concerned particularly for my constituency, in other words, soldiers, sailors and airmen and their families had to be told that what they were doing was legal’.²³³

Goldsmith’s first answer did not provide Boyce sufficient clarity to make that professional judgement. In a move that General Sir David Richards described as ‘courageous’²³⁴, Boyce sought a categorical answer on the legality of the war from the Attorney General. He directed his office to follow up formally, with his Director General of Legal Services writing on 12 March to the Law Offices that ‘it is clear that legal controversy will undoubtedly surround the announcement of any decision

²²⁹ Minute Goldsmith to Prime Minister, ‘Iraq: Resolution 1441’, 7 Mar 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²³⁰ Transcript of Public Hearing, Sir Michael Wood, 26 Jan 10, p. 21 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

²³¹ Wilmshurst wrote in her resignation letter that she could not ‘agree that it is lawful to use force against Iraq without a second Security Council resolution ... my views accord with the advice that has been given consistently in this office before and after the adoption of SCR 1441 and with what the Attorney General gave us to understand was his view prior to his letter of 7 March ... an unlawful use of force on such a scale amounts to a crime of aggression’. See Minute Wilmshurst to Wood, *Untitled*, 18 Mar 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²³² Jackson, *Soldier*, Loc Cit 4690.

²³³ Transcript of Public Hearing, Admiral Boyce, 3 Dec 09, p. 88 – 89 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

²³⁴ David Richards, *Taking Command* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2014), p. 167.

by the Government to proceed to military action in the absence of the adoption of a further resolution by the UN Security Council. The CDS is naturally concerned to be assured that his order to commit UK Armed Forces to the conflict in such circumstances would be a lawful order by him'.²³⁵

Goldsmith did not have to reply. He had fulfilled the instructions to his client. The legal profession, however, is not without its own moral and ethical responsibilities, and these weighed heavily. 'I very quickly saw that actually this wasn't satisfactory from their point of view. They deserved more, our troops deserved more ... than my saying there was a reasonable case ... I believed it was right to respond to the request from the head of the Armed Forces'.²³⁶ His sense of responsibility to his profession outweighed his instinct to be equivocal. Goldsmith instructed his staff to respond the very next day that his 'better view was that the conditions for the operation of the revival argument were met in this case, i.e. there was a lawful basis for the use of force without a further resolution beyond resolution 1441'.²³⁷ This change of heart had serious ramifications for Goldsmith, leading to years of accusations of bias, political pressure and impropriety. The honourable role held by the Armed Forces in British civil-military relations, and the personal responsibility felt by Goldsmith as a lawyer and citizen, played a heavy influence in March 2003.

There was one area, however, where Goldsmith lacked sufficient confidence to make an unequivocal judgement. While now seemingly content with the 'revival argument', he was clear that this would only be the case if there was strong evidence that Iraq was in 'material breach' of its obligations under Resolution 1441. This was the final gateway to a legal invasion. Here Blair's personal influence re-asserted itself. On 14 March 2003 Goldsmith's office wrote to Matthew Rycroft, Blair's Private Secretary, stating 'it is an essential part of the legal basis for military action without a further resolution ... that there is strong evidence that Iraq has failed to comply with ... resolution 1441. The Attorney General understands that it is unequivocally the Prime Minister's view that Iraq has committed further material breaches ... but as this is a judgement for the Prime Minister, the Attorney would be grateful for confirmation that this is the case'.²³⁸ Blair's response was one of the more legally and morally questionable decisions he made. Within twenty-four hours Rycroft responded that 'it is indeed the Prime Minister's unequivocal view that Iraq is in further material

²³⁵ Letter Hemming to Brummell, 'Iraq – Position of the CDS', 12 Mar 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

²³⁶ Transcript of Public Hearing, Lord Goldsmith, 27 Jan 10, p. 171 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

²³⁷ Minute Brummell, 'Iraq: Legal Basis for Use of Force – Note of Discussion with Attorney General Thursday, 13 March 2003', 13 Mar 03 from Iraq inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²³⁸ Letter Brummell to Rycroft, 'Iraq', 14 Mar 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

breach of its obligations', due explicitly to the incomplete nature of the Iraqi declaration of December 2002.²³⁹

This haste is deeply problematic. Blair sought no independent advice before making his 'unequivocal view'.²⁴⁰ For a judgement so much in doubt (given that even the definition of 'material breach' remained contested), Blair's confidence reflected more his 'black and white' philosophy than any certainty of evidence. But the die was cast. Four days later a highly-abridged and now unequivocal version of Goldsmith's legal advice was delivered to Cabinet and Parliament. The initial uncertainty of 7 March was neither revealed nor discussed. Individual influence from Blair was the final factor in the unequivocal declaration of a legal war.

The Dangers of an Unequivocal Legal Judgement: Strategic Impact. The echoes of Goldsmith's last-minute change to a 'better view' reverberated deeply within British strategy. Perhaps most enduring was the pervading sense of illegitimacy that haunted the campaign that followed. Goldsmith's advice suggested that the invasion was legal by strict interpretation, but it was unable to do so with sufficient confidence as to answer a more fundamental question: whether the war was *just*. The traditions of *jus ad bellum* (literally the 'right to war', but commonly known as Just War Theory) predate the formulation of IHL by some two thousand years.²⁴¹ It is from adherence to *jus ad bellum* that the UK fundamentally drew its moral authority for the use of force. Blair himself was well known to channel the language of *jus ad bellum*. On the intervention in Kosovo, he said 'no one in the West who has seen what is happening in Kosovo can doubt that NATO's military action is justified ... this is a just war, based not on any territorial ambitions but on values'.²⁴²

This combination of questionable legality and growing illegitimacy had very real implications for the transition from theory to practice. The war may have been deemed legal at the strategic level, but there remained deep concerns as to whether OPLAN 1003V was proportionate in *just war* terms.

²³⁹ Letter Rycroft to Brummell, 'Iraq', 15 Mar 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jul 24).

²⁴⁰ The exchange of letters between the offices of the Attorney General and the Prime Minister that confirmed that the Prime Minister considered Iraq to be in 'material breach' took place between 14 and 15 March 2003. There is no evidence that the Prime Minister sought additional advice before reaching his conclusion. The Iraq Inquiry concludes that it is 'unclear what specific grounds Mr Blair relied upon in reaching his view'. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 5, paras 934 - 936.

²⁴¹ The canon of Just War Theory reached as far back as the writings of Aristotle in the fourth century BC. Consisting of a set of seven criteria that must be met for the use of force to be considered just, *jus ad bellum* reaches beyond constructivist legality and to the very intentions of man and state. For a brief summary of the tradition of *jus ad bellum*, see Deane Peter Baker, *Key Concepts in Military Ethics* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd, 2015). The seven criteria are right intention, just cause, last resort, a proportionality of ends, reasonable chance of success, right authority and publicity declared.

²⁴² National Archives, *Doctrine of the International Community* [24/2/1999] found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

Franks sought to leverage the so-called 'revolution in military affairs' in his war plan, replacing massed ground forces with a remarkable campaign of precision bombing. As Hoon explained to Blair, the concept for the campaign was 'radically different from that employed in the 1990-1991 Gulf Conflict' ... much depended on achieving 'shock and awe' at the outset through the 'application of largely US air power to targets throughout Iraq'.²⁴³ Franks confirmed to Blair that 'during the 43 days of the Gulf War, 3,300 targets had been attacked. Plans for this campaign envisaged attacking 1,500 targets in the first 96 hours ... we must expect some civilian casualties. But the intensity of the initial attack was key to reducing the duration of the conflict'.²⁴⁴ The likelihood of civilian casualties was high.

Ministers saw this proportionality as a major strategic risk, one which resulting in significant friction between tactics and politics once put into practice. Political control of military targeting became considerable - with confirmation of responsibilities delayed until the very last minute. Decisions on air strikes were eventually delegated to senior officers (Air Marshal Burridge, the National Contingent Commander (NCC), and Air Chief Marshal Torpy, the Air Component Commander (ACC)), but Hoon maintained considerable powers of pre-approval and veto. Goldsmith requested daily views of targeting lists and advised Hoon that his delegations were too broad for such a controversial campaign.²⁴⁵ Blair himself considered civilian casualties to be the critical military issue.²⁴⁶

All of this reciprocal discourse took place exceptionally late, even drifting into April 2003 after the campaign began, creating dangerous friction. As Burridge wrote in his Post Operational Report, 'several key directives (ROE and Targeting in particular) were issued only shortly before operations began, and certainly too late for safe implementation had they contained significant changes ... many questions remained outstanding, and some of the staffing issues (such as targeting delegations) betrayed a corporate difficulty in coming to terms with the prospect of war-fighting operations of this scale and character ... the final ROE profile was received in my Headquarters two hours before operations commenced'.²⁴⁷ Fears of *jus ad bellum* illegitimacy caused very practical problems as the

²⁴³ Letter Hoon to Blair, 'Iraq: UK Land Contribution', 16 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²⁴⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.2, para 472. For concerns on proportionality at the highest levels, see Minute Straw to Prime Minister, 'Iraq: UK Land Contribution', 17 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18). Straw wrote to the Prime Minister that '*US plans envisage using five times as many air weapons ... in the first four days of the campaign than we used in the whole of the 1990 – 1991 campaign. This clearly raises questions about legality and proportionality*'.

²⁴⁵ Transcript of Public Hearing, Lord Goldsmith, 27 Jan 10, p. 6 and p. 223 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

²⁴⁶ In his interactions with CDS and the military staff, Blair would consistently raise the issue of avoiding civilian casualties. He even added it in a hand-written amendment in a note to Bush in Jan 2003. See Note Blair to Bush, [30 January 2003], 'Countdown', 30 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²⁴⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.2, para 270.

invasion began. Perceptions of illegality and illegitimacy would then be a persistent influence on the Iraq war in the years to come.

Part One Conclusion: Emerging Themes and a Look Ahead to a Second Decision

The decision to invade Iraq was the first and most consequential decision of the war. All other decisions that followed were contingent on it: the opening of the Pandora's box of war. The first decision, however, was almost entirely theoretical. To use Strachan's 2019 model, it was focused on thinking about strategy and then deciding on strategy. The 'doing' was to follow. The dominance of the theoretical makes the first decision different to the others. The study of initial conclusions and emerging themes must be approached through this lens, focused on strategy in theory, rather than strategy in practice. This was a complex arena of operational plans, assumptions, threats, international diplomacy, alliance and domestic politics, and the ticking clock of the exigencies of preparing and manoeuvring forces thousands of miles from home.

The history and ideology of the Labour Party certainly had a foundational influence on the development of their theory of strategy. 1997 was genuinely a watershed moment for the Party. In a world characterised by rapid globalisation, they arrived in power carrying the burden of eighteen years in opposition and a reputation for vacillating on foreign policy and defence. This burden, combined with a remarkable parliamentary majority, encouraged a bold and energetic approach that sought to refute the party's history. The result was the '*third way*' – a philosophy guided by internationalism and so-called democratic socialism. Their first major strategic action – the Strategic Defence Review of 1998 - transitioned theory into the tools of practice, reorienting the Armed Forces to an expeditionary 'foreign-policy led' approach that aimed to blend hard and soft power to advance Britain's global interests.²⁴⁸

Success in Kosovo and Sierra Leone in the early years of this new foreign and defence policy built both confidence and party loyalty, as did a second landslide commons majority in 2001. But it was Blair's personal influence that created a decisive shift. Under Blair, the '*third way*' strategic theory of internationalism steadily evolved into liberal interventionism, culminating in the 1999 declaration of the *doctrine of the international community*. Blair's speech in Chicago established the strategic concept that sovereignty should be contingent on adherence to a set of mostly-Western norms. It

²⁴⁸ Michael Clarke, 'Foreign Policy' and Lawrence Freedman, 'Defence' in Seldon, *Blair's Britain*, Chapters 27 and 28, p. 593 – 632.

was this doctrine, and not Cook's original 'ethical foreign policy' of 1997, that had a critical influence on the UK's decision-making in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks. Others may have helped draft the 1999 Chicago speech, but it was Blair's choice to employ such a construct. This was a key marker on the path to the Iraq war.

The near-simultaneous election of a neo-conservative, Republican administration in America and the 9/11 attacks fundamentally altered the strategic environment, creating multiple, practical dilemmas for New Labour's strategy. The theory of the *doctrine of the international community* ran full speed into the realities of American unilateralism at its most defensive. New Labour's political philosophy clashed with the core interest of maintaining the US alliance; the cornerstone of British defence. US and European relationships (a key pillar of New Labour's internationalist vision) deteriorated as Iraq became increasingly contentious. The dilemma became acute when UNSCR 1441 failed to resolve the Iraq crisis, and it became increasingly clear that the US would dismiss the authority of the UN to achieve their own aims. New Labour's seemingly-sound theory suddenly descended into a mire of thorny, practical questions. How was the British military to be a 'force for good' amongst these strategic dilemmas? Whose 'good'? And under whose authority? The PLP rebellion over Iraq (the largest in the party's history) exposed the scale of the fault lines in party politics, applying domestic political pressure to the decision-making process.

The responsibility to navigate these dilemmas rightly fell firmly at the feet of Blair and his inner circle, who were executing strategy through an increasingly centralised approach. Blair was personally pervasive throughout the political-military journey to the invasion. It was Blair who made the judgement to align UK strategy 'shoulder to shoulder' with the Americans after 9/11, framing this commitment in expansive language in his notes to Bush. It was Blair who decided over Christmas 2002 that the UK should be 'in', and 'if in, better in fully and not partly'. Blair set out to lead his Government in the 'big job of persuasion'. And at the last, it was Blair who personally certified that the Iraqi regime was in 'material breach' of Resolution 1441, opening the final legal gateway.

Blair must bear a heavy weight of responsibility, but he was by no means alone. In his book *The Direction of War*, Strachan argues that the UK had no strategy in the period post 9/11.²⁴⁹ I respectfully disagree. The New Labour administration developed and applied a clear theory of strategy in the build up to the Iraq war, with an agreed end: that of 'influence'. The 'big idea' of a *strategy of influence* was quickly and widely adopted across the civil / military community. Blair

²⁴⁹ Strachan, *Direction of War*, p. 218.

commenced it, supported by his inner circle. Pigott's SPG then operationalised the concept, explaining how the military could be specifically used to achieve the outcome of 'influence'. The MoD enthusiastically lobbied for expanded roles within the US plan, tying this enthusiasm to the aim of 'influence'. But such a concept was rife with problems, blurring as it did strategy in theory with strategy in practice. A little like deterrence in the Cold War, the achievement of 'influence' was wholly disconnected from the realities of war itself. British forces were offered into OPLAN 1003V based on their capacity to leverage 'influence', not on a hard-headed assessment of military effectiveness or national interest. An escalatory commitment was a logical outcome of such an approach. The British had a strategy for Iraq, one focused on 'influence', but this dangerously disconnected the application of the military from the realities of war, and its unpredictable nature.

The conventions of the Westminster system were designed to temper the risks of such an approach. Strategy by committee was slow, but it ensured contestation and scrutiny. In the case of the Iraq war, this system failed. Again, Blair and his inner circle were the protagonists of this failure. They evidently believed in the democratic centrality of Parliament in terms of the decision to go to war; the Commons vote of 18 March bears this out. But they did not believe in a broad audience in the development of strategic plans and theories, even in the final weeks of deliberation as the friction of the approaching war began to emerge. Despite assurances, the scale of the UK's military package was never taken to Cabinet for discussion and approval. No serious reconsideration of risk was conducted by Cabinet or an external group, even as the UK became the 'lynchpin' of OPLAN 1003V in January 2003.²⁵⁰ The military Chiefs of Staff reported feeling entirely shut out of the decision-making.²⁵¹ Strachan is entirely right when he attests that strategy requires a 'dialogue'. The 'hyperactive premiership' of Blair and his government ensured this did not take place.²⁵² The unpredictability of war, and the potential contingency outcomes of unleashing it in Iraq, were never properly considered as a result.

The net outcome of the British focus on influence was the near complete subordination of British strategy to that of the US, based around the military instrument. The inclusion of a British force

²⁵⁰ The British Cabinet were promised in September 2002 that they would have a voice in the final scale of the force (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.1, para 712). Military advice in early 2003 suggested that Cabinet should be consulted (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.2, paras 67 and 181).

²⁵¹ The British Chiefs of Staff of the three services, another potential fail-safe against poor decision-making, were marginalised by the close relationship between Blair, the CDS and CJO. As Admiral Sir Alan West would put it after the war, 'I never knew what went on between the CDS and the Prime Minister and I never felt I was included in the strategic decision-making apparatus for these wars. I did not feel I was part of the inner Cabinet where decisions were made' (see Elliott, *High Command*, p. 171).

²⁵² Conservative Democracy Task Force, *An End to Sofa Government: Better Working of Prime Minister and Cabinet*, found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 2018), p. 2.

package within American plans may have started politically, with the vague guidance that the UK would provide a 'significant contribution' to US military action. But the entanglement that followed was firmly an output of the military, doctrinally and institutionally, built on decades of conceptual alignment. Historical context set the bar of a British contribution at the scale of a division from the outset. The embedding of PJHQ staff in CENTCOM then opened the gateways to an unfettered American / British operational level of war. Escalation followed escalation, until by Ex INTERNAL LOOK in December 2002 the entanglement was complete. The US had never originally requested such a scale of UK forces, but Franks and his planners naturally accepted them with open arms. The UK's mantra was always that no political decision had been made before 18 March 2003, and this was true. But British decision-makers underestimated the extent to which an isolated operational level of war can shape and drive policy. Even plans for war reciprocate with policy in unpredictable ways. By the time British troops were in Kuwait in March 2003, 'cocked and locked' (as the Americans called it) within Frank's OPLAN, the political cost of refusing to deploy them would have been catastrophic. As Boyce later stated to the Inquiry, 'the reaction of the Americans was always 'Yes, I hear what you say [about no political decisions] but come the day, we know you will be there'.²⁵³

It is worth reminding that the open commitment of British forces to the US strategy did – to an extent – have the impact Blair desired, influencing Bush to seek Resolution 1441. The *strategy of influence* worked at the political level. The strategic theory that the commitment of forces would allow UK planners to influence the US OPLAN, however, was an illusion. There is little to no evidence that British military staff had any impact on 1003V in execution, not in terms of the timing, the tactics, or the preparations for the aftermath. British influence may well have existed in limited terms at the political level, but was scant anywhere else.

The final factor to consider in the first decision is the extent to which British decision-makers acknowledged the nature and character of war in their pre-war development of strategy. The history of British strategic thought should have made it clear that uncertainty and friction are part of war's enduring nature, and that the character of each war is different. British staff colleges, teaching Clausewitz at the time, would have asserted the mantra that 'everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult'.²⁵⁴ Unpredictability and friction is generally managed in strategic planning through the taking of assumptions. The future impact of factors that are difficult to predict

²⁵³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.1, para 333.

²⁵⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 65.

is assessed, and planning proceeds based on an accepted, agreed and assumed set of outcomes that seeks to balance potential risk with potential gain. Assumptions are a key tool to link strategy in theory to strategy in practice. The discourse that leads to the agreement of assumptions is one of the most vital elements of strategic dialogue.

The Iraq Inquiry evidence shows that British assumptions around the Iraq war were beset by a conspiracy of optimism, both internally and in terms of the adoptions of US assumptions. The vignette around the Turkish government and the northern option are a fine example. It was assumed from the outset of operational planning in early 2002 that Turkey would assent to a coalition deployment, despite the announcement in July 2002 of a Turkish election in November.²⁵⁵ This assumed 'northern option' shaped all considerations of force packaging, operational employment and post-invasion involvement until its collapse in late 2002 when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected as the Turkish Prime Minister.²⁵⁶ The failure of this assumption – which drove the shift of British forces to the south and the resulting adoption of Basra – had remarkable implications for UK strategy in the long-term.

Where does the responsibility for this conspiracy lie? The final decisions may have laid with government, but the expertise to understand the conspiracy really only lay in one place: the military. It was only those in uniform who were listening to the lessons of Clausewitz in the staff colleges. There were some attempts to show just how vulnerable the strategy in theory might be in practice. A March 2003 paper to Geoff Hoon, for example, pointed out that the US / UK plan was 'predicated on best-case assumptions for the progress of the conflict (swift, short and successful), the condition of Iraq post-conflict (infrastructure not greatly damaged by fighting, limited internecine conflict) and the degree of international buy-in with civil and military resources, including cash (considerable and UN endorsed) ... the Secretary of State may wish to remind his colleagues that there is at least a credible possibility that none of these conditions will obtain'.²⁵⁷ But the warnings were not loud, and nor were they heard. Once Saddam had fallen, the conspiracy of optimism rapidly turned into a nightmare of flawed assumptions.

Advancing to the Second Decision: From Theory to Reality

²⁵⁵ See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol 6.1, box on p. 285.

²⁵⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.2, paras 388 – 399.

²⁵⁷ Minute Sec(O)4 to PS/Secretary of State [MoD], 6 March 2003, 'Iraq: Aftermath – Medium to Long Term UK Military Commitment', 6 Mar 03, para 22 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

OPLAN 1003V commenced on the night of 19 March 2003, renamed as 'Operation IRAQI FREEDOM'. It was a remarkable success. Simultaneous air, maritime and ground assaults attacked the Iraqi military and political structures in multiple domains. The Iraqi military quickly collapsed. By 7 April the British entered Basra, and by 9 April the US military had captured Baghdad. Iraq fell, and on 1 May 2003 President Bush stood on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln and declared that 'in the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed'.²⁵⁸ He was right. 1003V had fulfilled its task completely, but there its concrete plans ended. No one was sure what was to follow.

The British military fulfilled their role in 1003V with great professionalism, achieving everything that the Government's strategy had asked of them. They had secured a meaningful role for British forces in the US plan. They had helped Blair influence Bush to Resolution 1441, and had (albeit via an indirect path) removed the ability of the Iraqi regime to use WMD. They had used, as Thomas Schelling called it, 'violent diplomacy' to meet their Government's immediate political end.²⁵⁹

However there the success stopped. On 8 April, sat in Basra, over-committed against planning assumptions, without a legal basis for an occupation, and entirely subordinate to a US strategy without a strategy, the British military had nowhere to turn. Blair had outlined his vision for the future of Iraq in his speech to Parliament on 18 March, but no plan existed to blend tactics and resources to get there. Even the *Execution Order for Operation TELIC* was silent on the matter, containing no instructions for the stabilisation of a city that just eight weeks before the British had had no intention of occupying.²⁶⁰ Strategy had gone silent along with the guns.

On 19 March 2003 the theory of British pre-war strategy transitioned to practice in a whole new environment. Strategy prior to the war played scant attention to Iraq and the Iraqis themselves. The weighing of choices took place in a theoretical world divorced from the actual realities of the Iraqi theatre, and the reciprocity of war. Iraq – and indeed war itself – were but minor actors in the pre-invasion playing field of the UN, the US, and UK domestic politics. All of this changed, however, once the invasion had taken place. From being a small part of the strategic environment, Iraq became its centre. The realities of war violently come back into play. It is in this environment that I will examine the UK's second strategic decision: the decision – or indeed the lack of one – to become a 'Joint Occupying Power' with the US for the next fourteen months.

²⁵⁸ CBS News Archive, *Text of Bush Speech*, 1 May 03 found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

²⁵⁹ Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Harvard, 1980).

²⁶⁰ Minute CDS to CJO, 18 Mar 03, 'Op TELIC: Authorisation for Military Operations in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

Part Two
Joint Occupying Powers

7 April 2003 to 28 June 2004

'You're going to be the proud owner of twenty-five million people. You will own all their hopes, aspirations and problems. You'll own it all.'

Secretary of State Colin Powell to President George Bush, 2003²⁶¹

On 7 April 2003 British forces seized Basra and captured the Ba'ath Party Headquarters. 500 kilometres away American forces were also moving decisively, and on 9 April they entered Baghdad.²⁶² The toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Sāḥat al-Firdaus, or 'Firdos Square', marks the moment the Iraqi Government collapsed. Images of a US Marine M88 armoured vehicle dragging the statue over by its neck, and Iraqi civilians beating it with their shoes, were transmitted live across the world: final refutation of the assurances of the Iraqi Information Minister that Iraq was winning. This symbolic fall of Hussein's regime sets the moment that the brutal social contract between the Ba'ath Party and the people of Iraq was fundamentally fractured. As Bush himself said in his infamous 'Mission Accomplished' speech, 'in the images of falling statues, we have witnessed the arrival of a new era'.²⁶³

It was not a happy contract between the Iraqi state and its people. Iraqi per capita income had fallen since 1991 from US\$2279 to less than \$450 (comparable to Rwanda). The country was in the grip of a humanitarian disaster: child mortality had more than doubled from 1984 to 1999 and the populace had been effectively pauperised, with the UN Oil For Food program feeding most Iraqis, but at lower than the UN targets for daily calorie intake.²⁶⁴ Mary Kaldor describes Iraq before the invasion as a 'failing state', with the regime exhibiting 'characteristics that are typical of the last stages of totalitarianism'.²⁶⁵ It has to be recognised, however, that the Hussein regime was holding order amongst a deeply divided and sectarian populace. Saddam maintained an iron grip on tribalism, criminality, sectarianism and ethnic conflict.

The removal of Hussein opened Pandora's Box. As Kaldor again observes, the 'invasion effectively destroyed not just the regime, but what was left of the state as well'.²⁶⁶ In just three weeks the Coalition returned Iraq to a pre-1958 state, overturning 45 years of political heuristics. The Islamic

²⁶¹ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 150.

²⁶² Keegan, *The Iraq War*, Loc Cit 3004 – 3318.

²⁶³ See CSPAN, *President Bush Mission Accomplished Speech*, 1 May 2003 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

²⁶⁴ Jacqueline Ismael and Tareq Ismael, 'The Social Contract and the Iraqi State', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 238 – 239.

²⁶⁵ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), Loc Cit 3554.

²⁶⁶ Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, Loc Cit 3563.

principle of *tawhid*, or 'unity', saw politics as a means to overcome tribal discord, but the Western invasion 'wrenched this constellation of social and political goods out of the Iraqi state's engagements with its citizens'.²⁶⁷ A social and political vacuum was left behind. For those (like me) who were there at the time, the immediate aftermath of the invasion led to a moment of shocked pause. The Iraqi people were waiting for one thing: to be told what would happen next. This pause, however, did not last for long. The human instinct for self-protection and power rapidly re-asserted itself. Life soon became, in the words of Hobbes, even more 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.²⁶⁸

The Coalition was the only authority available to step into the vacuum. From April 2003 to June 2004 it ruled Iraq as victorious occupiers – manifest through an institutional body called the Coalition Provincial Authority (CPA). The CPA wielded a remarkable level of authority, rigorously dismantling the Ba'athist state, and embarking on a campaign of rapid democratisation in a country that had never experienced such a system. It was this phase, not the initial invasion, that the British government had identified as being 'strategically decisive'.²⁶⁹ These critical months set the tone for post-Saddam Iraq for the remainder of the UK operation.

By May 2003 the British found themselves in a position that they had neither expected nor sought. They were formally appointed in UNSCR 1483 as a 'Joint Occupying Power' of Iraq alongside the US. This enmeshed the UK in the political and moral outcomes of the post-invasion period, enforcing a shared responsibility. The decision to accept this responsibility, which Britain's leadership eventually did willingly, represented a strategic gamble. It was not a good one. The UK lacked both the strategic foresight to understand the implications, and the instrumental tools to leverage influence within the arrangement. They failed to predict how quickly the war would evolve, and how aggressively it would influence strategy. By the end of the occupation, slave to a US vision for Iraq, they were responsible for a 'British fiefdom' in southern Iraq – but without the requisite authority or power to shape it. This second decision, built on flawed assumptions, proved as consequential as the first.

The decision to become a 'Joint Occupying Power' alongside the US will be examined in three phases. Initially I will bound the decision in time. I will then examine the decision through four turning points, ranging from the occupation of Basra to the surge in violence around Fallujah and the south

²⁶⁷ Ismael and Ismael, *Social Contract and the Iraqi State*, p. 240.

²⁶⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan* (first published 1651), Chapter 13.

²⁶⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Executive Summary, para 592.

in early-2004. I will close by critically comparing key themes against the first decision to identify continuity and discontinuity in influences. In doing so I will show how the transition from peace to war (i.e. from strategy in theory to strategy in practice) exposed the true weakness of Coalition assumptions, the inescapable impact of contingent decisions, and the dangers of ignoring the unpredictable nature of war.

Bounding the Second Decision in Time: Commencing and Defining Joint Occupation

The final moment of the first decision was relatively simple to identify: the Hansard Parliamentary Record holds every word of the Parliamentary vote in detail. The moment where the UK decided to become a 'Joint Occupying Power' is harder to tie down. The initial phases were informal, a contingent product of the decision to invade and driven by international law. As British troops crossed into Iraq on 19 March 2003 they engaged in armed conflict with Iraqi forces. They initially held no formal responsibility under international law for their contested area of operations: they might, after all, have been defeated. However as soon as they gained de-facto control of areas of southern Iraq, British forces fell under the constraints of IHL.²⁷⁰ They became an 'Occupying Power'. The nature of IHL means that this status could (in extremis) have been ignored²⁷¹, but given the political philosophy of the Government this was out of the question. The UK's 'force for good' would abide by its international responsibilities.

The first formal acknowledgment of this was on 2 April 2003, when FCO legal advisors confirmed to the Cabinet Office that British forces were 'occupiers' in the part of Iraq under their physical control.²⁷² This status firmed up as British forces entered Basra on 7 April and control stabilised. On 14 April Blair confirmed this *de facto* 'occupation', stating to Parliament that 'the south of Iraq is now largely under British control'.²⁷³ In all, the establishment of the British as an 'Occupying Power' took less than a month, was uncontroversial, and a logical legal outcome of the decision to invade.

Far more important, however, was the decision to expand this status to become a 'Joint Occupying Power' for the whole of Iraq alongside the US. The conduct of this joint occupation is the true topic

²⁷⁰ Specifically, the 1907 Hague Conventions, the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, and the 1977 First Protocol to the Geneva Conventions. For a summary of IHL treaties, states parties and commentaries, see International Committee of the Red Cross, *Treaties, States Parties and Commentaries* found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

²⁷¹ For an examination of constructivism and international law, see Jutta Brunnee and Stephen J. Troope, 'Constructivist Approaches and International Law' in Jeffery L. Dunoff and Mark A. Pollack, eds., *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on International Law and International Relations: The State of the Art* (Cambridge University Press, November 2012).

²⁷² Minute Llewellyn to Bristow, 2 Apr 03, [untitled] found at Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, p. 36.

²⁷³ See Hansard Record of Parliamentary Debate, 14 Apr 03, at [link](#) (accessed 16 Dec 19).

of study for the second decision, and it is important therefore to try and identify when the decision commenced. Analysis cannot start pre-invasion, as it was clear that no decisions were made in relation to 'Occupying Powers' before troops rolled across the border (see footnote).²⁷⁴

Instead it is better to argue that the UK had 'Joint Occupying' status imposed upon them immediately post-invasion, before then willingly submitting to the role. This began with Franks' 'Freedom Message to the Iraqi People' of 16 April 2003. Speaking on behalf of the 'Coalition', Franks stated that he was 'creating the Coalition Provincial Authority to exercise powers of government temporarily'.²⁷⁵ Despite the explicit inclusion of the UK in this declaration, British officials had no influence on the speech. FCO lawyers had the opportunity to comment on a draft on 8 April and expressed considerable concerns that the language of 'exercising powers of government' was not consistent with international law.²⁷⁶ These concerns went unheeded, and the text remained unchanged. Thus began a pattern of UK legal and moral burden-sharing with the US, but without requisite influence or commensurate benefit, which lasted until mid-2004.

The burden of 'Joint Occupation' was one that the UK eventually willingly accepted. Despite the legal concerns, and the lack of any clear agreement on responsibilities, Sir Jeremy Greenstock (the UK Permanent Representative to the UN) reaffirmed UK support for 'Joint Occupation' on 8 May in a letter to the President of the UN Security Council co-signed by the US Representative, John Negroponte.²⁷⁷ Not fourteen days later the UK and the US co-championed the unanimous endorsement of Resolution 1483 in the Security Council. This sweeping resolution explicitly linked the UK and the US together as a body known as the 'Authority' and formally placed them in the role as 'occupying powers under unified command'.²⁷⁸ With the UN's quasi-judicial authority in place, the UK was inescapably tied to the US in terms of responsibility for Iraq; at least until the formal end of

²⁷⁴ While the British and the US did consider the post-invasion problem before the invasion, this did not lead to any deliberate action, and the Iraq Inquiry is scathing about the final output of this work. Despite the SPG concluding that the aftermath was likely to be 'strategically decisive' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.4, para 1007), the Inquiry found that, by 19 March 2003, the Government had not 'made contingency preparations for the deployment of ... UK civilians to Iraq; allocated any funding to post-conflict reconstruction; drawn up any plans to deliver ... reconstruction in the South; established mechanisms in Whitehall [to] coordinate and drive post-conflict reconstruction; or, allocated responsibility to any department ... for delivering the UK's contribution to post-conflict reconstruction' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.4, para 4). There had certainly been no agreement with the US on the legal status of the Coalition as 'Occupying Forces', and clear divisions existed between the UK and US on the relevance of international law and the required role of the UN.

²⁷⁵ An official version of Franks' 'Freedom Message to the Iraqi People' is very difficult to find. The only openly available version is online via the site 'Psywar', and is found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

²⁷⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 152 - 155.

²⁷⁷ United Nations Security Council, 'Letter dated 8 May 2003 from the Permanent Representatives of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council' found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

²⁷⁸ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1483 (2003)* found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

the occupation in mid-2004. How they found themselves there, and how the outcome played out, is what I will examine below.

With this background understood, it is fair to conclude that the entry of British forces into Basra on 7 April 2003 is a suitable start point for the study of the second decision. Identifying the endpoint of the second decision is simple. The UK and US held the status of 'Joint Occupying Powers' until 28 June 2004 when the CPA handed power to the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) and was dissolved. This marks the end of this phase.

Four turning points exist between 7 April 2003 and 28 June 2004 that expose the influences on the second decision. These are: the occupation of Basra and the immediate post-invasion decisions in April 2003; the US's rejection of their pre-war strategy and the formation of the CPA in May 2003; the attempts by the British government to adapt in the face of adversity in August 2003; and finally the reaction to the surge in violence around Fallujah and the south in early 2004.

Turning Point: The Occupation of Basra and Post-Invasion Decision-Making

The UK's positioning in Basra was not by dint of design, but of crisis. It was never the plan for British forces to occupy southern Iraq. Until early January 2003, 1st (UK) Armoured Division's role within 1003V was as part of a northern penetration through Turkey.²⁷⁹ It was only on 15 January 2003, two months before the invasion, that the switch to the south took place. The British southern AO did not firm up until March 2003²⁸⁰, but as it did it was increasingly clear that the 'south-east' (named in simple terms) would form the centre of the UK's initial Phase IV responsibility.²⁸¹ This was indeed the zone that fell under the UK's immediate control as an 'Occupying Power' by April 2003. Such were the vagaries of the shift from strategy in theory to strategy in practice. Entangled in OPLAN 1003V, British decision-makers accepted the shift to the south, with limited time to consider the long-term, contingent implications.

This lack of a set plan for 'Phase IV' had not gone unrecognised in the US pre-invasion. Between January and March 2003 a nascent American post-invasion strategy was coalescing (somewhat

²⁷⁹ This was to be a secondary effort to the planned main thrust from the American V Corps from Kuwait in the south, and one designed to secure the Kirkuk oil fields and fix Iraq's northern forces.

²⁸⁰ This AO eventually formed a battlespace that included the Al Faw Peninsula, Umm Qasr Port, the Ramallah oil fields, and Basra city and the surrounding area.

²⁸¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 8, para 57.

confusingly) under a body called the 'Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance' (ORHA) led by retired US Lieutenant General Jay Garner. Established by Bush on 20 January 2003, Garner and his small team were tasked with a remarkably wide remit that included humanitarian relief, the dismantling of WMD, the defeat of terrorist networks, the reshaping the Iraqi armed forces, and the 'transition to an Iraqi-led authority over time'.²⁸²

The command and control of ORHA defined British strategy in the months after the invasion. In a move designed to ensure that 'our civilian efforts in Iraq would run through the same chain of command as our military operations', Bush placed ORHA (and therefore all post-invasion strategy) under the authority of the Secretary of Defence.²⁸³ This decision, ostensibly driven by lessons of Bosnia and Kosovo, aimed to ensure unity of command.²⁸⁴ In reality it triggered a damaging period of inter-departmental infighting.²⁸⁵ Understaffed and under exceptionally tight scrutiny from Rumsfeld, Garner had just fifty-six days from appointment to entering Iraq. Expediency and simplicity were therefore the order of the day. At a basic level, if the British were in Basra, they were responsible for it. Possession in Iraq was nine tenths of the law.

ORHA entered Iraq on 1 April, but was not established in Baghdad until nearly three weeks later. With Garner still in transit, the US military were already taking expedient steps to stabilise the troop laydown. The military plan approved by Blair on 14 March 2003 had defined a UK Phase IV AO as broadly equivalent to the single province of Basra.²⁸⁶ This conservative strategic framing did not last once the war began reciprocating with strategy. The UK's area of operations expanded rapidly, the result of military expediency and with little ministerial discussion. On 12 April Reith was approved to expand the AO to include all of Basra and Maysan provinces 'in preparation for Phase IV'.²⁸⁷ On 24 April, eight days after Franks' 'Freedom Message', CDS informed the new Ad-Hoc Ministerial Group on Iraq Rehabilitation (AHMGIR) that the US planned to divide Iraq into five sectors and that the UK would lead in the south-east: comprising of the four provinces of Basra, Maysan, Dhi Qar and Muthanna (see Figure 1 below). Designed to align the UK AO with ORHA's likely southern

²⁸² See declassified White House document, *National Security Presidential Directive 24* found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

²⁸³ Bush, *Decision Points*, Loc Cit 4234.

²⁸⁴ United States Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Hard Lessons: the Iraq Reconstruction Experience* (Washington: Special Inspector General, Iraq Reconstruction, 2009), p. 32 – 33.

²⁸⁵ Infighting was sparked by Defence's dismissal of the work conducted to that date by the NSC and State Department's Humanitarian Working Group, and Rumsfeld's personal removal from Garner's team of Thomas Warrick, a State Department employee who had been working for a year on a study of post-war Iraq called the 'Future of Iraq Project' (see SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 45).

²⁸⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 8, para 726.

²⁸⁷ Minute D/PJHQ to Private Secretary of the Secretary of State for Defence, 12 April 2003, 'Expansion of the UK AOR' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

boundaries, this total area included approximately 20% of Iraq's population.²⁸⁸ At no stage was this decision subject to formal Ministerial debate or decision, nor was there detailed analysis of the broader consequences across Government departments²⁸⁹, despite concerns from both the Treasury²⁹⁰ and the Cabinet Office.²⁹¹ This decision tied the UK to custodianship of southern Iraq for the remainder of the campaign.



Figure 1: Map of the Iraqi Provinces, April 2003.²⁹²

The days following the invasion were a time of considerable uncertainty, and critical decisions were made under pressure. Three influences are prominent in this turning point. The first is the extent to which UK decision-makers were limited in their options, in that they were fundamentally constrained by previous, contingent decisions. The second is the extent to which their inability to apply tools of national power beyond the military hampered the UK's ability to formulate an immediate post-

²⁸⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 8, para 681, and for the factor of 20% see Minute Straw and Hoon to Prime Minister, 19 March 2003, 'Iraq: UK Military Contribution to post-conflict Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

²⁸⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 8, para 687.

²⁹⁰ See Minute Dodds to Chancellor, 24 March 2003, 'Iraq: UK Military Contribution to Post-Conflict Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

²⁹¹ See Minute Gibbons to Manning, 31 March 2003, 'Iraq: COS meeting – Monday 31 March 2003' found at Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 8, para 574.

²⁹² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Annex 4, Map 1, p. 318.

invasion strategy. Third is the impact of the core contradictions between the political philosophy of New Labour and the US Republican administration, which were illuminated by the realities of war.

The Illusion of Choice: Subordinate Strategy, Contingent Decision-Making and the Strategy of

Influence. The decision to commit British forces to the invasion passed responsibility for strategic decision-making, for the initial phase at least, from Whitehall to the military. Reith (as CJO) sought to achieve his 'Strategic Military Objective' defined as: 'to support the coalition effort, within allocated resources, to create the conditions in which Iraq is disarmed in accordance with its obligations under UNSCRs'.²⁹³ British forces, however, did this fully embedded – conceptually, physically and doctrinally – within the US theatre plan.²⁹⁴ The subordination of British forces into US structures was nearly total; as was their reliance on US forces for logistic resupply. While the UK's strategic centre in Whitehall did monitor the situation, once the execution order was signed the Iraq theatre became the province of CENTCOM. The exigencies of war and military doctrine deterred external interference.

The outcome of this, intentional or otherwise, was that UK strategic decision-making in March and April 2003 was firmly disaggregated to the US commanders in Iraq and Kuwait, at CENTCOM HQ, and ultimately to Rumsfeld. UK policy makers had little capacity to influence theatre-level execution.²⁹⁵ When US intelligence believed they had identified Saddam at Dora Farms on 19 March 2003²⁹⁶, the decision was made to conduct an ultimately unsuccessful strike against him prior to the agreed deadline for war. Authorities in the UK were not consulted on this strike, but were instead informed (despite the considerable military and legal implications).²⁹⁷ Even Blair's views were not sought.²⁹⁸ It is wrong to state that the British chose to occupy Basra, or to expand to the four provinces. Their commitment was essentially pre-destined, contingent on the pre-war decisions to commit British

²⁹³ Minute CDS to CJO, 18 Mar 03, 'Op TELIC: Authorisation for Military Operations in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 16 Dec 19).

²⁹⁴ As designed by General Franks and as executed by Lieutenant General David McKiernan as the Coalition Forces Land Component Commander, or 'CFLCC'.

²⁹⁵ British Major General Albert Whitley, who served as Deputy Commanding General (Post Hostilities) for the CFLCC, confirmed in his statement to the Inquiry that 'at the highest ministry / Armed Forces levels the UK were unable to influence US decisions' during the invasion. He states that this was principally down to the misalignment in points of liaison between the MoD, the Pentagon, PJHQ and CENTCOM. General Frank's decision to cut out the Pentagon from the chain of command, and to work direct to Rumsfeld disempowered the traditional points of liaison. The subordinate role of the 1st (UK) Division in the CFLCC structures made them wholly subordinate to US theatre design. As Whitley stated, 'the size of our forces did not translate into strategic and political influence'. See Major General Albert Whitley, *Statement by Major General Albert Whitley* found at [link](#) (accessed 17 Jan 25).

²⁹⁶ Joel Rayburn and Frank Sobchak, eds, *The US Army in the Iraq War Volume 1 2003 – 2006* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2019), p. 84 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

²⁹⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 8, para 94.

²⁹⁸ Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 393.

forces to the invasion, to wholeheartedly embrace the revised 1003V, and to accept the 'lynchpin' role in the south.

The *strategy of influence* remained prominent. Now immersed in the realities of war, New Labour felt they had little choice but to apply maximum effort to try and influence the US in execution. Blair personally continued to push hard for aggressive commitments within the military sphere in the immediate post-invasion period.²⁹⁹ He was demonstrably angry when a US request for the deployment of 16 Air Assault Brigade to Baghdad was rejected in late April by the Chiefs of Staff. A letter written to Hoon on the topic contained, as General Richards saw it, 'the biggest bollocking by the Prime Minister in writing that he had ever seen'.³⁰⁰ The Prime Minister's position of 'in' and 'if in, better in fully and not partly'³⁰¹ continued to keep the escalation doors open. It is unsurprising that the decision to expand the UK area of operations took place with little debate.

The British therefore did not truly have strategic choice in April 2003. Instead the decision to take on responsibility for the south was (in Blair's own words) 'the inevitable outcome of the decision that our military contribution should be through the south'.³⁰² With UK strategy formally subordinated to the US hegemon, and with Franks and CENTCOM in control, the die was cast. Blair and his senior advisors held a daily 'War Cabinet' during the invasion (from 19 March to 12 April)³⁰³, but there is little evidence that this acted as a genuine strategy-making body (in the sense of influencing operations to steer them to advantageous British political ends) once 1003V commenced. All such attempts were gently but firmly rebuffed. US strategy dictated British strategy. What did remain, however, was the *strategy of influence*: a continuous reciprocal escalator that maximised British commitments.

Very British Infighting: The Challenge of Applying Tools Beyond the Military. The challenge of applying broader tools of national power in Phase IV reared its head quickly as the invasion commenced. There was no agreed unifying lead for post-invasion British strategy in March 2003, with responsibility (but notably not accountability) informally split between three Cabinet Ministers: Straw as the Foreign Secretary, Hoon as the Secretary of State for Defence, and Clare Short as the

²⁹⁹ In late March Blair and David Manning, his foreign policy advisor, advocated for an early and risky reprioritisation of coalition forces to a British entry into Basra, requiring Geoff Hoon to be reminded by both Major General Brims (Commander 1st UK Division) and Sir Kevin Tebbitt (the Permanent Undersecretary at the MoD) that Basra was not the US priority, did not align with the US theatre plan, and was a decision for CFLCC and not for the UK to make. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 8, paras 299 – 322.

³⁰⁰ Richards, *Taking Command*, p. 179.

³⁰¹ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 413.

³⁰² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 8, para 522.

³⁰³ See footnote 24 to Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1.

Secretary of State for International Development. The instinctive lead for humanitarian and reconstruction activities was actually Short's DFID. Only DFID had the experience and staffing to even scope a reconstruction task of the size of Iraq. It was however not just the US bureaucracy that found itself subject to departmental infighting. The UK also struggled.

The interplay around DFID's role in Iraq became a cyclical contest of personalities and bureaucratic tension as the realities of war began to reciprocate with strategy. Some context here is important. DFID was created in 1997 by New Labour on their third day in power, separating international aid from the FCO. Long an aspiration of New Labour, the new Department of State resembled (in Blair's words) 'a non-governmental organisation inside government'.³⁰⁴ By 2003 DFID's priorities were set by law. The *International Development Act of 2002* established two guiding principles: that DFID's efforts must be focussed on the reduction of poverty, and that its spending should be channelled through international institutions to avoid perceptions of 'tied aid'.³⁰⁵ Short had led DFID since its inception, and after six years she was deeply invested in the philosophy of its ethical foreign policy goals.³⁰⁶

Short's perspectives caused considerable issues before the war. She would not, for example, allow DFID to engage in post-invasion planning without UN authorisation in place. In October 2002 she directed her staff to cease all 'discussion and document sharing with the US on our preparations for humanitarian crises in Iraq'.³⁰⁷ On 18 February 2003, a month before the invasion and when it was clear that war was likely, she was asked by her staff for authorisation to conduct a number of 'pre-deployment steps', including establishing forward bases in Kuwait and Amman, and deploying a Civil-Military Humanitarian Advisor to 1st (UK) Division Headquarters. She refused on the basis that 'this would imply that military action was now a certainty', despite accepting that 'this would mean that DFID would not be prepared for an immediate response'. Critically, she would only allow close work with the US 'if there was an overarching UN mandate'.³⁰⁸ International legality, while important for

³⁰⁴ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 24.

³⁰⁵ UK National Archives, *International Development Act 2002* found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁰⁶ Short was a true proponent of New Labour's ethical foreign policy, having sponsored two white papers between 1997 and 2000 (both entitled 'Eliminating World Poverty') (see Oxfam, *How has DFID's Thinking Evolved Since 1997: Four White Papers* found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20)) and having been a central player in the birth of the UN's Millennium Development Goals in 2000 as part of the so-called 'Ulstein Group' of development ministers (see David Hulme, 'The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): A Short History of the World's Biggest Promise', Brooks World Poverty Institute, Working Paper 100 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20)).

³⁰⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.4, para 722.

³⁰⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.5, para 474.

New Labour, was an article of faith for Short. This uncompromising position created significant personal friction between her and other key strategic decision-makers.³⁰⁹

The outcome of these frictions became far more than personal in New Labour's centralised decision-making system. Short was deliberately excluded from the proposed list for the cross-Whitehall 'Ad Hoc Group on Iraq' in September 2002, and in December David Manning refused to allow DFID staff into the SPG meetings, stating in writing that 'DFID officials would feel bound to report what they had heard to Clare Short ... it was not acceptable to incorporate Ms Short herself into this level of debate'.³¹⁰ She did not receive a full briefing of MoD planning until 12 February 2003.³¹¹ By 19 March trust in Short was in such short supply that the CDS and the head of the JIC were 'reluctant to go over the military plans in detail' with her present in Cabinet.³¹² The negative impact on post-invasion humanitarian and reconstruction planning was evident.

These philosophical and personal clashes at Ministerial level resonated within Departments, in a reciprocal relationship that linked individual behaviour with bureaucratic outcomes. They proved to be an impenetrable barrier to pre-conflict planning. The formation of an Iraq Planning Unit (IPU) in February 2003 was designed specifically to bring the MoD, FCO and DFID together to add cohesion to long-term planning but with such division at the top, the departments were unable to agree a joint approach - even by 7 March when urgency was at its height.³¹³

The situation became even worse once the war began. Trust between leaders and departments collapsed. On 26 March 2003 Short briefed her senior officials that Blair had given her responsibility for reconstruction in Iraq (the Inquiry has found no record of this).³¹⁴ True or not, the Whitehall machinery moved rapidly to prevent it. The next day the Permanent Undersecretary of the FCO lobbied Sir Andrew Turnbull, the Cabinet Secretary, to establish a mechanism to keep the FCO in the

³⁰⁹ Short had been an MP since 1987 and was counted as one of the 'old guard' of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP): troublingly influential, and certainly not one of the 'inner circle' of the New Labour movement. Alastair Campbell records in colourful terms many of these frictions in his diaries, with Short criticising the US on their humanitarian record (see Campbell, *Burden of Power*, Loc Cit 2020, 2030 and 2213 respectively). Short clashed in Cabinet with Geoff Hoon over provision of UK troops to Iraq (see Campbell, *Burden of Power*, Loc Cit 8229). Eventually she raised the anger of both the Prime Minister and Campbell when she threatened in a public interview on 9 March 2003 to resign if war took place without a second resolution (Blair referring to her actions as 'disgusting') (for Blair's views on Short's threat of resignation see Campbell, *Burden of Power*, Loc Cit 9505 and Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.5, para 874).

³¹⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.4, para 917.

³¹¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.5, para 292.

³¹² Campbell, *Burden of Power*, Loc Cit 10071.

³¹³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.5, para 869.

³¹⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.4, para 14.

lead, noting that DFID were 'still hankering after the leadership of the Iraq reconstruction agenda'.³¹⁵ It was important, they believed, to secure Blair's endorsement of such a mechanism in advance, stating 'we cannot guarantee that Clare Short will accept it without argument'.³¹⁶ Senior officials at DFID reciprocated this lack of trust. In early April, minutes of a senior DFID meeting attended by Short recorded that they 'would need to be very clear that all parts of a plan ... were owned and managed by us, and not by No. 10 or a Cabinet Office structure we could not trust'.³¹⁷ Relations with the military were no better, with Air Marshal Burridge, the UK NCC, describing DFID as 'a disgrace, a bloody disgrace'.³¹⁸ This level of division, expressed so openly at a time of crisis, is remarkable.

These divisions persisted as a disruptive influence in the immediate post-invasion period. The AHMGIR, the product of the FCO/Turnbull manoeuvring to limit DFID's ownership, was designed to align cross-Whitehall planning: chaired by the Foreign Secretary, but inclusive of the Secretaries of Defence and International Development. DFID's obsession with UN authorisation, however, continued to constrain momentum – notably in the development of an aligned cross-government approach, and the immediate provision of staff to ORHA. Major General Tim Cross, the UK's first senior officer seconded to Garner's team, stated to the Inquiry that 'I was not receiving any clear direction from Whitehall, other than not to commit the UK to anything!'.³¹⁹ Short finally resigned on 12 May 2003.³²⁰ The step-change in momentum under Baroness Amos (Short's replacement) is an excellent indication of the impact individual philosophies can have on strategic outputs.

A Continued Clash of Alliance Aims: Issues of Legitimacy, Legality and the UN. The first few weeks of the realities and reciprocity of the war forced a stark light onto the differences between the British and American aims in Iraq. The rift between the two should not have been a surprise. The US aim in Iraq, as one of the earliest Cabinet papers exposed, was 'unambiguously ... the removal of the Saddam Hussein regime'.³²¹ New Labour could never officially, politically or ethically accept regime change as an end in itself. As such, the definition of military strategic objectives for the two nations could never really align. Freedman observed after the invasion that 'ultimately Blair and Bush were

³¹⁵ Minute Jay to Secretary of State [FCO], 27 March 2003, 'Iraq: Reconstruction: Whitehall Co-ordination' found at Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 139.

³¹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 140.

³¹⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 272.

³¹⁸ Burridge was the National Contingent Commander (NCC). See Minute O'Brien to Foreign Secretary [Straw], 30 April 2003, 'Mr O'Brien's Call on Air Marshall Burridge' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³¹⁹ Transcript of Public Hearing, Major General Cross, 2009, p. 17 - 19 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³²⁰ Clare Short, *Resignation Letter* found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³²¹ Minute Watkins to Policy Director, 'Iraq', 18 Apr 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

fighting different wars. For Blair, Iraq was about upholding values and the will of the international community; for Bush it was a demonstration of raw power to achieve a national purpose'.³²²

These differences between the allies seemed less important in the first few weeks of the war, obscured as they were by the exigencies of military operations. They re-emerged intensely, however, in the early stages of 'Joint Occupation'. In his speech to Parliament on 18 March 2003, Blair committed to a vision for Iraq built around three internationalist building blocks: a new UN resolution for the governance of Iraq, a trust fund for the Iraqi people for oil revenues under UN administration, and that the future government of Iraq be given the chance to unite the nation on a democratic basis.³²³ The UN was the centre of this vision. This was reinforced by Straw on 1 April 2003, where he said 'we will ensure that the United Nations oversees the medium and long-term international aid programme to Iraq'.³²⁴ These were not idle words, but part of their transactional commitment to the British people; commit to war without UN authorisation, and we will ensure that the aftermath is conducted under UN authority, in line with international law.³²⁵

Blair and Straw's commitments, however, underestimated two factors: the depth to which the US administration was unwilling to cede authority post-invasion, and the extent to which the Security Council (and indeed the UN Secretariat) would be reluctant to either provide *post facto* legitimisation to the war, nor take the lead for the aftermath. This is what Colin Powell and his Deputy Richard Armitage had privately called the 'Pottery Barn Rule' – you break it, you own it.³²⁶

US perspectives on a post-invasion UN role were actually positive just before the invasion. The British Embassy, Washington reported on 3/4 March 2003 that senior members of the US administration had accepted the need for a post-invasion Security Council mandate, a role for the UN, and the need for a UN Special Representative for Iraq.³²⁷ Blair and Bush discussed the UN's post-invasion role on 5 March, and Blair reported that they had agreed that the UN should be 'heavily involved'.³²⁸ On 10 March the US outlined post-invasion plans which included both the need for a

³²² Lawrence Freedman, 'Defence' in Seldon, *Blair's Britain*, p. 607.

³²³ See Hansard Record of Parliamentary Debate, 18 Mar 03, at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³²⁴ The Guardian, *Full text of Jack Straw's speech*, 1 Apr 03 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³²⁵ It was also clear, in the minds of the UK decision-makers at least, that the legitimacy brought by a UN role in the aftermath was the key to extraction: unlocking funds from international financial institutions and replacing UK and US forces with those of a broader coalition.

³²⁶ Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 150.

³²⁷ Telegram 284 Washington to FCO London, 4 Mar 03, 'Iraq: Day After' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.5, para 735.

³²⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.5, para 768.

UNSCR and the role of a UN Special Representative.³²⁹ However after the acrimonious end of the UN negotiations before the war, and in the stark light of the passions of actual war, the US view quickly changed. In the words of the British Embassy, they were 'not ready, having lost lives to liberate Iraq, to hand control of it over to the UN', and instead intended to pursue a unilateralist approach to the occupation.³³⁰ The UK and the US again found themselves in an ideological rift around the importance of international legitimacy in strategy.

This manifested itself most rapidly (again) in issues of legality. Goldsmith was unequivocal about the legal constraints placed on the 'Coalition' in the absence of UN authority. In formal advice to Blair on 26 March 2003 (as British troops were isolating Basra), he wrote that 'in the absence of a further resolution, the UK (and US) would be bound by the provisions of international law governing belligerent Occupation ... the general principle is that an Occupying Power does not become the government of the occupied territory. Rather, it exercises temporary de facto control ...'.³³¹

The US, however, held a different legal interpretation, which was reflected in ORHA's immediate plans. UK legal advisors identified a suite of ORHA intentions in early April that they considered illegal under international law, including 'installing Coalition nominees as "shadow ministers", filling vacated posts in the Iraqi justice system, appointing a US contractor to run Umm Qasr, and any management of Iraqi oil fields'.³³² Most concerning for the UK was the US's line that the UN should have no role in selecting candidates for an Interim Iraqi Authority (IIA).³³³ With American blood invested in Iraq, it was clear that the US would not cede control of the outcome to an institution they ideologically distrusted. New Labour's internationalist philosophy clashed again with American unilateralism.

The impact of this was considerable. It was central to DFID's refusal to engage with US post-invasion planning. Even more crucially it presented a barrier to UK participation in ORHA. With Whitehall legal officers presenting urgent concerns about the risk of exposing British secondees to potentially illegal activities, the newly-formed AHMGIR vacillated. On 3 April Tony Bereton, the Charge d'Affaires at the British Embassy in Washington, warned Manning that the UK 'was in danger of being

³²⁹ Telegram 321 Washington to London, 10 Mar 03, 'Iraq: Day After Planning' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.5, para 934.

³³⁰ Telegram 428 Washington to FCO London, 3 Apr 03, 'US/Iraq: Phase IV' and Telegram 448 Washington to FCO London, 4 Apr 03, 'Iraq: Post-Conflict' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 95.

³³¹ Minute Attorney General to Prime Minister, 26 Mar 03, 'Iraq: Authorisation for an Interim Administration' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³³² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 100.

³³³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 114.

left behind' on ORHA, with the list of personnel allocated to positions as 'shadow ministers' (one of the key areas of potentially illegal activity) almost filled.³³⁴ A week later at a first meeting of the AHMGIR, Straw called for a 'step change in [the UK's] contribution to ORHA', but Manning commented to the Prime Minister that 'legal constraints ... may be problematic'.³³⁵

The lack of a British lead for managing post-invasion strategy cannot have helped, and it is notable that the AHMGIR (the first attempt to fill the void) had to grapple with this issue at its very first meeting. Institutional and internationalist issues collided. In the end, right or wrong, the UK missed its window of opportunity at ORHA, with Ole Olsen (the Danish Ambassador to Syria) appointed as head of the ORHA southern office; there was no senior UK voice in the organisation during the important initial period.³³⁶ This continued until Olsen resigned in frustration and was finally replaced by a British appointee, Sir Hilary Synnott, at the end of July 2003.³³⁷

The six weeks of mid-March and April 2003 were a crucial time for British strategy in practice. The occupation of Basra, the uncontested expansion of the UK AO, the establishment of ORHA, and the evolution of Whitehall mechanisms to handle post-invasion strategy all took place in this short window: establishing the foundations for occupation, and defining the British capacity to adapt in the face of a rapidly evolving war. This period was typified for the UK by a distinct lack of choice. The endstate of the first decision fixed the frame for the second, trapping the UK in a series of contingent outcomes. The military operation set the tone: the UK's strategy was subordinated to an American operational-level of war, with the UK in-flow in the south pre-deciding the outcome for occupation. Above all, however, the fundamental clash in overall alliance aims continued to create strategic problems for the British: causing rifts between Ministers and Whitehall departments, limiting options, and constraining decisive decision-making. This was a dissonance between strategy in theory and strategy in practice that could not be overcome.

Despite all of these concerns, there was still a chance that the UK could have come out of the initial phase of the campaign with minimal damage. Garner's plan, *prima facie*, was characterised by haste: a rapid transition to an Iraqi authority within 90 days. By the end of April an authorising UNSCR looked negotiable. Unbeknownst to the British authorities, however, Bush and his team were about

³³⁴ Letter Brenton to Manning, 3 Apr 03, 'Post Conflict Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 194.

³³⁵ Letter Cannon to Owen, 7 Mar 03, 'Iraq: Post-Conflict Issues' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³³⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 323.

³³⁷ Synnott, *Bad Days in Basra*, p. 4.

to make dramatic strategic changes. The UK (who were not consulted) had little choice but to follow America down the rabbit hole.

Turning Point: the Rejection of the ORHA Post-Invasion Strategy

In 2008 RAND published a study entitled 'After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq', which included a succinct summary of the strategic assumptions that the Coalition was carrying at the time of the invasion. They were in turn: that the military campaign would have a decisive end and would produce a stable security environment; that Coalition forces would be greeted as liberators; that Iraqi government ministries would continue to function; that humanitarian relief requirements would be extensive; and that infrastructure throughout the country would remain largely intact.³³⁸

These assumptions were the foundation of ORHA's fledgling plan on their arrival in Baghdad on 1 April 2003. Importantly, ORHA's plan had Presidential approval. Between 10 and 13 March 2003 Garner and the Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith briefed Bush on their strategy. There were three key pillars. First Garner would fund the continued existence of the Iraqi army and police. Second was the conduct of a 'light' de-Ba'athification process, ensuring the continued existence of the Iraqi civil service. Finally, mirroring the model used in Afghanistan, was the rapid transition of governance to a new IIA within 90 days.³³⁹ This was no 'puppet-transfer', but the creation of a genuine power-sharing agreement between an Iraqi authority and the Coalition. USAID (the American aid agency) would coordinate a major humanitarian operation in the background. Bush endorsed the plan, and Garner arrived in the country, understaffed and in chaos but with the support of his President. 'We'll get there', he said, 'it will look like hell, but we'll all come together on the objective'.³⁴⁰

All of these assumptions proved to be wrong. The expected humanitarian crisis, the one contingency that had actually been planned for, never emerged. Government ministries were found to already be hollow, with many civil servants leaving their posts in fear of retribution. The Iraqi Army, in line with the psychological operations applied upon them by Coalition forces³⁴¹, mostly abandoned their posts.

³³⁸ Nora Bensahel, Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, Richard R. Brennan Jr., Heather S. Gregg, Thomas Sullivan, Andrew Rathmell, *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), pp. 234 – 235.

³³⁹ Paper IPU, 28 Mar 03, 'Iraq: Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA)' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁴⁰ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, pp. 44 – 45.

³⁴¹ For examples of Coalition psychological operations pamphlets that directed the Iraqi Army to desert see www.iwar.org.au at [link](#) and [link](#) and [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

Perhaps most consequentially, rather than a stable security environment, the removal of the Hussein regime unleashed an instinctive backlash of violence and destruction against the state. Widespread looting began in both Baghdad and Basra on the same day that Saddam's statue toppled in Firdos Square. When later interviewed by the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), an ORHA advisor said 'we found [Baghdad] in utter chaos'. Billions of dollars of damage were caused in the first few weeks, with critical infrastructure including power lines and hospitals stripped bare, and an estimated one million tonnes of conventional munitions³⁴² raided from arms caches (the fuel for the insurgency that later erupted).³⁴³ British troops in Basra, who had been issued no Phase IV instructions in the original *Execution Order*, stood by helplessly.³⁴⁴ Brigadier Graham Binns, Commander 7th Armoured Brigade, later stated to the Inquiry that 'the best way to stop the looting was just to get to the point where there was nothing left to loot'.³⁴⁵

Garner and ORHA bore the brunt of these failed assumptions. The reality was that they had never been resourced – in terms of time, staff, nor finance – to develop a successful plan. The most immediate result, however, was a perception in Washington that Garner was failing. More seriously, confidence within the White House for the strategy for a swift transition to an Iraqi authority was also fading. On 6 May 2003, just fifteen days after Garner's arrival, it was announced that L. Paul Bremer III, a career Foreign Service officer, would replace Garner and that ORHA would be absorbed into the CPA.³⁴⁶

Bremer's appointment did not just mark a change in leadership, but a change in strategy. In Bush's now infamous 'Mission Accomplished' speech on 1 May 2003 he stated 'the transition from dictatorship to democracy will take time, but it is worth every effort ... our Coalition will remain until the job is done'.³⁴⁷ In his memoirs Bremer recalled 'the President had effectively, though perhaps not formally, changed his position on the question of a short or long occupation, having before the war been in favor of a short occupation. By the time I came in, that was gone'.³⁴⁸ Bremer moved decisively on arrival, issuing the controversial and impactful CPA Orders One and Two, which directed

³⁴² Ricardo Sanchez and Donald T. Phillips, *Wiser in Battle: a Soldier's Story* (United States: Harper Collins, 2009), Loc Cit 2583.

³⁴³ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, pp. 58 - 60.

³⁴⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.8, para 16.

³⁴⁵ Transcript of Public Hearing, Brigadier Binns, 2 Jun 10, p. 11 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁴⁶ For an excellent record of the failures to support Garner and ORHA, and the outcomes of this, see Gordon Rudd, *Reconstructing Iraq: Regime Change, Jay Garner and the ORHA Story* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

³⁴⁷ See CSPAN, *President Bush Mission Accomplished Speech*, 1 May 2003 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁴⁸ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 69.

broad scale de-Ba'athification and the dissolution of the Iraqi state security architecture.³⁴⁹ As the SIGIR later concluded, 'during the summer of 2003 the US role in Iraq, under Bremer's leadership, rapidly and massively expanded, far eclipsing the minimalist liberation vision that had set planning for war in motion a year and a half earlier'.³⁵⁰ This change, discarding almost all of the pre-war planning, was a seminal moment in the 'Joint Occupation'.

The British Government was not meaningfully consulted on this change from one pre-war theory to a dramatically different strategy in practice. As Jeremy Greenstock stated, 'London was not ... sufficiently consulted on the change from ORHA to the CPA, from Garner to Bremer'.³⁵¹ The first mention of Bremer's appointment in the evidence is in a minute to Blair from Rycroft, his Private Secretary, on 2 May, stating that 'a State Department Ambassador, Bremmer [sic], is due to take over from Garner'.³⁵² There is no mention of the accompanying change in strategy, and the first time the AHMGIR discussed Bremer was on 22 May, sixteen days after his appointment and after CPA Orders One and Two.³⁵³ The strategic landscape was shifting dramatically beneath the feet of UK decision-makers. This did not necessarily have to be a threat: indeed there was opportunity, if the British could be flexible enough in the execution of strategy in practice. Three linked influences constrained their ability to do so: the lack of an expeditionary capability beyond the military, the limitations of the manoeuvre warfare doctrine being executed by Coalition armed forces, and the resulting failure of UK influence as their 'strategic currency' was exhausted.

A Crisis of Expeditionary Tools of National Power. To understand what it was like to be seconded to the Coalition effort in June 2003 one can turn to the evidence of Emma Sky, a British foreign policy specialist who served as the Governorate Coordinator for Kirkuk in Northern Iraq from 2003 to 2004 (see footnote).³⁵⁴ Sky's experiences are indicative of the lack of expeditionary civilian capability held

³⁴⁹ Bremer, *My Year in Iraq*, pp. 38 - 55.

³⁵⁰ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 64.

³⁵¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, p. 179.

³⁵² Minute Rycroft to Prime Minister, 2 May 03, 'Iraq: ORHA' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁵³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 376.

³⁵⁴ Sky was working for the British Council when she was forwarded an email being circulated around the Civil Service seeking volunteers for work with the CPA. When she expressed interest she was rapidly seconded from the British Council to the Foreign Office, and then to the CPA. She received no pre-deployment training or briefings, either on the political or security situation. She was given no job description and was entirely unaware of what role she would fulfil on arrival. As a British secondee in a US-led area of the CPA in the north of Iraq, she was given no boundaries: no terms of reference, no understanding of Resolution 1483, or of the legal risk the UK was carrying in its role as a 'Joint Occupying Power'. When she arrived in Baghdad she was simply told to 'go north'. She initially went to Mosul and then Irbil, only to be told there was already someone there. But Kirkuk was free, so she stayed – becoming the senior civilian representative of the 'Joint Occupying Powers', answering directly to Ambassador Bremer. She was the only British national in the province, but had no direct reporting chain to the UK. She used Hotmail as her principal method of communication. She had no end-date to her secondment. See transcript of Public Hearing, 14 Jan 11 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

by the UK government as the time of the invasion. On 18 March 2003, as Parliament was voting, the British government had only ten to sixteen non-MoD civilian personnel ready to deploy to Iraq.³⁵⁵ The wider deployed civilian footprint was not much more significant. The MoD contributed the greatest levels - deploying 156 civilians as part of the 46,000 armed forces personnel (less than 0.3%).³⁵⁶ The DFID presence was minuscule thanks to Short's direction: only four DFID staff were in Kuwait, with an additional two in Cyprus.³⁵⁷

The FCO commenced an emergency recruiting effort to fill the gap. There was limited capacity to be selective. Sir Michael Jay, the FCO Permanent Undersecretary, was clear that he would accept volunteers from anywhere. 'In all cases', Jay wrote to the Cabinet Secretary, 'enthusiasm and personal qualities are likely to be just as important as specific expertise'.³⁵⁸ By July over 100 civilian staff from sixteen branches of government were deployed, but this pool of staff barely scratched the surface. This problem was persistent. In late July 2003 Synnott, once he had taken over as the head of CPA (South), urgently sought provision of thirty-seven specific staff. By 1 January 2004, five months later, only eighteen of the thirty-seven had arrived.³⁵⁹

This was a systemic issue. The British government simply lacked any developed, expeditionary capability that could execute a civilian-effort on the scale of Iraq. This is best illustrated in the Minutes from Ministerial discussions around a post-invasion audit into Iraq reconstruction (that took place between July and September 2003) which record the following: that there was no MoD/FCO/DFID trilateral construct for strategic development; that no construct existed for aligned tactical to operational level planning for civilian deployments; there was no identified and trained civilian pool for deployment; there were no identified funding lines; and there were no standing contingency arrangements. It is striking how much comparison there is with standing military structures and doctrines³⁶⁰, and it would be reasonable to argue that what Ministers were really seeking was an 'operational level' for civilian/post-invasion efforts. The effort applied in 2004 to

³⁵⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 15.1, para 65.

³⁵⁶ Minute Flaherty to PS/PUS [MoD], 31 Mar 03, 'Deployed Civilians in Support of OP TELIC' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁵⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 15.1, paras 67 – 68.

³⁵⁸ Letter Jay to Turnbull, 22 Apr 03, 'Iraq: UK Support for the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA)' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁵⁹ Transcript of Public Hearing, Sir Hilary Synnott, 9 Dec 9 p. 45 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁶⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.3, para 901.

setting up a new cross-government organisation, the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit (PCRU), is indicative of the urgency to fix this systemic problem.³⁶¹

British strategy prior to the invasion – built for a battle, not the war – allowed this evident issue to be ignored. The view in both Downing Street and the FCO was clear that the British should provide expertise into both ORHA and the CPA, but both Whitehall offices were blind to how little capability existed. Blair (again) took a maximising approach to the British contribution in a quest for influence. On 13 April he told his team that the UK ‘should put as many UK people in [ORHA] as possible’.³⁶² On 17 April he chaired an Ad Hoc Meeting on Iraq, directed that personnel and funding should be allocated by 24 April, and that there should be ‘no bureaucratic hold up in sorting out this priority’.³⁶³ His view was summed up by his Private Secretary on the same day, who said that the UK’s input ‘should be commensurate with our contribution to the military phase’.³⁶⁴ But there was simply no broader expeditionary structure for Blair to activate. This is one of many examples where Blair and his inner circle established strategic ends, but with no detailed plan to deliver them. The frustration Blair expressed when his directions fell on deaf ears was wholly unreasonable.

The UK civilian personnel who were seconded to Iraq committed themselves to the campaign with bravery and self-sacrifice. Some, like Sky, were ideologically opposed to the invasion.³⁶⁵ However in comparison to the military this commitment was always going to be limited. In his book *The Profession of Arms*, General Sir John Hackett introduced the phrase ‘the unlimited liability contract’ to describe the commitment demanded by the military profession.³⁶⁶ Service personnel will (in the words of military ethicist Martin Cook), ‘follow lawful orders in full recognition that they may die or be severely injured in the fulfilment of those orders’.³⁶⁷ No such contract existed with deployed civilians. Each one was required to judge their own scale of commitment, particularly as violence grew. This resulted, understandably, in a trend of short tours, quick turnovers and long periods out of theatre for civilian staff.³⁶⁸ The creation of the PCRU had the potential to fix some of the structural

³⁶¹ Minute [DFID junior official] to Drummond, 29 June 2005, ‘PCRU Update Meeting with the PUSS, 21 June’ found at Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.3, para 918.

³⁶² Note Blair to Powell, 13 Apr 03, ‘Note’ from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁶³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 250.

³⁶⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 252.

³⁶⁵ Sky, *Unravelling*, p. 16.

³⁶⁶ General Sir John Hackett, *The Profession of Arms* (New York, Macmillan: 1983).

³⁶⁷ Martin Cook, *The Moral Warrior: Ethics and Service in the US Military* (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press: 2004).

³⁶⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 15.1, para 677.

issues, but it was never likely to provide the philosophical framework to match that of the military. The military, however, had their own philosophical issues to deal with.

Whither Operations Other Than War? The Shortfalls of the Military Philosophy of Manoeuvre.

Bremer pitched high when looking for historical comparisons for his role in Iraq. ‘My new assignment did combine’, he wrote, ‘some of the vice-regal responsibilities of General Douglas MacArthur, de facto ruler of Imperial Japan after World War II, and of General Lucius Clay, who led the American occupation of defeated Nazi Germany’.³⁶⁹ The comparison is doubtful, but what is true is that both MacArthur and Clay had one thing that Bremer did not: military mass. MacArthur had a total of 354,675 troops at his disposal in an acquiescent environment.³⁷⁰ Over 1.6 million soldiers occupied the US sector in Germany in the immediate aftermath of the Nazi surrender.³⁷¹ After the Iraq invasion, by comparison, only 173,000 troops were available to stabilise a country crippled by decades of repression, sanctions and war – one that (unlike Germany or Japan) contained an enemy who was far from defeated.³⁷²

Mass, however, was not the only problem. The Coalition forces that invaded Iraq were philosophically unprepared for what followed. Part One referenced that the small size of this force was the dirt of the so-called ‘revolution in military affairs’ (RMA), which found its greatest proponents in Rumsfeld and Franks. However to truly understand the philosophical issues one needs to go one level deeper, into the manoeuvre warfare doctrine born from the RMA and shared by both the UK and US.

As discussed in the Introduction and Part One, the publication of the revised Field Manual 100-5 in 1982 introduced the concept of the ‘operational level of war’ into US – and then NATO – military lexicons.³⁷³ The next two decades saw a steady effort across NATO to develop the ‘operational level’ into a doctrinal reality. US Army work on *AirLand Battle* in the early 80s sparked a resurgence in thinking within the British staff college on the idea of ‘manoeuvre warfare’. This concept, which drew on pre-existing ideas like Fuller’s ‘brain warfare’ and Liddell Hart’s ‘indirect approach’, focussed on the achievement of decisive military victory by attacking an enemy’s critical weaknesses:

³⁶⁹ Bremer, *My Year in Iraq*, p. 34.

³⁷⁰ James Dobbins, John McGinn, Keith Crane, Seth Jones, Rollie Lal, Andrew Rathmell, Rachel Swanger, Anga Timilsina, *America’s Role in Nation Building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA, RAND: 2003), p. 122.

³⁷¹ Dobbins et al, *America’s Role in Nation Building*, p. 73. While this reduced rapidly to an Occupational Troop Basis of around 200,000 by the end of 1946, it still initially ensured the comprehensive occupation of the country.

³⁷² For further analysis of how the historical context of previous post-war reconstruction tasks were fed into the interagency planning process for post-invasion Iraq, see Rudd, *Reconstructing Iraq*, pp. 87 – 93.

³⁷³ See pp. 14 – 15 in the Introduction, and p. 51 in Part One.

shattering his will and cohesion rather than the attritional destruction of his troops.³⁷⁴ Between 1989 and 1994 the planets aligned to enshrine a number of key theories into Coalition doctrine. The ‘manoeuvrist approach’ become gospel for both the American and British militaries after the 1991 Gulf War. In 1997 the British military enshrined ‘manoeuvre’ as its capstone philosophy in its first ‘joint’ doctrinal publication, *British Defence Doctrine*.³⁷⁵

Professor Richard Holmes once said, ‘doctrine is not just what is taught, or what is published, but what is believed’.³⁷⁶ By the turn of the century the belief in the philosophy of manoeuvre was common across the British services, and was near biblical in the British Army. It dominated joint and single service doctrine, particularly in the Army’s capstone *Army Doctrinal Publication 1 – Operations*³⁷⁷, and formed the core of the warfighting approach tested during Exercise SAIF SAREEA II in Oman in 2001.³⁷⁸ It coloured all tactical and operational design. Figure 2 below is an example of a doctrinal aide memoire issued to commanders in a British armoured battlegroup prior to the invasion, listing the ‘Ten Commandments of Manoeuvre Warfare’. This common warfighting philosophy of manoeuvre was a key factor in helping the British Division ease seamlessly into a US Corps. It is of note that the ‘manoeuvrist approach’ was seen as one applicable across the levels of war. In British military doctrine, manoeuvre was not just a tactic, it was strategy.³⁷⁹

This single-minded focus on manoeuvre, however, came at an institutional cost for both nations: forcing a focus on ‘battle’ vice the far broader strategic demands of ‘war’. Other doctrinal approaches atrophied in the shadow of major-combat operations. In the British military this was typified by what Engel and Ucko have categorised as a ‘misplaced complacency’ around stabilisation and counter-insurgency (COIN) operations. As they explain, neither COIN nor stabilisation were trained systemically within British military institutions. Instead the British relied on a belief that their

³⁷⁴ See Markus Mäder, *Doctoral Thesis on the Evolution of British Defence Doctrine*, 2003, p. 92 available at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁷⁵ In 1989 in the US the Marine Corps published their new capstone doctrine, FMFM1 – *Warfighting*, which enshrined ‘manoeuvre’ as their central concept, ‘a warfighting philosophy that seeks to shatter the enemy’s cohesion through a series of rapid, violent, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which he cannot cope’. The same message was emphasised in the UK’s newly published *Design for Military Operations – British Military Doctrine*, also produced in 1989, which reinforced both the operational level of war and the manoeuvre warfare approach. See Mäder, *Evolution of British Defence Doctrine*, 2003, p. 93.

³⁷⁶ UK MoD, *Army Doctrine Publication: Army Doctrine Primer* (Shrivenham: UK MoD 2011), p. 1-1 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁷⁷ UK MoD, *Army Doctrine Publication 1 – Operations*, Version 2 (Shrivenham: UK MoD 1995).

³⁷⁸ This exercise was the largest expeditionary deployment of British troops since the 1991 Gulf War, and which acted as a rehearsal for the Iraqi invasion.

³⁷⁹ For a discussion on strategy, manoeuvre and the operational level of war see Strachan, *Direction of War*, Chapter 11, p. 209 – 234.

previous experiences in Malaya, Northern Ireland and the Balkans filled this gap: a 'national military style' held within its institutional genetic code.³⁸⁰

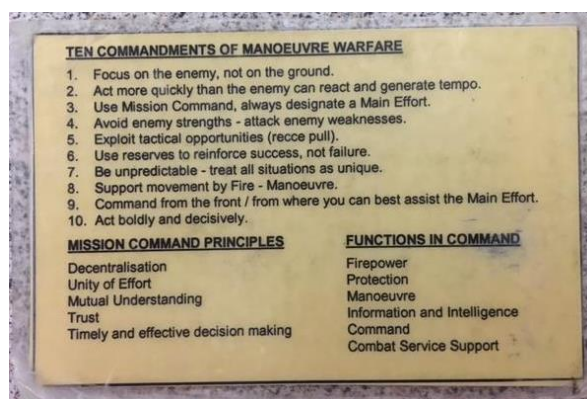


Figure 2: Manoeuvre Warfare Tactical Aide Memoire, 7th Armoured Brigade, 2003.³⁸¹

The reaction in the US was even more extreme. The American military simply dismissed stability operations, parking such tasks under the uninspiring title of 'Military Operations Other than War'³⁸², and declaring that stabilisation was not a conventional military role. This belief went high. In his Inquiry evidence, Boyce cites Rumsfeld's view that 'we are here to do the warfighting, not the peacekeeping'.³⁸³ Condoleezza Rice wrote in 2000 that 'the President must remember that the military is a special instrument. It is lethal and meant to be. It is not a civilian peace force ... and it is most certainly not designed to build a civilian society'.³⁸⁴ The singular focus on a manoeuvre philosophy, so successful from 19 March to 9 April, left the Coalition force misaligned and unable to adapt as the character of the war in Iraq started to change around them.

Mass and investment might have offset these philosophical shortfalls, but in OPLAN 1003V neither were present – indeed the opposite. On 16 April 2003, the same day as his 'Freedom Message', Franks ordered the redeployment of America's warfighting units within sixty days, and limited the deployment of incoming forces rolling into Iraq to only 120 days. The net effect of this sought to

³⁸⁰ Robert Egnell and David Ucko, 'True to Form? Questioning the British Counterinsurgency Tradition' in Heuser and Shamir, ed., *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies*, pp. 39 – 46.

³⁸¹ Author's own, issued on arrival in Kuwait during his service as an Armoured Troop Leader as part of 7th Armoured Brigade, prior to the invasion of Iraq. This aide memoire was intended to be carried everywhere, providing a ready reference of manoeuvre warfare principles.

³⁸² David Johnson, 'You Go to COIN with the Military You Have: The United States and 250 Years of Irregular War' in Heuser and Shamir, *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies*, p. 136.

³⁸³ See box entitled 'UK Comments on Levels of Deployed US Forces' at Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 8, p. 83.

³⁸⁴ Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, Loc Cit 3569.

reduce the US force presence in the country to less than 30,000 by the first of August.³⁸⁵ Rumsfeld added to this direction on 21 April by cancelling the deployment of 50,000 troops scheduled to arrive in the region as part of post-invasion reinforcements, to the surprise of Lieutenant General McKiernan and to the dismay of Garner.³⁸⁶ The troops were moving in the opposite direction to Bush's shifting strategy.

McKiernan himself did not have long to worry about such issues. On 16 May Franks issued orders for both him and CFLCC to hand over the Iraq theatre to Five (V) Corps (designated CJTF-7) and to extract by 15 June. In the view of the new commander of V Corps, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, 'this abrupt turnaround was another monumental blunder that created significant strategic risk for America'.³⁸⁷ The extraction of CFLCC stripped from Iraq the best theatre/strategic interface in the modern US military ('the dream team', as it was known) and replaced it with a Corps HQ that was untrained, understaffed and unsuited to a Phase IV role of the Bremer scale.³⁸⁸ Without the talents of the CFLCC staff, the Iraq theatre become even more disconnected from its political masters. Franks himself unexpectedly announced his retirement in mid-April 2003, just after the invasion. 'We are at an obvious point of 'mission change,' he said in his memoir, 'moving from major combat to post-hostility operations'.³⁸⁹ He clearly did not want to be part of a very different war.

In the south the UK was conducting its own rapid extraction. On 24 April, just two days after the UK AO was declared 'permissive', PJHQ received approval from Hoon for the first substantial withdrawal of UK ground troops³⁹⁰ (indeed the inquiry concluded that the drawdown had actually commenced before the 'permissive' declaration).³⁹¹ By 11 June 25,000 UK service personnel had returned, leaving behind around 17,000.³⁹² By mid-July, as the rotation was taking place between HQ 1st UK Division and HQ 3rd UK Division (who formed the first iteration of Multi-National Division (South East)), British troop strengths had reduced to 12,000, barely a quarter of its peak of 46,000.³⁹³ Leadership was also changing over, with Boyce retiring in May 2003 to be replaced by General Michael Walker³⁹⁴, and the

³⁸⁵ Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle*, Loc Cit 2510.

³⁸⁶ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 61.

³⁸⁷ Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle*, p. 179.

³⁸⁸ Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle*, p. 180.

³⁸⁹ Franks, *American Soldier*, p. 530.

³⁹⁰ Minute Wallace to PS/Secretary of State [MoD], 24 April 2003, 'Op TELIC: Realignment of UK Forces' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 8, para 692.

³⁹¹ Report Burrige to CJO, 8 May 03, 'NCC Operation TELIC Hauldown Report: 07 Feb 03 – 08 May 03' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, paras 233 - 234.

³⁹² House of Commons, *Official Report*, 11 Jun 03, columns 51-52WS found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁹³ Letter Williams to Rycroft, 10 July 2003, 'UK force levels in Iraq' including Manuscript comment Rycroft from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 216.

³⁹⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 273.

7th Armoured Brigade commander swapping out in Basra as early as April.³⁹⁵ One of the most impressive expeditionary deployments of troops in British history was followed by one of the most rapid withdrawals, as battlegroups streamed out of the country.

For the US this withdrawal was a matter of choice. For the UK, however, it was a matter of urgent expediency. The 1998 SDR's Defence Planning Assumptions placed TELIC as 'large scale', and policy advice from the MoD in March 2003 was explicit that this could only be sustained for up to six months unless 'very serious risk is to be placed on the deployed force, and UK forces more widely'. The six months was now up and it was imperative (in MoD eyes) to reduce the force to no more than the 'Medium Scale' of a 'Brigade size of equivalent'; around 10,000 troops.³⁹⁶ With 1,700 troops in Afghanistan, and with around 16,000 troops still being held ready for a strike of the fire service³⁹⁷, there was nothing left for the British military to give. Indeed Lieutenant General Anthony Palmer, the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Personnel), later attested that, at the highest point in 2003, 62% of the Armed Forces were committed to operations.³⁹⁸ This was far in excess of even the 50% assessed in pre-conflict advice to Blair, and evidently not sustainable. The British military had no choice but to push for a rapid withdrawal.³⁹⁹

The combined effects of the DoD and MoD's myopic focus on manoeuvre warfighting, and the decision/requirement to immediately withdraw, were a key constraint on Coalition strategic freedom of action as the war started to morph in May to July 2003. These effects should not have been a surprise: they had been identified well in advance of the invasion. General Shinseki's warnings to Congress were loud and clear.⁴⁰⁰ In addition, Conrad Crane and Andrew Terrill at the Army War College Strategic Studies Institute published a study on 1 February 2003 that identified 135 essential tasks and that military and civilian agencies would need to perform in post-invasion Iraq.⁴⁰¹ Other studies came to similar conclusions. The decision made by British and American officials to ignore these issues – in width, depth and context – can only be described as vincible. They deployed a force to win a battle, but one they should have known was wholly unfit to grapple with the war that would inevitably follow.

³⁹⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 223.

³⁹⁶ Minute Sec(O)4 to PS/Secretary of State [MoD], 6 March 2003, 'Iraq: Aftermath – Medium to Long Term UK Military Commitment', 6 Mar 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁹⁷ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 Apr 03, columns 12W onwards found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁹⁸ Parliament, *Third Report of the Select Committee on Defence*, para 44 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

³⁹⁹ Minute Sec(O)4 to PS/Secretary of State [MoD], 6 Mar 03, 'Iraq: Aftermath – Medium to Long Term UK Military Commitment' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁰⁰ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 96 – 97.

⁴⁰¹ Andrew W. Terrill and Conrad C. Crane, *Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario* (US Army War College Press, 2003) found at [link](#) (accessed 8 Apr 25).

Some perceptive minds did recognise after the invasion that the war was not over, but just changing. In preparation for a Blair/Bush engagement on 3 July, Manning wrote to the Prime Minister stating (emphasis from original), 'this is a key exchange. There are a number of vital messages to get across. Top is security. The signs point to this getting worse not better'. Troop levels were at the heart of Manning's concerns. 'Have we got enough troops? The US Administration (and our own MoD) seem to be arguing that we have. Personally I strongly doubt it'. Manning proposed a triad of measures to be discussed with Bush, of which the first was to, 'surge large numbers of additional troops into Iraq to get us through the current security crisis ... (I suspect our MoD would disagree. DOD certainly would)'. He summarised by stating that, 'Bush needs to hear the alarm now. He needs to focus, and to galvanise action, if we are not to find ourselves increasingly embattled in Iraq'.⁴⁰²

Manning's strategic foresight was sound, and it is notable that he was providing it and not the military leadership. But he was proposing options for which the UK had no resources. The only way there could be a surge in troops would have been through the US. Manning was seeking to leverage in his advice to Blair the one strategic tool that seemed to have proved consistently successful: the Blair/Bush personal connection. But while Blair may well have agreed with Manning, he could not bring himself to raise the issue in such stark terms with Bush. As we will discuss below, Blair and New Labour's 'strategic currency' was running low. Blair did not raise the subject, and the withdrawal continued apace.

'Strategic Currency' and the Failure of UK Influence: the Memorandum of Understanding Vignette.

Strategic theory can help us understand the net effect of the two influences described above. In the *Strategy Bridge*, Gray outlines nine dicta in his general theory of strategy. Two of these dictums are of use here. Dictum four is that 'strategy serves politics instrumentally by generating net strategic effect'. Dictum eight is that 'the meaning and character of strategies are driven, though not dictated and wholly determined, by their contexts, all of which are constantly in play'. Gray goes on to recognise seven contexts that shape any given strategy: 'political, social-cultural, economic, technological, military, geographical (geopolitical and geostrategic), and historical'.⁴⁰³

In the study of Iraq these two dicta can be combined into a useful concept of 'strategic currency'. This is where the value of the tools of national power that create net strategic effect (military,

⁴⁰² Minute Manning to Prime Minister, 2 Jul 03, 'Iraq: Your video conference with President Bush' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁰³ Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, pp. 31 – 41.

diplomatic, economic and so forth) change as the strategic context evolves. A currency that held exceptional value in one context may prove worthless later on. In mid-2003 the British were faced with just such a situation, where the tools that held value before the invasion lost their worth, and they were unable to find a replacement as the war and the context shifted beneath them. Their currencies in theory shifted in practice.

The most prominent strategic currencies for the British pre-invasion were military, political and social-cultural, in that order. Military capacity played a special role in New Labour's *strategy of influence*, with the escalating commitment of forces as a case in point. The remainder of the UK's currency was a blend of political and social-cultural influence, which they leveraged to considerable but ultimately unsuccessful effect within the UN. The UK's role as a P5 member carried strategic value in itself, but underpinning this was the even more powerful, intangible, historical weight of Great Britain as a political and cultural entity. While diminished since the high points of Empire, the voice of the British government still carried considerable weight. Blair and his team used a blend of these strategic currencies to persuade Bush to seek a UN resolution pre-conflict, and then to negotiate UNSCR 1441.

The value of these instruments was not, however, inherent. It was instead directly related to the strategic context at the time. Military force pre-conflict was particularly valuable due to genuine shortfalls in US capabilities within the military context, especially in the provision of British armoured units as the Turkish route closed and available US force levels dropped (the 'lynchpin' effect from Part One). The British voice in the UN was valuable pre-conflict as the Security Council was central to the legitimacy of the campaign. But as the context changed, the value changed. The British rapidly discovered that they needed to pursue new currencies once the invasion was over. They clearly did not have the military or civilian tools needed to trade for influence in the CPA.

Money was the next potential instrument of strategic value, but here the UK seemed unwilling or unable to provide anything substantive. By May 2003 DFID (who picked up the initial cost of reconstruction) had committed the not-inconsiderable sum of £117.8 million to 'relief, recovery and reconstruction activities' during the 2003 to 2004 financial year⁴⁰⁴, but this paled into insignificance in the face of the US\$20.3 billion appropriated by Congress into Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Funds

⁴⁰⁴ Letter Amos to Boateng, 10 Sep 03, 'Iraq Reconstruction Funding: Reserve Claim' and Paper DFID, 4 Nov 09, 'Iraq – DFID Timeline and Financial Commitments: 2003-2009' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 336.

(IRRFs).⁴⁰⁵ The British Treasury actively resisted increasing financial support, seeking instead to rely on US funding to underwrite the UK AO.⁴⁰⁶

By September 2003 the rift between the UK's desire for influence and their capacity to contribute 'currency' was plain. 'There is a growing and costly perception in Whitehall (and potentially parts of the CPA and US Administration)', wrote a British Treasury official, 'that if the UK wants to pull its weight, it should cover 10% of all costs ... Greenstock has hinted that if we want to influence the outcome ... we have to buy our way in. We refute this'. The Treasury official went on to reminisce about the invasion, stating 'our military contribution was crucial to the success of the initial operation ... and our ability to influence through political leverage should not be diminished significantly'.⁴⁰⁷ He was starkly wrong. The UK struggled throughout the 'Joint Occupation' to identify instruments of sufficient strategic value to influence US decision-making.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the UK's failure to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the US over shared authority within 'Joint Occupation'. This is a key example of the sudden bankruptcy of UK strategic currency post-invasion. In early April 2003 – at the same time that FCO lawyers were trying unsuccessfully to alter the text of Franks' 'Freedom Message' speech – Foreign Secretary Jack Straw wrote to Blair stating that his strategic instincts were that the UK should be fully involved in ORHA, but that if they did so, 'then the risk of the United Kingdom being jointly responsible for *all* ORHA's actions increases (including in the 75 percent – 80 percent of Iraq which will be under US and not UK de facto control)'.⁴⁰⁸ Straw's insights were prescient.

Straw's proposed solution was to negotiate a MoU with the US which formalised British authority in ORHA decision-making, ensuring the UK had an equal voice. Straw attached a draft of the MoU to Blair, which proposed that the UK and the US 'have agreed that there should be full consultation (and joint decision-making) in advance of policy decisions about ORHA's activities'. Straw's plan, as was so often the case within the *doctrine of the individual*, was for Blair to solve this issue directly with Bush in one-on-one talks at Hillsborough Castle on 8 April 2003.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁵ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, pp. 99 - 104.

⁴⁰⁶ Minute Treasury [junior official] to Chief Secretary, 18 Sep 03, 'Iraq Funding FY 2003-04: Dealing with Reserve Claims' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁰⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 713.

⁴⁰⁸ Minute Straw to Prime Minister, 7 Apr 03, 'Iraq: OHRA' attaching 'Annex E: Draft Memorandum of understanding between the UK and US on OHRA' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁰⁹ Minute Straw to Prime Minister, 7 Apr 03, 'Iraq: OHRA' attaching 'Annex E: Draft Memorandum of understanding between the UK and US on OHRA' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

Blair and Straw, however, had little 'currency' to barter with. The UK were fully entangled. In a dilemma that was almost Melian in nature, the British had little choice but to continue to commit to the evolving US strategy even in the face of the legal and moral risks. There was no agreement (nor even discussion) around a MoU at Hillsborough. Straw again raised the issue with Blair on 15 April.⁴¹⁰ The US pushed back hard against the idea when it was raised by British representatives in Washington, labelling it as a 'secret pact' that would garner suspicion within the international community.⁴¹¹ Major decisions continued to be made without any UK consultation, with the principal legal advisors to the FCO complaining that the CPA had been formed, but they had no idea what it was.⁴¹² Blair, however, elected again not to raise the issue with Bush when they next spoke on 7 May⁴¹³, and by 9 May British officials were admitting that a MoU was unlikely to succeed.⁴¹⁴

When the MoU negotiations failed, the UK stepped obediently into the 'Joint Occupation' role allocated them by the US. Straw was the most frustrated. He wrote to Blair on 5 June stating that the 'UK must be fully involved in all decisions since the US has forced us to be jointly responsible for the effect of all Coalition decisions across Iraq ... we wanted an MoU with the US to agree that the UK was solely responsible for our southern area: the US for the rest of Iraq. The US refused'. 'I'd be grateful', he wrote, 'if you could flag up very forcefully these points with President Bush'.⁴¹⁵ The Blair/Bush connection, relied on consistently, failed this time. I will examine later how a reliance on such personal connections both helped and hindered the UK.

Bush's decision in May 2003 to discard the pre-war reconstruction plan, to place Bremer and the CPA in charge, and to support CPA Orders One and Two represented a significant shift from the pre-war theory of US strategy. He moved the Coalition from a strategy of a short occupation to a long one, undermining many of the assumptions made before the war, and creating a strategic imbalance that had considerable implications for US allies. The UK were not consulted on these decisions; indeed they were unaware that the context was shifting beneath their feet. They soon discovered that they lacked the strategic currency – diplomatic, military or financial – to influence the outcomes. The US,

⁴¹⁰ Letter Straw to Prime Minister, 15 Apr 03, 'Iraq: Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA)' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴¹¹ Telegram 504 Washington to FCO London, 15 Apr 03, 'US/Iraq: Phase IV' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 195.

⁴¹² Minute Wood to Chilcot, 6 May 03, 'Iraq: The McKiernan and Franks Proclamations' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 289.

⁴¹³ Letter Cannon to McDonald, 7 May 2003, 'US Foreign Policy Issues: Prime Minister's Conversation with Bush, 7 May' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 300.

⁴¹⁴ Minute Chatterton Dickson to Private Secretary [FCO], 9 May 2003, 'Iraq: ORHA: MOU' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 324.

⁴¹⁵ Minute Straw to Prime Minister, 5 Jun 03, 'Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

emboldened by success in the mere first battle of the war, decided to shape the outcome of Iraq to their unilateral vision of the future: with no more than a passing nod to the fears of and costs to their junior partner. Both were about to discover, however, that the war would not bend easily to the will of the 'Joint Occupiers'. US strategic currency had its own limitations. Iraq had deadly surprises to offer, and the need for the British to adapt their strategy only grew as 2003 continued.

Turning Point: the Attempts to Adapt in late-2003

Iraqi expectations of the Coalition were high in the months after the invasion. Promises had been made, and belief in American exceptionalism was strong. On 10 April, the day after Firdos Square, Bush and Blair spoke in turn to the Iraqi people. 'Coalition forces', Bush said, 'will help maintain law and order, so that Iraqis can live in security ... and then our military forces will leave'. He went on to say, 'you will be free, free to build a better life'. Blair re-iterated these messages, stating that the Coalition would build 'a truly representative Iraqi government, which ... spends Iraq's wealth not on palaces and weapons of mass destruction, but on you and the services you need'.⁴¹⁶

The promises became more specific as the CPA became established. In the CPA's '*Vision for Iraq*' of July 2003, Bremer made a series of commitments on behalf of the Coalition – all with tangible outcomes and exceptionally short timescales (see footnote).⁴¹⁷ From June 2003 onwards Bremer re-iterated these promises in a weekly television address to the Iraqi people in his role as Iraq's 'Administrator'.⁴¹⁸ In late August 2003 he said that 'one year from now, for the first time in history, every Iraqi in every city, town and village will have as much electricity as he or she can use; and he will have it 24 hours, every single day'.⁴¹⁹ The Iraqis took the Coalition at its word. Their patience, however, was not inexhaustible. In August 2003 it ran out, and the character of the war shifted.

The last two weeks of August were the most disastrous for the Coalition – and specifically for the British – since the invasion. The failures of the CPA to meet their unrealistic promises sparked riots in Basra. On 13 August British troops fired 76 baton rounds to control rioters at Basra's Electricity Accounts Building, killing an Iraqi civilian.⁴²⁰ Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and complex ambush

⁴¹⁶ American Rhetoric, *Online Speech Bank: George W. Bush and Tony Blair Speeches to Iraq* found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴¹⁷ These commitments included deploying 30,000 trained Iraqi police, opening all courthouses, restoring basic health services and, critically, improving electricity power generation from 300 megawatts just post the invasion to 4,000 megawatts. See SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 98.

⁴¹⁸ Bremer, *My Year in Iraq*, p. 134.

⁴¹⁹ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 150.

⁴²⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 279.

attacks commenced in response.⁴²¹ On 22 August an attack on an RMP patrol killed three British soldiers, and just a week later another was killed in Maysan.⁴²² This last death represented a milestone for the UK, a tragic point where more British soldiers had been killed since the end of the invasion than during it (a total of fifty).⁴²³ As the DCDS(C) wrote, 'the honeymoon period that followed the conflict is now over'. There had been, 'a decline in Iraqi consent to the Coalition in MND(SE) due to the failure by the Coalition to deliver improvements in essential services'.⁴²⁴ It was, as UK official David Richmond stated with typical British reserve, a 'difficult month'.⁴²⁵

Issues in Basra, however, paled into insignificance in the face of what happened in Baghdad on 19 August, and in Najaf on 29 August 2003. War asserted its unpredictable nature in full through two signature expressions of violence. On 19 August actors most likely linked to Al-Qaida and under control of the Jordanian extremist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi placed a truck bomb under the Baghdad office of the UN's Special Representative for Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello. De Mello and 21 UN staff were killed. This caused a catastrophic reaction within the international community presence in Iraq. The UN withdrew almost entirely: by October 2003 there were less than 40 UN staff in country. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund followed, as did most NGOs. The impact on the progress of reconstruction was huge. Andy Bearpark, the CPA Director of Operations, told the Inquiry, 'on that day, an enormous body of knowledge, wisdom and ability was lost ... it is very difficult to overstate the chaos that caused for the CPA, because all your interlocutors suddenly vanished'.⁴²⁶

De Mello's death was followed by another attack ten days later in Najaf, the religious centre of the Shi'a faith. A bomb at the Imam Ali mosque – most likely also laid by Al-Qaida – killed Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, the leader of the Shi'a political party the Supreme Council for an Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).⁴²⁷ The death of al-Hakim, a moderate and powerful voice amongst the Shi'a south, left a power vacuum later filled by the fanatical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who proved to be a thorn in the side of the Coalition and the British for years to come. The Coalition were, for the first

⁴²¹ Briefing Cabinet Office, 14 Aug 03, 'Iraq: Update for Ministers, 14 August 2003' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 281.

⁴²² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, paras 292 – 294.

⁴²³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 295.

⁴²⁴ Minute DCDS(C) to COSSEC, 18 Aug 03, 'Essential services in MND(SE)' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 289.

⁴²⁵ Telegram 139 IraqRep to FCO London, 26 Aug 03, 'Iraq: How it Looks from Baghdad' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 302.

⁴²⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, paras 643 – 649.

⁴²⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 304.

time, beginning to understand that there were other players operating in the Iraq strategic environment – both within and external to Iraq – that might define the outcome. Iraq was becoming, in the words of the JIC, a ‘lightning rod for jihad’.⁴²⁸ The war, far from being ‘accomplished’, was instead beginning to reveal its true powers of reciprocity and unpredictability.

Blair’s strategic instincts were good. He was often one of the first to recognise that the UK, and the Coalition in general, were failing to adapt. At the end of August he received a comprehensive seven-page review of the situation from his new National Security Advisor, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, who had replaced Manning. The update presented a suite of issues: the declining security situation, the failure to improve utilities, the failure to locate WMD, and the need for a renewed UNSCR. Blair was unimpressed. In a large, annotated note on the document he wrote, ‘this isn’t really working at present. I will have to reflect on how we progress ... I need a meeting next week’.⁴²⁹

This note commenced a focused attempt to adapt British strategy in late 2003. It involved a surge in Blair’s personal engagement, an increase in his leveraging of his relationship with Bush, an increase of bureaucratic activity in standing and ad-hoc committees, and a drive to increase British troop levels. This attempt to adapt strategy in practice in the face of adversity in mid-2003 met with some, if limited, success. Three factors influenced this: the enduring power of Blair’s personal influence and his connection with Bush, the collapse of the Coalitions greatest assumption in the failure to find concrete evidence of Iraqi WMD, and the infiltration of external extremists into Iraq.

The Enduring Power of Blair and his Connection with Bush. In the conclusion to Part One I identified Blair himself as an important influence.⁴³⁰ The Prime Minister initially framed the *strategy of influence* that shaped much of the UK’s posture, influenced Bush towards UNSCR 1441, and his oratory in Parliament was key in taking the country to war. The decline in security in August to September 2003 presented Blair with a challenge, and he grew to believe that his personal energy could once again create strategic adaptation where Whitehall bureaucracies were failing. Did his influence remain undiminished? Or like the military, had his personal strategic currency already started to bleed away?

⁴²⁸ JIC Assessment, 15 Oct 03, ‘International Terrorism: Bases for Sunni Islamist Terrorists’ from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 471.

⁴²⁹ Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 29 Aug 03, ‘Iraq’ including manuscript comment Blair from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴³⁰ See Part One p. 67.

In some ways Blair's influence continued to carry the same power as before. Internally, his meeting on 2 September (the one following the note from Sheinwald) certainly saw him galvanise meaningful action in the following weeks. Blair expressed his full support for Sir Hillary Synnott as the head of CPA (South). He directed that the 'maximum possible support' be given to Synnott's proposals, and two days later the Secretary for International Development committed an additional £20 million of DFID funding.⁴³¹ Even then, DFID remained a bureaucratic problem - with Synnott stating that he would have to 'shame DFID into providing it'.⁴³²

In the following weeks Blair drove tempo hard now that the UK had *de facto* control of CPA (South), pushing Synnott to 'just spend the money and recoup later from CPA (Centre)'.⁴³³ Blair ordered an immediate surge of two full infantry battalions and specialist capabilities (an increase of around 12% of the force already in theatre), with the intention of accelerating Security Sector Reform and addressing Iraq's porous borders.⁴³⁴ He drove Sheinwald particularly robustly, pushing him to ensure that the UK and US strategic aims were aligned in a shared 'UK/US Action Plan' with Condoleezza Rice.⁴³⁵

Blair then sought to galvanise his struggling bureaucracy. He directed Sheinwald to form a new Iraq Senior Officials Group (the 'ISOG') to meet twice weekly, and in early October he personally renewed and chaired the DOP committee – which had not met since 2002 and had not discussed Iraq since 1999. The resurgence of the DOP, which included the Chancellor, Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary, International Development Secretary, and CDS and the Chair of the JIC as required, was an attempt to leverage the classical British theory of Cabinet strategy-making, ensuring alignment across ministers.⁴³⁶ This combined effort met with some success on the ground, albeit as a sticking plaster. By 9 October Synnott was able to report from CPA (South) that, 'all observers close to the scene here detect markedly improved attitudes throughout the South ... the overriding impression, backed by some firm evidence, is that the general population and its leadership have decided to give the

⁴³¹ Letter Benn to Blair, 4 September 2003, 'Iraq: Restoring Essential Services in the South' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 688.

⁴³² Synnott, *Bad Days in Basra*, p. 218.

⁴³³ Note [Blair to Bush], [untitled] from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴³⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 366.

⁴³⁵ Letter Sheinwald to Rice, 11 Sep 03, 'Iraq' attaching Note 10 Downing Street, 10 September 2003, 'Iraq: UK/US Action Plan 10 September' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴³⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 2, paras 142 – 143.

Coalition the benefit of the doubt'. Violence in the South did decline, with the weekly number of attacks against the Coalition falling from twenty in August to two in the first week in October.⁴³⁷

Blair's real belief, however, continued to be in the *doctrine of the individual*. This personal philosophy remained prominent in the post-invasion phase. On 3 June 2003, in one of his private notes to Bush, Blair pushed for the two of them to form a 'small US/UK team, with one of our own people from our own circle' to enable them to clear bureaucratic obstacles.⁴³⁸ When asked by the Inquiry about the impact of the failed MoU with the US on the 'Joint Occupation', Blair answered, 'look, you could have agreed some formal memorandum with the Americans. That wouldn't have been what made it work. What would have made it work was my relationship with the President, Jack's relationship and so on'.⁴³⁹ He re-asserted this belief in his memoirs, when he stated 'you can't take decisions by vast committees of people ... it just doesn't work'.⁴⁴⁰ This approach is why Blair invested such effort in selecting the senior British personnel within Iraq, from Sir John Sawers as the initial British Special Representative in Baghdad, and then onto Greenstock as Sawers' replacement, and Synnott as the head of CPA (South). Blair, and everyone in his team, considered himself and his relationship with Bush to be in that bracket: a critical strategic lever.

Did the Blair/Bush relationships remain as powerful an influence after the invasion? One can test this by mapping Blair's interactions with Bush against the ebb and flow of decision-making through the 'Joint Occupation'. Blair and Bush spoke either by phone or in person thirty-five times between 1 April 2003 and 28 June 2004.⁴⁴¹ Two spikes are recognisable: April 2003 at the end of the invasion (five times), and May 2004 during the first battle of Fallujah and the end of the CPA (also five times). What is more interesting, however, are the low points. Between 7 May and 4 September they only spoke six times: the lowest of any four-month period in the occupation, and coincident with the emergence of many of the core strategic issues within the Coalition. August 2003, the catastrophic month where the 'honeymoon' period was deemed to have ended and de Mello was killed, was the only month where they did not speak at all. This was for one reason – Blair was on holiday in Barbados. Herein lies the risk of the *doctrine of the individual*: personal influence cannot be divested to a deputy, and without one of the protagonists present it cannot be leveraged. Either way, the

⁴³⁷ Telegram Basra to FCO London, 9 Oct 03, 'South Iraq: The Political Scene' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, paras 458 – 459.

⁴³⁸ Letter Manning to McDonald, 2 Jun 03, 'Iraq: Prime Minister's Note' attaching Note [Blair to Bush], [undated], 'Note' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 45.

⁴³⁹ Transcript of Public Hearing, Tony Blair, 21 Jan 101, pp. 140 - 141 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁴⁰ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 447.

⁴⁴¹ This statistic is drawn from a survey by the author of the Iraq Inquiry evidence.

intimacy of the Blair/Bush personal relationship declined in the months following the invasion during a particularly challenging time for Coalition strategy.

Addressing this was a clear part of Blair's surge approach in late 2003. When he spoke to Bush on 16 September he gained concurrence for 'usually weekly' video conferences.⁴⁴² By November engagement frequency was at its second highest, including a four-day visit from Bush to the UK from 18 – 22 November (where Iraq was the key topic).⁴⁴³ This frequency was maintained until the end of the occupation.

Blair also continued to structure his interactions with the now-well-proven tool of strategic influence: his notes to Bush. These proved to be one of the most enduring and impactful factors in their relationship. Blair wrote a total of eleven personal notes to Bush between 12 September 2001 and 16 June 2003. These were a genuine private voice directly into the top of the US system. John Maynard Keynes once used a delightful turn of phrase in describing the US administration. 'I liken them', he wrote, 'to bees who for weeks will fly around in all directions ... providing both the menace of stings and the hope of honey; and at last, perhaps because the queen in the White Hive has emitted some faint, indistinguishable odour, suddenly swarm to a single spot'.⁴⁴⁴

Blair's notes were a powerful method of shaping the 'odour' emitted from the White House. Bush himself consistently read and absorbed them in detail, but even more powerfully they tended to provide structure to discussions. The note from 27 March, where Blair sought to persuade Bush of the need for a 'vital role' for the UN in post-invasion Iraq, stands out for Blair himself. 'We were due to meet on 27 March', Blair writes in his memoir, 'I wrote him a detailed note explaining why the UN had to be involved ... When we met at Camp David, we went through the note pretty much line by line. Once he had studied the note carefully it was clear that he would end up coming down on the UN side'.⁴⁴⁵ Bush was indeed drawn away from the instincts of his most hawkish staff to fully reject the UN in Iraq. Blair's notes were a powerful tool.

Blair's belief in the power of the individual, including himself, is one of the most enduring and influential factors between the first and second decisions. There were, however, considerable dangers in this approach. Over-reliance on the Blair/Bush connection was common, with unrealistic

⁴⁴² Letter Cannon to Adams, 16 Sep 03, 'Iraq: Prime Minister's Video Conference with Bush, 16 September 2003' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 395.

⁴⁴³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 537.

⁴⁴⁴ Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes; Fighting for Britain 1937 – 1946* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 115.

⁴⁴⁵ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 445.

expectations. When an individual was not there (as in Blair's August holiday), progress stumbled. The lack of a key relationship at a strategic point also became a significant shortfall: Hoon and Rumsfeld, for example, did not develop a close personal relationship. This must have been a key limitation given the Pentagon's prominent role in the command and control of the Iraq theatre.

Finally, a reliance on personal relationships was also slave to a key factor: the unpredictability of human interaction and cultures. It is not always easy to be frank and open, especially when discussing difficult topics with the world's most powerful people. Straw was particularly worried about Blair's language to Bush, writing in his memoirs that, 'when telling people things they didn't want to hear, Tony frequently used ambiguous, elliptical language. I continually worried that Bush heard Tony's nuanced phraseology as offering unconditional support. Time and again, on Iraq and the Middle East especially, Colin [Powell] told me that this was exactly what he was picking up inside the US administration. 'The Bush team took TB's comments as full support, and pocketed them'.⁴⁴⁶ Sometimes bureaucracies, with all the emotionless predictability they provided, had their place.

The Greatest Assumption: the Failure to Find WMD. Decision-makers across the 'Joint Occupying Powers' had another significant influence to contend with during late 2003: the failure to locate concrete evidence of WMD. This fatally undermined both the moral *casus belli* and the strategic narrative for the war. In September and October a number of streams were coming together to apply pressure to the British Government to acknowledge this failure. First was the publication in early October of an interim report by the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) (see footnote).⁴⁴⁷ Second was the need for the Government to respond to the Foreign Affairs Committee report into '*The Decision to go to War in Iraq*', published on 7 July 2003.⁴⁴⁸ Finally was the need for Blair and senior government officials to give evidence to the inquiry by Lord Hutton into the death of Dr David Kelly.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁶ Straw, *Last Man Standing*, Loc Cit 5197.

⁴⁴⁷ The ISG was a collaborative US, UK and Australian body formed by the Coalition to investigate and identify firm evidence of WMD programs and stockpiles within Iraq. Led by Dr David Kay, the UN's Chief Weapons Inspector in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, the ISG had been active in Iraq since May, battling against insufficient troop numbers, looting of sensitive sites, and a declining security situation to gain clarity on WMD. See David Kay, '*Statement by David Kay on the Interim Progress Report on the Activities of the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) Before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Defense, and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*', 2 Oct 03 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁴⁸ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, *The Decision to go to War in Iraq*, Ninth Report of Session 2002 – 2003, 7 Jul 03 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁴⁹ Dr Kelly, another UN Weapons Expert who had worked for British Defence Intelligence, committed suicide on 18 July 2003 following aggressive questioning by the Foreign Affairs Committee investigation, and after accusations that he had leaked information to the media that the British Government's 'September Dossier' of 2002 had been 'sexed up' by the Prime Minister and his team. The '*Report of the Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of Dr David Kelly CMG*', also known as the 'Hutton Inquiry' was commissioned the day Dr Kelly died, and began hearing evidence in Aug 2003. It published its final report on 28 Jan 04. The final report is available at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

The combination of these three themes began to confirm, for the first time, the true lack of Iraq's WMD programs and stockpiles. Many audiences were waiting voraciously for the US and UK to lay out their stall: the international community, an aggressive international and national media, domestic audiences who had trusted their Governments, and malign groups worldwide who hated the Coalition for their actions.

The belief that Iraq held programmes and stockpiles of WMD in 2002 was the casus belli of the invasion. It represented the Coalition's central strategic assumption, the one which underpinned the legitimacy of the use of political violence, and the urgency to overrule the authority of the UN. Many on both sides of the Atlantic had rested their reputations and morality on this case: from Blair's authoring the foreword of the 'September Dossier'⁴⁵⁰, through George Tenet's statements as the Director of the CIA that it was a 'slam dunk case'⁴⁵¹, and through to Colin Powell's famous testimony to the UN Security Council.⁴⁵² Blair particularly had continued to express his confidence on WMD after the invasion, stating to the media on 17 July 2003 that he believed 'with every fibre of instinct and conviction' that the threat existed.⁴⁵³

By late 2003, however, it was impossible not to recognise that this central assumption – while not wholly incorrect – had been dangerously overstated. The ISG interim report in October 2003 did indeed uncover 'dozens of WMD-related program activities and significant amounts of equipment that Iraq concealed from the United Nations during the inspections that began in 2002'. Saddam, the ISG believed, 'had not given up his aspirations and intentions to continue to acquire weapons of mass destruction' and that 'he intended to resume these programs whenever the external restrictions were removed'.⁴⁵⁴ This however was a far cry from the claims in the UK's 'September Dossier' that Iraq 'has existing and active military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons, which could be activated within 45 mins ... and that he is actively trying to acquire a nuclear weapons

⁴⁵⁰ Blair authored the foreword of the document entitled '*Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: the Assessment of the British Government*'. In it he used language that was more categorical than that usually found in intelligence assessment, stating 'I am in no doubt that the threat is serious and current, that he has made progress on WMD, and that he has to be stopped'. He also cited the '45 minutes' claim. The full report is available at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁵¹ Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 249.

⁴⁵² American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank, *General Colin Powell Address to the United Nations Security Council*, 5 Feb 03 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20). Powell's testimony was perhaps the most impactful given to the UN since Adlai Stevenson's evidence of Soviet nuclear weapons in Cuba on 25 October 1962.

⁴⁵³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 4.4, para 917.

⁴⁵⁴ WMD programs identified by the ISG included laboratories and safe houses, research on biological weapon agents, UAVs that breached the permissible limits, and plans and advanced design work for new long-range missiles that exceeded the UN-mandated maximum range by over 850kms. David Kay, '*Statement by David Kay on the Interim Progress Report on the Activities of the Iraq Survey Group (ISG)*', 2 Oct 03 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

capability'.⁴⁵⁵ The Coalition's assessment of Saddam's intent was right, but their intelligence on his capability was fundamentally wrong.

The failure of this central assumption in October 2003 had a major influence on the legitimacy of Britain and America's war. The invasion was already tarnished by the lack of UN Security Council authorisation, but the corrosion deepened as each day passed and WMD were not identified. This had a pervasive influence from top to bottom. Blair correctly described the mood to Bush as one of *schadenfreude*: 'Blair and Bush started it. It's their problem, let them sort it'.⁴⁵⁶ This translated in the Security Council into a continued effort by the other P5 members not to legitimise the invasion, or to allow the occupation to continue for any longer than absolutely necessary. At the Madrid Donors' Conference in October 2003, for example, neither France, Russia nor China made a substantive pledge.⁴⁵⁷

The international community increasingly perceived the 'Joint Occupation' as illegitimate, and began clamouring for an earlier transition to a sovereign Iraqi government. UNSCR 1511, agreed on 16 October 2003, stated that the Security Council 'reiterated its resolve that the day when Iraqis govern themselves must come quickly'.⁴⁵⁸ The UN Secretariat were in no hurry to seek a more prominent role within a campaign they considered illegitimate, with no serious attempt to appoint a new UN Special Representative after the death of de Mello until the appointment of Lakhdar Brahimi in January 2004.⁴⁵⁹ 'In this phase', Blair later recalled, 'the absence of international unity in the original decision, and the vested interests of many to prove that it was a mistake, counted heavily against us'.⁴⁶⁰

There was, however, another area where the growing illegitimacy of the campaign had a disastrous influence on the occupation, shifting the war in an entirely new direction. By August 2003 the invasion had become a siren call for jihadist extremists. Starting with the assassination of de Mello, these jihadis rapidly made their presence in the country known - with profound consequences for both British strategy and the unique character of the Iraq war.

⁴⁵⁵ See Blair's statement to Parliament at House of Commons, *Official Report*, 24 Sep 2002, Column 3 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁵⁶ Note [Blair to Bush], [undated], 'Note' from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁵⁷ Summary table of Madrid Donors Conference, [reliefweb.int](#). For a summary of the pledges made at the Madrid Donors' Conference, see Reliefweb News Article, 'Iraq: Tally Shows Pledges from Madrid Donors' Conference Total \$32 Billion' found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁵⁸ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1511 (2003)* found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁵⁹ Letter Rycroft to Adams, 23 Apr 04, 'Iraq: Fallujah: Prime Minister's Conversation with President Bush' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 915.

⁴⁶⁰ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 450.

The Enemy has a Vote: The Extremist Infiltration of Iraq. The threat from international terrorism was certainly a motivator for the invasion of Iraq, but the danger of it emerging inside the country *post facto* was not considered a major influence on the decision to invade. The JIC noted the threat from Al Qaida and affiliated groups in a TOP SECRET assessment on 12 March 2003, where they acknowledged that ‘senior Al Qaida associated terrorists may have established sleeper cells in Iraq, to be activated during a Coalition occupation’, and stated that ‘the threat from Al Qaida will increase at the onset of military action’.⁴⁶¹ This warning was not considered as anything more than a sideline to the principal aim of deposing the Ba’ath Party regime in order to remove the threat of WMD. By April 2003 the JIC softened their warnings, stating in an update on the initial landscape post-Saddam that ‘the threat from Al Qaida associates in Northern Iraq has been significantly reduced’.⁴⁶²

With the threat assumed to be low, both the Coalition and the international community were rocked back by the sudden reality that an enemy, and even an unexpected one, can violently seize control of strategy. The Al Qaida attacks on the UN and in Najaf in August 2003 proved once again that assumptions of the war evolving in a predictable direction were flawed. By September 2003 the JIC was tracking that Osama Bin Laden had called on Muslims to travel to Iraq to fight the Coalition, that Abu Musab al Zarqawi was likely in Iraq, and that ‘Sunni Islamic extremists/terrorists see Iraq as the new focus for jihad. They are likely to present the main long term threat to Coalition interests in Iraq’.⁴⁶³ The war suddenly broadened.

What were the causes of this infiltration? Many of the direct causes (i.e. those that opened the immediate, tactical gateways to Al Qaida) can be traced back to American decisions made in the months leading up to August 2003: the low-troop numbers of OPLAN 1003V, the decision to extract the bulk of the manoeuvre forces after the invasion, and the dissolution of Iraqi security forces by CPA Order Number Two. By October and December 2003 there were only around 158,000 Coalition troops in the country.⁴⁶⁴ The CPA planned to create a new security force – the New Iraqi Army – but failed contracts and insufficient resources meant that by the end of 2003 progress had been slow. The only force with any real mass was the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, stood up in September 2003 and standing in the tens of battalions, but these were focused on local security.⁴⁶⁵ It was not so much

⁴⁶¹ JIC Assessment, 12 Mar 03, ‘*International Terrorism: War with Iraq: Update*’ from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁶² JIC Assessment, 16 Apr 04, ‘*Iraq: The Initial Landscape Post Saddam*’ from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁶³ JIC Assessment, 3 Sep 03, ‘*Iraq: Threats to Security*’ from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁶⁴ Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle*, Loc Cit 3389.

⁴⁶⁵ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 124 – 130.

that there were not enough Coalition troops, but there were not enough of any troops. The result was uncontrolled borders – particularly through Sunni-dominated Syria – and unsecured weapons caches, and an inability to maintain a state-led monopoly on violence. The path for extremists was wide open.

Sunni extremists infiltrating through Iraq's porous borders found fertile ground, thanks to another direct cause: the aggressive execution of CPA Order Number One and de-Ba'athification. This was another area where British and American decision-makers could not agree a policy prior to the invasion.⁴⁶⁶ Bremer believed it important to provide a clear message to the Iraqi people that the Ba'ath Party would not return to power. He was concerned that ORHA had made initial mistakes, appointing senior Ba'ath figures in ministries and universities.⁴⁶⁷ He therefore sought for Order Number One to be deliberately aggressive, inclusive of the top four tiers of party membership. It was the inclusion of this fourth group ('Udw Firdaq' or 'Group Member') that proved so impactful, raising excluded numbers from 5000 to 30,000 - including much of Iraq's bureaucratic middle-management.⁴⁶⁸

Bremer's decisions may well have been right in the chaotic environment of Iraq in mid-2003: de-Ba'athification was welcomed by many Iraqis, and Bremer still counts it as one his best decisions.⁴⁶⁹ But his handing of the policy to Dr Ahmed Chalabi and Nouri al-Maliki (later the Iraqi Prime Minister) as the heads of the High National de-Ba'athification Commission allowed the execution to be disproportionately targeted against the senior Sunni community. Anger grew, as did violence. Chalabi and al-Maliki were described by David Richmond as 'hard-liners more interested in ... excluding former B'ath Party members from standing in elections to the Transitional National Assembly than in reconciliation'.⁴⁷⁰

The decisions made by the CPA outlined above, many of which the British had little influence on, were direct causes of the extremist infiltration of Iraq. The most indirect cause, however, remained

⁴⁶⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 11.2, paras 2 – 3.

⁴⁶⁷ Telegram 2 IraqRep to FCO London, 11 May 03, 'Iraq: What's Going Wrong?' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁶⁸ Telegram 10 IraqRep to FCO London, 15 May 03, 'Iraq: De-Ba'athification' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁶⁹ Bremer, *My Year in Iraq*, p. 56.

⁴⁷⁰ Chalabi and al-Maliki were described by David Richmond as 'hard-liners more interested in ... excluding former Ba'ath Party members from standing elections to the Transitional National Assembly than in reconciliation'. See Telegram 306 IraqRep to FCO London, 12 December 2003, 'Iraq: Sunni Strategy' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 11.1, para 124.

the perceived illegitimacy of the invasion and occupation. The failure to find WMD provided the ideal ‘master narrative’ of the extremist jihadi movement. Dr David Kilcullen has described such narratives as a ‘simple unifying, easily-expressed story ... that organises people’s experience and provides a framework for understanding events’. In the early 2000s the Al Qaida narrative clearly centred on a theme that ‘the West is oppressive and unjust towards Islam, is heedlessly or out of malice spilling the blood of innocent Muslims all around the world ... and that the ‘West is at war with Islam’.⁴⁷¹ Thomas Hegghammer, who studies jihadi online narratives, attests that ‘from 2001 [to 2006] the Iraq conflict became the most pressing single issue on the global jihadist agenda’.⁴⁷² Without discoveries of WMD, and with de-Ba’athification marginalising the Sunni community, the Coalition had little in their arsenal to fight a counter-narrative. In many ways their actions in Iraq fanned the flames of a war that went well beyond Iraq’s borders.

The US bore the brunt of the growing extremist insurgency around Baghdad in 2003, but the influence on British strategic freedom of movement was also clear – if different – in the south. Shi’a predominance meant that Sunni marginalisation did not create such a localised violent reaction. However, as Synnott later attested, while ‘there was still this tendency among some to regard the south as a British fiefdom, but actually, of course, it was not insulated from external factors and these external factors were very important in terms of security and levels of violence’.⁴⁷³ The growth of a violent Sunni backlash, characterised by the assassination of Ayatollah al-Hakim, empowered extremist Shi’a factions in the south – including Muqtada al-Sadr, who it is assessed established Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) (or the ‘Mahdi Army’) as a direct response to the bombing of the Imam Ali mosque.⁴⁷⁴ As we will see later, al-Sadr and JAM were within a year central to the UK’s strategic dilemma.

Late 2003 is where the long-standing structural shortfalls of British strategic theory came to roost. From dangerous assumptions prior to the invasion, to unexpected and malign third parties, and through an exhaustion of military and diplomatic ‘strategic currency’, the UK simply lacked the influence to control their environment as the war changed and evolved. The failure to discover WMD tarnished the occupation even further. Extremism flourished as a result. The British were not,

⁴⁷¹ Alex P. Schmid, ‘Al-Qaeda’s “Single Narrative” and Attempts to Develop Counter Narratives: The State of Knowledge’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, Jan 14 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁷² October 2003 marked the start of a remarkable surge in online extremist interest in the Iraq jihad: while only 626 online interactions were recorded by Hegghammer in October 2003, by August 2004 and the aftermath of the First Battle of Fallujah this had surged to 12,666 (see Thomas Hegghammer, ‘Global jihadism after the Iraq war’, *Middle East Journal*, Vol 60, No 1, Winter 2006), pp. 11 - 32.

⁴⁷³ Transcript from Public Hearing, Sir Hilary Synnott, 9 Dec 09, p. 63 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁷⁴ See box entitled ‘Muqtada al-Sadr and Jaysh al-Mahdi’ from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, p. 266.

however, in a position to give up. With the security situation declining, and with core British interests at risk, there was no choice but to continue the struggle – even if it meant diverging from their US alliance. This came to a head in early 2004 through the final turning point for this Part with Abu Ghraib, the *First Battle of Fallujah* and the rise of Muqtada al-Sadr.

Turning Point: the Surge in Violence in Early 2004

It started in Fallujah. On 31 March 2004, four employees from the US private security firm Blackwater were ambushed and killed in the Sunni-dominated Anbar Province west of Baghdad. Images of their mutilated bodies hanged from a bridge were passed to the international media in a deliberate provocation. These were seen worldwide, impassioning a wave of domestic anger in the US. Fallujah was well-known as a focal-point of Sunni extremist activity. Al Zarqawi was believed to be based in the city. General James Mattis, the operational commander around Fallujah, initially planned to use an ‘iron fist in a velvet glove’ approach, rooting out those responsible over time. Domestic anger in the US was, however, extreme, and Mattis was overruled by Bush and Rumsfeld. He was directed to attack, a decision of political expediency designed ‘to send a message that anyone who engaged in acts of terror would face the might of the US military’.⁴⁷⁵ The path to Operation VIGILANT RESOLVE, also known as the *First Battle of Fallujah*, began. A Marine Brigade and elements of the New Iraqi Army assaulted into the city just four days after the Blackwater incident. General Mattis made one strong statement up the chain of command: ‘once we assault, don’t stop us’.⁴⁷⁶ He believed that, in this phase of an evolving war, action needed to be decisive.

Two hundred kilometres south-east of Fallujah, however, a second crisis was brewing, unrelated to the first. The CPA were losing patience with Muqtada al-Sadr, the firebrand Shi’a cleric who was increasingly contesting their authority in the Shi’a heartlands. On 27 March 2004 Bremer gave an order that *Hawza*, the Najaf-based weekly newspaper operated by al-Sadr, was to be shut down for sixty days.⁴⁷⁷ On 3 April Bremer then ordered the arrest of Mustafa al-Yaqubi, al-Sadr’s senior aide. Al-Sadr was enraged, and for the first time unmasked the full extent of his influence with the Shi’a. He announced a call to arms, stating ‘I and my followers of the believer have come under attack from the occupiers ... be on the utmost readiness, and strike them where you meet them’.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁵ Jim Mattis and Bing West, *Call Sign Chaos* (United States: Random House, 2019), p. 123 – 124.

⁴⁷⁶ Mattis and West, *Call Sign Chaos*, p. 125.

⁴⁷⁷ Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle*, Loc Cit 4892.

⁴⁷⁸ Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle*, Loc Cit 3962.

The response was immediate and remarkable. The British, who (in an increasingly disturbing pattern) had not been consulted on al-Yaqubi's arrest, were hit hard in the usually-calm south. As Major General Stewart, the commander of MND(SE), attested, 'it was like a switch had been flicked. We woke up on the 6th [April], there were 35 shootings and attacks in Basra before 0730 in the morning. Nasiriyah had been taken over by the Mahdi Army ... in al-Amara there were running battles going on'. Further attacks were taking place in the US-controlled areas of Sadr City, and in Najaf the CPA building was attacked. The US military elected to confront al-Sadr and his followers with the aim of 'eliminating them as a credible force'.⁴⁷⁹ As Blair's Private Secretary reported to him, 'we are now fighting on two fronts for the first time'.⁴⁸⁰

The final blow in April 2004, however, came from within the Coalition. In the last week of April, US media outlets published the devastating revelations of the prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib.⁴⁸¹ While there was no British presence at Abu Ghraib, the publication on 1 May 2004 by the *Daily Mirror* newspaper of fake photographs of British soldiers torturing an Iraqi detainee intrinsically tied the UK to the amorality of the Abu Ghraib actions.⁴⁸² As Powell said to Straw, 'there was nothing in the world of public diplomacy which could conceivably offset the damage done by those images to the US cause, the reputation of its armed forces, and its standing in the Arab World and beyond'.⁴⁸³ The British, as 'Joint Occupying Powers', shared the moral burden.

The trio of Fallujah, al-Sadr and Abu Ghraib alienated almost every group in Iraqi society. When Al Jazeera broadcast images of the US and the Shi'a-dominated New Iraqi Army attack on Fallujah, most Sunnis felt this confirmed what they had long believed: the Coalition occupiers and the now-dominant Shi'a were colluding to violently suppress them. The 'Sunni Triangle' exploded as a response. Rising Sunni sectarianism placed Shi'a groups on the defensive - empowering al-Sadr, and fuelling his own firebrand preaching against both the Coalition and the CPA-appointed Iraqi Governing Council.⁴⁸⁴ Abu Ghraib, unsurprisingly, alienated everyone. The combination of these three factors led to a dramatic collapse of the view of the occupiers amongst the Iraqi people, with a

⁴⁷⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 859.

⁴⁸⁰ Minute Quarrey to Prime Minister, 6 April 2004, 'Phone call with President Bush, 7 April' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 850.

⁴⁸¹ The New York Times published hundreds of images of American soldiers from the 372nd Military Police Company forcing Iraqi detainees to masturbate, stacking them naked in pyramids, threatening them with unmuzzled dogs, and posing with the bodies of dead detainees. The images were seen across the world. See New York Times, *The Nightmare at Abu Ghraib*, 3 May 03 at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁸² See box entitled 'Abu Ghraib' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, p. 365 – 366.

⁴⁸³ Box entitled 'Abu Ghraib' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, p. 365 – 366.

⁴⁸⁴ Paper Richmond, 10 April 2004, 'Iraq: an Assessment on 10 April' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 865.

poll in May 2004 finding that only 10% of Iraqis had confidence in the Coalition (down 18% from January). There was no escaping the tar on the illegitimacy brush. The same poll showed that 54% of Iraqis believed that all Americans behaved the same as the abusers at Abu Ghraib.⁴⁸⁵ The Iraq war was shifting in character at an alarming pace, accelerating its reciprocal effect on Coalition strategy.

This final turning point in the second decision illuminates the dilemma in which the British found themselves in April and May 2004. For perhaps the first time the UK's interests in their 'fiefdom in the south', dominated by the situation with the Shi'a and reactive to Fallujah, were at direct odds to the American strategic direction of travel. The UK, after months of effort to regenerate influence, sought to assert themselves to influence US plans in their favour.

Diverging Strategies? UK Influence in the First Battle of Fallujah. By April 2004 the simultaneity of Fallujah and the actions against al-Sadr were making the British exceptionally nervous. Officials in Basra believed, not unreasonably, that this combination threatened a fundamental loss of Shi'a consent in the south.⁴⁸⁶ The UK AO had consistently experienced lower scales of violence thanks to this consent, helping the UK manage their minimal force levels in the country. The British view was twofold: that the aggressive assault into Fallujah, and therefore the risk of significant civilian Sunni casualties, had to stop⁴⁸⁷; and that action against al-Sadr, while potentially justified, had to be de-linked from the Fallujah crisis. There is irony here. Mattis' original tactical plan, the steady application of an 'iron fist in a velvet glove', closely matched the UK's proposed approach until Mattis was overruled by Bush and Rumsfeld. The UK now planned to use leverage with those same political masters to prevent Mattis' reluctant action taking place.

The successful transition of power from the 'Joint Occupiers' to an Iraqi government at the end of June 2004 was at the forefront of British minds. Desperate to terminate the burden of occupation, British decision-makers did all they could to protect this timeline. Threats by Sunni members of the Iraqi Governing Council to resign on the back of Fallujah were of particular concern, with David Richmond (by this stage the UK's Special Representative in Iraq) writing that, 'if the Governing Council collapses (or loses all credibility) it is difficult to see how we can find anyone else to work with us on the formation of an Interim Government to take over from the CPA on 30 June. We will have no-one to hand over to'.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁵ See box entitled 'Abu Ghraib' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, p. 365 – 366.

⁴⁸⁶ Transcript of Public Hearing, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, 16 Dec 09, p. 52 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁸⁷ Transcript of Public Hearing, Tony Blair, 29 Jan 10, p. 209 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 01 Jan 20).

⁴⁸⁸ Paper Richmond, 10 April 2004, 'Iraq: an Assessment on 10 April' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 865.

The British played a stubborn strategic game for the next month, demonstrating a rare capacity for influence on the US. This commenced in an unexpected place: the refusal of a Coalition military order by Major General Stewart in MND(SE). On the 11 April Lieutenant General Metz, the commander of the US theatre headquarters (now Multi-National Corps – Iraq (MNC-I)) ordered that Stewart forcibly close al-Sadr’s ‘Offices of the Martyr Sadr’ (OMS) and conduct offensive operations against JAM in the south. Stewart refused, explaining that he ‘fully recognised that our refusal to close down the OMS offices and take overt aggressive action against Sadr Militia will appear from Baghdad to be both ineffective and apparently out of line with your intent’. ‘Whether we like it or not’, he went on to explain, ‘Sadr’s movement is part of the political fabric of southern Iraq ... this does not mean that we are under the thumb of the Sadrists ... we take the view that it is the Iraqis who will have to go on living here after we depart and surely it is best to produce an Iraqi solution to an Iraqi problem ... I believe our current tactics in MND(SE) are correct’.⁴⁸⁹

Right or wrong, Stewart held ‘consent of the people’ as pivotal to his mission, and he was determined to maintain it – no matter the objections of the leadership in Baghdad. With just weeks to go before the transition, Stewart believed, ‘the Shi’a are on edge ... we must not push them over it’.⁴⁹⁰ Stewart was not willing to risk the British sector plan for a US theatre plan, and as a key Coalition partner he apparently still carried enough influence to refuse an order without repercussion.

The US military may have, albeit grudgingly, accepted Stewart’s objections about al Sadr, but influencing the civilian/military interaction around the Fallujah plan would take far more of a group effort by British decision-makers. This effort was successful, and it showed that the British had managed to re-develop some influence from the low-point period of mid-2003. The fact, however, that it was Blair and Sheinwald who had to take up the task shows how hard it could be.

Blair decision to stay personally involved in the UK’s Iraq strategy had sustained in the long months since September 2003, as had his weekly discussions with Bush. Since 1 September he and Bush had spoken fourteen times on Iraq, more than in the first seven months since the invasion. Blair was therefore well placed to apply pressure. He knew that action in Fallujah was already on shaky ground. Thanks to his sources in the CPA, Blair was aware that within thirty-six hours of the Fallujah

⁴⁸⁹ Minute Stewart to Metz, 11 Apr 04, ‘MND(SE) – Sadr situation’ from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁹⁰ Minute Stewart to Metz, 11 Apr 04, ‘MND(SE) – Sadr situation’ from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

assault Bush had received pressure from all sides to stop the assault: from Brahimi at the UN (who had threatened to resign), from the Governing Council (the Sunni members of which had threatened to resign), from Bremer, and from the US Congress (influenced by images of Fallujah in the media).⁴⁹¹ When Blair spoke to Bush, therefore, on 7 April all he had to do was to advise caution.⁴⁹² By 9 April, much to Mattis' anger, a ceasefire was called in Fallujah.⁴⁹³ But Blair, however, now needed to change the US direction of travel. What followed is a useful vignette of Blair's personal capacity for influence.

Blair followed up his 7 April call with one of his influential notes on 15 April. This note is particularly impressive. It started by reinforcing the sense of UK and US unity, reminding Bush that 'too many people want us to fail', and reminding that both leaders shared domestic issues. It talked of polarised opinion, and how the international community have 'worked themselves into a position where they think we are 'provoking' the terrorists rather than them attacking us'. Blair reminded Bush that there is a conflict in the 'hearts and minds of many Iraqis: joy at Saddam's departure, but humiliation that outsiders brought it'. 'How we follow this up is vital', he wrote, 'we aren't in our own country, we are in theirs and we need those hearts and minds won back'. Note the singular 'our country', vice 'our countries'; a literary expression of unity. He then laid out in detail his proposed strategy: that the calming of the Sunni and Shi'a communities should be passed to the Iraqis, with Shi'a clerics and politicians bringing al-Sadr out of Najaf so that the Coalition is 'no longer fighting on two fronts'. In Fallujah, 'any military offensive needs to be very careful ... and clearly a response to aggression, not initiating it'.⁴⁹⁴ The note is a subtle, sophisticated piece of work.

The next day Blair met with Bush, alongside Rice, Powell, Sheinwald and Rycroft in Washington. With his note having set the tone, the messaging face to face was just as clear and consistent: military action in Fallujah and Najaf should be a last resort.⁴⁹⁵ Blair then continued after the meeting to leverage trusted relationships as strategic tools. On 21 April Sheinwald spoke to Rice, stating Blair 'continues to believe, as he and the President had agreed ... that time was on our side and that we did not need to rush into military action'. Sheinwald even felt confident enough to throw some

⁴⁹¹ Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle*, p. 354 – 355.

⁴⁹² Letter Rycroft to Adams, 7 Apr 04, 'Prime Minister's Conversation with President Bush, 7 April' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 851.

⁴⁹³ Mattis and West, *Call Sign Chaos*, p. 129.

⁴⁹⁴ Blair's messaging here was consistent, emphasising no less than three times that military action in Fallujah and Najaf must only take place 'once it is clear that we have tried every avenue of diplomacy'. See Note [Blair to Bush], [undated], 'Note' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

⁴⁹⁵ Letter Rycroft to Adams, 16 Apr 04, 'Iraq: Prime Minister's Meeting with President Bush' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 889.

weight around, asserting that 'I made clear that the Prime Minister would want a discussion if there were any questions of US tactics changing'.⁴⁹⁶ Having not been consulted personally on the first decision to attack Fallujah and al-Sadr, Blair was willing to expend capital to ensure it did not happen again. This level of boldness is rare in the UK/US strategic interactions in Iraq.

Both the attack on Fallujah, and the decision to stop it, may well have been strategically flawed. The memoirs of the key US players on both sides of the civilian/military divide, from Bremer and Rumsfeld to Mattis and Sanchez, are all critical of both the President's and each other's decision-making. Even Blair stated to the Inquiry that 'at the time I was worried that the Americans were going in too hard and too heavy, and they made certain changes as a result of the conversations we were having. If I look back on it now, I'm not sure I was right about it, though'.⁴⁹⁷ Right or wrong, however, British decision-makers played a prominent role in shaping American strategy. The assault on Fallujah did not continue, and no direct action was taken against al-Sadr or JAM in either Najaf or the south. Both of these outcomes would come back and haunt the Coalition, but for the time being British strategic interests were protected. April and May 2004 show that the British system of influence had come some way since mid-2003, thanks to Blair, the right people in the right places, and the remaining intangible trust in the British opinion. This was one of the times when the inner team worked.

Part Two Conclusion: Continuity and Discontinuity in Influences on Decision-Making

The analysis of a second decision allows a comparison to the first. This comparison is important, as it allows us to critically analyse the British pre-war theoretical strategy, and to assess how it stood up to the realities of war itself. Did the prominent influences in the first decision persist into the second? Or did the fundamental shift from confrontation to conflict, from peace to war, reveal new or hidden influences on Britain's decision-makers?

The first and most obvious influence to examine is the presence of war itself, something conspicuously absent from the first decision. On 19 March 2003 the UK voluntarily created an environment of war, moving decisively from abstraction to reality. Once there, they soon realised a truism put best by baseball coach Yogi Berra (or alternately Albert Einstein), who said, 'in theory

⁴⁹⁶ Letter Sheinwald to Adams, 21 Apr 04, 'Iraq: Conversation with US National Security Adviser, 21 April' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 904.

⁴⁹⁷ Transcript of Public Hearing, Tony Blair, 29 Jan 10, p. 209 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 01 Jan 20).

there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is'.⁴⁹⁸ There is a considerable difference between conceiving strategies in abstract, and then executing them in reality. This is particularly the case where organised violence is the instrument of choice. The use of 'collective killing for some collective purpose' applies the unpredictable and chaotic nature of war, which is singularly difficult to predict in form and character.

As I discussed in Part One's conclusion, the making of assumptions is often the only option strategists have when thinking about strategy and war in theory. The accuracy of these assumptions is then put to the test through the frictions of strategy and war in practice. To borrow Freedman's concept of 'strategic scripts', in the period *pre bellum* strategists seek to articulate a vision of the future; a desired state that their strategy will lead them to.⁴⁹⁹ But this script, clear and categorical as it may be in theory, is always built on a foundation of imperfect assumptions that will inevitably be tested in execution.

The invasion and joint occupation took the assumptions underpinning the theoretical British 'strategic script' for Iraq and exposed them to the realities of war. At least initially the assumptions about the superiority of manoeuvre warfare, of the RMA and precision targeting, proved to be correct. OPLAN 1003V defeated the Iraqi military faster than even the UK or US had predicted. The initial invasion played to all the doctrinal strengths of the British and American militaries. This lulled the Coalition into a dangerously false sense of security that their 'script' was accurate: a confidence that played into the initial decisions to commence an early withdrawal of troops. They mistook their first battle as being the whole of the war, wholly underestimating the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of what they had begun.

This 'honeymoon period' did not last, and the Coalition's strategic strengths quickly turned into weaknesses. The study of the second decision exposes three foundational assumptions of British strategy that were flawed. The first is well known and to an extent forgivable: the assumption about WMD, and therefore the *casus belli* of the war. The second is less infamous but just as impactful. When considering the post-invasion period, Blair and his Government assumed that the US had the plan, resources and desire to underwrite British strategic outcomes. This second assumption was wholly incorrect. As the Inquiry concluded, 'above all, despite UK concerns that the US had not

⁴⁹⁸ Freedman, *Strategy: a History*, p. 576.

⁴⁹⁹ Freedman, *Strategy: a History*, Chapter 38, pp. 607 - 629.

prepared a satisfactory plan for post-conflict Iraq and that ORHA ... was not up to the task, it was assumed that the US could act as guarantor of the UK's objectives in Iraq'.⁵⁰⁰

The weakness of this second assumption was foreseeable. The MoD did perceive just how weak British assessments were about the post-invasion period. On 28 February 2003 they warned No. 10 that the UK was 'currently at risk of taking on a very substantial commitment that we will have great difficulty in sustaining beyond the immediate conclusion of conflict'.⁵⁰¹ Their protest fell on deaf ears. Blair eventually testified to the Inquiry that 'with hindsight, we now see that the military campaign to defeat Saddam was relatively easy; it was the aftermath that was hard. At the time, of course, we could not know that'.⁵⁰² The Inquiry's view on this statement was clear, and damning: 'the conclusions reached by Mr Blair after the invasion did not require the benefit of hindsight'.⁵⁰³

The third, and most impactful, assumption was that the war would proceed in predictable ways. This assumption was torn down in just ten short days in August 2003 with the Al-Qaida bombings of the UN and in Najaf in August 2003. These two signature expressions of violence dramatically twisted and expanded the character of the war, against the reported expectations of the Coalition. Neither the British nor Americans were ready to react and adapt to such an expression of war's unpredictability. Instead they found themselves wholly outpaced by the phenomenon of war itself.

The second decision therefore reinforces the prominence of the unpredictable nature of war as an influence on British strategic decision-making. But even more so it emphasises that it was the ignorance of war's nature, or the assumption that war could be controlled, that was so damaging. The hubris of New Labour's ambitious 'strategic script' for the aftermath of the invasion proved to be sorely misplaced.

The second decision also reinforces the conclusion from the first that British strategy was inescapably subordinate to US strategy. Key here is the idea of contingent decision-making. The absorption of the British military into OPLAN 1003V delegated the execution of British strategy to CFLCC, CENTCOM and the Pentagon. The conduct of Phase IV was therefore principally contingent on the outcomes of the military execution of Phase III, seen most notably in the British occupation of Basra. This

⁵⁰⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 17.

⁵⁰¹ Letter Williams to Manning, 28 February 2003, 'Iraq: Military Planning and Preparation' attaching Paper [unattributed], 28 February 2003, 'Iraq: Military Planning Update – 28 February 2003' from Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 6.5, para 677.

⁵⁰² Transcript of Public Hearing, Tony Blair, 14 Jan 11, p. 14 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 01 Jan 20).

⁵⁰³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Executive Summary, para 623.

subordination only deepened when Bush delegated authority for the execution of Phase IV to Rumsfeld and the DoD. As inadequate as it was, ORHA became the 'only game in town'⁵⁰⁴ and the UK had little choice but to be embraced as 'Joint Occupying Powers' (with the shared risk and moral responsibility this entailed). By May 2003 subordination was so deep that the decision by Bush to move from a short to a long occupation – realised through the appointment of Bremer – was done without consultation. British considerations barely registered in the American strategic conscience, something that will be echoed in Part Four of this thesis with the US decision to 'surge' in 2007.

The new insight offered by the second decision comes in the idea of strategic currency. British strategic influence prior to the war was solid, but this was only possible thanks to the relevance at the time of British strategic currency. The ever-escalatory offer of military capability was key in New Labour's ability to influence Bush – alongside the intangibles of British influence within the international community. In the aftermath of the invasion, however, the British were chagrined to find that the strategic 'exchange rate' had changed, particularly once war had shifted from abstraction to reality. A traditional strategy that relied on military force, while still relevant, was insufficient. Other Government departments lacked any expeditionary capability to invest in the aftermath, and the UK's ability to financially commit in a meaningful way was dwarfed by the sheer scale of US wealth. Even their intangibles had been deeply scarred by the perceived illegitimacy of the invasion. Their relationship with the US proved to be far more transactionary than they realised, and they had little currency with which to trade.

By the end of the second decision the UK showed their first glimmers of being able to break away from US strategic domination. Months of effort to enhance their capacity to influence allowed them to shape the outcomes of the *First Battle of Fallujah*, to an extent against US intentions and in British interests. But thanks to the institutional shortfalls in British strategic thought, and the narrow means available for execution, this could only be achieved through effort at the very highest level of the British political system. The evolving capacity for the UK to broaden strategy beyond the military, and to act independent to the US, is a theme that I will track carefully in later decisions.

Ideology certainly continued to play its part in the second decision. New Labour's political philosophies were deep rooted, and it is therefore not unsurprising that the clashes between ideas like liberal internationalist, liberal interventionism, and unilateralism continued to be a key influence. This particularly manifested in the machinery of government around DFID. The mixture of Short's

⁵⁰⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.1, para 68.

philosophy and DFID's 'NGO-like' design was a genuine constraint on the UK's capacity to grapple with the post-invasion challenge. The differences between the UK and US perspectives on the role of the UN continued to be an important influence, throwing up a second series of legal issues that constrained the UK's freedom of movement as 'Joint Occupiers'. Blair's world view and the beliefs of the PLP continued, at times, to be misaligned. Bush's decision to move to a long occupation – to shape Iraqi politics into a Western democratic image – was far more aligned with Blair's interventionist ideas of a 'new world order' than they were with New Labour's ideas of a 'force for good'.

The second decision, however, highlights that it was not New Labour's philosophy itself that was the influence, but instead how this philosophy interacted with the growing illegitimacy of the Iraq war. The failure to find concrete evidence of WMD deepened the initial tarnish of the invasion into a deep, pervasive sense of corruption. This caused a crisis for the British. The illegitimacy of the war created a constant strategic miasma that impacted domestically and internationally. British public and Parliamentary opinion turned against the campaign (although not so much as to see Blair ejected at the next election), and this applied pressure on the Government. Their reaction was to try to isolate the British public from the war just when they needed to engage them deeper within it. Increasingly only the Government and the military were at war: the British nation was resolutely not. It was very difficult to break out of this strategic trap once it was closed. From this point on the resources available to the war would always be limited.

The only real beneficiary of this illegitimacy were extremist groups, who were able to shape such a narrative that by early 2004 the occupation of Iraq was at the heart of global jihad. These third parties would soon prove that they had a wealth of strategic currency of their own. Abu Ghraib was then the final nail in the legitimacy coffin and arguably one of the most profound strategic disasters of the Iraq campaign. The UK, entangled with the US as 'Joint Occupiers', could not escape the moral fallout of such an event, which lit the extremist fires in Iraq. As we move towards the third decision, we will see how – by 2006 – Iraq had become the embodiment of a 'bad war'. The impact this would have on the escalation of troops to Afghanistan, and on ongoing support to the Iraq theatre, will prove to be considerable.

What of the *doctrine of the individual*? Part One laid much of the weight of strategic responsibility on Blair's shoulders, and by dint of contingent decision-making he also bears much of the weight for the shape of the post-invasion period. The second decision, however, reveals some of the strengths of his personal approach when operating in a crisis. His personal instincts were strong and were

often ahead of his key staff: he perceived early that ORHA was worthy of investment, and in September 2003 he was quick to recognise that strategic failure was looming. Blair continued to put great faith in the *doctrine of the individual*. His distrust of bureaucracies was strong, and instead he relied on a small group of individuals to apply strategic influence. His own personal energy remained key, particularly in his relationship with Bush (structured through his Notes). The *doctrine of the individual* proved to have utility, notably around the outcomes of the *First Battle of Fallujah*.⁵⁰⁵ But it also lacked depth. The absence of a key influencer, for example in Blair's August 2003 holiday, undermined strategic cohesion.

New Labour's individuals had influence, but ultimately strategic currency was more often than not manifest in the outputs of bureaucracies and institutions. The second decision proved that Blair and New Labour could happily state new strategic aims as the war evolved, but these were wholly disconnected from the military, economic or diplomatic resources required to achieve them. As the Iraq campaign deepened into its second and third year, I will examine whether the UK's 'strategic currency' could evolve to better enable New Labour's strategic vision.

The Shortfalls of Traditional Strategy? The New Labour Government did not explicitly leverage traditional theories of strategy in their approach to the Iraq problem. Indeed they did not view the word 'strategy' as being connected to the use of force. The Prime Minister certainly had a 'Strategy Unit', but in 2001 it was wholly focussed on domestic issues, none of which involved the military.⁵⁰⁶ But despite this theoretical disconnection, the plan they developed for Iraq was one that spoke firmly of the old ways. The commitment of British forces to OPLAN 1003V sought a military solution to a political problem through a decisive battle to defeat the military of an adversary. But it was a plan designed for that single battle, not for the broader war that it would inevitably spark.

⁵⁰⁵ This approach is not unusual in a crisis. In Bertjan Verbeek's study of British decision-making in the Suez Crisis (another controversial war of choice), Verbeek considers that 'the advent of a foreign policy crisis is likely to result in centralization of decision-making, increasing the likelihood that small groups are assigned to deal with the new situation ... the worldview of a group's leader as well as the images broadly held by a country's foreign policy elite contribute ... to high quality decision-making' (see Bertjan Verbeek, *Decision-Making in Great Britain During the Suez Crisis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 25). But Iraq, like the Suez, also exposes the inherent limitations of such an approach. New Labour had a tendency to gather together those who shared a common belief system (note the exclusion of Short as not one of the 'inner circle', and the resignation of Robin Cook), and this inevitably led to the phenomenon of 'Group Think', leading to unchallenged assumptions. As Verbeek concludes, 'homogeneity of group members in social background and ideology is expected to promote Groupthink ... several case studies of foreign policy decision-making by small groups confirm that group insulation, directive leadership and lack of methodological procedures are negatively associated with the quality of decision-making' (see Verbeek, *Decision-Making in Great Britain During the Suez Crisis*, p. 24).

⁵⁰⁶ Seldon, *Blair's Britain*, p. 84. The PMSU worked in project teams organised around five clusters, wholly focused on domestic issues. These clusters were: public service reform, home affairs, economy and infrastructure, welfare reform, and social justice and communities.

In the post-invasion period, as the true scale and character of the war emerged, this traditional approach to strategy became increasingly insufficient. The war evolved rapidly, driven by violence. The removal of the Hussein regime fractured the social contract between the state and the people, releasing an outpouring of repressed power and emotion. Force had an important role to play in what followed (indeed the lack of sufficient military force in the country was a key issue), but it was also wholly inadequate as a solution. British decision-makers needed a different set of instrumental strategic tools to succeed in post-invasion Iraq, including the capacity to build political systems, diplomatic capability to broker solutions, economic levers to hasten reconstruction, and intangibles such as legitimacy and trustworthiness. Moreover, they needed a surfeit of such resources in order to be able to grapple with war's unpredictable reciprocity with strategy: just enough was never going to be enough. A higher theory – one that went beyond force, but kept within its context – was clearly needed to address the post-invasion war.

The second decision therefore highlights the need for concepts that went beyond strategic theories of 'force', and more towards strategic theories of 'power'. Such concepts fit far more comfortably when examining the complexity of post-invasion Iraq. Indeed an over-reliance on theories of force, at the cost of a true understanding of power, was central to British strategic shortfalls. The UK and US saw the fight against Saddam as a simple, Clausewitzian 'duel', and they sought a decisive blow to defeat him. But as Freedman says, 'a duel is ... a bad metaphor because it suggests a fight to the finish with only one winner'. True strategy is not just the use of force, it is 'the art of creating power'.⁵⁰⁷ A true understanding of this would have suggested a very different theory of strategy, one for which the US and UK were institutionally unprepared. To use Joseph Nye's terminology, success would have required a far more balanced blend of 'hard' and 'soft' power. As Nye said, 'Americans were not wrong it invest in the revolution in military affairs; they were wrong to think it was sufficient'.⁵⁰⁸

The joint occupation of Iraq ended ignominiously on 28 June 2004. The formal transition of power to an Interim Iraqi Government, forced to take place two days early due to the threat of attack, was a hurried affair without much of a sense of history. The CPA, which for fourteen months and through over 100 orders had embodied British and American strategy, immediately ceased to exist and Bremer left Iraq hours after the event, never to return. After their departure the CPA issued itself what the SIGIR called a 'glowing report card', comparing the reconstruction of Iraq to the Marshall

⁵⁰⁷ Freedman, *Strategy: a History*, p. xii.

⁵⁰⁸ Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), Loc Cit 759.

Plan. The SIGIR's reality is somewhat different. 'The Iraq it left behind', he states, 'was in a perilous state ... Iraq had slipped into the grip of a fierce insurgency, more US troops were dying every day, and the occupation had soured many Iraqis on the continuing US presence in the country'.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁹ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, pp. 159 – 160.

Part Three

The Golden Mosque, the Shadow of Afghanistan, and Operation SINBAD

22 February to 7 November 2006

'It was pretty clear to me ... we had a strategy that involved extraction rather than necessarily achieving mission success. It was, in a sense, an exit strategy rather than a winning strategy.'

Major General Richard Shirreff, GOC MND(SE), 2006⁵¹⁰

The decisions studied in Parts One and Two have much in common. They took place in a clear crisis: the invasion and occupation of Iraq. The protagonists were broadly unchanged. The choice to study two such similar decisions has been useful, allowing examination of the development of strategy in theory, and its transition to strategy in practice. The next step is to study how influences change as war normalises. As Bertjan Verbeek tells us in his study of British decision-making in the Suez Crisis, a crisis has a deep impact. 'The advent of a foreign policy crisis', Verbeek writes, 'is likely to result in centralization [*sic*] of decision-making'.⁵¹¹ The first two Parts support this hypothesis. So, what happens to strategic decision-making when a crisis settles, and war becomes normalised? Does it decentralise back to strategy by committee? And do changes in leadership make a difference?

The best period to study a third decision exists between February and November 2006. Positioned eighteen months after the CPA's dissolution, it is well beyond the period of crisis. The Iraq war had – by dint of time – become normalised within the UK's strategic environment. Politics had evolved within Iraq, with the election of a first democratically-elected government. Regional players, in a state of shock after the invasion, had begun to execute their own strategies: the clash of wills in Iraq was far broader by 2006. Mid-2006 also marks a period of notable turnover in British strategic decision-makers. This year presents a rich seam for fresh analysis.

The period of February to November 2006 is book-ended by two dramatic events: the bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra, and the outcome of the US mid-term elections that ultimately led to President Bush's decision to 'surge' tens of thousands of troops into Iraq in 2007. The events will bound Part Three, to provide structure to the analysis.

Bounding the Third Decision in Time: al-Askari, a Civil War, and the Search for a 'Winning Strategy'

Sectarianism defined the new Iraq from the outset. For decades Saddam's Ba'athist Regime had elevated the minority Sunni to the societal fore, marginalising the Shi'a and Kurds. This had forced a

⁵¹⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 444.

⁵¹¹ Verbeek, *Decision-Making in Great Britain During the Suez Crisis*, p. 25.

form of stability between the sects: a parasitic relationship, but a predictable one. The invasion fractured this stability – overthrowing a century of Sunni dominance, and providing the Shi'a and the Kurds with a dividend of power. They immediately seized it.⁵¹² The Coalition struggled to be a neutral player in these changing dynamics from the outset. CPA Orders One and Two disproportionality targeted Sunnis, laying a tinder of grievance in a proud and previously-powerful sect. In turn, this led to a violent insurgency by late 2005. As we will see below, the Coalition's role in creating new sectarian imbalances in Iraq persistently haunted them.

The fault lines created by the invasion and the CPA also created fertile ground for growing jihadi exploitation. By 2004 Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had pledged *bayat* (allegiance) of his group to Al'Qaida as *Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi'l Bilad al-Rafidayn* (also known as 'Al'Qaida in Iraq' or AQI)⁵¹³, and had begun exploiting the ethnic rifts in Iraq. In January 2004 US forces intercepted a letter from al-Zarqawi to Al-Qaida committing to drawing the Iraqi Shi'a population 'into a sectarian war' by 'striking religious, political and military symbols'.⁵¹⁴ Fed by such provocations, sectarian violence in Iraq continued to rise throughout 2004, and by late 2005 Phillip Zelikow of the US State Department argued 'the civil war had already begun'.⁵¹⁵

On 22 February 2006 al-Zarqawi lit the firestorm. AQI fighters entered the al-Askari mosque in Samarra, the fourth holiest Shi'a site, and blew up the 'golden dome'; an act described by the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister as being 'as 9/11 in the United States'.⁵¹⁶ The shrine was located in a Sunni-dominated suburb, and it was clearly AQI's intention to provoke a violent Shi'a response. This was successful. More than thirteen hundred Iraqis died in sectarian killings in Baghdad in the following days, and both sects began to prepare for civil war. This was especially the case in Baghdad, where armed militias moved rapidly to 'cleanse' neighbourhoods of rival factions.⁵¹⁷ Within months the capital of Iraq had been 'balkanised' in a remarkable way.

So, why does al-Askari matter to British strategy, and why does it make a suitable marker for analysis of a third decision? While the British did not realise it, the destruction of al-Askari fundamentally

⁵¹² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 660.

⁵¹³ *Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi'l Bilad al-Rafidayn* translates as 'the Organisation of the Base of Jihad in Mesopotamia' (see David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: The Unravelling of Western Counterterrorism* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2016), p. 22.

⁵¹⁴ Hal Brands, Jeffrey A. Engel, William Inboden, and Timothy Andrews Sayle (eds), *The Last Card: Inside George W Bush's Decision to Surge in Iraq* (Cornell University Press: London, 2019), p. 9.

⁵¹⁵ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 47.

⁵¹⁶ Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2013), p. 28.

⁵¹⁷ Mansoor, *Surge*, pp. 28 – 29.

altered the character of the UK's strategic challenge in Iraq. A brief summary is needed to justify the selection of this as a suitable place to start Part Three.

From mid-2004 onwards the British sought to conceptualise their AO in southern Iraq as somehow separate and unique from the rest of Iraq. It did seem different. The Shi'a-dominated British area was distant from the worst of the violence. In mid-2005, for example, MND(SE) accounted for only 1% of violent incidents across the whole of Iraq.⁵¹⁸ Attacks did take place against the Coalition, but there was no sense of the horrifying sectarian brutality of the north. The 'big idea' that 'Basra is not Baghdad' soon became a rallying cry for British strategic decision-makers.⁵¹⁹ As time passed, the UK became increasingly protective of the independence of their less-violent 'fiefdom in the south'.

Al-Askari, however, fundamentally changed the importance of southern Iraq. This was in two vital ways. First, it placed the UK's AO firmly on the Iraqi sectarian/political fault lines, especially after the re-election of the Shi'a-dominated 'United Iraqi Alliance' (UIA) to government in December 2005, and the establishment of Nouri Al-Maliki as Prime Minister in May 2006. A key tipping point for the UIA victory in late 2005 had been the decision of Moqtada al-Sadr to align with the UIA, encouraging his followers to vote for the Shi'a alliance. Southern Iraq was at the heart of this, with 70 - 90% of UIA voters residing within the four provinces of the British AO (see Figure 3 below).⁵²⁰

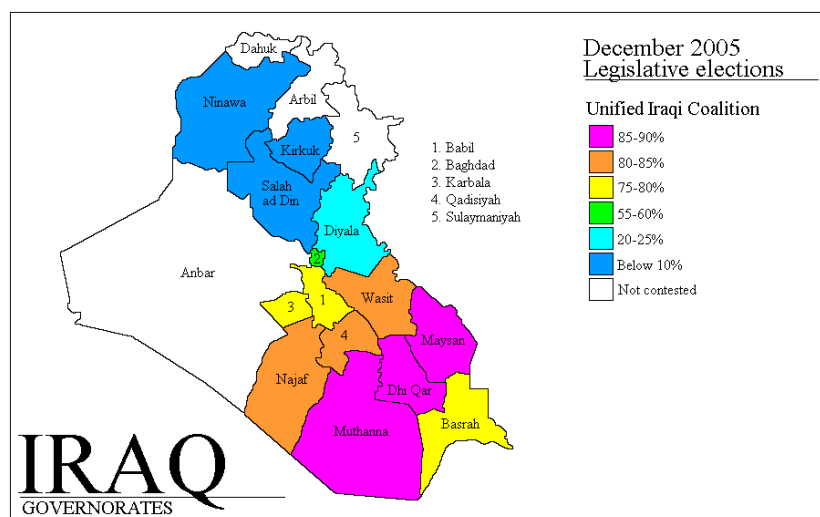


Figure 3: Distribution of Voting for the UIA in the December 2005 Elections.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 72.

⁵¹⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 418.

⁵²⁰ Adam Carr, *Melbourne University Online Election Archive* found at [link](#) (accessed 20 Mar 2022).

⁵²¹ Adam Carr, *Melbourne University Online Election Archive* found at [link](#) (accessed 20 Mar 2022).

This placed the south as Iraq's 'kingmaker' for any Shi'a Prime Minister, creating dilemmas down the road for both Maliki and the British. As Colonel Pete Mansoor put it, 'to stem the civil strife in Iraq, Maliki needed to rein in the Shi'a militias, but the two largest groupings, the Jaysh al'Mahdi and the Badr Organisation, belonged to parties ... that formed the core of his political support'.⁵²² JAM and Badr were dominant in the UK AO. So, while comparatively peaceful, the UK's Shi'a-dominated AO was about to become a key battleground in Iraq's sectarian struggles.

Secondly, the sectarian violence placed the UK on the frontline of a broadening influence in the war: Iranian strategic interest. Iran adopted a dual pronged approach to shaping the outcomes of the 2003 invasion to their desires. Politically, Iran supported the Shi'a parties; including SCIRI, the Dawah Party (of which Maliki was a member), and the political wing of al-Sadr's OMS. On a more nefarious line, however, Iran also increasingly sponsored Shi'a militia groups with training and weaponry. As early as 2004 the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force (IRGC-QF) was sponsoring camps on the Iraq/Iran border to train JAM members, funnelling up to \$80 million to support al-Sadr directly.⁵²³ Violence and politics were explicitly connected.

The UK's ownership of the south placed them at the frontline of Iran's plans. By mid-2006 MND(SE) was the lead facilitation route for Iranian support to the militias. The UK's AO became the most common route for militiamen to move into Iran for training, and for so-called 'lethal aid' to return back (see Figure 4 below).⁵²⁴ Fighters and weapons would then move swiftly into the sectarian fight in Baghdad, particularly through the notorious Sadr City. What happened in the UK's AO was no longer just UK business; what took place in Basra echoed into Baghdad. The UK's AO increasingly became vital ground for the whole Coalition effort.

The destruction of al-Askari marks a mid-point in the UK's Iraq story: a turning point where the strategic context shifted. It was in the period immediately after that the British executed a series of profound choices: backing Maliki, committing to Afghanistan, executing Operation SALAMANCA, and pressing home with early withdrawal. Al-Askari therefore marks a suitable start-point for my third phase.

⁵²² Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 30.

⁵²³ Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and 'Other Means'* (Combating Terrorism Centre at Westpoint, 2018) found at [link](#) (accessed 20 Mar 2022), p. 30.

⁵²⁴ Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq*, p. 60.

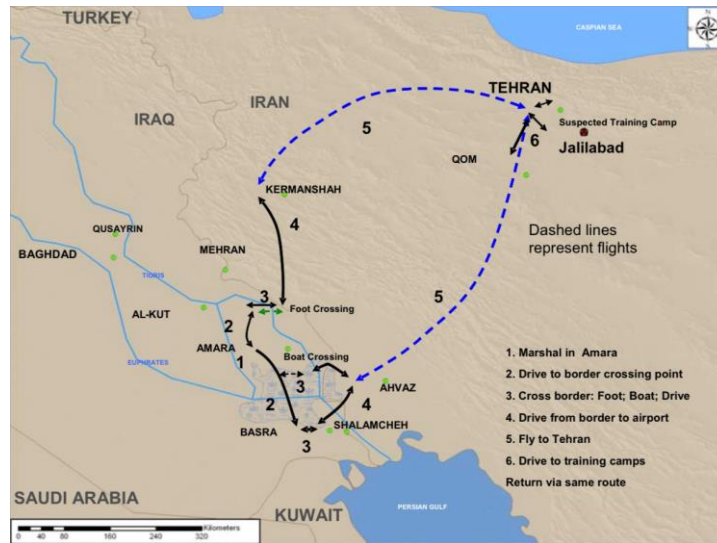


Figure 4: Common Routes Travelled to IRGC-QF Paramilitary Training in Iran.⁵²⁵

There are three turning points to examine in Part Three. They are: the formation of a ‘permanent’ Iraqi Government and the appointment of Prime Minister Maliki in May 2006; the decision by the British Government to deploy troops to Helmand Province also in May 2006, known as the ‘Helmand decision’; and the execution of Operation SINBAD/SALAMANCA by MND(SE) in October 2006. This Part will further expose how the British in 2006 built a strategy based on an assumption of predictability and linearity; a dangerous choice when the flames of war remained smouldering. One well-timed expression of violence re-ignited the war, reasserting its unpredictability. It will further examine how the British failed to learn the lessons of Iraq in the 2006 decisions around Afghanistan, resulting in the willing embrace of the unpredictability of two wars. Operation SINBAD/SALAMANCA then stands as an excellent vignette of the outcomes of both errors.

The identification of an end point for Part Three is simple. The outcomes of al-Askari eventually culminated in the place feared most for the Bush Administration: domestic opinion. It became increasingly clear to the American people in 2006 that the strategy in Iraq was not working. Violence hit a record high in May 2006 of 3,196 attacks, despite over 18,000 insurgents being detained or killed between 2004 and 2006. By October, over 3000 Iraqis were being killed in sectarian attacks each month⁵²⁶; a staggering 34,500 estimated deaths in the year.⁵²⁷ The two MNF-I operations

⁵²⁵ Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq*, p. 60.

⁵²⁶ Mansoor, *Surge*, pp. 31 – 32.

⁵²⁷ Michael E. O’Hanlon and Ian Livingston, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstructions and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Brookings Institute) found at [link](#) (accessed 20 Mar 2022).

designed to subdue the violence, known as *Ma'an ila Al'Amam* (or the *Together Forwards*), failed. American deaths remained high, with 822 fatalities and 6,412 wounded in 2006 (the second highest combined annual casualty rate so far).⁵²⁸

This turned the 2006 US mid-term elections into a referendum on Iraq. Public opinion was clear: 58% of Americans stated it was a 'mistake to send troops to Iraq' and 64% stated that things were either going 'moderately badly' or 'very badly'.⁵²⁹ Failure in Iraq became a key target for Democrats.⁵³⁰ Popular judgment was made clear on 7 November 2006 when, for the first time since 1994, the Democrats won control of both houses of Congress. The message for Bush was clear; you are failing in Iraq.

On 7 November 2006 the US President concluded that America's strategy in Iraq was not working. Bush's decision in response was one of the most unexpected of his presidency: to commit tens of thousands of additional troops. The 'surge' of 2007, as it became known, had deep ramifications for the British. 7 November 2006 is therefore a suitable marker for the end of this third phase of analysis, allowing me to bridge into an examination of the 'surge' itself.

Turning Point: Nouri Al-Maliki and a First 'Permanent' Iraqi Government

The path from the ignoble end of the CPA in June 2004 to a first 'permanent' Iraqi Government in May 2006 was traumatic for the Iraqi people. The IIG managed Iraq's affairs after the CPA until 30 January 2005, when the country held a rushed election to appoint a first General Assembly. With Sunnis boycotting the vote, the UIA won 140 of 275 seats – a dramatic success for the Shi'a. Only one seat was occupied by a hard-leaning Sunni party. A Shi'a politician, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, was appointed interim Prime Minister. In one fell swoop, and by no small measure thanks to their own actions, Sunnis were broadly marginalised from Iraq's post-invasion political process.⁵³¹

⁵²⁸ Michael E. O'Hanlon and Ian Livingston, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstructions and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Brookings Institute) found at [link](#) (accessed 20 Mar 2022).

⁵²⁹ Gallup Polling, *Iraq*, found at [link](#) (accessed 20 Mar 2022).

⁵³⁰ In New Jersey, for example, Democratic senator accused President Bush of 'living in an alternative reality where intelligence findings don't matter, mounting casualties don't count, and rhetoric about the war on terror is more important than results'. Similar sentiments were echoed across the country. For analysis on the role the Iraq War and casualty rates played in the 2006 mid-term elections, see Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, 'Iraq Casualties and the 2006 Senate Elections', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Nov., 2007, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Nov., 2007), pp. 507-530.

⁵³¹ For excellent analysis of the 2005 elections, see Meghan L. O'Sullivan and Razzaq Al-Saiedi, *Choosing an Electoral System: Iraq's Three Electoral Experiments, Their Results, and Their Political Implications* (Belfer Centre) found at [link](#) (accessed 20 Mar 2022). The marginalisation of the Sunni came from two important factors. First, the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) created a single electoral district across Iraq, making the elections very much a mass popular vote,

The purpose of this General Assembly was to draft the first Iraq Constitution.⁵³² In the words of Dominic Asquith (the Director of the FCO Iraq Directorate) the drafting negotiations ‘exposed the crystalline brittleness of the political process’.⁵³³ Issues of federalism, the role of religion in society, and de-Ba’athification loomed large, and while a text was eventually agreed the ‘domination of the political scene by a Shi’a Islamist and assertive Kurdish block ... resulted in an imperfect Constitution’.⁵³⁴

This imperfect Constitution went to a national referendum on 15 October 2005. This time Sunnis voted in high numbers: aiding an overall turnout of 63% that saw the Constitution narrowly approved. The referendum, however, highlighted the deepening Sunni/Shi’a sectarian rifts.⁵³⁵ Again, all the issues the Constitution failed to address were sectarian: federation, the distribution of power, the role of religion in law and justice, and de-Ba’athification. The urgency to hold a full national election was clear. What was unclear was whether the results would mitigate or exacerbate the increasingly strident sectarianism gripping the country.

The election took place on 15 December 2005.⁵³⁶ Sunni politicians, realising their mistake in boycotting the January 2005 political process, formed ‘blocs’ to cohere Sunni voting.⁵³⁷ Major counter deals, however, were also being struck by the Shi’a. Despite his concerns about Iranian influence on Shi’a parties, the fiercely-nationalistic al-Sadr placed his considerable weight behind the UIA. The ultimate intentions of many of the Shi’a bloc were made clear within a document that began circulating within the UIA in September 2005. The Shi’a, it said, sought true domination of Iraq. ‘Iraq is the Shi’a’, the document concluded, ‘and the Shi’a are Iraq’.⁵³⁸

devoid of a sense of balance to local politics. Second, Sunni insurgent and militia intimidation, combined with Sunni leaders calling for a boycott of the election, deterred Sunnis from coming out to make their mark.

⁵³² For the history of the drafting of the Iraqi Constitution, see Ashley S. Deeks and Matthew D. Burton, ‘Iraq’s Constitution: A Drafting History’, *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol 40: 1, Winter 2007 found at [link](#) (accessed 20 Mar 2022).

⁵³³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 65.

⁵³⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 307.

⁵³⁵ While the overall ‘yes’ numbers were met, the Sunni heartland voted overwhelmingly against the Constitution, with 97% of Iraqis in Al-Anbar (for example) making the mark for ‘no’. Only three of fifteen Sunnis in the drafting committee attended the signing ceremony, a clear indication of their views of the result (see Muntazra Nazir, ‘Democracy, Islam and Insurgency in Iraq’, *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (July 2006), p. 13).

⁵³⁶ Ali A. Allawi, the former Minister of Finance and Defence, later reflected on the urgency of the electoral process, writing ‘the saga over the constitution and the tumultuous crowding of events over a short period of time were symptomatic of the whole post-war period ... matters of an epoch-making nature were crammed into an impossibly short timetable, which could nevertheless be justified by the imperative of moving the country forward’. See Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2007), p. 417.

⁵³⁷ Most notably was the *Tawaffuq* (or ‘Accordance’) bloc, a coalition of the main Sunni parties seeking to emulate the success of the UIA (see Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, p. 437).

⁵³⁸ In September 2005 a document began circulating within the UIA, supposedly written by Vice President Adel Abd el-Mahdi, a key Shi’a figure. Entitled ‘Perspectives on the Principles of Governance in Iraq’, this document set out a vision for

Turnout for the 15 December election approached 80%.⁵³⁹ But as Ali A. Allawi (a former Iraqi Minister) put it, ‘there was no doubt about the hardening of sectarian or ethnic opinion. Shi’a voted for the UIA, Sunnis voted for the *Tawaffuq* bloc ... and the Kurds voted for the Kurdistan Alliance’.⁵⁴⁰ The Sunnis won 44 seats – and therefore a voice – in the new Council of Representatives. But the UIA remained dominant, controlling 130 seats in the Parliament and with a clear mandate to select a Prime Minister. The political battle-lines for the future of Iraq were formed firmly on sectarian lines, and in a tinder-dry nation it was a small step for politics to spark to broadening violence.

Selecting a Prime Minister and forming a desired government of ‘national unity’ took far longer than anticipated. Months of deadlocked negotiations passed, with the British applying all tools available to them in an attempt to drive the process forward.⁵⁴¹ By late March 2006 Blair considered the problem of forming a government in Iraq as the UK’s top foreign policy concern.⁵⁴² By mid-April he made his own intervention, writing to Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani to ask him to encourage the Shi’a community to select a Prime Minister.⁵⁴³

The unexpected result came on 21 April. The unknown Nouri al-Maliki of the Da’awa Party was announced as Prime Minister. Even William Patey in Baghdad described him as a ‘surprise candidate’.⁵⁴⁴ Maliki was not a known statesman.⁵⁴⁵ He bore none of the markers of a Prime Minister-in-waiting, and in many ways he represented the least-worst candidate to the feuding Shi’a

Iraq determined by the realisation of Shi’a dominance, and acceptance by the lower sects (including the Kurds and the Sunnis) of their rightful (and subordinate) role in society. The emancipation of the Shi’a would lead to the emancipation of all of Iraq (see Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, p. 439).

⁵³⁹ This was a remarkable turnout that notably dwarfed the 61.4% turnout of the UK’s own election in mid-2005.

⁵⁴⁰ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, p. 442.

⁵⁴¹ The UK focussed their influence after the December elections firmly on the identification of an Iraqi Prime Minister and, more importantly, the formation of a government of ‘national unity’. From mid-January onwards the FCO developed a comprehensive engagement plan of high-level visits and telephone calls (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 529). Able to step on slightly more neutral ground than the United States, the UK developed outreach connections to marginalised Sunni and Shi’a groups, including at times those closely connected to armed attacks on the Coalition: as Tony Blair would put it, ‘digging some way into the insurgency’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 384). The Blair Government’s trend of relying on the power of individuals continued. Straw as Foreign Secretary visited Iraq three times between the 6 January and the 2 April, the final time at the side of Secretary Rice in what they hoped would be a decisive visit (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 529). Unlocking the deadlock proved difficult throughout.

⁵⁴² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 629.

⁵⁴³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 607.

⁵⁴⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 687.

⁵⁴⁵ A former exile, Maliki had emerged in Iraqi politics only in the later stages of the post-invasion period. He had served as a senior parliamentarian in both the CPA-appointed National Assembly, and latterly in the Transitional National Assembly (who governed Iraq between the January and December 2005 elections). A former Deputy of the de-Ba’athification Commission, he was known for his uncompromising views on former senior Ba’athists, and on the need to confront the Sunni insurgency head on (he was also known for radical anti-American positions while in exile in Syria). See Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, p. 444.

factions. A weak leader, with no militia, he was seen as a malleable politician who would timidly hold the line while a true solution could be found. By 20 May 2006 this weak leader had formed a Cabinet. After three years of political shaping, and (as Defence Secretary Robert Gates would later point out⁵⁴⁶) for the first time in four thousand years, Iraq had a democratically-elected 'permanent' government on a four-year term: a genuine achievement. The scale of its challenge ahead was remarkable.

The formation of the first Iraqi government, and the appointment of Maliki, represented a major strategic turning point for the UK. This manifested itself in three ways. The first was in the creation of a new and second subordination of British strategy, in addition to the extant subordination to the Americans. Second, and thanks to this subordination, the British found it increasingly difficult to maintain a neutral position in Iraq, intrinsically linked to an Iraqi government that was sectarian in nature. Finally, the formation of the Government changed the strategic role of the UK AO in Iraqi politics: increasingly turning it from a 'backwater' into key terrain in the core issues in Iraqi society. The British situation in Iraq was about to get a whole lot messier.

A Second Subordination: Strategic Deference to Iraqi Sovereignty. The influence of New Labour's political philosophy on British strategy has been an important theme in this study. In Part One we saw how New Labour's ethical foreign policy (the 'force for good') and Blair's *doctrine of the international community* helped entrap the British into the Iraq invasion. In Part Two, we saw how the same philosophy drove the British into accepting their role as a 'Joint Occupying Power' in Iraq. This influence did not ease in 2006: if anything, it became more strident.

In March 2006 Blair laid out his views on the Iraq war in tones characteristic of his binary world view. 'This is not a clash of civilisations', he said in a speech, echoing Huntington, 'it is a clash about civilisation'. Blair was clear that the sanctity of democratic elections were a central expression of New Labour's vision. 'As we speak', Blair attested, 'Iraq is facing a crucial moment in its history: to unify and progress, under a government elected by its people for the first time in half a century; or to descend into sectarian strife ... it should be our task to empower and support those in favour of uniting Islam and democracy, everywhere'.⁵⁴⁷ The experiences of the previous two years had not dampened Blair's enthusiasm for interventionism, just as it had not done for his US counterparts.

⁵⁴⁶ Gates, *Duty*, p. 35.

⁵⁴⁷ The Guardian, *Tony Blair's Speech to the Foreign Policy Centre*, 22 March 2006 found online at [link](#) (accessed 25 Mar 22).

For Blair, elections were a key marker of civilisation. An elected government was a reflection of society, and therefore demanded respect: recalling Giddens and the '*Third Way*', '*ubi societas, ibi ius* ...whenever there is society, there should be laws'.⁵⁴⁸ A truly-democratic Government, as an expression of democracy, was sacred. This commitment had significant implications for British strategic freedom-of-action in the aftermath of the December 2005 elections. The previous iterations of Iraqi governance (the CPA, the IIG, and the Transitional National Assembly) were all relatively ambiguous in terms of sovereignty, sufficiently so that the British felt comfortable to act – and at times to overrule or ignore – the Iraqi Government to meet their own ends.⁵⁴⁹

But following the elections of December 2005 those grey areas disappeared. The Iraqi Government that formed on the 20 May 2006 was unambiguously sovereign, and democratically legitimate. Like any other country in the rules-based international order, its authority and decisions had to be respected: including in the conduct of the war, and in the terms of how the presence of international troops in the country continued or ended. British officials could petition, persuade and cajole. They could even influence or bully. But they no longer had the authority to order or override. The result was a second subordination of British strategy: now to both the US as the dominant power in the Coalition, and to the sovereign Iraqi Government. Creating even more difficulty for the British was the idea that, in principle, the Iraqis should take precedence over the US. If the Iraqi Government decided it, *prima facie* it had to be respected; no matter the risks.

The results of this second subordination were immediate, and then enduring. An early example can be found in the process for declaring Iraqi provinces to be ready for handover to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) as part of the shared US and British 'transition strategy'. Almost immediately after the elections, and even before a Government was formed, it was agreed that the Iraqi Government should make the final decision on when a province was ready to transition to 'Provincial Iraqi Control', or 'PIC'. In democratic terms, this makes logical sense; who else could determine whether the ISF were ready to take on security within a province, other than the Iraqis themselves? The British actively subordinated themselves to Iraqi sovereignty as a matter of both policy and practice.

⁵⁴⁸ Giddens, *The Third Way*, Loc Cit 1790 – 1803.

⁵⁴⁹ In 2004, for example, the British were more than comfortable to use their power and influence as an 'Occupying Power' (as limited as they were) to veto language in the TAL that might open the gateway for an Islamist-dominated Iraq, and to shape the nature of the first Governing Council to do the same. In his evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, Sir Jeremy Greenstock reported that he used his influence to shape the TAL, on occasion manoeuvring around the US in British interest. 'For instance', he reported, 'in the negotiations with the Kurds over the TAL, where I prevented the Kurds walking out, which Bremer wasn't aware of, in the final stages and negotiated some of the text with TAL when Bremer wasn't in the room'. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 752.

This immediately began to cause issues. Suddenly, Iraqi politics were driving the British military timeline. As Lieutenant General Houghton, the SBMR-I at the time, put it after the election, ‘the major threat to UK aspirations for transition is one of timing and derives from the desire for the Iraqi Government to be the authority for making decisions on provincial transfer ... every week that the government fails to form, a further week must be added to the anticipated timing of transfer’.⁵⁵⁰ This was but the first of a series of related problems, connecting politics and tactics, that plagued British strategy over the next three years. The deference the British felt bound to give the fledgling Iraqi democracy became a heavy chain around their strategic necks.

History did not help the British in this new subordination. Iraqis held long memories, and many remembered the outcomes of the last major British involvement in Iraq in the 1920s. Many of the problems of Iraq in the early 21st Century had their origins in the British governance of Iraq after the First World War: the centralisation of power in Baghdad, Sunni domination, and the marginalisation of the Shi’a and the Kurds.⁵⁵¹ The troubled legacy of the 1920s British mandate also set the

⁵⁵⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 520.

⁵⁵¹ The history of this period is best captured by Charles Tripp in his *History of Iraq*, and it is worth providing a more fulsome summary in an extended footnote. In the aftermath of the First World War, the newly-formed League of Nations developed the idea of ‘mandates’ to help control and stabilise the former territories of the defeated Central Powers as part of the agreements of the Peace Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The idea was a simple if somewhat hubristic one. The territories would eventually become self-governing entities, but only after mentoring in the skills of modern democracy by one of the European powers. Syria, for example, was placed under the tutelage of France, who would help develop a modern and progressive style of government and politics acceptable to the changing international system.

The British in 1919 were already occupying the territory that would become modern Iraq, and (as in 2003) possession became nine tenths of the law. The League of Nations ‘Mandate for Iraq’ was granted to the British at the San Remo Conference in April 1920, authorising the British to establish a ruling Council of State, mostly dominated by British officials and with Iraqis in subordinate roles under British control. As it was in Saddam’s time, most of these Iraqis were from the more sophisticated, more technocratic and less tribal Sunni classes, echoing their domination of the old Ottoman order. For the pragmatic and not idealistic British this just made common sense: only the Sunni had the administrative experience they needed. This was especially the case in the new Iraqi military, where (as they did under Saddam) Sunnis almost totally dominated the officer class.

It did not take long for the tribes and sects of the new Iraq to express their displeasure against the British and their co-opted Iraqi ruling class, deeply offended by what they saw as the domineering attitude of the victorious European powers and the Sunnis. The first revolt took place in June to October 1920, led by the son of a prominent Shi’a *mutjahid*, Muhammad al-Sadr, and his Shi’a-dominated resistance organisation named *Haras al-Istiqlal* (or the ‘Independence Guard’). The revolt was violently put down by the British, with the loss of around 6000 Iraqi lives and around 500 British and Indian soldiers. Over the decade that followed the British sought to reduce the risk of further uprisings by imposing a form of government that could be seen as acceptable to Iraq’s powerbrokers. A ‘Council of Ministers’ was formed, again dominated by Sunni Arabs, and at the Cairo Conference in March 1921 the British colonial secretary, Winston Churchill, led the decision to establish Iraq as a monarchy with Amir Faisal - a stranger to most Iraqis - as the first King of Iraq (having first deported his only real competition, Sayyid Talib al-Naqib, who had dominated Basra in the early 1900s).

The decisions of the next ten years very much set the stage for the Iraq of the early 21st Century. The creation of a monarchy ensured that power was centralised in Baghdad, marginalising the extremities of Iraq and especially the south. Shi’a exclusion and discrimination fostered resentment against both the King and the Government, and their British patrons, exacerbated by the British High Commissioner’s use of land rights as the key bargaining tool of patronage, and as a reward for influence and power. Sunni domination of key tools of national power, and particularly the armed forces, became endemic. While ostensibly Iraq was sovereign, the Iraqis were bound by the San Remo and Cairo Conferences to

foundations for the way the British were viewed in Iraq in 2006. A number of the intractable issues that plagued the drafting of the Iraqi Constitution in 2005 were rooted in the time of British occupation.⁵⁵² Al-Sadr himself was the great-grandson of the leader of the first 1920s revolution, Muhammad al-Sadr, and his ideological fight against the *kafir* invaders had a clear historical link.⁵⁵³ Iraqi suspicions of British intentions went deep, with Condoleezza Rice proposing to Straw in mid-2005 that ‘there appeared to be a latent suspicion that the UK would repeat the history of the 1920s and undercut agreements reached with the Iraqis’, and seeking for Straw to give assurances to the Iraqis that this was not the case.⁵⁵⁴ There is irony that many of the problems New Labour faced in realising their internationalist aims were rooted in the far-more-unilateral actions of their forebears just eighty years prior.

From 20 May 2006, the British found themselves under a new dual strategic subordination: to the US on one side, driven by the ‘special relationship’, and to the Iraqi Government on the other. It would prove to be very hard to navigate these dual subordinations in the years to come, especially when the two pulled in different directions. This was an arena of true strategic dilemmas.

Riven by Sectarianism: The Character of the Iraqi Government, and the Elusiveness of Neutrality.

This new subordination meant that the character of the Iraqi Government became vital to UK strategy. This character, however, was rife with flaws. Part Three’s introduction exposed how the seeds of sectarianism were sown right from the days following the overthrow of Saddam. But it was the election of the first Iraqi Government, and the choice of Maliki as Prime Minister, that truly entrenched sectarianism as a defining characteristic of the strategic environment. The feuds and intrigues that developed within this Government took place in an environment febrile with sectarian hatred and mistrust. Ultimately, this drove the country towards civil war.

submit to ‘such advice and assistance as may be required’ from their British tutors, who still occupied the country with a considerable military force. As Tripp puts it, ‘as British actions ... demonstrated, this was not advice that the Iraqis themselves were at liberty to refuse’.

The British fought hard to maintain their control over Iraqi politics throughout the decade that followed, right up until and beyond the declaration of Iraqi independence in 1932. Even then, the British were careful to enshrine in the final treaty with the King their right to move troops through Iraq, and to be the sole supplier (and therefore controller) of arms to Iraq. See Tripp, *History of Iraq*, pp. 44 – 54.

⁵⁵² These issues included questions of Kurdish autonomy, land rights, the equality and distribution of political power, and the role of the military in society.

⁵⁵³ The National Interest, *Muqtada al-Sadr: Rabid Warlord or Iraqi Ghandi* found at [link](#) (accessed 24 Mar 22).

⁵⁵⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 144.

On the surface, the Government actually seemed more balanced than in the past. There was a far more significant Sunni presence in the first Iraqi parliament than in the initial Governing Council,⁵⁵⁵ and Blair applied considerable effort to use this balance to achieve a 'Government of National Unity'. In a note to Bush in December 2005, he proposed that they must 'go all out to get a unity Government in Iraq ... this is the time to cash in all of our chips here'.⁵⁵⁶ In his letter to al-Sistani, he spoke passionately about his belief that the Coalition and the Iraqi people shared the aim of 'an effective Government of National Unity as soon as possible'.⁵⁵⁷ Achieving a 'unifying' Government was clearly a central part of British strategy: the gateway to stability, transition and eventually withdrawal.

Consistent British pressure had some effect.⁵⁵⁸ The Cabinet that was finally approved on 20 May 2006 seemed to address pressure for 'unity', at least in demographic breakdown (it consisted of twenty Shi'a, nine Kurds, nine Sunnis, and one Christian. Four cabinet members were women).⁵⁵⁹ This looked like a major step forward. Patey described it as a 'genuine government of national unity ... with a fair number of highly competent individuals in key positions' (although he also admitted that it was 'not quite the technical powerhouse we hoped for').⁵⁶⁰ This was echoed by Sheinwald, who assessed that 'this is – so far – a **real government of national unity**' (emphasis from original).⁵⁶¹

Sadly, this optimistic readout was inaccurate. This was for two principal reasons. First was the appointment of Maliki himself as the Prime Minister. The British had long expected that Adel Abd el-Mahdi, of SCIRI, would be the UIA's nomination⁵⁶², but el-Mahdi could not garner sufficient backing. Maliki became the only acceptable compromise candidate. The UIA deliberately selected a weak leader; someone who could meet urgent Coalition demands for a Prime Minister now, keep the seat warm, and be trusted not to cause trouble while those of true power manoeuvred to a position of strength. The British did not know what to make of Maliki, but they had little choice but to affirm his democratic leadership.

⁵⁵⁵ The *Tawaffuq* alone won 44 seats in the December election, a considerable step up from the two seats won by fundamentalist Sunni parties in January 2005.

⁵⁵⁶ Letter Sheinwald to Hadley, 1 April 2006, [untitled] attaching 'Note TB [Blair to Bush], 1 April 2006, 'Note' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

⁵⁵⁷ Letter Blair to Sistani, 12 April 2006, [untitled] from Iraq Inquiry Evidence at [link](#) (accessed 27 March 22).

⁵⁵⁸ Ayatollah al-Sistani, for example, did indeed intervene in early April 2006 to add momentum to the negotiations around Prime Minister and the formation of a Cabinet, at around the same time Blair's letter was delivered.

⁵⁵⁹ Al-Jazeera News Archive, *Iraq Cabinet List*, 21 May 06 found at [link](#) (accessed 8 Jul 24).

⁵⁶⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 727.

⁵⁶¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 697.

⁵⁶² Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, p. 439.

Maliki may have been acceptable to the Shi'a elites (for all the wrong reasons), but he was unlikely to win over the Iraqi people. A moderate Shi'a, it rapidly became clear that he would be endured, but not respected, by the more extreme Sadrists - who were aware that his position relied extensively on the support of al-Sadr and his factions. The relationship between Maliki and the Sadrists was notably one-sided throughout 2006, with Maliki holding few levers to influence those who had empowered his appointment.

Maliki was a highly divisive character for the Sunnis. He had been a Deputy Chair of the hated 'De-Ba'athification Commission'. Lieutenant General Chiarelli, the MNF-I commander, was convinced that Maliki's appointment was the final straw for many Sunnis. 'By the middle of July [2006]', he said, 'it was clear that [Maliki's] government ... wasn't a government of national reconciliation. The Sunnis felt they'd been sold a bill of goods'. Chiarelli believed that Maliki's appointment marked as grave a moment, if not quite so dramatic, as the al-Askari bombings. 'Samarra was an accelerator', he said, 'but nothing near Maliki coming into power'.⁵⁶³ The US played their own role in emasculating Maliki's authority. Their words were supportive, but they were unwilling to truly cede instruments of national power – such as the military – to him.⁵⁶⁴ In a strategic environment where violence remained a key currency, Maliki should have had the monopoly on the biggest militia: the ISF. Instead Iraqis, aware of his lack of monopoly on violence, turned to local militias for their security.

The reality was that Iraq had a Prime Minister singularly lacking in political authority. It is true that he made some visible attempts to seek 'unity' in the first few months. The balanced Cabinet was Maliki's own design. He published in his first weeks a new plan for 'national reconciliation' and a new Baghdad Security Plan. He was vocal in his commitment to taking on both the Sunni-led insurgency and the Shi'a death squads. But in reality, he lacked the influence to achieve any of these things. The final commitment was perhaps the hardest, given that Maliki was heavily reliant on the Sadrists for his political power. This reliance increasingly haunted British strategy in the Sadrist-dominated south.

⁵⁶³ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 277.

⁵⁶⁴ The Minister of Defence in Maliki's new Cabinet, Sunni General Abd el-Qadir Jassim, was well known to be an American selection, and it was clear to many that the MNF-I maintained an exceptionally close control over the Iraqi military instrument. In late 2006 Maliki complained that he had no effective control over the Iraqi armed forces, that he was unable to move a company of troops without seeking prior approval from MNF-I, and that there had been occasions where orders he had given to senior Iraqi officers had not only been countermanded by the Americans, but had seen the officer's dismissal. See Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, p. 450 and p. 453.

The second reason for the ineffectiveness of the Iraqi Government was the five-month delay in its formation, and the alignment of this delay with al-Askari. Five months does not sound like long, but the expansion of sectarian violence between December 2005 and May 2006 was spectacular. The thirteen hundred deaths in the days after al-Askari, understandably, inspired a reaction of extreme fear and anger in the Iraqi people. They did not have a government to turn to for help. Not only was the Iraqi political class internally focussed on manoeuvring for power in the new administration, many of them (such as Bayan Jabr, the Minister of the Interior) were implicated in the outpouring of sectarian revenge.⁵⁶⁵

Terrified Iraqis had no trusted Government with which to form a social contract, so they turned to the old ways; militias, families and neighbourhoods. Whole areas were cleansed of opposing sects while wrangling about the Maliki government went on, essentially forcing (as the SIGIR put it), the 'Balkanisation' of Iraq.⁵⁶⁶ The Shi'a and the JAM were at their strongest in two places: in Baghdad (in the suburbs of Sadr City and Kadhimiyah) and in the British-controlled south. The Sunnis controlled the fringes of Baghdad – the 'belts' – and western Iraq. This 'Balkanisation' was not just conceptual, it was physical. Barricades and militia checkpoints made it impossible to move between sectors without risking death, and neighbourhoods drove out or killed outsiders. In the initial months of 2006 it is estimated that nearly a quarter of a million Iraqis fled their homes.⁵⁶⁷ The collapse of civil society – and the resulting change in the character of the Iraq war – happened with remarkable speed in those leaderless months of December 2005 to May 2006. 'Collective killing for some collective purpose' came to define Iraqi society.

Would rapid Government formation after the December 2005 election have made a difference? Statistics suggest that there was a window where leadership might have mattered. Even with the thirteen hundred deaths after al-Askari, civilian casualties only rose by 3% between March and April 2006. By May, however, civilian casualties were 39% higher than in March, rising to 73% higher by July. The growth in violence after the initial pause was exponential.⁵⁶⁸ Jabr was finally removed from his post in the Interior Ministry in May 2005 as part of the initial cabinet formation, something that may have made a difference if it had taken place before al-Askari. Most importantly, though, an Iraqi

⁵⁶⁵ Most notorious in this was the Ministry of the Interior, who controlled an Iraqi police force that consisted mostly of Shi'a extremists (essentially a 'death squad' in uniform). Sunni fear was well founded: in early 2006 US forces uncovered 'killing rooms' inside the Ministry of Interior buildings, operating with the tacit approval of Shi'a politician and former Badr Corp commander Bayan Jabr, the Minister of the Interior. The evidence here of sectarian collusion by Shi'a politicians was so strong that John Pace, the senior UN human rights official in Iraq, openly accused Jabr of sponsoring death squads. The Sunni, understandably, could have no trust for such politicians (see Kilcullen, *Blood Year*, p. 30).

⁵⁶⁶ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 275.

⁵⁶⁷ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 274.

⁵⁶⁸ Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (London: Encounter Books, 2009), pp. 8 – 9.

Government with solid leadership might have given the Iraqi people someone to turn to in those terrifying days. In the end, the only people they could turn to for their safety were their local militias, and each other.

By the time the Government did form, it was too late. ‘Balkanisation’ was entrenched, and sectarian violence was endemic. The social contract between the people and the government was non-existent. No Iraqi Government was likely to succeed in such a deleterious strategic environment. Even Maliki did not trust his own Cabinet. As Asquith put it, Maliki ‘never felt confident that he commanded the loyalty even of those within his own Shi’a Alliance’.⁵⁶⁹ By September 2006, cohesion was minimal. Asquith, by then the British Ambassador to Iraq, wrote in his ‘First Impressions’ report that, ‘for a government of national unity, most of its members are in opposition’.⁵⁷⁰ By October 2006, the JIC concluded that, ‘the faction-based Iraqi government is proving ineffective’.⁵⁷¹

It was to this flawed Government, confronting a new face of war in Iraq and without a social contract with the Iraqi people, that the British subordinated their strategic outcomes. This tied the British Government not to a fair player in Iraqi politics, but to an increasingly sectarian one. As a result, the execution of a coherent British strategy in 2006 and beyond became exponentially more difficult.

‘So What’ for the British? The Changing Role of the South in Iraqi Politics. All of this led to a third blow to British strategy in early 2006, one that the British would not at first perceive, but one that would increasingly undermine their strategy. The election of Maliki, the growth of Sadrist influence, and the surge in sectarian violence considerably changed the role of southern Iraq in Iraqi politics, and not for the better. As outlined in this Part’s introduction, the British had been at pains – with some justification – to conceptually separate MND(SE) as somehow ‘different’ from the rest of Iraq. There was certainly plenty of statistical evidence to suggest that the south was consistently less violent in the early years.⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 17.

⁵⁷⁰ Letter Asquith to Sawers, 12 September 2006, ‘Iraq : First Impressions’ from Iraq Inquiry Evidence at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

⁵⁷¹ JIC Assessment, 5 October 2006, ‘Al-Maliki’s Government: Interim Progress Report’ from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

⁵⁷² From January 2004 onwards, accepting the notable spikes of the JAM uprisings in May and August 2004, violent attacks in MND(SE) rarely breached the 200 a month mark (see JIC Assessment, 27 September 2006, ‘Iraq: The Security Situation in the South’ from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22)). In July 2005, attacks in MND(SE) made up only 1% of total acts of violence across Iraq (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 72). By August 2006, even after al-Askari and the remarkable leap in sectarian violence, the JIC reported that MND(SE) only accounted for 3% of attacks (109 out of a total of 3725) (see JIC Assessment, 27 September 2006, ‘Iraq: The Security Situation in the South’ from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22)).

These statistics were of great value to British policy makers. The idea that Basra was ‘different’ became a foundational principle of British strategy. In September 2005 a combined FCO, MoD and DFID paper stated as a key conclusion that, ‘the scale of the problem in Basra is of a totally different order to other parts of Iraq’.⁵⁷³ On 15 March 2006, a month after al-Askari, the JIC again reinforced this line, stating that ‘levels of violence in southern Iraq are much lower than in Baghdad and Sunni areas in the centre and north’.⁵⁷⁴ By mid-2006 this theme was deeply embedded, almost guaranteed to be mentioned in the preamble of policy documents as a reminder to all that ‘Basra was not Baghdad’. At one stage, British belief in the independence of the south led towards considerations of separation, with Des Browne asking Margaret Beckett, the Foreign Secretary, the apparently genuine question, ‘what are our enduring interests in, and aspirations for, a (possibly autonomous) southern Iraq and Basra, bearing in mind that we have poured so much resource and effort?’.⁵⁷⁵

The Americans did not resist this idea of the ‘independence’ of the south, at least until the end of 2006. British Colonel Richard Iron, who we will meet again in Part Five and *Operation Charge of the Knights*, wrote in 2013 that ‘for the Coalition command in Baghdad, Basra was a backwater. From the beginning of the invasion it was ... an ‘economy of effort’ mission ... this was understandable given the early calm of the predominantly Shi’a regions relative to the burgeoning Sunni insurgency in Baghdad’.⁵⁷⁶ The US were content to leave the stable south to the British; it matched their understanding of the UK’s willingness to commit, their military capability, and their natural role as the leader of a ‘non-American coalition’. It looked neat on maps. Most importantly, it allowed the Americans to focus on the core issues of Baghdad and the ‘belts’.

This independence was increasingly physical as well as conceptual. There were only two occasions following the invasion where British troops deployed north of the MND(SE) boundary for combat operations (see footnote), and it soon became clear that British deaths in such ventures were high risk in a nation that did not consider itself at war.⁵⁷⁷ This was a lesson that the British government

⁵⁷³ Letter Hayes to Quarrey, 30 September 2005, ‘Iraq: Basra’ attaching Paper FCO/MoD/DFID, 30 September 2005, ‘South-East Iraq: Impact of Security Incident in Basra’ from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

⁵⁷⁴ JIC Assessment, 15 March 2006, ‘Iraq: the Security Situation in the South’ from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

⁵⁷⁵ Letter Browne to Beckett, 18 October 2006, ‘DOP(I) 20 Oct: Medium Term Paper’ from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

⁵⁷⁶ Richard Iron, ‘The Charge of the Knights’, *The RUSI Journal*, Edition 158:1, 2013, p. 55.

⁵⁷⁷ First was the short foray of the ‘Black Watch’, a British Army line infantry battalion, who deployed north for thirty-nine days in October 2004 at the request of US forces to support the outer cordon of Fallujah, freeing up much needed US Marine Corps troops for the intervention. The second was the commitment of UK special forces to the US-led Joint Special Operations Command Task Force (JSOCTF) throughout Iraq from 2004 To 2009, under ‘Task Force Black/Knight’, that saw a

would not forget, one that limited their capacity to adapt to the war's changing character. Brigadier Justin Maciejewski, who commanded a battlegroup in Iraq and then returned as the Chief of Staff of MND(SE), describes this isolationist approach well. 'From the outset', he writes, 'the boundary between MND(SE) and the rest of Iraq was more than a tactical boundary: it was a political boundary which both the American corps headquarters and the British divisional headquarters were reluctant to cross'.⁵⁷⁸ By 2006 this boundary was exceptionally firm. British policy was clear that they should never commit British forces north, nor accept US forces south, no matter how the war evolved.⁵⁷⁹

The appointment of the Maliki-led Government and the rise of a sectarian civil war, however, dramatically undermined the idea of southern Iraq as an independent, unimportant entity. The south increasingly went from being a 'backwater' to an area of key terrain. This stood out in two ways. First, in MND(SE)'s position as the heartland of the Sadrist movement; the safe haven of the increasingly powerful and violent Shi'a militias, and the foundation of Maliki's political power. Secondly, the south became the logistical highway sustaining the lifeblood of the Shi'a militias from their key external supporter, Iran. For it was in 2006 that Iran fully matured its own strategy for Iraq: an increasingly malign strategy that cost many British, American and Iraqi lives.

The Sadrists were key to the change of the role of the south. Their power, and their entanglement with mainstream Iraqi politics, had been growing steadily since al-Sadr's emergence in the chaotic post-invasion environment of 2003. Al-Sadr had originally gained prominence thanks to his distinct blend of Shi'a religious authority, Iraqi nationalism, an impressive revolutionary Shi'a lineage, and charisma (described by Iraqis as *qiyada*, or 'leadership').⁵⁸⁰ He combined this with a firebrand, nationalistic hatred of the Coalition occupation, a mix that allowed him to quickly gain power as a

concerted effort to conduct network attack against AQ-I. The latter of these commitments was not formally declared at the time by the British Government, and thus represented little political risk. The former, however, proved to be highly politically damaging. The British public, and particularly the Opposition in Parliament, labelled this commitment as a major expansion of UK commitment in Iraq. Five soldiers from the Black Watch died during the operation, three in a single suicide bombing incident that also wounded eight others. Despite the operational benefit to the US, overall the intervention was viewed as a net loss by the British.

⁵⁷⁸ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 158.

⁵⁷⁹ John Reid reaffirmed this in writing as a policy position in June 2005, stating that it was the policy of the Government that they would 'not agree to any significant deployments outside MND(SE)' (see Paper Reid, 14 June 2005, 'Options for future UK force posture in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22)). Nor would they accept US deployments to the south: when, in late 2006, Major General Richard Shirreff sought to challenge this policy by seeking US troop support for Operation SALAMANCA, his ideas to breach this now long-standing (if unofficial policy) were met with short shrift. As he told the Inquiry, 'the idea of American troops on the streets of Basra did not go down particularly well in London'. In the end, no US ground troops were involved (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 131).

⁵⁸⁰ Moqtada al-Sadr was a distant nephew of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (a distinguished Islamic scholar known as the 'first martyr', who was murdered by the Ba'ath party in 1980). Al-Sadr was the son of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (who had also stood up to the Saddam regime in support of the Shi'a and was murdered in 1999). See the National Interest, *Muqtada al-Sadr: Rabid Warlord or Iraqi Ghandi* found at [link](#) (accessed 24 Mar 22).

self-proclaimed 'protector of the Shi'a'.⁵⁸¹ Operating through his political arm, the OMS, and his JAM militia, within two years al-Sadr had gained control of the key Shi'a areas of Baghdad ('Saddam City' being changed to 'Sadr City', in honour of his father), and of the Shi'a tribes in the south. By the December 2005 elections al-Sadr was a key player, with the influence to shape the preferences of a huge swathe of Shi'a voters.⁵⁸²

Southern Iraq fed the rise of the overall Sadrist movement, especially from 2005 and into 2006. A key example can be found in the lifeblood of any movement: money. Early on, al-Sadr had been able to rely on traditional, tribal sources of funding.⁵⁸³ But in 2004 he lost control of these incomes and instead turned to another long-standing Shi'a tribal method: crime and extortion. Syphoning oil revenues through Basra was one of the most prominent and hotly contested funding streams. When al-Sadr met his representatives from Basra he famously scratched his nose and said, 'I smell gasoline'.⁵⁸⁴ The British were aware of this rising trend in tribal-based criminality in the south.⁵⁸⁵ But the link between criminality in Basra and Shi'a sectarian violence in other parts of Iraq did not seem to be made. British decision-makers who increasingly tried to cite Basra's instability as criminal rather than insurgency, as 'Palermo and not Beirut', seemingly missed (or downplayed) this important factor: it was the organised criminality in the south that was funding Shi'a violence in Baghdad. Throughout 2005 and 2006, the UK's 'backwater' increasingly became the 'breadbasket' of the Shi'a militias.

The political significance of the south also increased as the newly-dominant Shi'a political class became progressively entangled with the Sadrists through the December 2005 election. Al-Sadr was not wholly focussed on violence. As he said in an interview with *al-Arabiya*, 'the Sadrist movement first resorted to peaceful resistance, then to armed resistance, and finally to political resistance. But

⁵⁸¹ Al-Sadr's relationship with the Coalition was not helped by Bremer and the CPA, who missed the opportunity to co-opt al-Sadr, instead disdaining him in favour of building relationships with al-Sistani, and refusing to integrate him into the IGC. See International Crisis Group, 'Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?', *Crisis Group Middle East Report*, No 55, 11 July 2006, p. 8.

⁵⁸² Phil Williams and Dan Bisbee, 'Impunity', *Prism: National Defense University*, 2016, Chapter 2: Jaysh al-Mahdi in Iraq, p. 49 found online at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

⁵⁸³ In April 2003 al-Sadr was appointed by Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri, a leading Iraqi cleric in exile in Iran, as al-Haeri's representative in Iraq; with full authority to collect Islamic taxes, or 'khums'. This gave al-Sadr an income of nearly \$65,000 a month, a reasonable if not wealthy amount which he extended by issuing a fatwa authorising his followers to loot Ba'ath party properties as long as they gave a fifth of the value to the party (a fatwa that the Coalition unintentionally supported when they took a loose approach to stopping looting in 2003).

⁵⁸⁴ The Boston Globe, 'A Lesson in Iraqi Illusion' found online at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

⁵⁸⁵ When John Reid as the Secretary of State for Defence visited Basra in March 2006 he was told by Major General Cooper that 'corruption and intimidation are on the rise ... Basra City was becoming a 'criminal kingdom'' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 622).

this does not present any problem: every situation require its own response'.⁵⁸⁶ Al-Sadr engaged directly in the 2005 political process, using his considerable body of followers to great advantage. Allied with the UIA, Sadrist parties won 32 seats in the 2005 election. As the JIC put it, al-Sadr emerged from the December 2005 election with 'great political clout', establishing him as a 'kingmaker' in the selection of the Prime Minister.⁵⁸⁷ By late 2006, Maliki's government and the Sadrists were well enmeshed, with Maliki heavily reliant on the support of al-Sadr for his political authority.

So, the south was suddenly important to both Maliki and to the Sadrists. It was wholly uncontested by Sunni militias, and the British grip was loose. The various Shi'a militia enjoyed a raft of Government-linked freedoms, which they exploited wholeheartedly.⁵⁸⁸ Whether he liked it or not, the south was a base of Maliki's political power, and it was under de facto Sadrist control.⁵⁸⁹ Maliki's reliance on the UK's AO came around quickly and unexpectedly. This had profound consequences for British strategic freedom of manoeuvre as they sought to make key operational decisions, for example, around Operation SALAMANCA in 2006 (more of this later).

The final aspect that changed the role of the south was the maturation of Iranian influence. Since 2003 Iran had avoided direct confrontation with the Coalition, instead applying a dual-pronged approach of both political and violent means to achieve long-term goals. Iranian effort between 2003 and 2006 principally focussed on political leverage, seeking to ensure that Iranian-tied politicians gained power.⁵⁹⁰ But Iran also wanted to be able to stoke a crisis when it suited them. From the start they recognised al-Sadr's potential as a 'firebrand' and worked to facilitate his rise.

⁵⁸⁶ International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, p. 12 found online at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

⁵⁸⁷ See JIC Assessment, 16 March 2006, 'Muqtada al-Sadr' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22) and Marisa Cochrane, 'Iraq Report 12: The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement', *Institute for the Study of War*, 2009, found online at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22), p. 18.

⁵⁸⁸ Sadrist groups increasingly gained control of Government-funded uniformed organisations. Fadhila, a breakaway party from al-Sadr and the party of the Governor of Basra, controlled the Oil Protection Force which provided open access to oil smuggling revenues. The Badr Organisation controlled the Customs Police Force, and their parent organisation SCIRI controlled the Intelligence Service. Al-Sadr and the JAM focussed on dominating the local police forces, providing them a somewhat twisted monopoly on protecting the local population (see the Boston Globe, 'A Lesson in Iraqi Illusion' found online at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22)).

⁵⁸⁹ The power of the Sadrist groups was underpinned by the interests of just under five million Shi'a voters, 90% of whom had made their mark for the UIA in the December 2005 elections (see the Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Iraq: Council of Representatives of Iraq* found online at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22)).

⁵⁹⁰ Iran provided heavy political and financial support to SCIRI, who had the closest social and ideological links to Iran, and worked hard not to draw the ire of al-Sistani by adopting a moderate approach to their relationship with Iraq. They leaned heavily into reconstruction, negotiating a \$1 billion credit line to the Iraqi Government for reconstruction funds. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 69.

Iran moved to support him from as early as spring 2004, providing up to \$80 million in funding and establishing camps along the Iran-Iraq border to train JAM members.⁵⁹¹

When al-Sadr adopted an increasingly strident anti-Iranian voice in 2005, Iran worked to fracture his organisation to its own ends through funding so-called breakaway 'Special Groups'.⁵⁹² In the same way that it provided the life-blood of votes to Maliki in political terms, the UK AO increasingly proved to be the life-blood of these 'Special Groups'.⁵⁹³ The southern city of Amara, in the UK-controlled Maysan Province, became a prominent gateway for fighters to travel to Iran for training.⁵⁹⁴ After four to six weeks, the now more-lethal and indoctrinated fighters moved back across the border, through the UK AO, and back into the fight in Baghdad. A constant flow of weapons, explosives, lethal technology, and experience came with them, most of which were funnelled into the Shi'a strongholds in Sadr City and the surrounds. The UK's AO was the fuel feeding the gruesome flames of the Sadrist fight for dominance in Baghdad.

Amara provides an important vignette of the linkages between British tactical and strategic shortfalls in 2006, and the freedom of movement of the Sadrist militias that was feeding the Baghdad crisis.

The British had occupied Amara as part of their laydown in Maysan Province since 5 April 2003, and

⁵⁹¹ Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq*, p. 30.

⁵⁹² Many of al-Sadr's followers were disappointed with al-Sadr and looking for alternate direction, so the ground was fertile for recruitment. The IRGC-QF, who led Iran's clandestine operations in Iraq, expanded their program of support to Sadrist militias in 2005 and 2006. The Qods Force began to facilitate increasingly sophisticated training to Sadrist extremists, who travelled to Iran in groups of twenty to sixty for up to six weeks of training in everything from intelligence gathering to IED construction. Just as Maliki was forming his government in May 2006, it is believed that senior Qods Force and Hezbollah leaders were travelling from Iraq to Iran for a strategy meeting with Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani, the head of the IRGC-QF. This led to the formation, a month later, of a special Sadrist network under Qais Khazali, an associate of al-Sadr. Khazali and al-Sadr had experienced a turbulent relationship since 2003, with Khazali formally breaking with al-Sadr in 2004, then re-aligning, and finally increasingly disassociating with him in 2006. The 'Special Groups', as the Khazali network became known, increasingly became the primary pathway for Iranian nefarious support. For a detailed examination of the 'Special Group', see Cochrane, *Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, p. 19.

⁵⁹³ The principal logistics facilitator for the IRGC-QF into Iraq in 2005 and 2006 was a man called Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, a former Badr Corps commander from the 1990s who by that time led a facilitation network of over 280 members, divided into seventeen teams. He and his network covered the full spectrum of support to the Sadrist militias, in both directions; providing weapons, money and explosives one way, and identifying and moving fighters for training in Iran in the other. Most of the militia members selected for Special Group trainees came from towns within southern Iraq, including Najaf, Nasiriyah, Kut, Amara and Basra. Numerous detainee reports drawn from US sources show that the UK's AO was by 2006 the key facilitation hub for trainees into Iran, and for weapons and explosives back into Iraq. See Marisa Cochrane, *Iran's Hard Power Influence in Iraq* found online at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

⁵⁹⁴ Selected militiamen, carefully picked by facilitators like Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, would converge in Amara, staying in safe houses prior to being guided across the border to Iranian training camps. As one detainee recalled, 'when the training travel was ready, [name withheld] would call the Special Group areas and have the trainees travel to Amara. The trainees would usually travel by taxi, a seven to eight passenger vehicle, to the Baghdad garage in Amara ... the trainees would then wait at the safe house until [name withheld] told them it was time to depart for Iran. The trainees would again use taxis in their travel to the Iranian and Iraqi border' (see Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq*, p. 57). Movement between countries would be done either illegally through the highly-porous border, legally using Iraqi passports, or with the tacit support of the Shi'a-controlled Iraqi border police. Their final destination could be as varied as Iranian towns just over the border, like Deir and Kutaiban, or as far as Tehran, Qom, Ahvaz, and Mashad (see Cochrane, *Iran's Hard Power Influence in Iraq* found online at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22)).

had fought hard to control the city. But by mid-2006 pressure to reduce British forces made Maysan – and Amara – one of the first targets for British withdrawal. The Sadrist militias encouraged this early departure, firing 283 mortar rounds into the British Camp Abu Naji in Amara between March and August 2006, increasingly persuading the British that their position was untenable (in his first week as Commander MND(SE), Major General Richard Shirreff described Abu Naji as a ‘tethered goat’).⁵⁹⁵ On 7 July 2006 Major General Cooper, Commander MND(SE), first discussed with Chiarelli (Commander MNC-I)) an option to withdraw the British battlegroup in Amara prior to formal transition to PIC in Maysan, splitting the resulting forces into a mobile cavalry force to patrol the Iraq/Iran border, and a ‘ground holding’ force to cover an Italian withdrawal. This would, according to Cooper, both ‘deliver greater effect along the border’ and would ‘send a message that we were serious about handing back responsibility for security’.⁵⁹⁶

British plans for Amara exposed the divisions between UK and American strategy. Both Chiarelli and General Casey, Commander MNF-I, were deeply uncomfortable. For four months the British assessments of Maysan had marked the province ‘green across all four transitional criteria’ for PIC. The Americans did not share this assessment. MNC-I did not recommend Maysan as ready for transition, due to the increasing complexity of attacks, the flow of fighters across the Iraq/Iran border, and the co-option of the Provincial Governor by JAM. Despite this, the British pressed their case. According to Lieutenant General Fry, the SBMR-I, Casey finally conceded on 30 July 2006 on two conditions: that the British ‘retain a handle on JAM intentions, and ... create a persistent flank guard effect against the Iranian border’.⁵⁹⁷ In a telling turn of affairs, the first the Governor of Maysan heard of the imminent re-posturing of British forces was when Shirreff told him on 9 August. He was, according to Shirreff, ‘genuinely surprised’.⁵⁹⁸ The withdrawal – which would later become the US textbook example of how not to execute PIC – brutally exposed how much terrain the British were ceding to the militias.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 97.

⁵⁹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 55.

⁵⁹⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 57 – 58.

⁵⁹⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 125.

⁵⁹⁹ The Battlegroup commander on the ground, Lieutenant Colonel David La Bouchere, tried to place a positive line on the ‘tactical redeployment’ from Amara but the reality was grim. No warning was given to the Iraqi Army of the withdrawal from Camp Abu Naji (as Bouchere told the BBC, ‘we couldn’t trust them to tell them in advance’), and within 48 hours the camp had been looted. Two months later a JAM commander, Abu Mahdi, told the same BBC team that, ‘we have liberated Amara from the British, Basra is next ... my men are everywhere, can you see the British anywhere? For the people in the street it’s my men who rule the town’. The British mobile presence on the porous border, consisting of less than a battlegroup of light vehicles, seemed to have little effect on the flow of Iranian-trained fighters and Iranian lethal aid. See the Guardian, ‘We Have Liberated Amara from the British ... Basra Next’ found online at [link](#) (accessed 27 Mar 22).

It is no coincidence that the reduction of the UK's military footprint in Maysan and Amara took place coincident to the apogee of Iranian cross-border facilitation. British re-posturing provided an open gateway to facilitators who found it easy to avoid the light footprint on the border. The Sadrists moved with confidence in areas like Amara from August 2006. The British did not recognise the open door they were providing to the Iranians as they withdrew. JIC assessments are relatively clear (and in hindsight accurate) about Iran's objectives in Iraq in 2006, but there is little specific warning of facilitation routes in discussions around Maysan reposturing.⁶⁰⁰

It was only in hindsight that British intelligence realised that Iran's involvement was reaching (as Sir John Scarlett put it), 'a sort of highpoint in the summer and autumn of 2006'.⁶⁰¹ The direct links between British withdrawal and Iranian facilitation were not considered strongly in the decision to withdraw from Amara. Tim Dowse, the Chief of the Assessments Staff, goes so far as to blame optimism bias for this lack of consideration. 'I think', he said to the Inquiry, 'we started this whole period with a reluctance to see an Iranian hand'.⁶⁰² But the hand was there, carrying with it training, experience, money, ammunition, and the lethal EFPs that killed many soldiers in the months to come. The nefarious influence of Iran was a key factor in driving the violent evolution of the Iraq war in 2006.

The election of Iraq's first democratic Government should have been a moment of celebration for the British. In some ways it was. It represented the fulfilment for New Labour of a central political goal: self-determination for the Iraqi people. But this moment of celebration was bitter-sweet. The election and the tortuously-slow formation of the Maliki Government provided a terrible window for change in Iraq's strategic environment. The bombing at al-Askari poured fuel on a smouldering sectarian war. With no strong Iraqi leadership in place, 'Balkanisation' took place remarkably quickly, as social contracts collapsed and new deformed ones emerged. Iran took the opportunity to surge into its malign goals. And when the Iraqi Government did form, it was soon found to be riven with sectarian weaknesses. The role of the British AO changed decisively as a result, with Sadrist militias not only acting as the 'kingmakers' of Iraq's new Prime Minister, but also controlling the Iranian facilitation 'rat lines' that were keeping the insurgency alive. The UK's 'backwater' was a backwater no more.

⁶⁰⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 68.

⁶⁰¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 71.

⁶⁰² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 72.

Most importantly for the British, however, was the fact that their own New Labour philosophy meant they had no choice but to defer to this sectarian, ineffective Government. After years of trying to remain neutral and secular in Iraqi's affairs, they were now intrinsically linked to a sectarian player. It was in this dangerous environment that the British made their next major strategic decision, one that rested outside Iraq but had significant consequences within: the remarkable choice to expand a second front in the GWOT into Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

Turning Point: the Helmand Decision

In April 2006 the first paratroopers from the 16th Air Assault Brigade arrived in Helmand Province, Afghanistan: the neglected first front of the GWOT. The initial force was deliberately conservative, consisting of a strict cap of 3,150 soldiers, a cost limit of £808 million, and a time limit of three years. The mission was equally conservative. They were tasked as part of a broader NATO strategy with conducting stability operations within Helmand as part of 'Regional Command (South)' (RC(S)). The operational design was incremental. With resources at a premium, the British task force was to first establish a 'lozenge of security' around the key population centres of Lashkar Gah, Gereshk and Camp Bastion. Over time they would then expand this 'lozenge', taking with them better governance and improved quality of life.⁶⁰³ The British contingent, military and civilian, were to steadily help build a stronger social contract between the Helmandis and the Afghan Government.

It did not eventuate this way. Within weeks the 3rd Battalion the Parachute Regiment were engaged in the fiercest fighting experienced by the British since the Korean War (far fiercer than in Basra).⁶⁰⁴ Within months more than 40 British soldiers were dead.⁶⁰⁵ The British Government had little choice but to reinforce 'Task Force Helmand': the 3,150 cap was discarded, and by autumn 2006 there were 6,300 troops in Helmand. By July 2007 this was 7,600, by 2009 it was 8,300, and by 2011 it peaked at just over 10,000.⁶⁰⁶ These raw troop numbers belie the huge amount of niche military investment

⁶⁰³ House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report of Session 2010-12' (House of Commons: London, 2011), p. 25.

⁶⁰⁴ For this history, see Stuart Tootal, *Danger Close: Commanding 3 PARA in Afghanistan* (London: John Murray, 2009); Patrick Bishop, *3 Para* (London: Harper Press, 2007); Chris Terrill, *Commando* (London: Century, 2007); Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars*; James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets: The Real Story of the British Army in Afghanistan* (London: Corgi Books, 2008); Allan Mallinson, *The Shape of Battle* (London: Pegasus Books, 2022); Michael Clarke, 'The Helmand Decision', *The Afghan Papers: Committing Britain to War in Helmand 2003 – 2006* (London: Routledge, 2011); and Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan* (London: Random House, 2017).

⁶⁰⁵ Mallinson, *The Shape of Battle*, p. 329.

⁶⁰⁶ Clarke, *The Helmand Decision*, p. 7.

that had to be poured into the theatre.⁶⁰⁷ By 2009 the task was of a scale that the British Army's Commander in Chief Land Forces issued orders for 'Operation ENTIRETY': the plan to re-design the Army solely to achieve operational success in Afghanistan.⁶⁰⁸ By the time British forces withdrew in 2021, 457 service members had died and the campaign had cost more than thirty-three times the initial estimate.⁶⁰⁹

It is fair to say that the 'Helmand Decision' was the most consequential British foreign and defence policy decision since the Iraq invasion. While much has been written about the Afghan campaign itself, far less focus has been applied to understanding how Iraq and Afghan decision-making were interwoven in 2006. The Inquiry, thanks to its carefully-limited terms of reference, does not study it in detail: but the two are intrinsically linked. It is this linkage that I will examine in this section.

To understand the 2006 'Helmand decision', and its interrelations with Iraq, one must first briefly review its provenance. The international campaign to overthrow the Taliban in late 2001 was initially successful, but by mid-2004 it had become, as Lieutenant General Fry put it, 'completely moribund'.⁶¹⁰ A view began to develop within NATO, and especially within London, that the Afghan campaign needed (in the words of General Richards) 'gingering up'.⁶¹¹ The British decided to do the 'gingering'. Two strategic decisions were announced in quick succession in 2004 and 2005: that the UK would deploy the standing NATO Corps-level Headquarters, the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) HQ, to Afghanistan in 2006 to take over command of the International Security Assistance Force, and that the UK would also deploy significant troops to southern Afghanistan.⁶¹²

The decision to expand the British commitment in Afghanistan was philosophically connected with Iraq from the very beginning, and at the highest levels. It was back at the NATO summit in Istanbul on 28 June 2004 that Blair elected to announce the British decision to deploy the ARRC.

Coincidentally, this was the same day that marked a key phase of UK / US collaboration in Iraq: the disbanding of the CPA. Just hours before Blair's announcement, Condoleezza Rice handed President

⁶⁰⁷ This was particularly found in the traditionally scarce military pinch-points of helicopters, medical facilities, and logistics support.

⁶⁰⁸ For the most comprehensively available description of Op ENTIRETY, see Ministry of Defence, *Op HERRICK Campaign Study*, found at [link](#) (accessed 5 Sep 22), p. xxxv to xli.

⁶⁰⁹ The conservative estimate of the overall cost of Operation HERRICK is £27.7 billion (see House of Commons Library Research Briefing, *Afghanistan Statistics: UK Deaths, Casualties, Mission costs and Refugees* found at [link](#) (accessed 5 Sep 22)).

⁶¹⁰ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 158. Lt Gen Fry also uses similar language in his oral evidence to the Iraq Inquiry, see Transcript of Public Hearing, Lt Gen Fry, 16 Dec 09, p. 92 - 93 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 5 Sep 22).

⁶¹¹ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 214.

⁶¹² Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 160.

Bush a note (at Figure 5), informing him that Bremer had transferred power to Interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, before immediately (and ignominiously) leaving the country. 'Mr President', the note read, 'Iraq is sovereign. Letter was passed from Bremer at 10:26 AM Iraq time'. Bush responded with 'Let Freedom Reign!'.

Bush then turned to the man sat to his right, Blair, and shook his hand (at Figure 6). It seems that any concerns that Blair might have harboured about another escalating British commitment in the GWOT evaporated in that moment of shared affirmation. Britain would remain America's central ally in the joint venture of the war on terror, and indeed would seek to draw others deeper. The challenges of Iraq had done little to blunt Blair's enthusiasm for liberal intervention.

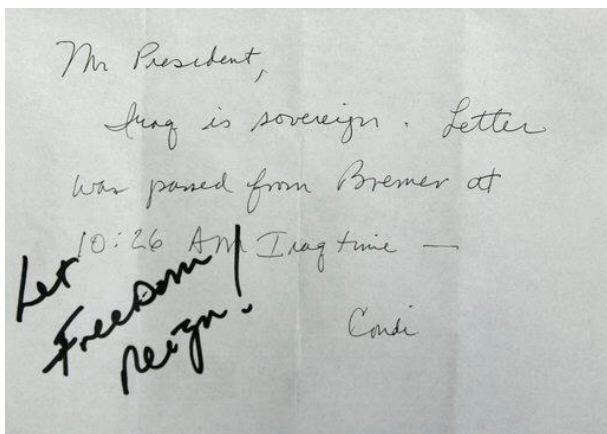


Figure 5: Note from Rice to Bush, 28 June 04.⁶¹³



Figure 6: Bush Shakes Blair's Hand, 28 June 04.⁶¹⁴

There was no detailed tactical plan available when the political decision was made in 2004 to commit troops to southern Afghanistan – it was not until early 2005 that either the location or timings of the British deployment could be confirmed. In April 2005 the UK Chiefs of Staff agreed that Helmand should be the destination, and that the deployment should begin in September that year.⁶¹⁵ As Carter Malkasian makes clear in his recent history of the Afghan war, Helmand was a poor choice: another place where the scars of British history ran deep, and the locals had long memories.⁶¹⁶ The next challenge facing British planners was the size of the force package. Still heavily committed to

⁶¹³ White House Archives: President George W. Bush, 'President Bush Discusses Early Transfer of Iraqi Sovereignty' found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Sep 22).

⁶¹⁴ White House Archives: President George W. Bush, 'News and Policies 2004' found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Sep 22).

⁶¹⁵ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 160.

⁶¹⁶ Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 132.

Iraq, the MoD and the planners at PJHQ faced (as Fry dryly put it) a ‘tension between the level of strategic ambition and the degree of material resources to make it work’.⁶¹⁷

The British knew almost nothing about Helmand, and reconnaissance by both PJHQ staff and the Government’s new Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit, or ‘PCRU’ did little to fill the gaps.⁶¹⁸ Faced with many unknowns, the British Government defaulted to a well-worn if blunt approach of managing strategic commitment through a cap of numbers, cost and time. In mid-2005 it was decided that – no matter the situation on the ground – the Afghanistan mission was to be limited to 3,150 service members and an overall expenditure of no more than £808 million for a three-year mission. The resulting conservative operational plan was presented to the new Secretary of Defence Dr John Reid for approval in June/July 2005, for execution in September; a tight timeline by all measures.⁶¹⁹ Reid stepped into the role of Secretary on 6 May 2005, replacing six-year incumbent Hoon, just a day after a General Election that saw Labour re-elected but at the cost of over 100 seats. New to the role, if not to the MoD⁶²⁰, it fell to Reid to lay the proposed Afghan commitment alongside the Iraq war, and to determine what was feasible. Reid was nervous from the outset at the MoD’s confidence that they could resource both missions simultaneously.

What followed is important. Reid verbally asked for reassurance on resources from the CDS twice between April and September 2005, and was given it; but by September he still held such harbouring doubt that he instructed his Private Secretary to write to General Walker. The letter is worth quoting in detail. Dated 12 September 2005, it states ‘the Secretary of State recalls that during his meeting with CDS, for an operational update on 1 September 2005, he queried whether in the event of a slower than expected drawdown of UK forces in Iraq our planning assumptions for deployment in Afghanistan would be achievable. His recollection is that CDS confirmed to him that our current commitment in Iraq would be sustainable when set against a deployment to Afghanistan ... [he] would be grateful for your confirmation that CDS would be content for this to be recorded as the

⁶¹⁷ Transcript of Public Hearing, Lt Gen Fry, 16 Dec 09, p. 94 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 5 Sep 22).

⁶¹⁸ The PCRU reconnaissance team, led by former British Army officer Mark Etherington, met resistance at almost every turn. Both the British Embassy in Kabul and the in-country DFID team felt that the PCRU encroached on their relationships with the Afghan Government. The PCRU team made limited progress in filling the British intelligence gaps, able to spend only a few days conducting field research in Helmand. The one thing they did identify was that British aspirations were both highly ambitious and likely unachievable. They sought to make this clear in one of their first reports, entitled ‘UK Objectives in Helmand Not Achievable’. This honest view was not well-received in the Cabinet Office, who (according to one of the members of the team) became ‘a bit hysterical, really’. The result was that their final report reportedly received heavy editing from the Cabinet Office prior to its submission to Government, diluting the reliability of the recommendations (see M.J. Williams, *The Good War: NATO and the Liberal Conscience in Afghanistan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 128 – 130).

⁶¹⁹ Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 161.

⁶²⁰ Reid had served as Minister of State for the Armed Forces from 1997 – 1998.

formal position'.⁶²¹ The MoD's response read, 'the short answer is yes ... CJO ... is clear that our plans for Afghanistan are deliverable even if events slow down our Iraq disengagement; furthermore DCDS(C) [Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Commitments)] has factored the possibility of such slippage into the MoD's strategic planning for Afghanistan and our strategic intent for future commitments'.⁶²²

Asked by the Inquiry why he had sought such assurances, Reid's answer was clear. 'I did not want one to be reliant on the other', he said, 'in case we couldn't get out of Iraq'. CDS's answer understandably allayed his concerns. 'There wasn't a concern in my mind that [going into Helmand] would result in a diminution of our resources in Iraq, personnel or otherwise. Why? Because I had asked that specific question and been told, 'No'.⁶²³

Even then, Reid delayed the deployment for over seven months until he felt both the domestic and NATO conditions were met.⁶²⁴ But by the end of January 2006, however, the outstanding issues had been resolved enough to be viable. Political pressure from NATO was high, so on 26 January 2006 Reid took the plan for a conservative 'ink spot' deployment to Afghanistan to Cabinet for approval. This was duly granted, and by April the first elements of Brigadier Ed Butler's Brigade were in Helmand. But within weeks the limited mission and the force design analysis were thrown into disarray; the result of a dramatic under-estimation of the Taliban presence in the Province, and of decisions to dramatically expand the UK's AO through what became known as the '*charge up the valley*'. Within months, and notably under the guidance of yet another new Secretary of State for Defence in Des Browne, the Helmand Task Force doubled in size, placing dramatic pressure on both the UK Armed Forces and – as it would soon prove – the Iraq theatre.

The Cabinet did not know that their 26 January decision to approve the Helmand deployment was being taken at a dangerous strategic moment in Iraq, which sat on a knife's edge in the aftermath of

⁶²¹ Minute Naworynsky to PSO/CDS, 12 September 2005, 'Iraq/Afghanistan commitments' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

⁶²² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 202.

⁶²³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, paras 204 – 205.

⁶²⁴ Reid imposed three conditions that had to be met before he would take the deployment to Cabinet for approval: first, the Treasury had to fully fund the configuration that the Chiefs thought necessary; second, DFID had to re-allocate sufficient funds to meet development goals; and third, that both the Canadians and the Dutch had agreed to deploy their forces to the UK's flanks. It was the last of these that proved to be the sticking point. The Netherlands Government had not confirmed their deployment into Uruzgan in September 2005 and so, true to his word, Reid delayed the deployment until January 2006 when such assurances were finally made. Only then did he agree to take the plan forward, standing firm in the face of considerable national and international political pressure. See Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 160 – 162. See also Nick Beadle, 'Afghanistan and the Context of Iraq', *Whitehall Papers*, 77:1, p. 76.

the December 2005 election. Sectarian battle-lines were being drawn, and ethnic violence was growing apace. All it really needed was a spark. Just under a month after the 'Helmand decision', the al-Askari bombing lit that spark. The UK's assumptions, this time in two wars, were about to be rapidly undermined.⁶²⁵ It is the interaction between the two theatres that I will now explore.

I will do this through three analytical points: how the campaign stood as a quest for professional redemption for the British military, with the resulting concept of the 'comprehensive approach'; how the institutional failure to learn the lessons of the Iraq war continued to impact on British strategy through Afghanistan; and finally how the wholesale 'changing of the guard' of senior leaders within the Defence establishment in early to mid-2006 impacted on both campaigns.

A Quest for Professional Redemption: The British Military, and the 'Comprehensive Approach'.⁶²⁶

Both sides of the civil / military relationship in Britain viewed Afghanistan as an opportunity. For Blair and New Labour, this opportunity lay in a sense of philosophical affirmation. They sought to use the expanded NATO campaign as proof that the struggles of Iraq were an aberration: an exception to the successes of the *doctrine of the international community* in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. A re-energised Afghanistan mission, executed under a NATO banner, created a pathway to draw the Americans away from the blunt unilateralism that had characterised the Iraq invasion, and back towards multilateralism.

For the British military, however, Helmand offered an even greater opportunity for professional redemption. By 2006 the tactical successes of the initial invasion of Iraq had long faded into memory, obscured by a failed *casus belli*, images of uncontrolled looting and torture, and a seemingly endless list of dead and wounded soldiers. The institutional desire to recover from these scars manifested itself in two ways. First, through the development of a new 'Comprehensive Approach' doctrine, an approach that bureaucratised simple concepts of strategy, ultimately confusing and obfuscating them. Secondly, through a desire within the British military to divest itself from the illegitimacy of Iraq (the 'bad war') in favour of the legitimacy of Afghanistan (the 'good war'). These dual influences served to encourage the UK to expand its Afghanistan campaign, despite the rapidly declining situation in Iraq.

⁶²⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 530 onwards.

⁶²⁶ I have drawn the idea of 'professional redemption' from Nick Beadle, the Private Secretary to both John Reid and Des Browne as Secretaries of State for Defence. It is Beadle who suggests that there was a 'sense of redemption' in the decision making about Afghanistan. See Beadle, *Afghanistan and the Context of Iraq*, p. 79.

First to the 'Comprehensive Approach'. By late 2005 the failures of the Coalition's strategy for post-invasion Iraq were well recognised.⁶²⁷ In the conclusion to *'The Utility of Force: the Art of War in the Modern World'*, published in 2005, General Sir Rupert Smith dissected these shortfalls. 'It is obvious', he wrote (admittedly with hindsight), 'that the nature of the desired outcome [in Iraq] could not be achieved by military force – the most that it could achieve was the condition in which other levers of power could create the desired outcome. Therefore it could not, and did not, have a strategic effect'.⁶²⁸

Smith argued that, in 'war amongst the people', military force was 'sub-strategic': unable to achieve truly strategic outcomes. To achieve such outcomes required a grander alignment of force with other elements of national power. 'The more we wish to use force sub-strategically', Smith concludes, 'the more we need to understand that the other organs of power – economic, diplomatic, politic, humanitarian and so on – are part of the context of such an operation: they define the confrontational battlefield'.⁶²⁹ It is only by aligning all of these elements that force can have true 'utility'. There was broad agreement with Smith. By early 2006 Strachan was writing that, 'a new model of civil-military relations is required, and it has to reflect the changing character of war ... the principle we need to embrace is that of civil-military integration'.⁶³⁰

Smith and Strachan were describing, in clear terms, strategy in the context of modern war: an urging for the application of all tools of national power in war to pursue national aims. British institutions, however, chose to bureaucratise these simple concepts through the complex and cryptic terminology of the 'Comprehensive Approach'. The spirit was similar: a focus on aligning civilian and military tools to a single strategic outcome, seeking to enforce the cooperation between Government Departments (particularly the MoD, FCO and DFID) in a way that had been lacking in Iraq. This could have easily been called 'strategy in practice'. But the chosen approach clouded any sense of such simplicity. The 'Comprehensive Approach', for example, continued to separate war into phases of 'warfighting' and 'peace support', with guiding principles like 'proactive engagement', 'shared

⁶²⁷ The House of Commons Defence Committee's report entitled *'Iraq: An Initial Assessment of Post-Conflict Operations'*, published in March 2005, concluded that, 'the post-conflict situation with which the Coalition was faced did not match the pre-conflict expectations ... it is difficult to avoid concluding that the Coalition, including British forces, were insufficiently prepared for the challenge represented by the insurgency' (see House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Iraq: An Initial Assessment of Post Conflict Operations', *Sixth Report of Session 2004 – 2005 Vol 1* found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Sep 22), p. 7).

⁶²⁸ Smith, *The Utility of Force*, p. 396.

⁶²⁹ Smith, *The Utility of Force*, p. 403.

⁶³⁰ Strachan, *Making Strategy*, pp. 75 – 76.

understanding', 'outcome-based thinking', and 'collaborative working'. Strategy in the 'Comprehensive Approach' remained firmly theoretical, not practical.⁶³¹

The 2004 formation of the PCRU (as a specialist unit co-owned by the MoD, FCO and DFID) was one of the few tangible steps of this new doctrine. While many credit the military with the 'Comprehensive Approach'⁶³², this first major move was actually DFID's. It was the International Development Secretary who announced the formation of a specialist unit to try to bring together tools of national power post-conflict. This unit, so Houghton tells it, was 'one of the significant lessons learned [from Iraq] in phase 4 planning'.⁶³³ The military took the next step in formalising this approach. In early 2005 the MoD's Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) published a 'Joint Discussion Note' entitled 'The Comprehensive Approach'.⁶³⁴ The concept received strong intellectual support within the British military in the middle years of the Iraq campaign⁶³⁵, but the staff in the FCO and DFID were far more circumspect. The PCRU answered to the Cabinet Office and all three parent departments. A challenging set of masters. Many saw the PCRU as a positive step, but in reality it further separated strategy from Whitehall's core business, establishing it as a specialised activity to be conducted by a bespoke team.

The institutional evolution of the 'Comprehensive Approach' matters because it clearly drew the British deeper into Afghanistan; a new form of intellectual 'strategic currency' for the UK to exploit. Helmand seemed ripe for the testing of this new concept; the ideal place to prove that the chaos in Iraq was an aberration, and that a doctrine of 'intervention' could work if only better cross-government alignment was achieved. Bureaucratically-framed and intrinsically tied to a values-based

⁶³¹ House of Commons Defence Committee, 'The Comprehensive Approach: The Point of War is not Just to Win, but to Make a Better Peace', *Seventh Report of Session 2009 – 2010* found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Sep 22), p. 11.

⁶³² House of Commons Defence Committee, 'The Comprehensive Approach', p. 15.

⁶³³ Defence Committee, 'Iraq: An Initial Assessment of Post Conflict Operations', p. 87.

⁶³⁴ This document argued that 'the realisation of national strategic objectives inevitably relies on a combination of diplomatic, military and economic instruments of powers, together with an independent package of developmental and humanitarian activity and a customised, agile and sensitive influence and information effect'. The document argued that the only solution, as had not happened in Iraq, was to develop a single approach that aligned the four key elements of: governance (the FCO), security (the military), political (again, the FCO), and development and reconstruction (DFID) (see UK MoD Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre, 'The Comprehensive Approach', *Joint Discussion Note 4/05* (Shrivenham: UK MoD, 2006), pp. 1-2 and 1-3).

⁶³⁵ In early 2007 Professor Theo Farrell of King's College London surveyed the military students of the UK's Joint Services Command and Staff College, asking them whether they agreed with 'the proposition that the future of operations would involve an 'holistic approach', involving a 'mix of military and non-military instruments', and directed towards 'strategic effects''. 88% of the officers surveyed agreed that it would. See Defence Committee, 'The Comprehensive Approach', p. 226.

approach to strategy, the 'Comprehensive Approach' soon became a rallying cry for multilateralism, not just in NATO in relation to Afghanistan, but across the EU and other institutions.⁶³⁶

The sense of opportunity of the 'Comprehensive Approach' soon combined with another increasing perception: that Iraq was the 'bad war' vice Afghanistan's 'good war'. By mid-2006 senior military officers were lobbying (in both public and private) for a re-allocation of effort from the tarnished theatre of southern Iraq to the clear opportunities of southern Afghanistan. Most publicly-vocal was the new CGS, General Sir Richard Dannatt. Dannatt made his views on Iraq clear in a forthright interview with the Daily Mail in October 2006. 'Our presence exacerbates the security problems', he stated, continuing that, 'I think history will show that the planning for what happened after the initial successful war-fighting phase was poor, probably based more on optimism than sound planning ... Let's face it, the military campaign we fought in 2003 effectively kicked the door in. That is a fact. I don't say that the difficulties we are experiencing around the world are caused by our presence in Iraq, but undoubtedly our presence in Iraq exacerbates them'.⁶³⁷

Dannatt's conclusions on Iraq were frank: the UK should 'get ourselves out sometime soon because our presence exacerbates the security problems'. Dannatt then went on to directly contrast this uninspiring situation in Iraq with the legitimate foundations in Afghanistan. 'There is a clear distinction between our status and position in Iraq and in Afghanistan, which is why I have much

⁶³⁶ The British found kindred spirits within NATO in the Danish government and military, who had also been forward leaning in Iraq and would soon deploy 760 soldiers to bolster the British commitment in Helmand. In the summer of 2005 the Danish Government organised a conference in Copenhagen to align NATO members on the need for an 'integrated approach', with good effect. By the spring of 2006 a growing consensus of important NATO members – including the UK and Denmark (as leading voices), Canada, the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway and Slovakia – were calling for the codification of the 'Comprehensive Approach' within NATO (see Defence Committee, 'The Comprehensive Approach', pp. 218 – 219). This came at the NATO Summit in Riga in November 2006, where NATO nations agreed on their first formal articulation of the 'Comprehensive Approach' in their *Comprehensive Political Guidance*.

It is important to note that, within NATO, the clearest practical expression of the 'Comprehensive Approach' was found in the PRT concept. As NATO's Assistant Secretary General for Operations said in 2007, 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams are at the frontline of NATO's efforts' (see Adam Kobieracki, 'The Comprehensive Approach: NATO Responses from an Operational Standpoint', *Connections*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer 2007), p. 89). Again, this helped the British step deeper into Afghanistan. The British had already successfully established the first of their PRTs in Mazar-i-Shariff in the comparatively peaceful north of Afghanistan, and it was therefore an easy step to envisage the expansion of such PRTs into the south (see Defence Committee, 'The Comprehensive Approach', p. 217).

Within the EU, the MoD managed to insert the 'Comprehensive Approach' into EU documents before it even became formal British policy, seeding it firmly into the framework for the EU's 'European Security and Defence Policy' (ESDP) missions. See Margriet Drent, 'The EU's Comprehensive Approach to Security: a Culture of Coordination?', *Clingendael: Netherlands Institute for International Relations* published 10 Oct 2011 found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22). Taken together, these efforts show a nation seeking to use the 'Comprehensive Approach' to continue to influence in the international sphere, and to prove that the lessons for Iraq could be learned. Afghanistan was the place to prove it.

⁶³⁷ See Daily Mail, *General Sir Richard Dannatt: a Very Honest General* published 12 Oct 2006 found at [link](#) (accessed 9 Sep 22).

more optimism that we can get it right in Afghanistan'.⁶³⁸ The interview was not a misjudgement. Dannatt was echoing the messages he had sent in private in a letter to the Secretary of State on his first day as CGS.⁶³⁹ The interview drew considerable ire from the Government ('as you can imagine', Blair writes in his memoirs, 'I wasn't best pleased').⁶⁴⁰

Dannatt was the most public with his views, but he certainly was not alone in private. Most of note were the views of ACM Sir 'Jock' Stirrup, the CDS from April 2006. In one of his first acts Stirrup visited both Iraq and Afghanistan, providing him with a direct comparison. On his return he wrote a detailed secret report to Reid. Stirrup was explicit in his views about the relative benefits of Afghanistan over Iraq. In Iraq, he said, 'as consent continues to reduce (as we have always foreseen it would), so too does our ability to effect further (significant) improvement. The law of diminishing returns [my emphasis] is now firmly in play, and there is an increasing risk that we become part of the problem, rather than of the solution'. This situation, he wrote, was in direct comparison to Afghanistan where the UK position in Helmand was 'sound – indeed exemplary'. Stirrup is the first to use the phrase 'the law of diminishing returns' in reference to Iraq, but (as we will see) this simple statement increasingly came to define the UK's approach. From the outset of Stirrup's tenure it was clear where he stood on the comparative value of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Military enthusiasm for Afghanistan was such that it played a major role in shaping professional advice at the highest level. When Reid expressed his concerns about resourcing both theatres, the assurances he received from an enthusiastic military were unequivocal. The Chiefs recommended unanimously to Reid on 17 January 2006 that he should deploy the full Helmand Task Force, with all assessing that the challenge of dual theatres was 'manageable'.⁶⁴¹ It is not surprising that Reid went ahead with the mission, given such comprehensive military advice. Even Blair lays the Afghanistan war at the MoD's door. 'They said it was going to be tough for us', he told the Inquiry, 'but they said we can do it and we should do it. So in a sense, right at the moment it was difficult in Iraq, we were prepared to make the additional commitment to Afghanistan'.⁶⁴² The lure of professional redemption for a bruised military was difficult to resist.

Not Learning Lessons: The Continued Failure of Assumptions. Taking a step back, the similarities between the Iraq and Afghan decisions are striking, particularly in terms of reliance on flawed

⁶³⁸ Daily Mail, *General Sir Richard Dannatt: a Very Honest General* published 12 Oct 2006 found at [link](#) (accessed 9 Sep 22).

⁶³⁹ Dannatt, *Leading from the Front*, p. 236.

⁶⁴⁰ Blair, *A Journey*, p. 470.

⁶⁴¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 532.

⁶⁴² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 550.

assumptions, insufficient intelligence, and poor strategic foresight. Within weeks of troops moving into Helmand almost every assumption taken proved to be flawed: clear evidence of an inability of British institutions to learn from the previous Iraq experiences. In this section I will outline just two of these flawed assumptions as examples: the failures of intelligence in Helmand; and the failures of assumptions of the sufficiency in troop numbers (the very fear that Reid had expressed in late 2005).

First to the intelligence, and to examine this we go back to Iraq. On 14 July 2004, around eighteen months before the 'Helmand decision' was made, Lord Butler published his 'Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction'.⁶⁴³ This review analysed two things: how the intelligence that took the UK into Iraq in 2003 was developed, and then how it was used by Government to inform decision-making. It absolved the Government of some of the worst accusations of 'dodgy dossiers'⁶⁴⁴, but it highlighted clear lessons to be learned. These should have had a direct bearing on the handing of intelligence for Afghanistan, but – as we shall see – they substantively did not.

The dangers of a paucity of intelligence were a central lesson from Iraq. Butler concluded that the bulk of SIS judgements on Iraq's WMD were based on no more than five human intelligence sources, none of whom had first-hand knowledge of Iraq's weapons programs. As a result, 'intelligence reports were mostly inferential'. Two of the five sources were especially dominant, providing more than two-thirds of the intelligence reports circulated in the build up to the war. When the SIS rigorously reviewed their sources post-invasion, two of the five sources were found to be so unreliable as to need to be withdrawn.⁶⁴⁵ As the Report concluded, 'the most important limitation on intelligence is its incompleteness'.⁶⁴⁶

The problem of 'pressure' on the intelligence community also yielded important lessons from Iraq. The expectations laid on the JIC to enable Government decision-making in 2003 were extreme, and they did what they could with the limited intelligence they had. They were careful to always highlight to Government what they did not know.⁶⁴⁷ But, over-time, the 'creeping tide' of certainty

⁶⁴³ This is colloquially known as the 'Butler Review'.

⁶⁴⁴ The report concluded that 'we have found no evidence of deliberate distortion or of culpable negligence' in the gathering and analysis of intelligence, and that 'we found no evidence of JIC assessments and the judgements inside them being pulled in any particular direction to meet the policy concerns of senior officials on the JIC'. See House of Commons, 'Review of Intelligence of Weapons of Mass Destruction', p. 110.

⁶⁴⁵ House of Commons, 'Review of Intelligence of Weapons of Mass Destruction', pp. 107 – 108.

⁶⁴⁶ House of Commons, 'Review of Intelligence of Weapons of Mass Destruction', p. 14.

⁶⁴⁷ In September 2002, for example, they wrote, 'intelligence remains limited and Saddam's own unpredictability complicates judgements about Iraqi use of these weapons. Much of this paper is necessarily based on judgement and assessment' (see House of Commons, 'Review of Intelligence of Weapons of Mass Destruction', p. 73).

(as the Report called it) was inescapable. ‘We were struck’, the Report observed, ‘by the relative thinness of the intelligence base supporting the greater firmness of the JIC’s judgements on Iraqi production and possession of chemical and biological weapons, especially the inferential nature of much of it’.⁶⁴⁸ This tendency, the Report argued, was a key lesson for the future. Analysis based on limited intelligence should, they argued, be viewed with extreme caution: ‘problems can arise if the JIC has to make bricks without (enough) straw’.⁶⁴⁹

The Government committed to addressing all of the Butler Report’s recommendations.⁶⁵⁰ These issues, however, clearly repeated themselves – if not worsened – just eighteen months later around Afghanistan. At the heart of this, as in Iraq, was a paucity of intelligence in an area where the UK had little source access or institutional expertise. British force presence in Helmand was minimal between 2001 and 2006.⁶⁵¹ As Fry put it, as in Iraq, ‘human intelligence is what we lacked and that is always going to be the most telling insight that you can ever get in an operation like a counter-insurgency operation, which is based in the minds of the people’.⁶⁵² The UK had no more than a toe in the intelligence ‘water’ of Helmand in 2005, when key decisions were being made.⁶⁵³

⁶⁴⁸ House of Commons, ‘Review of Intelligence of Weapons of Mass Destruction’, p. 75.

⁶⁴⁹ House of Commons, ‘Review of Intelligence of Weapons of Mass Destruction’, p. 13.

⁶⁵⁰ See House of Commons, ‘Review of Intelligence of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Implementation of its Conclusions’ (London: Parliament Press, 2005) found at [link](#) (accessed 9 Sep 22).

⁶⁵¹ In 2005 a small cohort of US Special Forces soldiers (accompanied at times by British SAS elements) were operating in the Province under Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, but they were focussed wholly on counter-terrorism and had established a ‘profoundly live-and-let-live’ relationship with local Taliban and insurgent elements. Intelligence feeds from this small force were few. There is no evidence in available records that the British SIS had a significant human intelligence presence in the region.

⁶⁵² Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 168.

⁶⁵³ The fact that lessons had to be learned from Iraq clearly recognised. General Peter Wall, who was Deputy Chief of Joint Operations at the time of the ‘Helmand decision’, told the Defence Committee ‘one of the other things that had not gone well in Iraq if we are honest, was our understanding of the situation and ability to garner the fullest intelligence picture down to the tribal level ... we were not about to emulate the inadequacies of our Iraq efforts [in Afghanistan], and as far as we were concerned we were stretching every sinew to get the picture as clear as possible’ (see Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 226).

PJHQ, still at the heart of the UK’s operational level of command, deployed a series of planning reconnaissance missions to Helmand Province in 2005 seeking to gather intelligence, answer ‘Requests for Information’ (RFIs), and (perhaps most importantly) refine assumptions. The PCRU joined this fray as they increasingly came online, linking up with the military reconnaissance mission through the insights of the forward-thinking Colonel Gordon Messenger. This helped a little. As General Fry put it, ‘successive reconnaissances were being done by the planning staff at the permanent joint headquarters, so it wasn’t as if we were entirely disassociated from what was going on there’ (see Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 168).

But given the low-ebb and minimal start-point of the UK’s intelligence access to the Province, this has to be seen as no more than a toe in the water. Post-facto, decision-makers across the board agreed that intelligence was scarce, including both of the Secretaries of State for Defence who bridged the ‘Helmand decision’. John Reid would later attest that, ‘yes, enormous efforts made to get intelligence there but it was, as ever, fragmentary and, probably because of so few people on the ground, it would have been commensurately less than we had in other areas’ (see Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 168). Des Browne agreed that, ‘there was a degree of intelligence and knowledge of the area, but it was not as extensive as we would have wished’ (Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 197).

This scant intelligence was given strikingly short shrift in decision-making. Any concerns about the significant intelligence gaps were quickly overtaken by political pressure. Optimism was rife. Whereas Butler critiqued the Iraq intelligence for assuming the worst case, in Afghanistan the default was often to assume the best-case.⁶⁵⁴ Concerns were only given cursory attention at the highest levels – and were then quickly overtaken by the drive to meet politically-agreed timelines. Stirrup himself told the Defence Committee that in his first weeks chairing the Chiefs of Staff Committee, ‘a number of us were very cautious indeed about this deployment because of the lack of knowledge ... I personally said, “we need to call a halt ... we cannot possibly deploy UK forces when we don’t know what the environment is going to be like ... we did halt for a time, but then concern grew within NATO, the Dutch resolved their difficulties and then at that stage we were seen by NATO as holding up the whole process. We were asked to step forward again, which we consequently did’.⁶⁵⁵ The lessons from the past, formally expressed just eighteen months early, were not allowed to inhibit the political aspirations of the future.

Like in Iraq, the intelligence failures in Afghanistan rapidly came to light as the Taliban fought back. General Wall later attested that, ‘what we found ... was starkly different from what we had anticipated and hoped for’.⁶⁵⁶ Many have argued that Reid is misquoted when he is criticised for stating that the British would have been happy to complete their mission in Helmand ‘without a shot being fired’.⁶⁵⁷ It is fair to say that, in this, he was expressing a preference, not predicting the future. But he can be rightly criticised for the assumption he was making, given the scant intelligence. The British may well not have been looking for a fight in Helmand, but to believe they would not find one was utopian, and ignored the inherent unpredictabilities of political violence. As Lord Butler warned, ‘the assessment process ... must avoid being so captured by policy objectives that it reports the world as policy-makers would wish it to be rather than as it is’.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁴ General Sir Mike Jackson, who as the Chief of the General Staff at the time of the decision sat on the Chiefs of Staff Committee, told the Defence Committee that ‘there was an assumption of too favourable an environment ... I have no recollection of dire warnings that if you do this, you are going to get a violent reaction. I say, with hindsight, perhaps there was a degree of optimism that underpinned the planning and thinking’. See Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 185.

⁶⁵⁵ Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 202.

⁶⁵⁶ Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 216.

⁶⁵⁷ For example, General Sir Mike Jackson states to the Defence Committee that ‘John Reid’s famous, or infamous, remark ... is misquoted’ (Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 185), and Des Browne suggests that John Reid was ‘subsequently been consistently misrepresented about that interview’ (Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 190).

⁶⁵⁸ House of Commons, ‘Review of Intelligence of Weapons of Mass Destruction’, p. 16.

In addition to the intelligence assumptions, British decisions-makers were also dangerously over-estimating their capacity to resource both theatres simultaneously. At the heart of this were two linked beliefs. The first was that the strictly-capped force package allocated to Afghanistan would be sufficient, which we have already seen was based on a perilously-thin intelligence base. The second, and perhaps more dangerous, was the growing belief that the British would be able to withdraw sufficient troops from Iraq between October 2005 and November 2006 to provide a dividend of troops for Afghanistan. It is this assumption I will examine next.

The belief that the British military would be able to withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2006 started evolving as early as November 2004.⁶⁵⁹ This rapidly firmed into strategic guidance by mid-2005. On 14 June 2005 the MoD published an influential planning paper called 'Options for Future UK Force Posture in Iraq'. This paper, and the process that followed it, is a valuable example of the challenges of British strategy in practice. The MoD paper argued that the current UK strategy was 'broadly on track' and, based on this, a plan should be developed to hand over Al Muthanna and Maysan provinces in October 2005, and Dhi Qar and Basra in early 2006. This was, the paper argued, driven by US assumptions of handing 14 – 18 provinces to the Iraqis by early 2006 (a US troop reduction from 176,000 to 66,000). When executed, this rapid hand-over would lead to a reduction from the current UK force levels of 8,500 to no more than 3,000.

It is important here that, for the first time, what we might call the 'antibody' argument is expressed in policy; the idea that the sheer presence of British troops in Iraq acted to have an 'antibody' effect that drove violent insurgency, and that therefore the situation would be fundamentally better if they left.⁶⁶⁰ I will return to the impact of this idea later on pages 219 and 220, when I examine the growing divergence in late 2006 and early 2007 between British and American strategies.

⁶⁵⁹ It was at that time that an Iraq Policy Unit (IPU) paper first posited the possibility that the MNF presence in Iraq could reduce in 2005 (as security responsibility was progressively passed to the Iraqis), and then could end as soon as possible after the establishment of a truly sovereign government in the December 2005 elections (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.3, para 312). This paper started a perception that rapidly became dominant in early 2005. In early April 2005 Lieutenant General Kiszely (the SBMR-I at the time) helped build momentum for this idea, writing in his 'hauldown report' that all four UK-controlled provinces could be under PIC by March 2006, offering the 'potential for considerable reductions in UK force levels' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.3, para 543). Both Straw and Hoon found this argument persuasive, advising Cabinet on 7 April 2005 that Iraq was moving towards a position where a drawdown of British troops could, in time, be possible (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.3, para 536).

⁶⁶⁰ Paper Reid, 14 June 2005, 'Options for future UK force posture in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22). It is worth noting that Colonel Peter Mansoor, who was General Petraeus's Chief of Staff during the 'surge' in 2007, attributes the 'antibody' theory on the US side to General John Abizaid, Commander US Central Command in 2006. This was a common, indeed unifying, belief between the US and UK in 2006, but was wholly refuted by Petraeus and his team during the 'surge'. See Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 14.

MoD guidance soon led (as is its purpose) to operational planning. On 22 June 2005 the CJO presented a plan back to the Chiefs of Staff entitled 'Op Telic: Operational Transition in Iraq'. This took the assumptions of the MoD paper and turned them into a reality. A force-flow diagram (at Figure 7) explained how the planned reduction of troops would take place, with the UK reducing from 8500 to 3000, and then into 'strategic overwatch', between November 2005 to November 2006. The steepest reductions were to take place in 2006, with UK battlegroups withdrawing in February, June, July and August of that year. Despite the continued political narrative that withdrawal was 'conditions-based', it was clear that time was the driving framework. Careful language was used to obfuscate this politically-uncomfortable fact. The MoD argued that it was not introducing timelines, *per se*, it was instead introducing the 'discipline of a time-based approach'.⁶⁶¹ This met with the approval of the Chiefs, who noted that the UK was 'in a good position to force the pace of drawdown in the comparatively benign MND((SE)'.⁶⁶² In this case, the military were certainly driving the strategic tempo in Iraq.

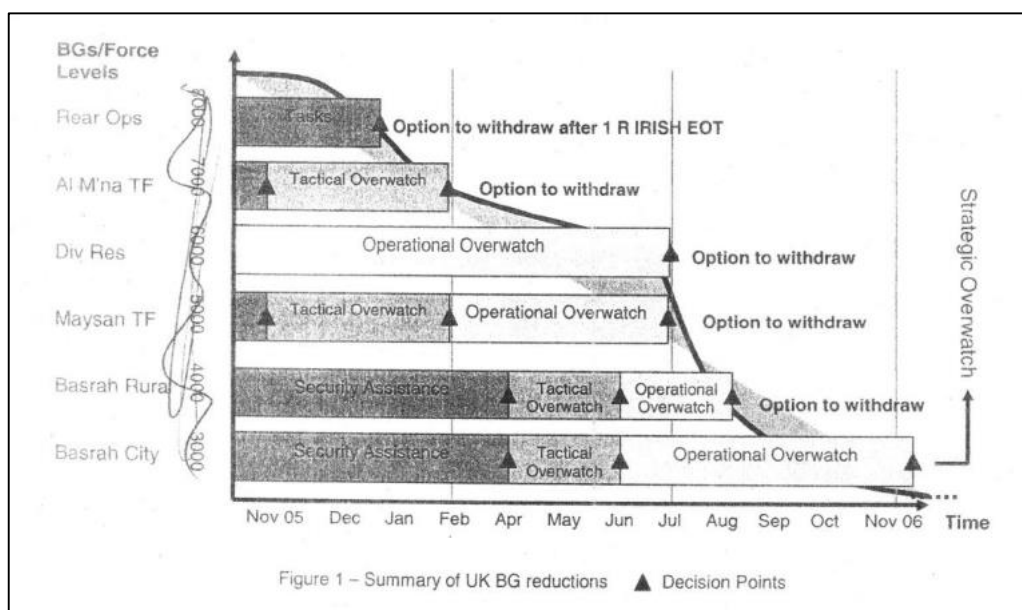


Figure 7: Force Flow Diagram from 'Operational Transition in Iraq'.⁶⁶³

⁶⁶¹ Minute CJO to COSSEC, 22 June 2005, 'Op Telic: Operational Transition in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

⁶⁶² See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 56. It is worth noting that the dissonance between this developing operational planning and the Government's openly-stated policy of remaining 'conditions-based' was reinforced when, not days later, Reid told Parliament that 'we have not set down rigid timelines for the downsizing or withdrawal of troops' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 68).

⁶⁶³ Minute CJO to COSSEC, 22 June 2005, 'Op Telic: Operational Transition in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

The MoD rapidly staffed this June 2005 plan for political approval. The Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (Iraq) (DOP(I)), chaired by Reid in July 2005, formally considered the plan. They were asked to approve the timelines for Province handover and predicted force-levels from the CJO paper.⁶⁶⁴ To its credit, the DOP(I) paperwork highlighted three strategic risks against the plan's assumptions. They were: 'a deterioration in the security situation resulting from a change in Shi'a quiescence', 'a failure to deliver an effective ISF', and 'a prolonged delay in the political process'. This paperwork edged towards honesty that this plan established a timeline for withdrawal, and that this implied political risk. It reminded DOP(I) that Bush had recently stated that 'changes in force posture will not be linked to a timeline', and admitted that this 'timeline for withdrawal' would need to be turned to a narrative of 'transition rather than force reductions'. It did, however, maintain some hope of flexibility. The plans, it argued, were 'conditions-based, flexible, phased and adjustable' and 'they are also reversible'.⁶⁶⁵

Taken in isolation, this hope of flexibility might have been fair and reasonable. But the assumptions in the Iraq planning did not exist in isolation; they existed with an explicit link to the simultaneous assumptions being taken about Afghanistan. Yet the Iraq papers in the three paragraphs above do not mention Afghanistan or the linked assumptions at all. It is perhaps uncommon for research to be able to locate an exact 'moment of assumption' in strategic decision-making, but in this case it is possible to identify a single day when these assumptions – tied in reality but delinked in policy – around Iraq and Afghanistan were formally accepted as strategy.

This day was 21 July 2005, with the 'moment of assumption' being found in two meetings, both chaired by the Prime Minister. It was in the morning of that Thursday that DOP(I) met with Blair in the Chair to consider the MoD's 'Op Telic: Operational Transition in Iraq' paper. Blair noted that the UK had to avoid giving the 'erroneous impression that we intended to leave whatever the circumstances'. But despite this, DOP(I) and the Prime Minister agreed the paper and the timeline, giving it full political agency as Government policy.

Just hours later, however, Blair was involved in another meeting – with many of the same people. This is where the assumptions were explicitly tied. The second meeting was the overall DOP committee, of which DOP(I) was a subset. This specific DOP had been convened, with Blair in the

⁶⁶⁴ A first reduction of 1,000 in March 2006 once Maysan and Al Muthanna had transitioned and stabilised, and then a rapid reduction from around 7,000 to 3,000 by July 2006.

⁶⁶⁵ Letter Reid to Powell, 18 July 2005, 'Operational Transition in Iraq' attaching Paper Secretary of State for Defence, [undated], 'Operational Transition in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

Chair, to discuss the developing plans for Afghanistan in 2006. Three force packages were proposed for the Helmand deployment, with the largest scaled at 2,500 troops. Interestingly, the Afghanistan proposal paper for DOP did explicitly consider Iraq, when the Iraq papers did not consider Afghanistan. It warned that, 'if drawdown in Iraq were to slip significantly, the MoD would be able to resource [the packages] ... but the effects would be exacerbated significantly'. There is no record of discussion at the DOP about how the two campaigns might interrelate, despite the risks and overlapping timelines, and despite the common membership of the committees. It was assumed it would work. Like Iraq, the DOP approved the Afghan deployment in principle, based on the largest package. From this stage on, the UK were formally proceeding assuming that they could resource both campaigns.⁶⁶⁶

This was ultimately wrong. The core assumptions in both Iraq and Afghanistan failed: the UK was not able to withdraw from Iraq, and the force levels in Afghanistan proved insufficient. The poor quality of this assumption was – on balance – foreseeable at the time. While there were some positive elements in reporting about the future of Iraq in early 2005⁶⁶⁷, it was clear by July that the situation was dangerously degrading.⁶⁶⁸ By October 2005 it was plainly evident that the UK's plans were being built on increasingly poor assumptions, but no changes to policy were made.

⁶⁶⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, paras 100 – 110.

⁶⁶⁷ In the days after the January 2005 Iraqi election Major General Riley, then Commander MND(SE), described an almost festive atmosphere that he considered 'extraordinary' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.3, para 449). As we have seen it was Lieutenant General Kiszely, clearly an authority having just spent six months as the SBMR-I, who first proposed the idea of a withdrawal plan by March 2006 thanks to the positive trends he was seeing (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.3, para 543).

⁶⁶⁸ There was clear and consistent evidence that the assumptions being made on withdrawal were dangerously unsound. In January 2005 Lieutenant General Fry, serving in the MoD, wrote to Hoon to report that, 'the prognosis for the security LOO [Line of Operation] in 05 is stark ... the Sunni insurgency will grow in scale and intensity ... the recent alignment of AQ and Al Zarqawi has formally established Iraq as the central front for radical Islamic terrorism ... in sum, we are not on track to deliver the Steady State Criteria (SSC) before the UN mandate expires, or even shortly thereafter'. Fry argued for more commitment to Iraq, not less. Only one thing, he stated, could get the campaign on track: 'additional military effort by the MNF-I as a whole' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.3, para 414).

Such warnings continued to sound throughout the early months of 2005, and into July when the 'moment of assumption' was taken. In May 2005, just as Reid was being appointed at Defence and two months before the day of the dual DOP(I)/DOP Committees, he received a minute from Sir Kevin Tebbit that warned that 'significant reductions in Coalition force levels (including UK forces) are unlikely to be possible until 2006. This is 6-12 months later than our initial hopes. It inevitably has knock-on consequences for the planned increase in our military effort – expanded stabilisation operations in Afghanistan – and the size of our force there' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.3, para 573).

The evidence continued to mount against this 'moment of assumption' in the days and weeks after it was taken. The very day after the dual DOP(I) and DOP meetings Blair received a paper from his National Security Advisor, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, that might have caused him to question his views of the previous day. 'Of course we should be concerned', it stated, 'about the continuing high level of violence; lack of grip of the ITG [Iraqi Transitional Government]; slow pace of reconstruction etc. It is difficult to see these things being remedied quickly ... at present there is no doubt that the presence of the MNF contains the sectarian violence' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 112).

Six weeks later, in early September 2005, the US published an in-depth and influential 'Red Team' report that warned that, under the current strategy, the ISF would not be able to defeat the insurgency and take over security of the country in the

Who bears responsibility for this? Up to September 2005 it was a joint venture, given the co-scrutiny of the plans by civilians and military. But from September 2005 the military must bear the weight of responsibility. It was the military, under Walker as CDS, who confidently assuaged Reid's very valid concerns in late 2005. There was no equivocation present in their advice.⁶⁶⁹ Their confidence continued throughout the tail-end of 2005, and into the critical early months of 2006 despite a raft of negative indicators in Iraq.⁶⁷⁰ It even continued as the slippages to the DOP(I)-agreed Iraq transition timelines started to bite in October 2005.⁶⁷¹ At no stage did the Chiefs formally flag new concerns around Helmand.

The Chiefs met again in January 2006 to consider their final recommendation to Reid. This provided them with one final chance to review their confidence on force levels. They concluded that the Helmand Task Force 'calls on a variety of capabilities, and a lengthy and complex logistics tail. With the continued commitment to Iraq through 2006, this presents significant but manageable challenges, particularly for logistic enablers (including air transport)'. As we know, they recommended the full deployment.⁶⁷²

But Walker's true perspective came to light in a letter to his colleague David Richards a few days later, where he stated that 'militarily, the UK force structure is already stretched and, with two concurrent medium scale operations in prospect, will soon become exceptionally so in niche areas'.⁶⁷³ The language of 'exceptionally so' did not find its way into Ministerial advice. Institutional

foreseeable future (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 161). Days after the 'Red Team' report, Blair's Private Secretary wrote to him personally to flag 'further concerns' about the security situation in Iraq, and the risks of failure (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 178). By the 5 October 2005 the Chief of Defence Intelligence was writing to senior officials in the MoD after a personal visit to Iraq to highlight the 'very apparent deterioration in the security situation in Baghdad over successive visits' and that sectarian tensions were at 'an unprecedented level'. 'The clear conclusion', he wrote, 'is that the security situation is getting progressively worse' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 305).

⁶⁶⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 202.

⁶⁷⁰ These included the al-Askari bombing, the scale of the growing sectarian rifts illuminated by both the Iraqi constitutional referendum and the parliamentary elections, the continued decline of the security situation, ongoing issues with the ISF, and delays to the political process.

⁶⁷¹ In October 2005 the Chiefs concluded in a report to the Secretary of State that the existing UK strategy was 'not fundamentally flawed, but its implementation was failing ... Ministers needed to be clear that the campaign could potentially be heading for strategic failure' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 370). On 10 November the first formal delay to the Iraq withdrawal timelines bit, with Reid having to write to Blair to explain that, instead of the first provinces transitioning in October 2005 (which had already passed), military judgement remained that it 'would, in principle, be possible to hand over responsibility for security for the Iraqis in Muthanna and Maysan provinces by around February 2006' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 411). This, as Reid explained, had clear force level implications, with reductions in numbers that were planned for February 2006 having to be deferred to May 2006: the very time that the Afghan deployment commenced.

⁶⁷² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 532.

⁶⁷³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 541.

deviance was, by that stage, fully normalised. Walker stated to the Inquiry that it ‘absolutely was’ a breach of Defence Planning Assumptions, ‘but as we hadn’t stuck within our Defence Planning Assumptions for the previous – I’m trying to think when we did stick with them since 1998. I don’t think we were ever inside them’.⁶⁷⁴ The drive for professional redemption overcame closed-door concerns.

By the time Stirrup and Dannatt looked at the problem with ‘fresh’ eyes in mid-2006, the UK was committed and the situation was fixed. But both officers say that the scale of the problem was obvious on their assumption of post. Stirrup attested that ‘it became clear to me very soon after I took over that there was no way we would be able to draw down our force levels in Iraq at the pace that had been previously assumed. That was one of my earliest pieces of advice to the Secretary of State’.⁶⁷⁵ It was Dannatt who coined the phrase that the British Army was ‘running hot’.

The final toll in Iraq for these failed assumptions is an unhappy one. The handover of Al-Muthanna took place on 13 July 2006, instead of October 2005. Dhi Qar was eventually handed over before Maysan, on 21 September 2006, with Maysan not fully transitioning to the Iraqis until 18 April 2007 (a full 17 months after the initially planned window of October 2005). Al Basra held out all the way until the 16 December 2007. In October 2006, at the time when the DOP(I) paper had initially planned for the UK to be shifting to ‘strategic overwatch’, 7,100 troops remained in Iraq and DOP(I) was being asked to approve a plan for a force of 4,500 to be sustained throughout 2007.⁶⁷⁶ Force levels had actually risen at times thanks to surge requirements.⁶⁷⁷ Over in Afghanistan, July 2007 saw 7,600 troops in Helmand (more than double the initial estimate). By January 2007 Houghton, serving as CJO, was trading battalions between theatres: imploring to the Chiefs that the Worcester and Sherwood Foresters be stood down from Operation TELIC by the end of January ‘to meet the enduring liability in Afghanistan’.⁶⁷⁸

The interactions between the Iraq and Afghanistan decisions in 2005 and 2006 expose many of the issues with British strategy in practice. Decision-makers were considering two wars. While different in genesis and character, these two wars were intrinsically connected by their unpredictable nature, and the single set of tools the British had available to apply within them. But they were considered

⁶⁷⁴ Transcript of Public Hearing, General Lord Walker of Aldringham, 1 Feb 10, p. 55 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

⁶⁷⁵ Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 210.

⁶⁷⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 226.

⁶⁷⁷ Around 1000 soldiers were surged for Operation SALAMANCA/SINBAD throughout the second half of 2006 (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 135).

⁶⁷⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 371.

in isolation. Separate plans were developed, both of which were underpinned by overly optimistic advice and assumptions. These plans were then accepted by political leaders (despite the flawed assumptions being laid side by side on a single day). The DOP, which Blair had re-energised and chaired since October 2003 in an attempt to re-instigate and improve Cabinet strategy-making, could have identified the combined strategic risks of engaging in two wars simultaneously. It failed in this task. But the key responsibility in this case then lies with the military, and the efficacy of their advice to the Cabinet body. When policy concerns were raised, they were assuaged by the CDS and the Chiefs in the name of professional redemption. Private correspondence shows that military advice was neither frank nor honest: it was instead coloured by both institutional and personal interests. More honest advice of the uncertainties and risks might have led to a different strategy.

The final outcome of these failed assumptions – and the inability to learn lessons writ large – is clear: by 2007 the UK's strategic flexibility had been fundamentally removed, and the military were unable to service either theatre without considerable risk to the other, and to the long term health of the military. The withdrawal plans in Iraq were no longer 'conditions-based, flexible, phased and adjustable', as the DOP(I) had hoped in 2005, nor were they 'reversible'. The UK had to withdraw from Iraq in order to meet the liability in Afghanistan. This reality, especially once the US decided to 'surge', became a central influence on British strategic decision-making moving forward.

Changing All of the Guard, and Slipping Through the Strategic Cracks. I will now briefly examine one final influence on the interactions between the Iraq and Afghanistan decisions from early to mid-2006. This window saw a new phenomenon: a wholesale changeover of strategic decision-makers. This is a factor that Freedman briefly recognised in *Command* as having a considerable impact in 2006 and 2007.⁶⁷⁹ There had always been a steady turnover of the operational commanders in Iraq⁶⁸⁰, but things had remained very stable at the strategic and political level since 2003. Walker had taken over as CDS from Boyce just after the invasion and was still in place as 2006 dawned. The key role of DCDS(C) had been filled by Lieutenant General Fry since 2003, also providing important continuity. There had only been one change in CJO, with Reith (architect of the UK's embedding within 1003V) handing over to Air Marshal Torpy (the ACC in the invasion) in July 2004. General Jackson had been CGS from 1 February 2003, seeing his way through the invasion and all the way to 2006.

⁶⁷⁹ Freedman, *Command*, p. 460.

⁶⁸⁰ The early decision to establish six-month tours in Iraq meant that by early 2006, five officers had served as Commander MND(SE) (Graeme Lamb, Andrew Stewart, William 'Bill' Rollo, Jonathon Riley, James Dutton and John Cooper), and six as SMBR-I (Freddie Viggers, Andrew Figgures, John McColl, John Kiszely, Robin Brims and Nicholas Houghton). See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 222.

On the civilian side, things were also consistent. Hoon had held the position of Defence Secretary from October 1999 to May 2005, making him the second longest-serving politician to hold the position (just overtaken by Denis Healey, who served for two months longer). Sir Kevin Tebbit had been consistently by his side in the key civil service post of Permanent Under-Secretary, from 1998 to 2005. Straw was equally long-serving as Foreign Secretary, arriving in June 2001 and still in place at the start of 2006. Strategic and political decision-makers up to late 2005 were a consistent factor, not a variable.

This consistency was fractured in the six-month period between March and August 2006. In chronological order, the changes commenced with Fry handing over DCDS(C) to Vice Admiral Charles Style in late March 2006, before Fry then headed to Baghdad to take over from Houghton as SBMR-I. Houghton was not done with Iraq: he returned to the UK to take over from Torpy as CJO (keeping him deeply embroiled in the war). Around a month later, on 28 April 2006, the key change of CDS was made, with Walker handing over to Stirrup.

Just a week later, Blair conducted a no-notice Cabinet reshuffle that saw major changes in defence and foreign policy. Reid, Secretary of State for just a year, unexpectedly handed over to Des Browne (who came across from Chief Secretary to the Treasury). Straw handed over to Margaret Beckett at the FCO. Beckett came from the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs with no deep experience of foreign affairs. Finally, in August, Jackson handed over to Dannatt as CGS. By the end of August 2006 the 'guard' had been well and truly changed, and a very different command structure was in place from the one that grappled with the early decisions of 2006.

The 'change of the guard' in early to mid-2006 had a significant impact on the early months of the Afghan campaign; with a requisite influence in Iraq. It resulted in the tacit, even unconscious, endorsement at the highest level of an operational decision with strategic consequences; one that acted as a catalyst for the failure of the assumptions examined in the last section. This decision has become known as the '*charge up the valley*', where Brigadier Butler deployed his small band of paratroopers far beyond the security lozenge of Lashkar Gah and into a series of 'Platoon Houses' up the Helmand River. It was this '*charge*', and the violent response of the Taliban, that led to the escalation in British military force levels in the autumn of 2006. This vignette provides an excellent example of the influence of changing so many strategic decision-makers, in a single system, in such a short period of time.

Early analysis of the '*charge*' laid the responsibility for the decision firmly at the tactical level. These narratives suggest that Brigadier Butler went looking for a fight. Butler's Brigade had – according to some – unilaterally discarded on arrival the carefully crafted, comprehensive 'Joint UK Plan for Helmand', electing instead to conduct their own, isolated planning that focussed on military not civil effect. Butler, fixated on the tactical and unable to grapple with the strategic context, personally took the decision to '*charge up the valley*', shifting British strategy. It was, according to this version, the tactics that were to blame. There is certainly subjective evidence to suggest some truth to this (see footnote).⁶⁸¹

This explanation is, however, insufficient. The '*charge*' was as much a failure of acumen at the highest level as it was at the tactical, caused by the change in strategic leadership between March and August 2006. The best way to examine this is to analyse the perspective of the '*charge*' both before and after the changeover of leadership: a period of just a month.

The collective position on any extension of forces to northern Helmand was clear before the guard changed. The incremental nature of the 'Joint UK Plan for Helmand' was explicit: 'Interim Operating Capability' in May 2006, 'Full Operating Capability' in July, the steady build-up of a 'security lozenge'

⁶⁸¹ Mark Etherington, who led the PCRU effort in Afghanistan and as an ex-member of the Parachute Regiment himself was certainly qualified to comment, is quoted as saying, 'I think some in the military were just jolly keen to get stuck in ... you know, to charge off over the Helmand desert in a stripped down Landrover with a 0.50 calibre machine gun' (see Robert Egnell, 'Lessons from Helmand, Afghanistan: What Now for British Counterinsurgency?', *International Affairs*, March 2011, Vol. 87, p. 306). In the book '*A Million Bullets*', which analyses the Helmand deployment, author James Ferguson quotes a very senior Army officer as holding a similar opinion, stating 'if you take a battle group of Paratroopers that looks like a hammer, they are inclined to look for a nail and they found a nail. In fact, lots of them. We got what we wanted on Herrick 4, which was a battle'. Etherington's civilian colleague at the PCRU, Minna Jarvenpaa, was and remains highly critical of the 16th Air Assault Brigade's approach. 'We were quite naive on the civilian side,' she said. 'We thought that the tactical HQ coming into theatre would do what PJHQ had previously agreed – obviously – because they were a lower-order HQ. But that wasn't what happened. The brigade chose instead to do their own planning and their own thinking' (see Ferguson, *A Million Bullets*, p. 178 – 183).

These concerns were not only held at the lower levels. Ed Butler recalls that General Sir David Richards, as the incoming Commander ISAF, was heavily critical of him and his Brigade, stating that Richards was 'publicly critical of the decision to move north', and was openly stating that the 'incoming Task Force and its commander had 'gone rogue' (see Ed Butler, 'Setting Ourselves up for a Fall in Afghanistan', *The RUSI Journal*, 160:1, 2011, pp. 53 – 56). General Sir Nick Parker expressed a similar view to the Defence Committee, stating that 'we may have allowed brigadiers to make decisions that are beyond their capacity or capability' (see Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 132).

Butler has consistently and sharply contested accusations of an aggressive approach, but at times even his own views seem to reinforce them. In interviews with Ferguson for '*A Million Bullets*', Butler confesses a belief that campaigns need to go through a 'Hobbesian cycle of violence' before they can transition to a 'peace campaign'. 'I'm not a military historian,' Butler is quoted as saying, 'but based on my twenty years plus of experience in the operational field, you've got to go through ... an attritional war to exhaust those physical battles before people start to recognise that there is a political solution which needs to be negotiated' (see Ferguson, *A Million Bullets*, p. 186). Overall, it is clear that the tactical character of both the individuals and institutions who took part in the '*charge up the valley*' played some role in the decisions. Mark Etherington put it well when he said, 'I do not doubt the military's bravery and commitment in Helmand for a moment. But did we lose sight of our objectives? It is at least arguable' (see Ferguson, *A Million Bullets*, p. 184).

in Lashkar Gah, and then a Malaya-esque 'ink spot' approach to expanding governance and security to be conducted over years. This plan and the size of the force were interdependent and co-reliant: the capabilities of Task Force Helmand were only 'sufficient' if laid out against a limited and gradual operational design, and the design had to be conservative given the limited forces available. No provision was made or considered for an aggressive expansion of the plan. Both the PCRU and PJHQ's 'Prelim Operations Team' (co-signatories of the 'Joint UK Plan for Helmand') agreed on this. As did the CDS and Joint Commander's Directives, which were all about 'localised effect'.⁶⁸²

Reid, already concerned about Afghanistan in the context of the Iraq war, was also clear on this point. Reid visited Helmand from 23 April 2006. Butler had been in theatre for three weeks by that stage and was deeply concerned by his situation. Butler briefed Reid that Helmand was already in crisis and his Task Force was at great risk.⁶⁸³ He highlighted the dissonance he saw between Helmand and Whitehall, raising how 'some in London genuinely believing that we could rebuild the governance of Afghanistan and deliver all of our development and aid objectives "without a shot being fired"'. He went on to say that their "'assumptions" were not based on reality and clearly they had not read much Afghan history'.⁶⁸⁴ Butler warned Reid that he might have to operate well outside of his initial security zone to secure his position.

Reid's intentions on his return to London, however, were to deter expansionism, not encourage it. On 3 May he received an Operational Ministerial brief where PJHQ implied that 'there might be a requirement for an earlier than planned and more significant deployment to the north of Helmand'. But Reid recalls that the 'clear implication was that [such] demands ... ought to be resisted, because they were requiring us to do things that were unsustainable'.⁶⁸⁵ He repeated this view in written evidence to the 2011 Defence Committee.⁶⁸⁶ There is no evidence that Reid encouraged or tacitly approved the '*charge*'.

The 3 May Operational Ministerial brief was, however, Reid's last. On 6 May Reid departed to the Home Office as Browne came in as the new Secretary of State. Of note, the Operational Ministerial brief on 3 May was not just Reid's last, it was due to be Stirrup's first as CDS. Stirrup, however, was not there. He had departed two days earlier for his own introductory tour of Iraq and Afghanistan, to

⁶⁸² Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 163.

⁶⁸³ Butler, 'Setting Ourselves up for a Fall in Afghanistan', p. 8.

⁶⁸⁴ Butler, 'Setting Ourselves up for a Fall in Afghanistan', p. 8.

⁶⁸⁵ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 164.

⁶⁸⁶ The Defence Committee recorded that 'the minute that he [Reid] wrote to us ... was crystal clear on his absolute opposition to moving into the dodgier parts of the Northern part of the Province—never mind tactics. It could not have been clearer; it was in black and white' (see Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 211).

take stock of the two theatres dominating his portfolio. Critically it is at this point that the context in the evidence around the '*charge*' changes, and where a pre-decision becomes a decision already made by the outgoing team.

Stirrup records from his visit that the move to the north had already begun. 'When I went out at the beginning of May to Afghanistan' he recalls, 'we were already in the process of doing [the move to the north] ... that was before I took over'. When asked by the Defence Committee if the decision had been made by Ministers, he responded 'I was not there when the decisions were made, but certainly it would have been briefed to Chiefs of Staff and to Ministers'.⁶⁸⁷ Stirrup considers that, by the time he had taken over, the decision to '*charge*' had been made.

Browne however considers that the decision was not made by him, nor indeed that it was his to make. His inability to make such decisions – or even to recall how they were made – was the result of the unpredictability of the war in Iraq. On 6 May 2006, hours after Browne took over, a British Army Lynx helicopter was shot down in Basra by a shoulder-launched missile reportedly fired by JAM. Five soldiers were killed and running battles in Basra ensued. Browne found himself consumed by the Lynx incident. 'I was totally focused on Iraq in the initial days', he recalls, 'so from my point of view, having forces deployed in two environments, and conducting two wars was challenging. When events determined that you had to focus on a particular area, you had to focus fully on that area'.⁶⁸⁸

Browne received his first briefing on the situation in Afghanistan on 11 May, while still deep in the Lynx fallout. The critical briefing around the '*charge*' then took place on 24 May 2005. At Stirrup's request, Butler flew back from Afghanistan to personally brief the Chiefs of Staff, and then Browne, on an expansion into northern Helmand. Butler vividly remembers briefing Browne in his office.⁶⁸⁹ Browne, however, has no memory of either the 11 or 24 May briefs, stating to the Defence Committee that 'I have no recollection of being briefed on this series of events as they happened'.⁶⁹⁰ This was the last opportunity he would have to take a view on the '*charge*'. The move to Sangin took place on 26 and 27 May, and then to Musa Qala and Now Zad on 28 May.⁶⁹¹ The first brief on Afghanistan that Browne professes full memory of was in mid-June, when he visited Helmand himself. By this stage 16th Air Assault Brigade was already firmly fixed in the platoon houses, and Butler was asking for additional forces. It was this provision of an extra battalion of 900 troops that

⁶⁸⁷ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 208.

⁶⁸⁸ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 191.

⁶⁸⁹ Butler, 'Setting Ourselves up for a Fall in Afghanistan', p. 10.

⁶⁹⁰ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 193.

⁶⁹¹ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 218.

Browne sees as his first decision on Afghanistan, the first step in a series of commitments that removed all flexibility in Iraq

Even if Browne had been able to perceive the scale of the strategic implications of the '*charge*', it is unlikely he would have had the confidence or experience to step in. When asked by the Defence Committee about the chain of command, he stated 'I was never briefed that I was part of the chain of command, and I never considered myself to be part of the chain of command'. It was not his role, he believed, to probe military decisions. 'I have no personal knowledge of [these decisions]' he said, 'it wasn't my job, and if I had started to interfere in that, with the level of knowledge I had of the detail of how the military worked then—I know a lot more now—it would have been entirely inappropriate'.⁶⁹²

Reid, whose involvement in Helmand had been characterised by strategic caution, was shocked by the '*charge*'. 'You can imagine', he told the Defence Committee, 'that when, five weeks later, sitting in the Home Office, I heard that we were fighting for our lives in Sangin, I could not entirely understand it'.⁶⁹³ Stirrup is clear that the abrupt change between Reid and Browne was hugely disruptive. Stirrup went to Iraq and Afghanistan in May with one Secretary of State, and returned with a different one, noting that 'what I certainly did not expect was to lose my Secretary of State within days of taking over. Given that John Reid was immersed in this, and ... had exerted considerable leadership within the Cabinet on Afghanistan, there is no doubt that that was a significant transition to make at that particular stage'.⁶⁹⁴

Browne has argued consistently since 2006 that the '*charge*' was a tactical decision. That may well be true, but it had strategic implications, especially with a growing crisis in Iraq that threatened the assumptions on which both theatres relied. In his examination in *Supreme Command* of the failings of US leaders in Vietnam, Eliot Cohen writes that 'part of the statesman's art of perception lies in seeing, embedded in a mass of detail, that which is indeed new and different ... the existence of novel strategic conditions or operational problems. Inevitably, a military commander's point of view must be partial, restricted in various ways but not least by a sense of responsibility for the conduct of actual operations. It is up to the statesman to find the right point of view from which to judge

⁶⁹² Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 194 – 195.

⁶⁹³ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 163.

⁶⁹⁴ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 211.

military action ... usually, though not always, this entails deciding when political considerations must override legitimate, even pressing military ones'.⁶⁹⁵

This was Browne's role as Secretary of State; to see the strategic amongst the tactical, and to judge military action. But brand new in the job, and with a full-scale crisis on his hands with the Iraq Lynx deaths, Browne was in no position to achieve it. He defaulted to silence and, as Stirrup attested, 'silence means tacit approval'.⁶⁹⁶ It was not necessarily that the 'changing of the guard' approved the 'charge', it was that it failed to question, probe or prevent it. Had the Ministerial change not taken place, it is possible – indeed probable – that a different outcome would have eventuated.

I have now examined the 'Helmand decision', and its links to Iraq, through three lenses. It is worth highlighting the key conclusions before I move on. First is the dissonance between the political/strategic and the military operational levels in the 2005/2006 decision-making. Blair and New Labour saw the efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan as conceptually linked, part of a 'grander' strategic approach.⁶⁹⁷ The period of 2004 – 2006 saw New Labour double down on their philosophy of interventionism. But in practice the two campaigns were executed separately, particularly in terms of assumptions and honest considerations of resources. The machinery of government was in a position to challenge this – for example on 21 July 2005 at DOP and DOP(I) – but it did not. This was a key failing.

The second important conclusion is just how little UK strategic decision making had improved between the Iraq and Afghan decisions. The use of intelligence to inform the 'Helmand decision' was not improved by the rigorous work of Lord Butler.⁶⁹⁸ The trends of the two campaigns are far more similar than dissimilar. As Fry said to the Inquiry, 'if [Afghanistan] sounds as if it has a remarkable

⁶⁹⁵ Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), Loc Cit 4092. The application of Cohen's theories of civil / military relations in *Supreme Command* to the British experience in the Iraq war must be approached with caution. Cohen is describing a US system of politics and society that is profoundly different to the British system. In addition, the bulk of his analysis is focused on US supreme commanders fighting total wars of national survival: a very different situation to Iraq. In this case, however, Cohen is referring to the application of statesmanship and strategy in Vietnam, a conflict with enough similarities to Iraq to make Cohen's analysis relevant and useful.

⁶⁹⁶ Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 209.

⁶⁹⁷ When Blair addressed Parliament on 30 June in 2004 to announce the deployment of the ARRC to Afghanistan, Blair was explicit about this, stating 'both Iraq and Afghanistan face the same struggle for democracy and freedom. Both were used as terrorist bases ... both now have the hope of a new dawn, but are confronted by the remnants of the past they seek to escape. What happens in Afghanistan and Iraq affects us here. Our ultimate security lies in the spread of our values: freedom, democracy and the rule of law'. See CSPAN, 'Prime Minister's Questions: Report on NATO Meeting', 30 June 2004, found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

⁶⁹⁸ The major assumptions that underpinned the decision very quickly proved to be wrong. These assumptions included: limited Taliban capability, feasibility of an incremental approach, sufficiency of force level packages, likelihood of success of the 'comprehensive approach', and likely financial costs.

resemblance to going into Iraq, then you are absolutely right to draw that conclusion'.⁶⁹⁹ Helmand shows how difficult it is to learn lessons at both the bureaucratic and individual level.

The final observation is that the quality and experience of individuals continues to matter, as does stability in the system. Reid was proving to be a highly-effective Secretary of State.⁷⁰⁰ But the wholesale 'changing of the guard' in early 2006 removed not just Reid, but almost the entire top echelon of decision-makers. Given this disruption, it is perhaps unsurprising that the strategic significance of the '*charge*' was missed by the new team. It is also of note how absent Blair is in these decisions: I will return to this later when I examine the Prime Minister's declining influence in the 2006 period.⁷⁰¹

It is now time to leave the poppy fields of Helmand, and to move back to the dangerous streets of Basra in mid-2006. There the British soldiers could not see and were not thinking about Afghanistan. Instead they were contending with a sharply declining situation and one officer, Major General Richard Shirreff, was working to re-energise his own moribund campaign. His professional view on arrival in Basra was that the UK was seeking 'an exit strategy rather than a winning strategy', and he was determined to turn this around. It is here, in the form of 'Operation SALAMANCA', that all the issues highlighted above eventually came to roost.

Turning Point: Operation SALAMANCA/SINBAD and a 'Winning Strategy'

In January 2006 the next commander of MND(SE) began preparing for the task ahead.⁷⁰² Richard Shirreff was selected as the sixth commander of the UK's division in southern Iraq. Shirreff had not served in Iraq before, but it was clear that he approached his new role with strong views. He conducted his first recce to Iraq in April 2006, and a second in May, and was disturbed by what he saw. 'I found a situation', he later testified, 'where we only had only thirteen multiples (half-platoons) available for operating amongst the 1.5 million people of Basra'. He instinctively compared this to his Northern Ireland experience, where 'there were 10,000 troops operating amongst the

⁶⁹⁹ Transcript of Public Hearing, Lt Gen Fry, 16 Dec 09, p. 95 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 5 Sep 22).

⁷⁰⁰ It was Stirrup who testified that Reid had 'exerted considerable leadership within the Cabinet on Afghanistan', including seeking to tightly bound the strategy given broader pressures. Even Brigadier Butler considered him impressive, stating 'where it started to work was when Dr Reid was Secretary of State for Defence and he was the *primus inter pares* between DFID and the FCO and the military. He really got to grips with things in the last part of his tenure as Secretary of State, in those two or three months up to his move to the Home Office. He knocked heads together'. See Defence Committee, 'The Comprehensive Approach', p. 24.

⁷⁰¹ See Part Four pp. 226 – 237.

⁷⁰² Elliott, *High Command*, p. 115

300,000 population of Belfast'.⁷⁰³ It was clear to him that the force levels in theatre were wholly insufficient for the scale of the security challenge.

More quietly, he also formed views that commanders were describing a far too optimistic view of the security situation. Rather than progressing steadily to PIC, Stirrup found that when he arrived there 'was effectively no security at all'.⁷⁰⁴ This was not, he explained to the Inquiry, 'what he had been led to expect from his briefings and recce beforehand'. The result, he said, was a 'cycle of insecurity ... no security meant no reconstruction and development, it meant a loss of consent, the militia filled the gap and, effectively, the militia controlled the city'.⁷⁰⁵ This view, admittedly developed over a brief period of immersion, set the tone for what followed.

Shirreff was even more concerned by the perspectives in London. On his return from his recces he travelled to Northwood and briefed Houghton as CJO. Their views differed sharply. Shirreff had written to Houghton on his return from his May reconnaissance to express his concerns. 'I am not convinced', he wrote, 'that we have correctly identified the strategic Main Effort and resourced it appropriately to potentially avoid disastrous failure in Iraq'. He stated forcefully that the British military would need to 'clout' and not 'dribble' if they wanted to succeed.⁷⁰⁶ His concerns, however, fell on deaf ears. 'My sense', Shirreff stated, 'was that the overriding theme within PJHQ [and] within London was ... accelerated transition and that the gravity of the situation was not fully appreciated'.⁷⁰⁷

Houghton was as concerned by Shirreff's proposals as Shirreff was of PJHQ's plans. Houghton had only just returned from Iraq himself following six months as the SBMR-I, and he was one of the lead architects of the current British strategy. Shirreff's blunt perspectives on the plan did not impress him. 'We want no displays of military testosterone in Basra', he said forcefully.⁷⁰⁸ For Houghton, the plan in Iraq was set and was not to be deviated from.

⁷⁰³ Ministry of Defence, *Operations in Iraq, January 2005 to May 2009 (Op TELIC 5 – 13), An Analysis from a Land Perspective* (Wilton: November 2010), p. 69.

⁷⁰⁴ Transcript of Public Hearing, Lt Gen Shirreff, 11 January 2010, p. 3 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 22).

⁷⁰⁵ Transcript of Public Hearing, Lt Gen Shirreff, 11 January 2010, p. 4 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 22).

⁷⁰⁶ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 163.

⁷⁰⁷ Transcript of Public Hearing, Lt Gen Shirreff, 11 January 2010, p. 10 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 22).

⁷⁰⁸ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 163 and Mark Urban, *Task Force Black* (Brown: Great Britain, 2010), p. 188.

Shirreff, however, was not deterred. Disappointed by the perspectives in PJHQ, he set about forming an operational plan to achieve three outcomes: to defeat the Iranian-sponsored 'Special Groups' who dominated his AO; to turn around the situation in Basra; and (perhaps most importantly in his mind) to save the reputation of the British Army. Shirreff tasked his staff to develop the framework for a three-month UK operation; what initially became 'Operation SALAMANCA', and later 'Operation SINBAD'. Shirreff made his aim for this plan, and his view of London and PJHQ, clear when he drew together the Regiments and Battalions who would go on to fight SINBAD. 'The time has come', Shirreff told them, 'to take the offensive against the enemy and challenge the defeatists who seem to pervade Whitehall and much of Northwood. The British Army was not going to lose its name in Iraq.'⁷⁰⁹

Shirreff's determination did not wane on his arrival. For successive months MND(SE) had rated Maysan as 'green' against the criteria for PIC, something that MNC-I had consistently contested.⁷¹⁰ In his first weekly report back to Houghton, dated 21 July 2006, Shirreff sided firmly with MNC-I, stating that 'I cannot see how, given the level of attacks against coalition forces, we can claim that Maysan is green ... in my view it is at best yellow'.⁷¹¹ 'The only way we will achieve mission success', he continued, 'is by winning the battle for Basra and defeating militant JAM and the death squads (whether by capturing, or, if necessary, by killing them) ... but we must be clever about it ... the key to this is energetic and sustained effort along the governance and economic lines of operation, both of which remain inadequate ... (the comprehensive approach did not exist)'.⁷¹²

Operation SALAMANCA was Shirreff's solution. He and his team planned a focussed operation designed to break the cycle of insecurity and re-establish order in Basra.⁷¹³ The minimal force levels available to MND(SE) were to be concentrated in Basra, consciously taking risk elsewhere in the AO, and then combined with reinforced elements of the Iraqi Army from the 10th Division. These combined forces, with the Iraqis in the lead, would then surge into each of Basra's sixteen districts, one by one over a three-month period to create a definitive security presence. The design aimed to achieve the 'comprehensive approach' that Shirreff believed did not exist, via a 'pulsed' security effect.

⁷⁰⁹ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, pp. 161 – 162.

⁷¹⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 57.

⁷¹¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 97.

⁷¹² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 98.

⁷¹³ Key players were Colonel James Cowan, Shirreff's Chief of Staff who had commanded the Black Watch Battlegroup when they deployed north to Fallujah, and Brigadier James Everard, the Commander of the 20th Armoured Brigade who were providing the bulk of the fighting troops for Shirreff's tour.

Behind these forces would come a surge, in two key forms. First a surge in 'Civil Military Operations', with improved security allowing reconstruction projects. Second was a surge to deal with the endemic, sectarian Iraqi policing problem: to 'cull the unredeemable and rehabilitate the 'just about salvageable'.⁷¹⁴ Underpinning this was a campaign of carefully-targeted strike operations against the most irreconcilable elements of JAM. Shirreff summed up the focus of SALAMANCA in a report back to PJHQ, where he wrote 'fundamental to my concept is the variable application ... of J3 (operations – kinetic if necessary), J7 (Security Sector Reform) and J9 (the integration of short, medium and long term projects) to ensure that the people of Basra perceive that the situation is getting better; very much the comprehensive approach'.⁷¹⁵ Overall, his 'aim is to colour Basra green by district in order to get to PIC'.⁷¹⁶

Key to Shirreff's plan was the massing of resources. To secure these he first dealt with the aspects directly under his control. As discussed earlier in this Part, he closed Camp Abu Naji in Amara early, which readers will recall he described as a 'tethered goat'.⁷¹⁷ He then sought to break MND(SE)'s standoffish relationship with the US command, and to seek resources directly from the Americans. Soon after his arrival in theatre he wrote to Chiarelli as Commander MNC-I and re-introduced himself as a subordinate Divisional-level commander within the US Corps structure. He pitched SALAMANCA to Chiarelli, arguing that it needed to be seen as part of a 'coherent Corps-level operation if we are to maximise effect'.⁷¹⁸ Prioritising his subordination to MNC-I over PJHQ, Shirreff asked Chiarelli for resources to enable the operation to take place. Chiarelli – sensing opportunity – leaned in and offered a US infantry battalion, attack helicopters, and Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS). He also offered significant reconstruction funds in the form of over \$80 million from his allocated USAID budget. For reasons I will outline later Shirreff had to refuse the offer of the US infantry battalion, but the remainder was accepted.

Finally, Shirreff turned to the hardest of audiences for additional resources: his own Government departments. He asked Houghton and Browne for more troops for SALAMANCA, and asked both DFID and the FCO for a surge in reconstruction and police mentoring effort. He met with very mixed

⁷¹⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 175.

⁷¹⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 127.

⁷¹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 127.

⁷¹⁷ This allowed Shirreff to release infantry capacity for SALAMANCA and relying instead on a mobile cavalry force to try (with little effect, as outlined in earlier sections) to secure the porous Iranian border. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 97.

⁷¹⁸ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 163.

results. Houghton and the MoD eventually agreed to reinforce MND(SE) with around 1,000 additional troops, but allocated for a strictly time-limited period from October 2006 to April 2007.⁷¹⁹ The response from the other Government Departments was wholly underwhelming. The FCO and DFID refused to commission new initiatives for SALAMANCA, eventually offering just \$10 million in extra funding; a meagre sum in comparison to the \$80 million gifted by Chiarelli.⁷²⁰ Shirreff found it very challenging to turn SALAMANCA into an exemplar of the so-called 'comprehensive approach'.

By August 2006 Shirreff had garnered together the forces he was able. Undeterred by shortfalls, he turned to the execution of SALAMANCA. Here, however, he hit a final and essentially terminal barrier: Maliki and the Iraqi Government. Initially Maliki had portrayed himself as a supporter of SALAMANCA.⁷²¹ Shirreff found, however, that all was not as it seemed. On 21 September, days before SALAMANCA was due to commence, Maliki intervened with General Casey (Commander MNF-I). 'The political situation in Basra needs to be dealt with quietly', Maliki told Casey, arguing that 'the security situation ... was not bad enough to warrant an operation that would upset the political balance'.⁷²² Maliki refused to sanction SALAMANCA, showing particular opposition to the intent for strike operations against the Sadrist militia leadership. This left Shirreff with little choice. With British strategy subordinate to the Iraqi Government, the position in London was clear. As recently as 15 September the Iraq Strategy Group had re-affirmed that SALAMANCA could not proceed without Maliki's approval.⁷²³ Under intense resource and time pressure, and in an uncertain political environment, Shirreff moved to make the most of a bad situation; redesigning SALAMANCA to a model more acceptable to Maliki's appetite.

And so Operation SINBAD was born. In just a few short days between the 16 and 23 September 2006, Shirreff's staff turned SALAMANCA (a security-focussed operation with reconstruction efforts)

⁷¹⁹ Shirreff was provided an additional infantry battalion and the Cyprus-based Theatre Reserve Battalion. The additional infantry battalion was the 1st Battalion, the Stafford Regiment who had only left Iraq less than a year before (an example of the shortfall in available British forces at the time). See Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 164.

⁷²⁰ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 164.

⁷²¹ Two months earlier, in June 2006, Maliki had declared a state of emergency in Basra and had agreed to a 'Basra Security Plan' (BSP) under Shirreff's predecessor, Major General Cooper. The BSP ostensibly included plans to 'remove the immunity and impunity that [the] Governor of Basra's patronage provides to assassination squads, target the rogue Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) leadership, and target and reform corrupt police agencies' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 26). Maliki established a five-member committee in Basra to help execute the plan, reporting directly to him, and Maliki assured the British Prime Minister himself this committee would be non-sectarian (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 104). According to Browne, Maliki 'expressed delight' on the planned approach of SALAMANCA when he was briefed, and assured that General Hamidi (the Iraqi commander in Basra) would report direct to him and not to the Governor of Basra, who was seen as deeply sectarian and highly compromised by Shi'a interest groups. On the face of it, it seemed that Maliki was a supporter of the SALAMANCA approach, including the planned Iraqi and MNF combined strike operations against the 'irreconcilable' elements of the Shi'a militias.

⁷²² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 183.

⁷²³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 171.

into SINBAD (a reconstruction operation enabled by a politically-constrained surge in security). The changes to the plan were significant. The planned Iraqi/British combined strike operations against the Shi'a militias were removed (although a British unilateral series of force-protection strikes, notably not briefed to Maliki, remained part of the plan). The surge in police mentoring remained, but decisive actions to excise the militia-linked, corrupt Specialist Crime Units (for example) would not; Shirreff's 'cull of the unredeemable' was too much for Maliki.⁷²⁴ SINBAD extended SALAMANCA from three months duration to six, to ease Maliki's concerns about the operation's aggressive nature. Shirreff flew himself and key members of the Basra Security Committee, including Major General Hamidi (the ISF commander in Basra), to Baghdad to brief the revised plan to Maliki alongside Casey. Maliki was persuaded, as long as it was Hamidi who commanded the operation and not Shirreff.⁷²⁵

Shirreff had done well under difficult circumstances, but he was clear on the implications. 'Be under no illusions', he wrote to PJHQ, 'SALAMANCA "lite" will not deliver the security conditions for PIC. The full implication of Gol [*Government of Iraq*] ... deciding that security in Basra is "good enough" and trying to impose constraints on MNF freedom of manoeuvre in the City will be de facto, unconditional PIC. This will leave Basra in the hands of the militant militia and death squads, with the ISF unable to impose, let alone maintain, the rule of law. Unable to draw down completely until the US effectively declare game over, we could find ourselves laagered up in Basra Air Station and effectively fixed outside a city in hostile hands. In my view, this does not constitute "good enough", either in endstate or in reputation terms for the UK Armed Forces'.⁷²⁶ His words were prescient of the exact situation the British found themselves in by 2008.

SINBAD commenced on 28 September 2006, a week later than planned. An estimated 2,300 Iraqi troops and 1,000 British soldiers took part in the operation, with another 2,000 Iraqi troops in reserve.⁷²⁷ The combined Iraqi and British force executed a series of 'pulses' through each of the sixteen Baswari districts. During the 'pulse' the district was locked down with patrols and check points. Simultaneously a surge in reconstruction effort took place; medical centres and schools were repainted, community areas rejuvenated, and drainage and sewage ditches were repaired. Local leaders were brought in to advise where reconstruction should concentrate, and young Basrawi men were employed to do the work. Immediately after the 'pulse' was a security 'pause', aimed to

⁷²⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 175.

⁷²⁵ For a thorough description of the evolution of SALAMANCA into SINBAD, see Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 167.

⁷²⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 184.

⁷²⁷ Ministry of Defence, *Analysis from a Land Perspective*, p. 68.

consolidate the gains of the initial phase. But herein lay the issue. There were simply not enough soldiers, either Iraqi or British, to hold in each district and therefore the 'pause' was mostly left to the local police who were, in general, sectarian and compromised by the militias. Each 'pulse' made a marked difference, but the absence of persistent mass in the 'pause' drained away the long-term impact.⁷²⁸

The militias contested SINBAD energetically. British and Iraqi troops were heavily targeted with sniper fire and IEDs from the first day of the operation. The JAM and Iranian-backed 'Special Groups' took full advantage of the reduced force levels during each 'pause' phase, attacking police mentoring visits and intimidating local leaders from working with the British and Iraqi armies. They also mounted an intense indirect fire campaign against British bases. Basra was statistically well-known for its comparatively low violence levels, but for the period of SINBAD British bases stood out as the most rocketed in the whole country. Over 1,200 rockets and mortar rounds were fired at Basra Palace alone between September 2006 and the end of SINBAD in May 2007. Here the British paid a hard price for the shortage of UAVs and helicopter air-cover. There were no deaths from these attacks, but casualties were many and the psychological impact on both uniform and (as we will see below) 'Other Government Agencies' was high.⁷²⁹

The militias contested the operation directly on the ground as well, and by January 2007 over half of all British patrols taking place for SINBAD ended with an exchange of fire with the enemy. Here, tragically, there was a heavy physical cost. Forty-six British soldiers were killed during SINBAD and 350 wounded, to say nothing of the unrecorded losses in the ISF. The militias also paid a heavy bill. Three hundred and forty militiamen were confirmed to have been killed during the operation. In addition, 139 arrests were made in fifty-six unilateral UK strike operations, with seventy-five important JAM members confirmed as detained.⁷³⁰

SINBAD ended in May 2007, with questionable outcomes. In most ways the operation failed to meet its ambitious aims. The British Army's own 'Operations in Iraq: Analysis from a Land Perspective' study concludes that, 'Op SINBAD did not achieve the results originally intended ... it did not change the political situation in Basra, nor did it increase the appetite of PM Maliki to confront Shi'a militias'.⁷³¹ Marston, who was in Iraq during SINBAD, records that, 'it was clear that SINBAD was not

⁷²⁸ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, pp. 168 - 169.

⁷²⁹ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 169.

⁷³⁰ Ministry of Defence, *Analysis from a Land Perspective*, p. 68.

⁷³¹ Ministry of Defence, *Analysis from a Land Perspective*, p. 68.

a success, due to lack of resources and issues with the ISF'.⁷³² Even Maciejewski, who commanded a Battlegroup in SINBAD, concludes that 'Operation SINBAD ... ultimately fell well short of its declared objectives to subjugate the militias to the rule of law and bring adequate stability to Basra. It could for this reason be judged a failure'.⁷³³

But one can also argue that SINBAD did have benefits, albeit indirect and vicarious. The British Army campaign study considers that SINBAD 'did have an effect on the Iraqi Army', in terms of both their confidence and their professionalism.⁷³⁴ Maciejewski also argues for this positive impact. By the end of SINBAD, he states, 'the Iraqis were ready to take responsibility for security, believing that the militia would be reluctant to confront them, as they had shown during the closing stages of Operation Sinbad'. Maciejewski particularly argues that SINBAD 'challenged the perception of [JAM] invulnerability that had grown during the previous three years', thereby giving the ISF – and indeed the people of Basra – the confidence to challenge the militias in the months to come.⁷³⁵ Overall, however, it is difficult to argue that these gains (indirect and unintended as they were) were instrumental from the intentions of SALAMANCA/SINBAD. The operation was not what it sought to be.

Operation SALAMANCA/SINBAD provides a suitable vignette to examine the net impact of the influences outlined so far through this Part. Shirreff's bold plan represented a genuine attempt to break the morass of British strategy in 2006, perhaps the most ambitious tactical/operational intention since 2003 and one that sought to achieve strategic effect. It fell afoul, however, of three combined crises. The crises were, respectively: a crisis of resources; a crisis of perspectives; and, a crisis of strategic subordination.

A Crisis of Resources: Whole of Government Parsimony and the Shadow of Helmand. SALAMANCA fundamentally lacked the resources to achieve its outcomes. This was the case for British, Coalition and Iraqi Army perspectives. In terms of British troops, the strategic context for force-levels during SALAMANCA was actually set in March 2006 (before Shirreff arrived in theatre) with the announcement to Parliament that UK force levels in Iraq would be reduced from 8,000 to 7,200 from

⁷³² Marston, *Operation TELIC VIII to XI*, p. 71.

⁷³³ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 172.

⁷³⁴ Ministry of Defence, *Analysis from a Land Perspective*, p. 68.

⁷³⁵ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, pp. 171 - 174. It is also worth noting that in the aftermath of SINBAD two Iraqi Army battalions from the 10th Division deployed to Baghdad, mentored by British troops, in support of the 'surge'. They reportedly performed very well, but PJHQ's concerns around the risk of mentoring persisted and this success was not exploited. See Ripley, *Operation Telic*, Loc Cit 9095 and Daniel Marston, 'Adaptation in the Field: the British Army's Difficult Campaign in Iraq', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn 2010), pp. 71 – 84.

the May 2006 rotation.⁷³⁶ This announcement, the first of the drawdown milestones from the 2005 DOP(I) 'Operational Transition in Iraq' paper⁷³⁷, placed the 3rd UK Division deployment firmly on a reduction pathway from the outset: especially as these reductions had already been delayed from late 2005.⁷³⁸ Shirreff, who needed more forces for SALAMANCA, was sailing firmly against London's strategic winds.

The 'Helmand Decision', executed simultaneously to Shirreff's operation, then undercut any possibility for strategic flexibility. The 16th Air Assault Brigade deployed to Helmand in April 2006, and the decision to 'charge' was being taken in May, at the same time as Shirreff's alarmist reconnaissance reports were arriving on Houghton's desk. The dates show that Houghton would have been reading Shirreff's words just at the same time as hearing the alarm bells from Butler in Afghanistan, who was seeking a 30% uplift of air and aviation capability in Helmand. This may have been the source of Houghton's nervousness around Shirreff's evident bullishness, and his direction to avoid 'unnecessary displays of military testosterone in Basra'.⁷³⁹ Houghton had the unpredictability of two wars to grapple with.

By August 2006, when Shirreff was garnering his forces for SALAMANCA, Browne, Stirrup and Houghton had already been required to surge a battalion of infantry and engineers into Helmand to provide Butler with some semblance of manoeuvre.⁷⁴⁰ The shortfall in combat troops was not temporary, but rather deeply institutional. In July 2004 the MoD had endorsed a Defence Review entitled *Future Capabilities*, which had cut the British Army (upon whom the weight of land operations in Iraq and Afghanistan predominately fell) from 108,500 to 102,000. This ultimately resulted in a reduction of four infantry battalions, a reduction that took place in mid-2006, just at the time when assumptions were failing and the dual pressures in Iraq and Afghanistan were mounting.⁷⁴¹ The fact that these cuts were persisted with, despite the two ongoing campaigns, shows just how disconnected London had become from the realities of war. Even if Houghton had been bold enough to seek a change in strategic direction in Iraq, and even if Stirrup and Browne had been willing to support it, the dual pressures of Helmand and cuts meant they had little left to give.

⁷³⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 602.

⁷³⁷ Minute CJO to COSSEC, 22 June 2005, 'Op Telic: Operational Transition in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

⁷³⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 411.

⁷³⁹ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 163 and Urban, *Task Force Black*, p. 188.

⁷⁴⁰ House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report', p. 196 and p. 239.

⁷⁴¹ See Defence Committee, 'Future Capabilities', Fourth Report of Session 2004 – 2005 found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

The provision of the additional 1000 troops to Shirreff, even for a strictly time limited basis, was all that could be made available.

The US-led Coalition could have eased Shirreff's crisis of resources, but here he fell afoul of British pride, politics, and a fear of reciprocal commitment. The steady isolation of the 'British fiefdom in the South' by both the UK and US is well evidenced⁷⁴²; but Chiarelli was more than willing to seek to break that status quo when Shirreff approach him for support. Chiarelli viewed Maliki's election as a serious catalyst for sectarian violence in Iraq⁷⁴³, and he was aware that southern Iraq was playing an increasingly critical role as Maliki's powerbase. Chiarelli, and his superior Casey, had previously expressed considerable discomfort at the UK approach in the south. To Chiarelli, Shirreff's desire to see MND(SE) as an intrinsic part of Chiarelli's Corps was a breath of fresh air (Shirreff recalls that his 'reaction was very positive'⁷⁴⁴). Chiarelli's rapid offer of significant US forces was reflective of the opportunity he saw in both SALAMANCA and Shirreff's approach.

But the most tangible support of the US infantry battalion was not to be. Shirreff had to defer to the MoD on such a consequential decision as US 'boots on the ground' in Basra, and the answer was 'no'. Houghton asked Stirrup at a Chiefs of Staff meeting on 2 August 2006 for direction on the extent to which US capabilities could be used for SALAMANCA. The direction was that while US 'enablers' (such as aviation and ISR) could be used for SALAMANCA, the major commitments had to be met by existing MND(SE) forces. CDS's view of the relationship between the south and the rest of Iraq was clear. Any consideration of sharing forces between AOs 'crossed a clear policy 'red line' and seemed counter-intuitive ... the UK needed to draw down its force levels as soon as practicable'.⁷⁴⁵

There was also no real Iraqi military solution, thanks to the low prioritisation of southern Iraq by both the Iraqis and MNC-I. The 10th (Iraqi Army) Division, based in Basra, was the lowest of priorities for the Iraqi Ministry of Defence – and for the Coalition. The Division was insufficiently resourced and poorly led. It consisted in 2006 of only a single field Brigade, which had just two undermanned

⁷⁴² As outlined earlier in the works of Richard Iron and Julian Maciejewski.

⁷⁴³ Recall Charelli's comment 'Samarra was an accelerator ... but nothing near Maliki coming into power' (see SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 277).

⁷⁴⁴ Transcript of Public Hearing, Lt Gen Shirreff, 11 January 2010, p. 16 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 22).

⁷⁴⁵ It was perhaps unfortunate for Shirreff that the consideration of US forces for SALAMANCA was conducted at the same time as a scoping request from the Americans for UK forces to potentially deploy to MND (Centre South) (MND (CS)) to relieve pressure being applied by the fight in Baghdad. It is not clear whether the one topic was intrinsically linked to the other, or whether it was coincidence: but with the risk of reciprocal escalation firmly in the face of Stirrup and the Chiefs of Staff, the outcome was clear. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 118 - 120.

battalions. Overall, there were only four Iraqi companies routinely available in Basra at any given time; barely double Shirreff's own 'thirteen multiples' (around 200 troops). In a letter to the Prime Minister, sent in November 2006 during SALAMANCA, the MoD affirmed that the 10th Division were 'consistently placed at the bottom of the prioritisation list by Baghdad due to the perceived low threat in Southern Iraq. As a result, they are potentially outgunned by insurgents and remain vulnerable'.⁷⁴⁶ Issues came to a head in August 2006, just as Shirreff was massing forces for SALAMANCA, when elements of the 10th Division mutinied against orders to deploy to Baghdad.⁷⁴⁷ While Shirreff was able to ensure he had an Iraqi face to SALAMANCA/SINBAD, he could by no means rely on Iraqis mass. Only 2,300 Iraqi troops took part in the operation, only just over double the already conservative UK numbers.⁷⁴⁸ Thanks to Maliki's veto, there was no appetite for an Iraqi military surge into Basra.

Shirreff's crisis of military resources was bad, but it was nothing compared to his crisis in two more esoteric areas: civilian reconstruction capacity, and political support from Whitehall. Civilian/military effort was at the heart of Shirreff's design for SALAMANCA. Shirreff wanted the operation 'to be an exemplar of the ... Comprehensive Approach. This was not achieved because, however well-conceived and compelling the theory of the Comprehensive Approach was, it did not have significant bureaucratic traction across Whitehall'.⁷⁴⁹ SALAMANCA/SINBAD was already starting on a low ebb in terms of civilian support. The planned pre-SALAMANCA expenditure for civilian reconstruction within the so-called 'Better Basra Plan' for the financial year 2006 to 2007 was only £30.7 million; an amount that, as Browne highlighted to Blair in mid-July 2006, was 'a relatively small sum given the strategic importance of Basra'.⁷⁵⁰ Beckett at the FCO and Hilary Benn (then the International Development Secretary) pushed back against increasing this expenditure for SALAMANCA.⁷⁵¹ The MoD did try to engage these other government departments in taking the opportunity to surge. Browne wrote to Benn to highlight the opportunities SALAMANCA presented for civil development efforts. 'It should create an opportunity', he wrote, 'for other government departments to deliver on the medium-term and capacity-building initiatives'.⁷⁵²

This request fell firmly on deaf ears. There is no evidence of a recognition of the opportunity for a civilian 'surge' to match the military effort in SALAMANCA. Funding for the Basra PRT is a case in

⁷⁴⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 12.1, para 1262.

⁷⁴⁷ Ministry of Defence, *Analysis from a Land Perspective*, p. 72.

⁷⁴⁸ Ministry of Defence, *Analysis from a Land Perspective*, p. 68.

⁷⁴⁹ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 158.

⁷⁵⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 47.

⁷⁵¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 53.

⁷⁵² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 152.

point. A 2006 Defence Committee report found that UK agencies were providing no funding at all to the Basra PRT, despite it being a co-sponsored project of DFID, the FCO, and the MoD. The PRT was instead entirely reliant on US funding. The International Development Act of 2002 (as described in Part Two) continued to fundamentally constrain any considerations of a potential 'surge' into Iraq, with the Defence Committee noting that DIFD 'must spend 90% of its money in poor countries, and 10% in others'. Iraq was not deemed a 'poor country'.⁷⁵³

The willingness of Whitehall to spend political capital on SALAMANCA was also limited. Shirreff recognised the political risk for Maliki's Government inherent in SALAMANCA, and was clear on what he needed. He reported early in planning that it would be 'fundamental to ensure that, behind any operation, there would be political will in Baghdad'.⁷⁵⁴ Shirreff sought support at multiple levels to achieve this; Ambassadorial, Ministerial, and even Prime Ministerial. He sought the help of both William Patey and Dominic Asquith, successive British Ambassadors to Iraq, to garner support in Baghdad.⁷⁵⁵ Soon he up-gunned to the Defence Secretary, with a missive from the MoD to Browne in August 2006 stating that 'a key ingredient in the operation will be PM Maliki's support for operations against rogue elements of the JAM. To this end, Secretary of State is requested to discuss this point with Maliki during his visit, highlighting the need for [Maliki's] concurrence and active support'.⁷⁵⁶ Browne did as he was asked, discussing SALAMANCA with Maliki when he visited Iraq from 27 – 29 August (an engagement where Maliki 'expressed delight' around the ideas).⁷⁵⁷ The Prime Minister had already supported this narrative when Maliki visited London in July 2006, reinforcing that 'action had to be taken against the death squads, and a clear political signal given to the ISF that they should go after them with all necessary means'.⁷⁵⁸

Even this modest investment of capital was ineffective. The reality was that UK politicians had little strategic currency with which to move Maliki on SALAMANCA: the UK provided little military capability, invested minimal civilian funds in the country, and increasingly held few levers with the US. Maliki had his own suspicions of the British, rooted in Iraqi history. Could the British have invested more political currency on behalf of Shirreff? Perhaps, but political currency in Iraq in 2006 rested heavily on tangible, physical investments. By failing to invest in the physical, the British undermined their ability to invest in the political. Ultimately Maliki felt comfortable to tell the British

⁷⁵³ House of Commons Defence Committee, 'UK Operations in Iraq, Thirteenth Report of Session 2005-06' (House of Commons: London, 2006), p. 17.

⁷⁵⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 99.

⁷⁵⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 99.

⁷⁵⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 137.

⁷⁵⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 140.

⁷⁵⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 103.

one thing while doing another. Underinvested and nearing strategic bankruptcy in the country, there was little Patey, Asquith, Browne and even Blair could do about it.

A Crisis of Perspectives: the ‘New Guard’ and the ‘Law of Diminishing Returns’. The second crisis Shirreff faced was less tangible, but just as influential; a crisis of perspectives borne of the 2006 ‘changing of the guard’. This ‘new guard’, less tied to the genesis of the war, arrived into senior roles with a different set of perspectives. At the heart of this was an embedded idea that the presence of British troops in Iraq was increasingly without military value, and that the British soldiers were as much part of the problem as they were a solution. The injection of the ‘big idea’ of the ‘law of diminishing returns’ had serious implications for Shirreff and SALAMANCA, and it was an idea that persisted heavily in the British reaction to the US ‘surge’ in 2007.

The central proponent of the ‘law of diminishing returns’ was Stirrup as the new CDS. Indeed (as we have seen) it was Stirrup who first coined the phrase, writing in May 2006 that the ‘law of diminishing returns is now firmly in play’. This was not just minor word play but was in fact a defining feature of his strategic approach to the Iraq campaign. It was ‘for these reasons, and for reasons of momentum’, he wrote, that ‘I judge that we should press on’ with plans to reduce force levels.⁷⁵⁹ This perspective heavily coloured Stirrup’s views around SALAMANCA. It provides an explanation as to why he pushed back so strongly to the acceptance of US ground forces in MND(SE) for SALAMANCA. With the ‘law of diminishing returns’ in place, it made no sense to blur the strategic lines with the Americans.

When SALAMANCA became SINBAD, Stirrup doubled down on this perspective. ‘Once [SINBAD] had concluded’, he reported to Blair, ‘we would have done as much as we judged militarily possible in Basra’.⁷⁶⁰ For Stirrup the best option, indeed the only option he countenanced, was the withdrawal of British troops from the equation. By May 2007 Stirrup was using this thesis as the logic behind privately recommending a precipitous withdrawal of British troops, from 4,500 to no more than 500 by the end of the year.⁷⁶¹ Stirrup’s view was influential. Sir Nigel Sheinwald stated in a private letter to Blair in May 2007 that ‘I found [Stirrup’s] overall thesis persuasive. It would be virtually impossible for UK Ministers to ask the Army to stay in significant numbers in Basra if the advice from the Chiefs is that there is no militarily useful mission to conduct – the risks are just too high’.⁷⁶² There is no

⁷⁵⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 712.

⁷⁶⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 263.

⁷⁶¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 781.

⁷⁶² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 782.

evidence that Stirrup ever challenged or changed this perspective, privately or in public. The ‘law of diminishing returns’ was a defining feature in his personal strategic approach.

With this in mind, it is interesting to ask why Stirrup supported SALAMANCA/SINBAD at all. He did at least provide limited support for the concept. He told Christopher Elliott, the author of *High Command*, that he ‘supported the approach [he] had discussed with Richard [Shirreff] just after [Stirrup] took over as CDS, and just before he [Shirreff] deployed’.⁷⁶³ He continued that support just enough for the operation to be taken to limited execution. In the days before SALAMANCA became SINBAD he wrote to Browne to report that ‘as briefed to you, SALAMANCA was a good plan’.⁷⁶⁴ The answer seems likely that Stirrup was more interested in the narrative of SALAMANCA, rather than the operational intent itself. Stirrup saw SALAMANCA as a tool to make a decisive step in the ‘story’ towards PIC: a last British push prior to stepping into overwatch. The actual outcome was immaterial; it was just important that an operation took place that justified British withdrawal.

Stirrup inferred as much to Browne when Maliki intervened at the eleventh hour, stating that ‘from a force structure perspective the aftermath of SALAMANCA might look pretty much the same, succeed or fail’.⁷⁶⁵ This was a narrative that landed comfortably in London. Houghton as CJO is reported by Maciejewski to have referred to SINBAD as ‘Operation SPINBAD’⁷⁶⁶, and by January 2007 the Iraq Strategy Group were considering how to use SINBAD (succeed or fail) as part of a narrative to the US that the UK had already ‘surged’ in Basra, despite there being limited uplift in resources, funding and outcomes.⁷⁶⁷ Shirreff’s complaints that London was seeking ‘an exit strategy, rather than a winning strategy’ are certainly reinforced here.⁷⁶⁸

As with the crisis of resources, the crisis of perspectives extended deep into the civilian branches of Government. Beckett as the incoming Foreign Secretary in 2006, another of the ‘new guard’, was one of the most prominent concerns. Beckett had no background in the Iraq war. While she had been supportive as a Cabinet Minister in March 2003⁷⁶⁹, she played no major role in the decision to invade itself and came to the Foreign Office with no previous experience in international politics or

⁷⁶³ Elliott, *High Command*, p. 115.

⁷⁶⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 185.

⁷⁶⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 188.

⁷⁶⁶ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair’s Wars*, p. 163.

⁷⁶⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 373.

⁷⁶⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 444.

⁷⁶⁹ Alistair Campbell recorded in his diary that during a Cabinet meeting on 27 Feb 2003, Beckett ‘made a very strong intervention ... she was a really useful barometer and she was very supportive’. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 3.7, para 817.

defence issues.⁷⁷⁰ Events then conspired to prevent her from taking any form of interest in Iraq when she was appointed in May 2006, with the immediate emergence of the July 2006 Iranian nuclear-enrichment crisis.⁷⁷¹

This crisis absorbed all of Beckett's bandwidth in her first six months as the Foreign Secretary. She confirmed as much to the Inquiry. 'In the early days of my time in the office, the immediate priority, or course, was Iran ... I was appointed on the Friday, and on the Monday I was in New York or Washington, talking about Iran, nuclear negotiations ... so, for me, there were a whole lot of other things going on which were requiring my attention'.⁷⁷² The lack of time for her to engage in the 2006 issues in Iraq is a problem she returns to at the end of her evidence. '[Iraq] was an underlying and very serious thread through all the time I was in the Foreign Office, but I am afraid quite a lot of the time there were things that were more urgent and more desperate to deal with'.⁷⁷³

This lack of engagement was clearly reflected in the Foreign Office output in 2006, and not in a way that benefitted Shirreff. On 18 October 2006, in a somewhat remarkable illumination of a lack of strategic thinking on Iraq in the FCO, Browne wrote to Beckett to highlight the challenges he faced in the campaign. 'It is difficult', he wrote in bold text, 'to plan the medium to long term force posture (and wider security relationship) [in Iraq] without a clearer sense of the UK's medium to long term foreign policy interests in Iraq. I look to the FCO, supported by DFID, to lead such a discussion including detailed plans for engagement over the medium term'.⁷⁷⁴ There is no evidence that Beckett responded to this call for strategic clarity.⁷⁷⁵ Coming back to Strachan's question of 'who thinks about strategy' in Iraq, it seems that in the FCO no one was.

Indeed Beckett was responsible for only one bold decision on Iraq in that year; one that significantly undermined Shirreff's plans for a 'comprehensive approach'. This was the decision to withdraw all

⁷⁷⁰ See the New Statesmen, *Interview with Margaret Beckett*, 18 December 2006, found at [link](#) (accessed 27 Apr 23).

⁷⁷¹ On her arrival in post, Beckett immediately stepped into the declaration by the UN of a crisis around the failures of Iran to be transparent in inspections of their nuclear weapons program, a crisis that led to a 31 July 2006 demand by the UN that Iran suspend all uranium-enrichment activities, and then a decision on 23 December 2006 by the UN to apply sanctions to Iran for the first time. See United Nations Security Council Press Release, *Security Council Imposes Sanctions on Iran for Failure to Halt Uranium Enrichment, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1737 (2006)* found at [link](#) (accessed 27 Apr 23).

⁷⁷² Transcript of Public Hearing, Rt Hon Margaret Beckett, 26 Jan 2010, p.5 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 22).

⁷⁷³ Transcript of Public Hearing, Rt Hon Margaret Beckett, 26 Jan 2010, p.55 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 22). It is worth noting that Beckett's oral evidence, when taken in reasonable comparison to others, portrays a shallow knowledge of the events of the period within Iraq.

⁷⁷⁴ Letter Browne to Beckett, 18 October 2006, 'DOP(I) 20 Oct: Medium Term Paper' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 23).

⁷⁷⁵ There is no available evidence to suggest that Beckett considered any proposals for a surge of funds or effort from the FCO in 2006.

civilian staff from Basra Palace at the height of SINBAD, following a spike in IDF attacks.⁷⁷⁶ The decision – taken without consultation – was a disaster for Shirreff and the MoD, given SINBAD was in full flow and on a knife’s edge of perceptions of success or failure. The impact on the ‘comprehensive approach’ of the civilian withdrawal was immediate, with a reduction in prisons and police mentoring, and impacts to reconstruction work.⁷⁷⁷ The coalition view in Baghdad was even more damaging, with General Lamb highlighting the negative perceptions with the US⁷⁷⁸, and reminding that what happens in Basra now echoed in Baghdad. ‘168 days ago, it may have mattered less’, he reminded London, ‘but the moment we gained a Shi’a Prime Minister, the profile of our “independence” down south changed inexorably. Our actions now have a direct relationship with those in Baghdad ... our performance was hardly a “comprehensive approach” and was, I felt, rather un-British’.⁷⁷⁹

The decision to withdraw the civilian staff from Basra Palace was Beckett’s to make. But she made it based on a perception that Iraq was not prominent in her portfolio, and that the risks to her staff outweighed any impact their withdrawal might have on strategy. She did not see it as a major decision. She personally attended DOP(I) with Blair the day before the withdrawal, but she made no reference to her decision to withdraw her staff. She did not invest significant time weighing the strategic risks; she recalls nothing more than a ‘long conversation’ with Sir Michael Jay on the topic.⁷⁸⁰ It is of note, and I will return to this later on page 234, that even the Prime Minister’s office gave her no reason for pause. As soon as McDonald announced the decision to withdraw the staff,

⁷⁷⁶ The initial weeks of the operation saw a spike in IDF attacks against Basra Palace. Shirreff reported these as a ‘tactical nuisance’ and ‘not a showstopper’ (which was probably accurate), but the psychological effect on the civilian presence in the Palace was high (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 317). After a US contractor was killed on 23 September 2006, the Foreign Secretary’s office sent a security assessments team to assess the risk of the attacks to civilian staff. In a conclusion that Beckett admits was ‘not totally shared by the people on the ground’, the team recommended that all civilian staff be withdrawn (see transcript of Public Hearing, Rt Hon Margaret Beckett, 26 Jan 2010, p. 7 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 22)). Hasty discussions between Beckett and Sir Michael Jay (Permanent Undersecretary at the FCO) rapidly led to a decision, and on 27 October 2006 Simon McDonald, the FCO’s Director for Iraq (and later Gordon Brown’s Foreign Policy Advisor) announced to the Iraq Strategy Group that Mrs Beckett had ordered the withdrawal of almost all civilian staff (less the Consul General and a small team) from Basra Palace to Basra Air Station, located well outside of the city (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 239).

⁷⁷⁷ Shirreff’s Chief of Staff in MND(SE) wrote on 2 November that the civilian withdrawal had ‘come as a surprise’ to the Division, and was expected to have a dangerous impact on police and prisons mentoring, and long-term reconstruction work as a result of the ‘haste by which the PRT had been evacuated’. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 251.

⁷⁷⁸ On 5 November General Lamb wrote to London that ‘while I understand but do not necessarily agree with the reasons for the relocation [of the PRT and FCO staff], the interpretation up here was that the case, haste and timing was unhelpful ... US comments such as ‘I see the Brits are doing their own thing again’ from both the military and Embassy do count in a coalition where our currency for making change is often our opinion’. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 255.

⁷⁷⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 255.

⁷⁸⁰ Transcript of Public Hearing, Rt Hon Margaret Beckett, 26 Jan 2010, p. 8 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 22).

Sheinwald confirmed that Blair would be 'content to accept Mrs Beckett's judgement on the matter'.⁷⁸¹ This is despite Sheinwald warning the Prime Minister later that same day that 'this move is likely to be seen as a victory by those attacking us'.⁷⁸² Blair's failure to step in, or to perceive the risk, is solid evidence of how much his influence was waning by late-2006.

Overall, the perceptions of the 'new guard', exemplified by Stirrup and Beckett, created a crisis for Shirreff and his plans for SALAMANCA/SINBAD. The 'new guard' were far less personally invested in Iraq, and held perceptions tarnished by the status of the campaign. The characterisation of Iraq as the 'bad war' weighed heavily, as did the momentum towards withdrawal. For Stirrup, this manifested in the 'big idea' of the 'law of diminishing returns'; a concept that heavily influenced his approach as CDS. Beckett, like Browne, arrived into her role with no experience and straight into a nuclear proliferation crisis and, as such, Iraq found itself low on her list of priorities. She had no impetus to make bold surge decisions on Iraq, as Shirreff sought from the FCO, and indeed she was guided heavily by the trend towards withdrawal. This was not an environment conducive to Shirreff's attempts to turn an 'exit strategy' into a 'winning strategy'.

A Crisis of Strategic Subordination: Maliki, Casey and the Veto on SALAMANCA. The third and final crisis that Shirreff experienced was one of strategic subordination, and this crisis was perhaps the most impactful. As already discussed in Part Two, the British Government's policy of liberal internationalism placed the sovereignty of the elected Iraqi Government in primacy. As a result of this, Shirreff found himself firmly entangled in Iraqi sectarian politics as he sought to execute SALAMANCA. It did not make for a smooth operating environment.

Shirreff can be forgiven for assuming at the outset that the Iraqi political conditions for SALAMANCA were at least relatively sound, and that Maliki would be supportive (see footnote).⁷⁸³ But, like many things in Iraq, there were also clear indications that all might not be as it seemed. In his 'valedictory

⁷⁸¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 240.

⁷⁸² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 242.

⁷⁸³ As described in the introduction to Part Three, by June 2006 Prime Minister Maliki was concerned enough about the security situation in Basra to formally declare a 'State of Emergency', and to establish a Basra Security Committee (independent of the seemingly-untrustworthy Provincial Council). Led by the relatively capable Iraqi General Hamidi, the Security Committee had the responsibility for delivering the Basra Security Plan, launched by Maliki as the sister project to the Baghdad Security Plan (which was encapsulated in the ultimately-unsuccessful *Ma'an ila Al'Amam* or *Together Forward* operations). In July 2006 Maliki sought to reassure Blair during a personal visit to London that he was committed to dealing with the militia problem in Basra, stating firmly that 'the committee he had established to take forward the security plan [in Basra] was reporting directly to him, and he denied that it was sectarian in its approach'. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 104.

telegram'⁷⁸⁴ in mid-July 2006, William Patey cautioned against being too bold in national approach, lest the politics be wrong. 'We need to be careful', he wrote, 'to avoid the impression that we are ready to take on Shi'a militias in order to restore Sunni dominance ... our efforts must be in support of a clear Iraqi Government strategy and we should avoid getting into a position where we are seen to be confronting the militias alone'.⁷⁸⁵ Maliki echoed similar concerns to Browne, stating that while he was committed to dealing with the militias 'his machinery of government was not always capable of delivering that, and he had the additional problem ... that the Provincial Council in Basra ... did not function properly on occasions'.⁷⁸⁶ Maliki made the noises of being committed, but he was always careful to caveat his enthusiasm.

These concerns were echoed in late August 2006 by the JIC, who wrote that 'Iraqi political commitment for more vigorous action – against JAM in particular – is uncertain ... We judge Maliki is ... unable to confront the militias, fearing a violent backlash that would threaten the break-up of the Shi'a political coalition (the UIA)'.⁷⁸⁷ This reporting, which came the day before Browne considered Shirreff's request for an uplift of troops for SALAMANCA, made the scale of the political challenge clear.

There were also few signs in mid-2006 that a pathway through these political challenges could be found. Maliki's reticence to apply a heavy hand to the Shi'a militias was not whimsical. It was instead grounded in intractable Iraqi political issues. Federalism, revisions to the de-Ba'athification laws, the dispersal of Iraq's oil revenues, and the role of religion in society all remained unresolved in 2006. These issues had 'the potential to capsize the Government'.⁷⁸⁸ For Maliki this meant that sustaining his political support base was key. When you recall that 70 – 90% of the voters who supported the UIA (and therefore underwrote Maliki's election) were Shi'a living within the four provinces of the British AO, it is clear why Maliki was hesitant to play a firm hand against the Shi'a militias in 2006.⁷⁸⁹ As Patey wrote in July 2006, 'Maliki knows he must reduce and eventually eliminate the power of the militias but does not feel he has sufficient forces at his disposal or cover

⁷⁸⁴ These 'vaedictory telegrams' are a strange and often notable output of the Foreign Office, in that they routinely offer a far more honest opinion of the situation than normal telegrams, stripped of all the nuance that seem to colour the opinions sent by diplomats during their posts.

⁷⁸⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 91 – 92.

⁷⁸⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 90.

⁷⁸⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 134.

⁷⁸⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 202 – 204.

⁷⁸⁹ To re-quote Colonel Mansoor, 'to stem the civil strife in Iraq, Maliki needed to rein in the Shi'a militias, but the two largest groupings, the Jaysh al'Mahdi and the Badr Organisation, belonged to parties (SCIRI and the Office of the Martyr Sadr, or OMS) that formed the core of his political support'. See Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 30.

within his own political circles to do so while terrorism and the insurgency show no signs of abating ... we are in a catch-22'.⁷⁹⁰

This 'catch 22' ultimately undermined Shirreff's plans, nearly terminally. The canny Maliki played his cards with the British well, aware of UK deference to Iraqi sovereignty. He worked to limit the effectiveness of planned operations, insisting that the dire Iraqi police lead on arrests.⁷⁹¹ He blamed his immature and ineffective Government, and especially the Basra Provincial Council.⁷⁹² Ultimately Maliki was confident enough in his position to then specifically block British plans on the very eve of SALAMANCA, believing that his relationship with Casey would be sufficient to outweigh British protests.⁷⁹³

Maliki's confidence was well-founded. Casey and MNF-I were facing multiple crises in Baghdad and the belts, and Maliki rightly deduced that it was not within Casey's appetite to push back hard when Maliki vetoed SALAMANCA on the 20 September 2006. Casey had far more pressing battles to fight. Maliki also correctly identified that the British would not countermand his orders.⁷⁹⁴ But perhaps most importantly, Maliki's confidence that he could veto SALAMANCA was based on the sheer limitations in strategic currency that the British held at the time. There were simply no levers for the UK to push.⁷⁹⁵

One of Shirreff's greatest frustrations, however, was that the British Government did not try. Shirreff instead had to turn to Casey to lobby on his behalf to salvage what was left of SALAMANCA after Maliki's veto. It was Casey who led in Baghdad to present the repackaged Operation SINBAD. It was also Casey who flew to Basra to reassure a nervous General Hamidi, and to persuade him to execute SINBAD. Shirreff would later relay that Casey 'played a blinder on behalf of the British'. While

⁷⁹⁰ eGram 31514/06 Patey to FCO London, 'Iraq: Valedictory', 20 July 2006 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 23).

⁷⁹¹ Maliki was careful to reinforce 'the importance of strengthening the ISF so that arrests were made by Iraqi, not British, forces', well aware that such an approach limited the overall effectiveness of operations given that 'the police force was hopelessly corrupt' and Iraqi force levels in the south were highly limited given the prioritisation of Baghdad. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 104.

⁷⁹² Recall Maliki's claim to Blair that his 'machinery of government was not always capable of delivering'. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 90.

⁷⁹³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 182.

⁷⁹⁴ Recall that on 15 September 2006, the Iraq Strategy Group 'were reminded that Prime Minister Maliki had yet to endorse the [Op SALAMANCA] plan and agreed that it could not proceed without his approval' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 171).

⁷⁹⁵ By 2006 UK force levels were low, commitment of reconstruction and development funds were low, and political 'skin in the game' was also minimal: the British had few strategic levers they might apply to change Maliki's approach, and little appetite to wield these levers at all. If Maliki wanted to veto SALAMANCA, there was little the British could do, strategically or morally, to push him to change his mind.

Shirreff acknowledged that Asquith had played an important role in securing support in Baghdad, he believed that British ministers in London had done ‘absolutely nothing’ to set the political conditions for SALAMANCA/SINBAD. The Americans had to do it instead.⁷⁹⁶

Overall, Operation SALAMANCA/SINBAD tells a cautionary tale of just how challenging the strategic environment was in southern Iraq in 2006. Shirreff’s decision to design SALAMANCA was motivated by his desire to salvage what he saw as a disastrous outcome for the British military. He believed that, in just a few short months, he could wrestle an ‘exit strategy’ into a ‘winning strategy’, a view seemingly grounded in sheer self-confidence in his own strength of character. But to do this he had to make a series of bold assumptions about what could be achieved: in terms of force levels, politics, and perceptions.

Shirreff underestimated the deleterious state of his strategic environment, and (as had been done so many times before) his early assumptions were poor. It is hard to understand, for example, why Shirreff was so optimistic he could secure additional forces for SALAMANCA. The resource challenges described above were foreseeable. Shirreff could not have foreseen, however, what was happening in Helmand: how much the wider strategic ground was shifting under his feet. He could not have predicted the wholesale change of British decision-makers (and therefore perspectives) that took place in early 2006. And, given his lack of experience in Iraq, he could not have foreseen just how much the election of Maliki would change the role of the south in Iraqi politics. The UK’s freshly-established ‘second subordination’ to the Iraqi Government was ultimately Shirreff’s nemesis.

The final scorecard for SINBAD remains mixed. As mentioned above, some have sought to cast the outcomes, perhaps a little vicariously, as a major step in the assertion of Iraqi sovereignty.⁷⁹⁷ Others, however, cite SALAMANCA/SINBAD as a genuine failure, a misplaced adventure at the operational level that exposed the hollowness of British strategy in 2006. Some have expressed surprise at the

⁷⁹⁶ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair’s Wars*, pp. 166 – 167.

⁷⁹⁷ Some officers argue that the Iraqi Prime Minister’s vetoing of SALAMANCA was a signature moment where Maliki found his confidence to state what he wanted to happen in Basra, vice what the Coalition wanted to happen. Justin Maciejewski, as one of the architects of SALAMANCA/SINBAD, argues this exact point, stating that ‘the problematic birth of Operation Sinbad in 2006 illustrates that Maliki was beginning to assert the sovereignty of Iraq; this could be regarded as the beginnings of campaign success’ (see Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair’s Wars*, p. 167). Others cite that SINBAD was a critical point on enhancing the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces in Basra. Vice Admiral Charles Style, who was Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Commitments) in 2006, told the Inquiry that ‘SINBAD was a very considerable success ... [there was] a new level of co-operation between our own forces and the Iraqi Army, better Iraqi Army and police co-operation, both the police and the army effectiveness ... by the end ... the Iraqis were in the lead to an extent they had not been before’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 297). SINBAD, they argue, was the key precursor to the Iraqi Government and Army truly asserting themselves against the Shi’a militias in 2008, in what would become Operation *Saulat al-Fursan*, or *Charge of the Knights*.

failure of the Government to rein in Shirreff's divergence. 'Astonishingly', writes analyst James de Waal, '[SALAMANCA] seems to have been a personal initiative by the British commander, Richard Shirreff ... what Maciejewski represents as a failure of determination by "defeatists" at home can equally be seen as a baffling reluctance by government to rein in an insurgent commander acting against national policy'.⁷⁹⁸ Strachan argues that SALAMANCA/SINBAD created 'dissonance' at the strategic level. 'As the army reached up into the strategic sphere from the operational level, it created dissonance at both levels', Strachan writes. 'At the strategic level, the United Kingdom was set on reducing its force levels in Iraq and establishing a timetable for withdrawal ... at the operational level, British troops in theatre were devising a plan whose aim was not withdrawal but success ... predicated on increasing the resources in Iraq, not decreasing them. "Operation Sinbad" ... was conceptually sound enough ... but it assumed that it had greater numbers of troops available than it possessed'.⁷⁹⁹

It is worth providing the final word on SALAMANCA/SINBAD to Shirreff himself. Shirreff was introspective when he expressed his views on SINBAD to the Inquiry some years later. Shirreff did not seek to make expansive arguments of success. Shirreff instead focused on the opportunity that the operation presented. 'All SINBAD could do', he told the Inquiry, 'was create an opportunity ... and that opportunity needed to be filled by massive economic impact. What we were incapable of doing was really delivering a genuinely big idea and that was what was needed ... my recommendation was that there should be what I called a Rooseveltian new deal for Basra'.⁸⁰⁰ Shirreff was an individual of many 'big ideas'⁸⁰¹, and at times such individuals can make a difference, but Iraq in 2006 – with all the deficiencies of British strategy and hostile influences that existed – was not one of those times.

Part Three Conclusion: Continuity and Change in the Iraq War

Part Three has provided the opportunity to examine the Iraq war as it evolved over time; to consider if the power of early influences endured, and whether the British were able to learn from a lengthening experience of protracted war. In 2006 the character of the Iraq war changed markedly

⁷⁹⁸ Elliott, *High Command*, p. 115.

⁷⁹⁹ Strachan, *Direction of War*, p. 222.

⁸⁰⁰ Transcript of Public Hearing, Lt Gen Shirreff, 11 January 2010, p. 43 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 21 Apr 22).

⁸⁰¹ In Part Four I will explore Shirreff's Dec 2006 letter to Blair where he called for the formation of a 'Joint Inter-Agency Task Force' in Basra, led by himself and his successors. This was another of Shirreff's big ideas that gained little traction in London. As we will see, this letter also acted as a clear demonstration of Blair's fading influence on Iraq strategy. See Letter Shirreff to Blair, 29 December 2006, [untitled] from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

in terms of political context, internal and regional protagonists, and the tactics being used. The bombing at al-Askari lit the firestorm, but the political tinder of sectarian violence had been laid over the previous three years by a myriad of decisions and outcomes. Part Three tests the adaptability of British strategy in practice: its capacity to respond to the changing character of an extended war. The outcome is a complex blend of continuity and change, but with a prominent bent towards continuity in the big, fundamental influences on strategic decision-making.

Continuity: The Nature of War, Political and Professional Redemption, and a Second Strategic

Subordination. The most prominent continuity in Part Three is the influence of the chaotic and unpredictable nature of war. There is no sense that this influence declined as the Iraq war extended over time. Indeed it is the enduring presence of ‘war’ that seems to have made the environment so difficult to operate within. Sir John Keegan defined war simply as ‘collective killing for some collective purpose’.⁸⁰² The presence of ‘collective killing for collective purpose’ creates a foundational undercurrent of uncertainty and friction that challenges the ability of all strategic decision-makers to undertake their task ... no matter how much time passes. Strategy must account for – and interact with – this uncertainty if it is to be effective.

Iraq in 2006 provides a strong example of how challenging this can be. British strategy through late 2005 and into 2006 placed a heavy emphasis on political progress as the solution to Iraq’s instability. The British ‘strategic script’ believed that the election of a representative Iraqi Government would dispel the demons of Iraq’s past, negating the post-Saddam violence. Early on there were some markers that this approach might be valid. The exceptionally high 80% voter turnout in the December 2005 elections suggested a thirst for a democratically-elected Government. The inclusive, non-sectarian nature of Maliki’s first Cabinet seemed to be another positive marker. For a brief period it seemed that a British approach focussed on political progress could be successful.

But such an approach relies on a certain logic and linearity. The British were banking on an equation that political progress would equal political reconciliation, and then stability. But the presence of ‘collective killing for some collective purpose’ ensured such logic and linearity was a fallacy. While 2005 represented a comparative lull in violence across the country, that violence was still there: it had just become normalised. There continued to be in the region of 600 – 700 security incidents every week throughout 2005, with a slow but steadily escalation as the year progressed.⁸⁰³ The fires

⁸⁰² John Keegan, *War and our World* (London: Vintage Books, 2011).

⁸⁰³ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Trends in Iraqi Violence: Casualties and Impacts of War 2003 – 2015 (Working Draft 4 Sep 2015)*, p. 47 for ‘CENTCOM SIGACTS’, found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

of 'war' were still burning, if suppressed, just waiting for the right fuel before again applying chaos and friction to Iraq's strategic environment.

This fuel came through the sectarian outcomes of the 2005 election, through the equally-sectarian nature of Maliki's Government, and through malign actors like al-Zarqawi. Signature expressions of violence like the bombing of al-Askari provided a seed around which inter-sect hatred could coalesce, fracturing the political process that the British sought. Time and time again the presence of war, and the uncertainty and chaos it implied, undercut attempts at coherent strategy. Iraq increasingly acted as a lodestone for malign actors like Iran, who sought to leverage the presence of war as part of their own strategic approach. The existence of war in the environment became self-perpetuating, and self-expanding. As David M. Satterfield, one of Secretary Rice's advisors, aptly put it, in 2006 'politics would not matter ... politics would be submerged in the flood of violence and division'.⁸⁰⁴

Two areas of British strategic behaviour stand out in this. First is that the British were at times effective at recognising the potential for the inherent uncertainty in war, but then they failed to act on it. The DOP(I) paper entitled 'Op Telic: Operational Transition in Iraq' from July 2005, for example, correctly identified three strategic risks to the British drawdown plan following the Iraqi elections: 'a deterioration in the security situation resulting from a change in Shi'a quiescence', 'a failure to deliver an effective ISF', and 'a prolonged delay in the political process'. This showed strategic foresight. But British decision-makers were then unable – or perhaps unwilling – to accept it when these risks became a painful reality, and to adapt as a result. Al-Askari triggered the first risk, the increasingly sectarian ISF were unable to manage the resulting violence on the second, and the delays in the political process triggered the third. But despite this, British strategy remained doggedly unchanged as decision-makers failed to acknowledge failed assumptions and realised risks. Honesty and adaptability were not strengths in 2006.

The second is the failure of the British to learn the lessons from Iraq in consideration of Afghanistan. Despite reviews such as Lord Butler's, British decision-makers still acted on the basis of poor assumptions, insufficient intelligence, and an inability to develop strategic foresight. Just like in Iraq, the assumptions of the 'Helmand decision' proved to be flawed just weeks after strategy in theory transitioned into practice: the second time this happened in three and a half years. It seems clear that at the political level the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were designed to be complimentary, but this connection was never truly made within the halls of Whitehall. Throughout 2006 and into 2007

⁸⁰⁴ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 73.

the two campaigns were considered and fought separately, with Afghanistan applying moral and resource pressure against Iraq from the first day of the 'charge'. The 'Helmand decision' showed that, despite Iraq, British decision-makers still believed that they could unleash the unpredictability of war, and then control it. Hubris remained a dogged characteristic of British strategy in 2006. By the end of the year, thanks to such hubris, decision-makers were grappling with the inherent uncertainty and friction of two very different wars, and with wholly insufficient tools. The theory may have been persuasive, but the practice was starkly different.

The final enduring influence from the first phases of the war in Iraq was the subordination of British strategy. This became even more complex in 2006, with the UK willingly submitting itself to a 'second subordination', this time to the democratically-elected Iraqi Government. Having invaded Iraq for the purposes of liberating the Iraqi people, it was unthinkable for the British Government to not respect the authority of the Iraqi Government: no matter how flawed it was in nature. This second subordination placed British strategy in Iraq in an unenviable position. The intended drawdown of British troops almost immediately became dependent on both US and Iraqi acceptance of the markers of 'PIC': a set of conditions that were difficult enough to define in the first place, let alone agree. The difficult history between the British and the Iraqis did not help in this new subordination.

Shirreff probably felt the pain of this second subordination the most, in Maliki's vetoing of SALAMANCA. But the reality was that Shirreff's timing was entirely wrong for Maliki, and there was little to no chance that the Iraqi Prime Minister was going to align to Shirreff's design. Shirreff was right that his plans for Basra were probably in Maliki, the Baswari, and the British best interests: but not in 2006 when Maliki's powerbase was perversely reliant on al-Sadr and the Sadrists in the south. It was not until 2008 and the *Charge of the Knights* (see Part Five) that Maliki would feel the time was right to assert his authority over Basra's Sadrists. This was, on balance, foreseeable from the HQ of MND(SE) in mid to late 2006. It was not a reality that the Shirreff wanted to see.

The major themes of influence from Parts One and Two therefore continue into Part Three. This is an important conclusion, as it shows that war's nature, political and professional drivers, and strategic subordination as a junior partner can stand the test of time. Not everything, however, remained the same.

Change: Third-Party Sectarian Strategy, the Power of Individuals, and the Start of a Prime Minister on the Wane. The first and most important change in influence in Part Three was the maturation of

what might be called ‘third-party’ strategy, both internally within Iraq and more broadly in the region. Part One exposed just how little a role Iraq and the Iraqis played in the decision-making about the invasion. As I argued then, British decision-making in 2003 took place ‘in a strategic environment divorced from the actual realities of the Iraqi theatre’. This changed in Part Two, as decision-making moved from abstraction ‘about Iraq’ to reality ‘within Iraq’, but even then the British/US relationship continued to dominate. The region, and particularly Iraq’s neighbours, played little role. But by 2006 all of this had changed. The influence of the third party of Iraq and the Iraqi Government, and third parties in the region such as Iran, played a powerful role as an influence on British decisions.

The standout factor of these third parties was their sectarian nature. The 2003 invasion of Iraq broke apart the delicate Shi’a/Sunni power balance in Iraq, and indeed in the region. It took nearly three years for sectarianism to gain momentum, but by 2006 it was ready to unleash its full force. The election of a Shi’a government in Iraq, and the appointment of Maliki, created the tinder for a ground-swell of sectarian violence; tinder that was lit by AQ-I at the al-Askari shrine. There is a strong argument that a sectarian Shi’a government was more destabilising than the bombing itself; recall Chiarelli when he argued that ‘Samarra was an accelerator ... but nothing near Maliki coming into power’.⁸⁰⁵ Regionally, 2006 also saw the maturation of Iranian strategy within Iraq, with the execution of a sophisticated overt/covert approach that sought to ensure that their own sectarian interests were achieved – namely a Shi’a Iraqi government, sympathetic to Iranian interests, and no permanent US or western military presence in the country. Iran’s influence as a new antagonist in the Iraq strategic environment was deeply unwelcome in the British AO.

Sectarianism profoundly changed the character of the Iraq war, and the British were unprepared for this evolution. They failed to recognise the fundamentally-changed role of the south in Iraqi politics, and failed to identify that MND(SE) suddenly rested on key sectarian fault lines that both underpinned Maliki’s authority as Prime Minister (in terms of votes), and the execution of Iranian strategy (in terms of training and facilitation). It was only in hindsight that realisation followed. Recall John Scarlett’s evidence to the Inquiry that Iran’s involvement in Iraq reached ‘a sort of highpoint in the summer and autumn of 2006’⁸⁰⁶ but that, according to Tim Dowse, ‘we started this whole period with a reluctance to see an Iranian hand’.⁸⁰⁷ Either way, the British acted unconsciously to enable Iranian influence through the withdrawal from Al Amara and Maysan province. They were

⁸⁰⁵ SIGIR, *Hard Lessons*, p. 277.

⁸⁰⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 71.

⁸⁰⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 72.

then slow (or indeed unable) to adapt strategy to these new problems once they were recognised. Recognition of a problem does not guarantee action against it.

The second new influence in Part Three was the impact of the 'changing of the guard'. In just six short months in the first half of 2006 many of those who held deep personal equities in Iraq moved on from their positions. The 'new guard' brought with them a set of highly negative perceptions of Iraq, coloured by the outcomes of the decisions in Parts One and Two. Stirrup, Houghton and Dannatt's views were clearly influenced by the enduring tarnish of illegitimacy that dogged the war. All three believed that Iraq was a campaign unworthy of additional investment: Stirrup's injection of the 'law of diminishing returns' became a key unifying idea in 2006, one that continued to reach deep into 2007 and the US 'surge'. Only Shirreff approached his role from the position that the UK was failing, that the damage would be unbearable, and that something dramatic had to be done. The strategic 'big ideas' of the 'bad war' and 'diminishing returns' had a deep impact.

On the civilian side of the machinery of government the 'changing of the guard' saw another new, and very worrying, influence: inexperience. Both Browne and Beckett arrived cold into their portfolios, and stepped into all-consuming crises. Browne immediately received a taste of the unpredictability of war in the Lynx incident; a fine example of how war's nature can directly undermine the ability to form coherent strategy. The loss of a British helicopter on Browne's first day entirely consumed him – removing any capacity for deep strategic thinking. Beckett equally walked into a strategic crisis in the Iran nuclear standoff in June 2006, which left little time for considerations of Iraq. It is worth recalling that interest in Iraq within the FCO under Beckett was so low that Browne felt the need to write to her in October 2006 to ask what the UK's long-term foreign policy interests were in the country. The lack of such defined interests is a clear marker of the lack of coherent British strategy. Blair would later recall in his memoir his disappointment with his 2006 reshuffle, calling it the 'worst of all worlds' and a 'mess at the wrong time and with the wrong people'.⁸⁰⁸

Bureaucracies stepped-in to help made decisions in the face of such inexperience and the scale of the 'change of the guard'. This is seen most profoundly in the strategic decision (or lack thereof) to execute the '*charge*' in Afghanistan in May 2006. This course of action had been previously

⁸⁰⁸ Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 11356.

recognised by Reid as an exceptionally high risk move to be actively avoided.⁸⁰⁹ But when the decision was brought to Browne in late May, he does not even recall being briefed (although Butler assures us he was), let alone making a decision to endorse what was a strategic act. Inexperienced, and faced with enough crises for one month, Browne instead instinctively defaulted to a cultural British influence: to defer to the advice of the commander on the ground. As Professor Sir Michael Clarke and Freedman separately tell us, such cultural deference is well-established in British military culture.⁸¹⁰ In this case it allowed tactics to dictate strategy in Afghanistan, to the detriment of UK strategy in Iraq.⁸¹¹ Bureaucratic muscle memory and strategic culture were a major influence in mid-2006, as the ‘new guard’ found their experience, preconceptions, and capacity for pressure sorely tested.

Blair’s personal influence also started to notably decline in Part Three. It is of real note how increasingly absent he is in the strategic decision-making of the time. Blair was clearly front and centre in Part One, and remained prominent in Part Two. But in Part Three much of this seems to have drained away. Blair, for example, was key to managing the UK’s ‘first subordination’ through his personal relationship with Bush, and the influence of his ‘Notes’. However he was unable to establish any such relationship with Maliki, who seems to have had little interest in listening to a junior ally to the US. Blair was not a major player in the ‘second subordination’. Blair clearly had significant influence on the decision to commit troops to Helmand Province in mid-2004, including in his own presence at the Istanbul Summit alongside Bush. But by the time of the execution of the Helmand operation, and particularly in the decision-making around the ‘*charge*’, Blair is a subdued player. His traditional heavy probing and influence on British strategy was mostly gone.

⁸⁰⁹ Recall Reid’s views that Governor Daoud ‘needed to be strongly discouraged from making gestures—for example, the idea of a forward operating base at Sangin—that were unsustainable’, and that in relation to the decision to deploy paratroopers north that Reid ‘only knew that the decision to go there was out of step with everything that I thought was the nature of the mission’ (see Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 163 and p. 167).

⁸¹⁰ In terms of the ‘*charge up the valley*’, Clarke concludes that ‘the actual decision was Brigadier Butler’s. He was the man on the ground; it was up to him, and there is a high degree of deference in the British system to back the judgement of the commander in-theatre’ (see Clarke, *Helmand Decision*, p. 26). Indeed, this deference to the ground commander in British strategic culture stood the UK apart from her allies. In his book *Command*, for example, Sir Lawrence Freedman records Wes Clarke’s observation from his time as SACEUR that ‘in the British system a field commander was always supported. They were given their mission and trusted to achieve it without detailed and continuing guidance’ (see Freedman, *Command*, p. 356). Cultural deference certainly influenced Browne, who would later say that his role ‘certainly wasn’t to try to interfere with the chain of command or with military decisions’ (see Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 195). General Houghton’s recollection from the 24 May 2006 Butler briefing, which Browne does not himself recall at all, was that ‘my memories of Lord Browne are that he was understanding and wholly supportive about the judgments of the tactical commander on the ground, and who could see through the optics of political necessity the need to do this’ (see Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 219).

⁸¹¹ General Sir Nick Carter later concluded that the ‘hierarchy of wisdom’ that should have been in place had failed, and that the UK had allowed ‘Brigadiers to make decisions that are beyond their capacity or capability’ (see Defence Committee, ‘Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report’, p. 132).

Blair had a key opportunity to apply his strategic acumen on 21 July 2005 when he attended both DOP and DOP(I), and had the inherent tensions, poor assumptions, and contradictions of the Iraq and Afghan strategies laid in front of him and his Cabinet. This was the very point of the DOP as a culmination of the machinery of government, and the evidence shows that the dangers were perceivable. But Blair either did not perceive the moment, or decided not to lean in. Nor did his Cabinet colleagues. Blair as a passive character in Iraq and Afghan strategy is a key influence in late 2006, seen once again in his decision to accept at face value Beckett's decision to withdraw the civilian staff from Basra. This passivity sets the stage well for Part Four, where we see how Blair become wholly isolated from US strategic decision-making, along with the entirety of the UK's decision-making machinery.

Final Thought: Theories of Power and the 'Comprehensive Approach'. At the end of Part Two I posited that a definition of strategy focused just on the use or presence of force in the international system seemed insufficient for the tangled dynamics of post-invasion Iraq. A definition that focussed on theories of 'power', I argued, provided a far more complete framework. Rather than strategy being the art of wielding political violence, it is instead (as Freedman put it), the 'art of creating power'. Part Two particularly suggested that the UK (and the US) were institutionally unprepared to 'create power' after the invasion. Part Three reinforces this conclusion, and reinforces how much the UK particularly struggled to expand their application of strategy into the evolving dynamics of Iraq in 2006. The tangled strategic environment post al-Askari and the election of Maliki required a response that garnered every element of British national power if the UK was to achieve its ambitious strategic aims, with a key outcome being the ability of the UK to adapt to a rapidly changing situation.

In some ways the UK did recognise this. Thanks to the analysis of the likes of Smith and Strachan, the British sought an expanded approach to strategy in 2005 and 2006. But they drastically over-complicated it. Instead of just calling it strategy, they developed the 'Comprehensive Approach'. This was commenced with good intent, but it was soon deconstructed in detail by the bureaucratic stereotypes of the Whitehall system. Walker perhaps put it well when he argued that, in terms of the 'comprehensive approach' and the PCRU, 'creating this beast is beyond the wit of man'.⁸¹² Placing these bureaucratic barriers to one side, Part Three still suggests that it was the failure by the UK to provide sufficient 'hard' and 'soft' resources to Iraq that fundamentally held back any chances of real success. Shirreff dreamed the biggest of dreams, envisaging a 'Rooseveltian new deal for

⁸¹² Transcript of Public Hearing, Gen Walker, 1 Feb 2010, p. 64 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

Basra'. But big dreams, and grand strategy, are costly, and the UK was unwilling to provide the commitment of enough 'strategic currency' in Iraq to truly turn the tide.

This draws Part Three to a close. By November 2006 British strategy in Iraq was in a difficult place, struggling to adapt to a rapidly evolving war. Honesty was, however, starting to creep in. The plan for the next phase of the Iraq war, beyond 2006, is best found in a document entitled 'Medium Term Prospects', submitted to DOP(I) in October 2006. Since the invasion the UK had pursued a theoretical goal in Iraq that had remained remarkably sticky: the achievement of a 'democratic, stable, united and law-abiding Iraq, within its present borders, co-operating with the international community, posing no threat to its neighbours or to international security, abiding by all its international obligations and providing effective, representative and inclusive government for all its people'.⁸¹³

But the 'Medium Term Prospects' paper admitted, for the first time, that this goal was 'unlikely to be achieved'. The best the British could hope for was 'an Iraq which can govern and sustain itself nationally and provincially, and where sectarian and other violence is contained short of the point where it would overwhelm Iraq's institutions and precipitate chaos and/or civil war'. Even this far less ambitious aim, they believed, would require a more sustained presence of British forces than was planned. But this honesty did not translate to a recommendation for a change in strategy. Withdrawal, they argued, remained the right pathway, even if it bore the risk of 'serious ramifications for our relations with the US'. Neither the authors of the 'Medium Term Prospects' paper, nor the decision-makers reading it, realised quite how fundamentally the relationship with the US was about to change. As early as May 2006 President Bush had realised that American strategy in Iraq was failing. Months of highly-secretive deliberations had followed, and by the end of 2006 he was ready to make a decision. The 'surge' was coming, and the British were wholly unaware of the scope and scale of the crisis that was approaching.

⁸¹³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 205.

Part Four
Resisting the 'Surge'

13 December 2006 to 16 December 2007

'We were wrong in the recommendation against the surge, but for the right analytical reasons. The President ... was right in his decision to go for the surge, but for the wrong analytical reasons. And you all can sort out – historians that you are – which of the two it's better to be. But I would say it's better to be right for the wrong reasons, than wrong for the right reasons'.⁸¹⁴

David M. Satterfield, US Coordinator for Iraq and Advisor to Secretary of State, 2006 - 2009

December 2006 provided an ignoble ending to a difficult year in Iraq. On Saturday 30 December Saddam Hussein was taken to a place of execution, having been convicted of the murder of 148 Shi'a civilian in the town of Dujail in the 1980s. Bearded and haggard, he resembled little of his former, powerful self. He was stood on a wooden scaffold and, in chaotic scenes marked by a wholesale lack of dignity, he was hanged. Video of the moments leading up to the execution was formally transmitted on Iraqi state television by the Maliki Government, who chose not to reveal the chaos of Saddam's actual hanging. But within hours grainy footage of the execution was circling on the internet.

Saddam's execution marked another decisive step in the end of an era in Iraq, but its manner typified the ongoing collapse of order. His death instilled many emotions. The Shi'a celebrated. Na'eem Al Zubaidi, a Shi'a doctor, recalled that 'there was an overwhelming celebratory spirit, especially here, you can expect, in Najaf, one of the cities that suffered most from the oppressive tyranny of Saddam'. But others saw Saddam's humiliating execution as a humiliation for Iraq. Amina Ahmad, who was 17, recalled that 'I surely felt very sad. I started crying because it wasn't about Saddam himself but I felt they executed Iraq. When these countries come in and take him down and then they execute him, you feel like that's it, Iraq is done'. Many recall the irony of the chaos gripping the country when Saddam was killed. 'First', Amina argues, 'we were afraid of only one person, [Saddam] ... after that it was complete chaos'. Surood Ahmad, a Kurd from Halabja, agreed. 'In the past we had one enemy', he said, 'but now we have a hundred enemies and we don't know who our enemies are'.⁸¹⁵

The British, caught between the need to respect Iraqi sovereignty and their liberal values, found themselves simultaneously welcoming and condemning Iraqi justice. 'I welcome the fact that Saddam Hussein ... has now been held to account', said Beckett in a statement. But she also added

⁸¹⁴ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 203.

⁸¹⁵ CNN, 'I was shocked: Iraqis remember day Saddam Hussein was hanged', 29 Dec 2016, found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

that ‘the British Government does not support the use of the death penalty, in Iraq or anywhere else ... we have made our position very clear to the Iraqi authorities, but we respect their decision as that of a sovereign nation’.⁸¹⁶ Such were neatly captured the contradictions inherent in British strategy in Iraq in late 2006.

The United States, employers of the death penalty themselves, felt no such need to condemn Iraqi justice. But it was the US who held a more honest opinion of the situation in Iraq at the end of 2006. By 30 December 2006 Bush and his cabinet were clear that their strategy was failing. Sectarian violence was out of control, especially in Baghdad. The Maliki Government seemed unable to grapple with the core political and social drivers that were the cause of sectarian fury. Casualty rates amongst US forces remained high, for little visible benefit. The Iraq Study Group report (published in December 2006) had painted a dire picture of the situation. Most significantly, the US mid-term elections had proved that American strategy had failed in the court of public opinion. With just two years left in office, Bush was faced with an overall legacy tarnished by strategic failure in Iraq: potentially the worst foreign/military policy outcome since Vietnam. Bush was also clear about what defeat would mean for the health of the US military. ‘If you’re talking about breaking the force’, Bush said to the Joint Chiefs, ‘nothing would break the force like us walking out of Iraq with our tail between our legs. We don’t get into wars to lose them in this country’.⁸¹⁷

So on 10 January 2007 Bush addressed the American people to provide his solution to avoiding defeat in Iraq. ‘The situation in Iraq is unacceptable to the American people – and it is unacceptable to me’, he began, ‘it is clear that we need to change our strategy’. He continued, ‘our past efforts to secure Baghdad failed for two principal reasons: there were not enough Iraqi and American troops to secure neighbourhoods that had been cleared of terrorists and insurgents’. This he intended to fix. The first part of the solution, he was clear, needed to be Iraqi: he announced on behalf of Maliki that the ISF would deploy eighteen brigades across Baghdad in their own surge. But the core effort would be American. ‘This is a strong commitment [from the Iraqis]’, Bush said, ‘but for it to succeed, our commanders say the Iraqis will need our help. So America will change our strategy to help the Iraqis carry out their campaign ... this will require increasing American force levels. So I’ve committed more than 20,000 additional American troops to Iraq. The vast majority of them – five brigades – will be deployed to Baghdad. These troops will work alongside Iraqi units and be embedded in their formations. Our troops will have a well-defined mission: to help Iraqis clear and secure

⁸¹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 366.

⁸¹⁷ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 265.

neighbourhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security that Baghdad needs'.⁸¹⁸ This 'surge' of ideas was as important as the troop 'surge' itself.

This represented a remarkable change. Flatly rejecting the ailing 'as Iraqis stand up, the US will stand down' strategy of Rumsfeld, Abizaid [Commander of US CENTCOM] and Casey (all of whom were replaced), it placed the US firmly on a strategy that defined 'securing the population' as the central tactical task. With more troops, and new ideas, came new leadership. Secretary Gates announced that General David Petraeus would follow Casey as the MNF-I commander.

Like the formation of the CPA, and al-Askari, the US decision to 'surge' represented a bifurcating moment for British strategy. The UK's first 'strategic subordination' took a hard right-turn. But the British were unaware of, and unprepared for, this shift. They did not realise that – while they were focussed in 2006 on the 'law of diminishing returns' – President Bush was instead considering sunk costs: whether to pull out of Iraq, or to double down. Part Four examines how, for the period leading up to and after Bush's decision to 'surge', British and American strategy sharply diverged. What influenced this divergence, and whether it was a conscious choice or one driven by expediency and contingent decisions, is a key question that I will consider in Part Four.

Bounding the Fourth Decision in Time: From the Decision to 'Surge', to PIC in Basra

Part Four logically commences with the US decision to 'surge'. But, as ever, narrowing down the exact moment of that decision takes work. Bush had actually begun to consider that the US strategy in Iraq was failing as early as May 2006, when he told Stephen Hadley (his National Security Advisor) that, 'this strategy isn't working ... we need to develop a new one'.⁸¹⁹ This led to a series of quiet, highly-secretive considerations of US strategy in the summer and fall of 2006. But – for a range of reasons – Bush held back from making a change, or even publicly commissioning a review, throughout mid-2006.⁸²⁰

⁸¹⁸ The White House, President George W. Bush Library, *Address to the Nation*, 10 Jan 2007, found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁸¹⁹ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 213.

⁸²⁰ The reasons for this were complex. In the excellent oral history *'The Last Card'*, Bush himself suggests that he held back from concern that an open questioning of the current strategy would damage the morale of the troops. There were also sensitive dynamics around Donald Rumsfeld, a man that Bush deeply respected but who seemed almost ideologically unable to see the flaws in the US strategy in Iraq. Bush had actually decided in mid-2006 that he needed a change in the US Secretary of Defense, but then events conspired against making one. The well-known 'Revolt of the Generals', where retired senior US military officers called for Bush to sack Rumsfeld, ironically led to Rumsfeld being kept in place for longer than he might have in other circumstances. Bush was not about to let the retired military fraternity dictate the President's decision-making on Iraq (see Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 81).

The mid-term elections – widely seen as a referendum on Iraq – were the last straw. Rumsfeld resigned the day after and was replaced by Gates. On 10 November Bush announced a formal review of the Iraq strategy under Deputy National Security Advisor J. D. Crouch. Over the next six weeks other key reviews, including the review of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) and an external review by the independent American Enterprise Institute (AEI), also matured and reported. By mid-December 2006 a full spectrum of options had been laid before Bush. The decision to ‘surge’ was one of the most unexpected of his presidency.

Bush had been thinking specifically about a ‘surge’ option from as early as September 2006, and had more or less gone firm on the idea after a critical meeting with Maliki in Amman on 29 November 2006.⁸²¹ The ‘idea’ was converted into a strategic decision (particularly in civilian/military terms) on 13 December 2006 when Bush made the unusual move of visiting the Joint Chiefs in their briefing room at the Pentagon, known as the ‘Tank’. Flanked by his outgoing and incoming Secretaries of Defence, Bush laid out his stall: America must win in Iraq, this probably meant a ‘surge’, and the Chiefs had to explain why it should not be done. The President allayed their fears, and gently made his position clear. Eventually they supported him. This was decisive. As Hadley put it, ‘at the end of that meeting, they know that he’s going to pick the surge. He knows he’s going to pick the surge ... face to face with the chiefs, he’s addressed all their objections, and he’s brought them on’.⁸²²

13 December 2006 is a suitable start point for Part Four not only because it was the moment that the ‘surge’ became US strategy, but also because it marked the moment that UK strategy became wholly isolated from the US strategic changes. As I will describe below, British decision-makers were entirely unaware of the approaching change in the US strategic winds. This was a momentous day for the British as well as the Americans, and is therefore a suitable place to start the analysis for Part Four.

So, where to end this next Part? British decision-makers grappled with strategic divergence throughout 2007. This ended on 16 December 2007 with the final transition of Basra Province to PIC, the last of the four provinces that fell to the UK as ‘Joint Occupying Powers’ in 2003. From 16 December the UK stepped into ‘operational overwatch’, an approach that placed the Iraqis firmly in the lead for security in southern Iraq. The plan from that stage forward – as it had been throughout

⁸²¹ Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 373.

⁸²² Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 175.

2007 – was clear: despite the US ‘surge’, indeed in direct contradiction to it, the British intended to withdraw their forces from Iraq (initially to 4,500 by spring 2008 and then aggressively further down) prior to ending the UK mission. Just as the ‘surge’ was hitting its peak, the British were leaving. This time, unlike so many times before, British decision-makers resisted the influence of their senior partner.

The story of this resistance is an important one to examine. Up to this stage the UK’s ‘strategic subordination’ to the US had been a heavy influence on British decision-making.⁸²³ But in 2007 this influence declined. Suddenly faced with a bold American strategy that committed huge resources and accepted great risk, the UK choose a different path. By 16 December and PIC there was no turning back for the British: physically out of Basra, based at the airport and in ‘overwatch’, their rejection of the ‘surge’ was complete. This is why 16 December acts as a suitable end point for Part Four.

Part Four will examine this strategic divergence through three turning points. First it will consider how British decision-makers became so isolated from American decision-making around the ‘surge’. Second it will examine the completion of Blair’s tenure as Prime Minister, which ended on 27 June 2007: examining how Blair’s personal influence declined in its last six months. Finally it will examine the arrival of Gordon Brown as Prime Minister, and whether this change in the key British protagonist made a substantive difference to UK strategy.

Turning Point: the Isolation of British Strategy from US Decision-Making

The suggestion that the British were surprised by Bush’s decision to ‘surge’ is no exaggeration. Blair and his senior decision-makers were wholly (not a word to be used lightly) unaware of the change in the American strategic winds in late 2006. Throughout this period British strategy was aligned with what they believed to be the extant US strategy; that of transition and withdrawal. In a speech in November 2006, the Prime Minister summarised a key facet of the UK’s strategy in Iraq in terms that, ‘we must plug any gaps in training, equipment and command control in the Iraqi Army ... which in turn will allow us, within the timeframe set down by General Casey, to transition to Iraqi control’.⁸²⁴ Des Browne reinforced this same alignment to DOP(I) in mid-November 2006, when he confirmed

⁸²³ The UK’s strategic subordination to the US had driven the UK’s decision to invade in 2003, the extreme scale of UK commitment to the invasion, the acceptance of the British role as ‘joint occupying powers’ in 2003 and 2004, and the rolling decisions to delay the pace of troop withdrawals throughout 2006.

⁸²⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 276.

that the US was not only committed to transition and withdrawal (as the UK were), but that they were looking to speed up the process.⁸²⁵

The belief that UK and US strategy were nested – at least in first principle – was deeply embedded in British thinking in late 2006. In November that year the FCO published what was called the ‘Forward Plan’, a new Iraq policy document commissioned directly by Blair and drafted by Simon McDonald, ‘Director Iraq’ at the FCO and later Gordon Brown’s Foreign Policy Advisor. The ‘Forward Plan’ was clear that the US were firmly on the pathway to transition, and it showed a complete lack of awareness of any considerations of a ‘surge’. In its section on ‘security’, the ‘Forward Plan’ stated that ‘the revised US plan was likely to see a move by coalition forces out of urban areas into consolidated bases on the outskirts of urban areas and **accelerated transition** [my emphasis] to Iraqi control based on a more pragmatic and subjective Iraq-led approach ... this may mean that the conditions for transfer are relaxed thus accelerating the process of transition’.⁸²⁶

Once again assumptions were the problem. The draft ‘Forward Plan’ assumed that there would be no fundamental change in US policy, and it was clear that the UK sought no such change. Blair spoke to the American Iraq Study Group personally in late November (as the ‘Forward Plan’ was being drafted) to reinforce that the current strategy of transition was working. ‘The UK policy was to stay until the job was done’, he told the ISG, ‘which meant drawing down as the ISF [Iraqi Security Forces] were prepared to take over’. Blair eventually summarised his views as ‘it would be helpful if the ISG endorsed a plan that was essentially an evolution of our current strategy’.⁸²⁷ Blair described the ‘Forward Plan’ itself as ‘excellent’, accepting all of the assumptions of US strategic continuity it suggested.⁸²⁸

Blair and the ‘Forward Plan’ were entirely wrong. By late-November 2006 Bush had fully dismissed the transition strategy, and the ‘surge’ was gathering momentum. For months Rumsfeld had been saying to Bush – almost like a mantra – that ‘we’re teaching the Iraqis to ride a bicycle, and eventually you have to take your hand off the bicycle seat’. Increasingly Bush was rejecting this view. ‘But Don’, the President said, ‘we can’t afford to have the bicycle turn over. We can’t start again. So if the bicycle starts to tip, we’ve got to be able to grab it’.⁸²⁹

⁸²⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 293.

⁸²⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 307.

⁸²⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 284 to 285.

⁸²⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 208.

⁸²⁹ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 238.

Bush moved out to put his hand back on the bicycle and to change the strategy assumed by the UK's 'Forward Plan' immediately after Rumsfeld's resignation. On 10 November he ordered J.D. Crouch to review the US strategy in Iraq. Crouch's review, which was conducted in strict secrecy, included the deputies of all the US Government Departments; a truly inter-agency process. Within two weeks Crouch had developed a range of options for Bush, who already had a clear preference for a 'surge'. This was made clear when, on 17 November 2006, Stephen Hadley met with Crouch and the deputies and told them that (at Bush's direction) they had to provide a 'surge' option to the President.⁸³⁰

Bush spent the time until early December ironing out the doubts and issues in his new strategy in detail: generating a civilian surge, confirming troop availability, and testing Maliki.⁸³¹ Blair and his team had no knowledge of any of this, and the decision to isolate them so completely from the US decision-making process can only have been deliberate. It certainly was not down to a lack of opportunity to bring them into the circle of trust. On 25 November 2006, days before Bush visited Maliki, Blair and Bush spoke via VTC; a moment which presented a key chance for Bush to draw Blair into his plans as the key coalition partner. He elected not to do so.⁸³²

A further opportunity presented itself when Blair and Bush spoke privately over a breakfast at the White House on 7 December, a full week after Bush had discussed the surge plan with Maliki in Jordan, and just a week prior to the President's meeting in the 'Tank'. By this stage the plan was firm enough that a full draft of the 'surge' speech had been written.⁸³³ Again, there is no evidence that Bush discussed his intentions with Blair, and the notes from the formal meetings make no mention of a 'surge'.⁸³⁴ It is difficult to argue that this could have been anything other than a deliberate isolation of the UK from US decision-making.

It was not just Bush keeping his cards close to his chest. From Secretary of State to Secretary of Defence, and from National Security Advisor to military commanders, there is no evidence that the

⁸³⁰ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 320.

⁸³¹ Bush's inner circle was clear that a purely military surge would not work, and so Bush directed Secretary Rice to resource a civilian surge to match. Bush then needed to understand that the military element of the surge could be resourced with formations and units, confirmation of which he received by the first week in December when Hadley reviewed the slides that would be used for the 'Tank' presentation the following week, and confirmed five brigades could be found. Bush's greatest doubts rested on Maliki. He had to answer the question in his own mind whether he was doubling down on an Iraqi Prime Minister who genuinely sought stability, or on one who would use the extra US investment to simply further his sectarian agenda. So on 30 November 2006 Bush met Maliki in Amman, Jordan to seek Maliki's firm commitment to a combined, non-sectarian surge. This he received, and by the 13 December he walked into the 'Tank' ready to commit to the new 'surge' strategy (see Brands et al, *The Last Card*, Chapter 9).

⁸³² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 309.

⁸³³ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 171.

⁸³⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 334.

British were consulted, briefed, or even considered in the 'surge' decision-making process. The first the British heard of it was on 12 December 2006, the day before the 'Tank' meeting, when Hadley told Sheinwald that the US was considering a 'bridge force' in 2007 to help stem violence, but he was careful to state that 'no decision had yet been taken'.⁸³⁵ By 3 January 2007 Rice (who was heavily involved in the decision, and knew exactly where it stood) was still briefing Beckett that 'contrary to media reports [Bush] had not taken any final decisions on the proposed 'surge' of 20,000 troops into Baghdad'.⁸³⁶ The first time Bush openly discussed his intent personally with Blair was on 29 December 2006.⁸³⁷ He did not confirm his intentions for the 'surge' to Blair one-to-one until 5 January 2007, just five days before his address to the American people.⁸³⁸ This could not have been left any later, despite the difficult implications Bush's decision held for the British.

Why were the British so decisively isolated from the US decision-making around the 'surge'? Two reasons were prominent. The first was the extreme drive for secrecy in the US administration, which isolated the UK's habitual connections into the American system – especially at the military operational-level. Secondly, the British isolation can again be attributed to the growing bankruptcy in the British investment in 'strategic currency' in Iraq; a bankruptcy that made them increasingly irrelevant to US decision-making.

Secrecy and Isolation at the Operational Level. Secrecy was the first factor. Like all diligent junior partners, the British had worked hard throughout the war to maintain a network of connections into US agencies, partially for influence but also to gain privileged insights.⁸³⁹ The US embraced this arrangement as a method of integrating – and indeed entangling – the UK. The placement of British senior officers in key roles in the MNF-I command structure (such as the SBMR-I and Deputy Commanding General MNF-I) is a sound example of the privileged access the UK routinely received as a core US ally. This network was not just a military one, but also existed in the State Department and other department in the US system. Personal relationships, such as the relationship between the British Foreign Secretary and the US Secretary of State were equally as important in keeping the British well-informed on American decision-making; a vital function given the British strategic subordination to US strategy.

⁸³⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 339.

⁸³⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 368.

⁸³⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 361.

⁸³⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 390.

⁸³⁹ The agreement by both nations to embed UK planners into General Franks' CENTCOM HQ in 2002 was, for example, a key moment in allowing the UK to understand and, in some ways, influence OPLAN 1003V (see Part One p. 53).

But this system failed to pick up the fundamental change in US thinking around the 'surge'. At the heart of this was the secrecy applied to the decision. Bush was exceptionally cautious of having his doubts towards Iraq strategy expressed in public, lest they have a negative impact on the morale of the troops, or on American national confidence. Meghan O'Sullivan, a Deputy National Security Advisor, recalls the lengths that were taken to avoid leaks during the formal NSC reviews of December 2006. 'There were dozens of papers', she recalls, 'and those papers ... were all written on my computer, and I was not allowed to e-mail them to anyone ... there was a real effort to make sure that nothing leaked'.⁸⁴⁰ The deliberately tight net placed around such sensitive deliberations isolated not just the American public but also the British network.

Other elements of the British isolation were more inadvertent. One of the most impactful was the decision by the US to deliberately isolate their own operational level of military command: an isolation that inadvertently severed one of the best UK networks of information. It seemed to Bush's inner circle that Rumsfeld, Abizaid and Casey were institutionally incapable of considering that their strategy was failing.⁸⁴¹ So, in a somewhat remarkable action in civilian/military relations the Department of Defence leadership were simply cut out of the 'surge' thinking – at least until the announcement of the formal inter-agency review by Crouch on 10 November 2006.

The shutting out of the US operational level of command vicariously cut-out the embedded British officers at that level. This was a major contribution to the British fallacy that they were aligned to US strategy throughout the second half of 2006 and into early 2007. What information did flow out through military channels in the last weeks of 2006 focussed almost solely on enhancing transition through increasing training support to the ISF. Major General Simon Mayall (serving as Deputy Commanding General of MNC-I) reported on 16 November 2007 of a 'Transition Bridging Strategy' for enhanced ISF training.⁸⁴² CDS himself provided a similar report Blair on 13 November.⁸⁴³ While a sense of change in strategy is detectable, there is no flavour of the 'surge'. This isolation was not just in the military sphere. There is no evidence in the Inquiry that the British diplomatic network in

⁸⁴⁰ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 232.

⁸⁴¹ Hadley recalls an early attempt to seek different approaches from Rumsfeld as the 'chillest reception' he ever received in the Pentagon. Rumsfeld response was simply to offer his resignation, stating 'if you and the President have lost confidence in the ability of this building to do military planning, then you should get yourself a new secretary' (see Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 101). Abizaid also complained bitterly about the isolation of the operational level of command from the decision-making. He later told the *Last Card* historians that 'the process was not healthy, because the process did not use the whole of government approach to include the chain of command in a way that could have resulted in a different outcome.... I don't think I would have kept the commanders in the field so much in the dark as we were' (see Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 299). It is worth noting that neither Rumsfeld nor Casey would agree to be interviewed for the oral history of the 'surge' (see Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 36).

⁸⁴² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 289.

⁸⁴³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 272 – 273.

either Washington or Iraq identified the evolution of the 'surge' strategy. Rice certainly did not discuss it with Beckett. The British isolation took place across all levers of national power, and across all government departments.

There is an irony in this change from 2003 to 2006. In 2003 the influence of the operational level played a significant role in driving the political dynamics between the UK and the US, particularly in terms of the conceptual embedding of the British in 1003V, the scale of the commitment of forces, and as a principal 'strategic currency' in New Labour's *strategy of influence*. In 2006, however, it was the deliberate isolation of the military operational level by the Bush administration that helped sever the connection between the two. This changing role reinforces the operational level of command as an important influencer on decision-making, for both good and ill.

The Problem of Strategic Bankruptcy. Even if the US had chosen to bring the UK into the tent on the 'surge' in 2006, it would have been clear to them by the start of 2007 that to do so would reap almost no strategic reward: the UK had neither the capability nor the intent to contribute further strategic currency to Iraq. Instead the UK stood out by that stage as being strategically bankrupt, and heading for the exit: militarily, diplomatically and economically.

It is instructive to take a step back from MND(SE) at the start of 2007, and to review from a US perspective the British decisions, actions and events of the last few months. Throughout July 2006 the US perceived that the UK were suppressing their reporting of the situation in Maysan Province, so as to label the Province as 'green' and to move to PIC early.⁸⁴⁴ In August 2006 they saw London refuse to deploy British troops to support US formations under pressure in MND (Centre South), and refuse to accept US ground troops into Operation SALAMANCA to help increase the force-levels to stabilise Basra.⁸⁴⁵ The British departure from Camp Abu Naji in Amara (also in August), driven by the need to concentrate force levels for SALAMANCA, left the Iranian border worryingly vulnerable, and the uncontrolled looting of the camp made national news in the US.⁸⁴⁶ In September 2006 SALAMANCA stumbled as a plan, and Casey had to come to Shirreff's aid to persuade Maliki to keep it alive as SINBAD; the British Government lacked the will and influence to achieve this themselves. October 2006 brought Dannatt's comments in the *Daily Mail*, sparking 'immediate' complaints from

⁸⁴⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 57.

⁸⁴⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 118 – 121.

⁸⁴⁶ Washington Post, *Looters Ransack Base After British Depart: Failure of Iraqi Soldiers to Prevent Assault Raises Worries About Security Transfers*, 26 Aug 2006, found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

the Americans.⁸⁴⁷ In November 2006 the US watched as the FCO personnel were withdrawn from Basra Palace, leading to comments to Lamb that ‘the Brits are doing their own thing again’.⁸⁴⁸

The UK’s aggregate actions would not necessarily be seen as damaging in the context of the Rumsfeld/Casey ‘stand up/stand down’ approach. But their impact is clear when taken in the context of the highly secretive considerations of the ‘surge’ strategy. The UK’s actions in the six months leading up to the ‘surge’ decision suggested they would have no interest in following Bush’s bold strategy. Every action was instead coloured by the ‘big idea’ of the ‘law of diminishing returns’. The UK’s strategic bankruptcy in Iraq was evident: it is of little surprise that the US were unwilling to share their considerations for a ‘surge’. With secrecy paramount, the potential for reward of bringing the British into the tent was clearly not worth the risk.

The Outcome of Isolation: Inescapable Divergence. The isolation of the UK from US strategy came at a very bad time for the British. The period from May 2006, when Bush first identified that his Iraq strategy was failing, through to the ‘surge’ decision in January 2007 saw the UK make a series of decisions that ultimately removed any strategic flexibility they might have had to react. At the heart of this was the Helmand decision, the ‘*charge up the valley*’, and the need to rapidly scale up the UK military presence in Afghanistan. But it was not just Helmand that set the tone for the UK’s inability to respond to the US ‘surge’. As we saw in SINBAD, the six months leading up to Bush’s decision saw the embedding of a set of perceptions and biases amongst the ‘new guard’ of British decision-makers. From the ‘law of diminishing returns’ to the ‘good war/bad war’ dichotomy, the bulk of UK decision-makers were convinced by January 2007 that Iraq was a failing campaign and that an expedient – if managed – withdrawal was the only option. The one exception to this was perhaps Blair himself, but as we will see in the next section he was unable to personally turn the tide.

A divergence of British and US strategy was therefore inescapable. It began with an immediate change in approach by senior US interlocutors. Blair was the first to experience this when he met Gates on 14 January 2007. Gates was upfront that Basra was nowhere near ready for PIC, and that his preference was for significant numbers of British forces to remain in the city until at least the end of 2007.⁸⁴⁹ This was in stark contrast to the UK’s plans. On 7 December 2006 DOP(I) had approved plans for aggressive re-posturing that had been introduced as being ‘consistent with US and Iraqi intent to speed the process of transition’. These plans suggested that ‘Op SINBAD could create the

⁸⁴⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 214.

⁸⁴⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 255.

⁸⁴⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 430 – 431.

conditions for handover in Basra as early as March [2007]', that the UK would seek to achieve PIC in April 2007, and that they would re-posture all military forces out of Basra City and to Basra International Airport (BIA) no later than May 2007: reducing from six battlegroups to four (or 7100 to fewer than 4500).⁸⁵⁰ These plans had been reconfirmed on 11 January 2007, just three days before Blair's meeting with Gates.⁸⁵¹ Gates's views immediately showed just how much the US were diverging.

Browne was the next British official to encounter the changed 'surge' perspectives. He visited Iraq between 28 and 31 January 2007, where he was fully exposed to the 'surge' divergence. His Military Assistant's summary (classified 'SECRET UK EYES ONLY') captures the starkness of the changed US approach. The new US team were 'in no mood to take risks', were 're-evaluating across the board', and were 'applying the brakes to PIC'. 'The net effect', it records, 'was, at first sight, an alarming and unforeseen change in military advice over re-posturing, which has implications beyond Iraq. It suggested that we had either failed to foresee the scale of this US change of approach and its implications, or that our previous plan was lacking in some areas. There are bound to be a host of nuances that soften this rather stark conclusion but they were drowned out by the "shock of the new"'. Lamb, well placed as SBMR-I, confirmed in the same trip that there was 'a clear and widespread apprehension at the highest levels of the US military about our plans for Basra'. The US posited, for the first time, that they would have to deploy troops to the south to backfill the UK, a comment that Browne expressed as 'distinctly unhelpful' to US Ambassador Khalilzad.⁸⁵²

New concerns about British strategy reverberated across the US diplomatic branches in early 2007. In late January the British embassy in Washington reported that they had 'picked up significant concerns within the US system that lawlessness was rife in Basra and that the UK military were doing little to confront it'.⁸⁵³ At the end of January Gates himself stated to the US press that there were 'four wars' in Iraq, and that one of these was 'Shi'a on Shi'a, principally in the South'.⁸⁵⁴ On 1

⁸⁵⁰ Paper MoD Officials, 5 December 2006, 'UK Military plans for Southern Iraq in 2007: a Briefing Paper for DOP(I) by Officials' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁸⁵¹ The Prime Minister was warned in a paper that any delays to the re-posturing plans would have 'significant force generation consequences', but the paper also re-affirmed that the MoD saw 'no tension between emerging US plans to increase troop numbers and UK objectives and activities in Southern Iraq' given that the Ministry had 'briefed our plans for southern Iraq to the US throughout 2006'. See Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 5 January 2007, 'Iraq: Conversation with President Bush' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁸⁵² Minute McNeil to MA1/DCDS(C), 1 February 2006, 'Defence Secretary's Visit to Iraq – 28-31 January 2007' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁸⁵³ These concerns were particularly focussed on Iranian influence in the south, and the emergence of a power vacuum if British troops departed (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 476 – 477).

⁸⁵⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 505.

February, the day after Browne completed his trip to Iraq, Secretary Rice contacted Manning (the British Ambassador to Washington) to ask him 'to tell her honestly whether the UK was now making for the exit as fast as possible'.⁸⁵⁵ These concerns about British plans only continued to deepen throughout the first six months of 2007 as the 'surge' gathered pace.⁸⁵⁶

US nervousness reached a height by the end of May 2007, when Stephen Hadley directly contacted Sheinwald to report that the planned reduction to 4,500 UK troops in Basra had caused 'considerable discomfort' to Petraeus and others. It sent, Hadley worried, 'conflicting signals ... to the Iraqis and international opinion'. Sheinwald reported that an intervention of this type from Hadley was 'relatively rare' and that it had probably been the result of a US principals meeting with Bush.⁸⁵⁷ Immediately after this intervention Lamb captured well the 'all to play for' feel of mid-2007, when he wrote to Blair that 'our part in the war... is how our coalition partners, the Iraqis and the Arab nations in particular will perceive us. Given our British heritage in this part of the world and the high regard for our honesty, principles and the quality of our contribution, there is, unless I am much mistaken, a lot yet to play for and a great deal at stake'.⁸⁵⁸

Strategic divergence between the UK and the US did not, however, only emerge in terms of force numbers. Divergence also appeared in the very way in which the campaign was being executed: the tactics of the Coalition. Bush had been clear from the outset that the 'surge' must include a 'surge of ideas', rather than just an increase in US troops.⁸⁵⁹ It was the need for a 'surge of ideas' the led to Bush's decision to appoint Petraeus as the new commander of MNF-I; Petraeus was clear eyed on

⁸⁵⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 525.

⁸⁵⁶ Senior military officers in Iraq soon began to use the looting of al-Amara as the text book example of how PIC must not be conducted (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 486). General Petraeus conducted his first visit to the UK area of operations in mid-February and, while he stated that he was 'largely receptive' to UK drawdown plans, he cautioned strongly about assuming that transition and PIC in Basra was in any way close (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 589). The Prime Minister's Private Secretary met with Meghan O'Sullivan, the US Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan and a prominent architect of the 'surge' strategy, at around the same time – where he was told that the US Corps in Iraq were assessing that 'Maysan might be ready for transition in May, but that Basra won't be ready in June': well beyond planned British timelines (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 592). When Blair announced to the British Parliament on 21 February that troop numbers in Iraq would fall in the coming months from '7,100 ... to roughly 5,500' (which was less than initially planned), the British Embassy in Washington reported that 'the Administration puts on a brave face and tries to portray UK plans as evidence of progress ... the media see the announcement as a serious setback for Bush's surge. The Democrats use British plans as ammunition in their battle to force US troop withdrawals' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 617). On 3 May 2007 Mr Blair's Private Secretary reported to him that 'the US may be becoming more concerned about our own plans for Basra ... The US will see the timing [leaving Basra Palace in August] as presentationally, awkward, given Petraeus's planned testimony in the Autumn. They may also have concerns ... about the level of criminality and the difficult political situation in Basra, which they would argue should delay PIC' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 779).

⁸⁵⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 875.

⁸⁵⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 881.

⁸⁵⁹ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 323.

what he believed was required to turn the campaign in Iraq around.⁸⁶⁰ The core of Petraeus's approach was to place the security of the Iraqi people as the number one priority for MNF-I. This re-prioritisation drove a major change in operational approach for US forces, who were largely withdrawn from urban areas in 2004 due to the 'antibody' theory.⁸⁶¹ But Petraeus explicitly rejected this. His insight was to realise that by the end of 2006 – with the ISF often embroiled in sectarian killing – the US service members weren't causing the violence; they were instead the only non-sectarian player that was in a position to stop it (a view echoed by Hadley).⁸⁶²

Petraeus's first order therefore was to deploy the 'surge' troops back into the most violent neighbourhoods in Baghdad and the surrounds, as this non-sectarian broker. This represented a major change in tactics⁸⁶³, and there could be no doubt that Petraeus intended it for the whole of Iraq.⁸⁶⁴ The flat rejection of the 'antibody' theory meant that UK tactical plans for 2007 – once aligned to Rumsfeld and Casey – were now moving in entirely the opposite direction.

The 'antibody' theory, however, remained fully established as accepted wisdom in the British strategic view of southern Iraq, with no attempts to challenge it.⁸⁶⁵ A central pillar of UK operational

⁸⁶⁰ Recall that Petraeus had written the US Army's new doctrine on counter-insurgency in 2005 and 2006.

⁸⁶¹ Since the spring of 2004 US service members had been operating largely out of four major operating bases on the peripheries of Baghdad; Camp Victory/Liberty near Baghdad International Airport, FOB Falcon in the south, FOB Rustamiyah in the southeast, and Camp Taji in the north of the city. The decision to withdraw them from the urban areas of Baghdad had been made in 2004 by Lieutenant General Sanchez and CJTF-7, ostensibly based on the 'antibody' theory that suggested that the presence of foreign military personnel was the source of much of the violence – and therefore risk of civilian casualties – within the city' (see Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 14). While this withdrawal may have been successful in the short term, in the long term the move into the peripheral bases left Baghdad open to the orgy of sectarian violence that took place in 2006 (with killings taking place mostly at night, when US service personnel were not present, and mostly in Iraqi homes). The 'antibody' theory had remained influential on both Casey and Rumsfeld, and was one of the foundational factors behind the 'stand up, stand down' approach (see Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 109).

⁸⁶² Petraeus was not alone in this belief. Hadley himself later told the *Last Card* oral history that he 'became convinced that actually to bring down the sectarian violence, the United States Army didn't need to get out of the way ... in fact [it] needed to inter-position itself and of course provide security to all three communities [Shi'a, Sunni and Kurds]. And that of course was the essence of the change of strategy that was associated with the surge' (see Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 125).

⁸⁶³ In one Divisional area alone, US forces established seventy-seven partnered outposts in the first months of the 'surge' (see William J. Denn, 'Strategic Command: General David Petraeus and the Execution of Strategic Leadership', *Military Review*, Sep 2016, p. 6 found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23)).

⁸⁶⁴ There could be no doubt about Petraeus's intentions to anyone in Iraq. On 15 March 2007 he transmitted an 'open letter' to all coalition troops (including the British) saying that he wanted them 'to be aware of [his] recognition that our focus on securing the population means that many of you will live in the neighbourhoods you're securing ... that is, in fact, the right way to secure the population ... because we can't commute to the fight in counterinsurgency operations; rather, we have to live with the population we are securing' (see Small Wars Journal, Bulletin Threads, *Threads: General Petraeus: Collection* found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23)). Once settled in theatre, Petraeus followed this up by publishing theatre-wide direction on ten key requirements for prosecuting effective counter-insurgency operations in Iraq, of which 'secure the people where they sleep' was established as the number one priority (see Mansoor, *Surge*, Loc Cit 2982).

⁸⁶⁵ General Dannatt asserted the 'antibody' theory clearly in his *Daily Mail* interview in October 2006, stating 'our presence exacerbates the security problems' (see *Daily Mail*, *General Sir Richard Dannatt: a Very Honest General* published 12 Oct 2006 found at [link](#) (accessed 9 Sep 22)). In late January Des Browne wrote to the Prime Minister stating that 'the fact is that the levels of violence [in Basra] remains relatively low – half that in Mosul, and a fraction of that in Baghdad and most violence is directed against the coalition. Once that is excluded, the level of violence is very low compared with many areas

plans for 2007 remained to withdraw British troops from Basra City itself, consolidating them in the single base at BIA.⁸⁶⁶ This aimed to have a number of complementary effects, including reducing the violence by removing coalition forces.⁸⁶⁷ But Petraeus and Gates feared that British plans to leave Basra would instead give Basra over to the Shi'a militias, and to Iranian influence.⁸⁶⁸ At a meeting of Iraq's neighbouring countries and the UN Permanent Five members, held in Baghdad on 10 March 2007, it was the Iranians who called loudest for a timetable for MNF-I withdrawal, arguing that they were 'part of the problem not the solution'.⁸⁶⁹ The Iranians were certainly believers in the 'antibody theory', even if the new US team were not.

By June 2007, American concerns around the British ceding the south to the Iranians were such that US forces conducted a Corps-level strike operation against Iranian-backed militias in Maysan just two months after the UK had executed PIC in the province; a telling judgment on how the UK had left the province in American eyes.⁸⁷⁰ The inescapable divergence between UK and US strategies was increasingly clear to see.

The Reaction: Increasing Dissonance. Was this divergence addressed (as one might hope) by British decision-makers with clear eyes, a careful re-assessment of assumptions, an adjusted strategy, and a realistic understanding of the potential impact of the decisions being made? The answer, in the main, is 'no'. Instead the evidence shows a growing dissonance at the highest levels of the British system; a dissonance that increasingly concealed the strategic reality in Iraq from Parliament, the US alliance, and the British public.

in Iraq' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 472). In March 2007 ACM Stirrup wrote to the Prime Minister that the large majority of attacks in the south were directed against MNF-I, and that violence was likely to reduce once British forces had left Basra (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 682). In April the JIC re-stated this pattern, concluding that the vast majority of violence in the south was in Basra province, consisting principally of attacks on MNF-I by JAM (it is worth noting that violence in the south had by this stage increased to representing 5% of attacks across Iraq, vice the 1% in mid-2005) (Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 759). Even the Prime Minister took the 'antibody' line in his 21 February statement to Parliament on UK re-posturing plans, where he stated that in the UK AO 'there is no Sunni insurgency and no al-Qaida base. There is little Shia on Sunni violence. The bulk of the attacks are on the Multi-National Force'. He reinforced the insinuation that the MNF were the cause of the violence, rather than a solution to it, later in his responses to Parliamentary questions that same day, stating that 'a lot of the fire is directed at the multinational force, rather than involving sectarian violence, so it is a different situation there' (Hansard record of Parliamentary Debate, 21 Feb 07, at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23)).

⁸⁶⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 410.

⁸⁶⁷ The first was to reduce the number of forces required to guard bases, thereby allowing a reduction of troop numbers. Second was to physically cede Basra back to Iraqi sovereignty, forcing the issue of the ISF taking ownership for security (often phrased in policy documents as showing that the British were 'serious about transition') (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 647).

⁸⁶⁸ For US concerns about militia and Iranian influence in Basra post UK draw-down, see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 476 and Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 572.

⁸⁶⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 668.

⁸⁷⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 913.

This dissonance was in three areas. The first was in the nature of the reporting from the MoD. The Ministry increasingly provided advice coloured by the most optimistic assessments of the situation, and portrayed unreasonable confidence about the alignment between British and American strategies. Browne played the most prominent role in this dissonance. On 11 January 2007, the day after Bush's announcement, he sought to reassure DOP(I) that the 'surge' had few implications for British strategy, stating that UK and US plans were 'entirely consistent' and that the concepts behind the 'surge' and Operation SINBAD were 'virtually identical'.⁸⁷¹

Browne continued this hard defensive in a brief on the same day to a joint session of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Select Committees, where he affirmed to them that 'the United States' plans are entirely consistent with our objectives and activities in MND(SE)'. When probed by the Committee on British consultation on the 'surge', he stated confidently that 'every single aspect of the structure of the way in which this coalition operates at a military level is reflected in agreements and in joint committee documents and we have a continuing role in the consideration of them and in the revision of them'.⁸⁷² This was not accurate: the evidence instead shows that the British political, strategic and operational levels had been decisively isolated from the 'surge', and had not been consulted.

This dissonance rapidly developed into a pattern. In late January 2007 Browne provided an update to Cabinet in which he gave overly positive reflections of the situation in southern Iraq, stating questionable statistics as objective facts. 'The murder rate', he stated, 'had reduced from over 100 to less than 30 a month ... the kidnap rate had been halved and polling suggested levels of confidence in security which would be welcome in the UK'.⁸⁷³ Just two days later, however, one of the Government's intelligence services provided a very different view to Blair's office. The report stated that 'by nearly every measure, security in Basra has deteriorated in the past year ... only a decline in sectarian murders in mid-2006 was a heartening indicator ... most Baswaris live in fear, including the civic leaders ... JAM have already spread a culture of criminality, intimidation and violence in Basra'.⁸⁷⁴ Despite this stark difference in perspective, it was Browne's view that made it into a Prime Ministerial update to Parliament in February 2007, which stated that 'the reported levels of murder and kidnapping are significantly down' in Basra.⁸⁷⁵

⁸⁷¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 407.

⁸⁷² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 424 – 425.

⁸⁷³ In terms of polling and confidence, Browne reported that '90 percent of those polled felt more secure than a year ago; only 2 percent had encountered intimidation in the last six months' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 484).

⁸⁷⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 494 – 495.

⁸⁷⁵ Hansard record of Parliamentary Debate, 21 Feb 07, at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

Dissonance continued under Stirrup as CDS, the architect of the 'law of diminishing returns'. Stirrup provided unrealistically optimistic military advice in early 2007. Much of this revolved around his assessment of the impact of troop withdrawals on military capabilities in Basra. In January 2007, just after the 'surge' announcement, Stirrup was asked by a concerned Blair what the impact would be of drawing down from 7,100 to 4,500 troops in Iraq. Stirrup told him there 'would be no impact, and no difference in our ability to create military effect, though this would in future be focused on training and mentoring'.⁸⁷⁶ This highly questionable assertion was immediately challenged by others. A paper coordinated by Cabinet Officials for a meeting of DOP (chaired by Blair) on 1 February 2007 cautioned that 'in Basra the effect of closing the bases in the city will be to reduce our tactical and situational awareness, making any re-intervention high risk'. The paper went on to say that it would be 'impossible to mitigate fully' the 'serious implications' on British military situational awareness once troops had left Basra city.⁸⁷⁷

Major General Shaw (who had replaced Shirreff as Commander MND(SE)) raised his own concerns about the impact of drawdown on military capacity to Stirrup personally when CDS visited Iraq in late February, but Stirrup overruled him, outlining how 'the strategic benefits of vacating Basra Palace (BP) outweighed the tactical benefits of remaining'.⁸⁷⁸ As the plans for the drawdown progressed, the overly optimistic nature of Stirrup's advice became clear. By March 2007 MoD sources were briefing that the withdrawal of British troops from Basra would 'impact significantly on the range of activity the FCO and PRT can carry out'⁸⁷⁹, outlining that police mentoring and political engagement would likely have to cease post withdrawal: a fact that was confirmed in July.⁸⁸⁰

It was only in May 2007, once the withdrawal was in full swing and arguably once it was too late to make any adjustments, that Stirrup's advice began to change. On 3 May Stirrup was approached by Sheinwald privately to ask him about the continued military utility of the UK's mission in Iraq. April

⁸⁷⁶ This became formal military advice when Des Browne wrote to the Prime Minister in late January to state 'the clear military advice ... is that re-posturing and the associated drawdown will not adversely affect our capacity to provide support to the Iraqi Security Forces'. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 435.

⁸⁷⁷ Paper Cabinet Office, 31 January 2007, 'Transition in Southern Iraq: Progress and Plans' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁸⁷⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 637. Shaw had already raised concerns in early reports, highlighting his concerns that his situational awareness in Basra was 'already limited'. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 500.

⁸⁷⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 662.

⁸⁸⁰ By July 2007 combined MoD and FCO papers were clear that 'a withdrawal from Basra Palace would mean closing the UK base at PJCC [Provincial Joint Coordination Centre], and so halting SSR [Security Sector Reform] work and losing 'situational intelligence within Basra City''. See Paper FCO and MoD, 12 July 2007, 'Iraq: Transition in Basra' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

2007 had been a tragic month for British forces, with eleven soldiers killed (the highest number in a single month since the invasion). Stirrup's advice painted a very different picture to the one he had presented in January, just four months earlier. He stated that once the final troops had left Basra Palace (the last military combat outpost in the city) they would 'lose [their] situational awareness'. He predicted that by 'late Autumn ... the UK capacity to re-intervene and conduct ... operations [would have] – as expected – degraded'. The risk at that stage would be so high, Stirrup argued, that there were only two options moving forward: a very rapid scaling down from around 4,700 to 500, or a 'gradual tapering' of forces over a longer period. With the 'law of diminishing returns' firmly in mind, Stirrup recommended the first option: essentially a full withdrawal.⁸⁸¹

The pathway from Stirrup's advice in January 2007 that military withdrawal from Basra would make 'no difference', to his advice in May 2007 that military withdrawal from Basra required a withdrawal from Iraq *writ large*, is not a pleasant one. Shaw painted the reality in Basra at the end of April 2007 when he wrote that 'we are at the limit of our ability to achieve effect, in particular to do anything about the casualties we are taking'.⁸⁸² Strategic dissonance was being felt not just in divergence with the US, but in lives lost.

Growing dissonance in the first half of 2007 did not go unnoticed in Downing Street. On 24 January, just after Blair received written advice from Browne that the level of violence in Basra was 'very low compared with many areas of Iraq' and that re-posturing would have no impact, Blair received the word from the British Embassy in Washington of concerns that 'lawlessness was rife in Basra and that the UK military were doing little to confront it'.⁸⁸³ Blair hand-wrote a comment on this report that 'either this is correct in which case we have a real problem, or it isn't in which case we must correct it. But what is going on in Basra?'.⁸⁸⁴ Days later, when he received the intelligence report that 'by nearly every measure, security in Basra has deteriorated in the past year', Blair commented that 'this is plainly utterly inconsistent with the CDS and Des [Browne's] view. So who is right?'.⁸⁸⁵ Blair was clearly unhappy with both the reporting and the strategic direction of travel.⁸⁸⁶

⁸⁸¹ Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 3 May 2007, 'Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁸⁸² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 752.

⁸⁸³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 476.

⁸⁸⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 477.

⁸⁸⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 496.

⁸⁸⁶ Nigel Sheinwald advised Blair in late December 2006 that 'the MoD are putting a positive gloss on Operation SINBAD because they are desperate to get down to 4,500 by May/June for Afghan reasons' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 379). Cabinet Office officials advised Blair in February that the MoD's assessment of Operation SINBAD would be drafted to be as 'positive as possible' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 583). Things did not improve as the 'surge' evolved. When presented with Air Marshal Stirrup's views in early May that a precipitous and rapid withdrawal by the end of 2007 was the right option, Blair wrote that 'it will be very hard to present as

But Blair's discomfort did not lead to a root and branch review or adaptation of strategy, as it had in the US, or in clear Prime Ministerial direction.⁸⁸⁷ Instead it led to a growing dissonance between what the Prime Minister and his close team were hearing and saying internally, and what they were telling their US and Iraqi interlocutors. On 5 February 2007 Blair spoke to Bush about the forthcoming announcement of UK drawdown plans. Despite his evident discomfort about the information he was receiving from the MoD, he assured Bush that the British would maintain the 'ability and tactical awareness to re-intervene' post withdrawal from the city.⁸⁸⁸ He passed on the same message the next day to Petraeus in their first meeting, re-assuring him that the UK would 'ensure that we retained good situational awareness, and the ability to re-intervene quickly and effectively'.⁸⁸⁹ He knew this was not likely to be the case.

On 14 February 2007 the Prime Minister was exposed to the full resource tension between Iraq and Afghanistan via a frank DOP paper entitled 'Iraq and Afghanistan: Balancing Military Effort in 2007', which stated explicitly (for the first time) that 'at least since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 we [the Armed Forces] have been operating in excess of our assumptions'.⁸⁹⁰ The DOP paper made it clear that it would not be possible to sustain five battlegroups in Iraq beyond August 2007 if Afghanistan commitments were to be met, and it set August that year as the necessary timeline for the withdrawal of the fifth battlegroup from Basra Palace. No other options were provided, and none were sought by Blair. Despite this, Blair reassured Maliki (who was seeking a modest delay on British withdrawal plans) on 19 February that 'the UK would stay in Basra throughout 2007 and into 2008 for as long as Maliki ... wished and the conditions warranted it', and reaffirmed to Bush on 20 February and again on 6 March that the UK would 'not be reducing combat capability' in Basra.⁸⁹¹

The Prime Minister's reassurances to Bush that the UK withdrawal would be 'conditions-based' continued right up until 21 June 2007, six days before he left the office.⁸⁹² By that stage, however, it was wholly evident to him that the MoD could not and would not offer options to extend the

anything other than a total withdrawal ... this can work if Basra's politics are sorted in the meantime but otherwise it cd [sic] be very dangerous for the stability of Iraq, & the US will, rightly, be v. concerned' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 783).

⁸⁸⁷ The only adaptation this discomfort prompted was a relatively minor one; the decision to sustain a UK battlegroup at Basra Palace for an extra three months between May and August 2007.

⁸⁸⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 549.

⁸⁸⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 551.

⁸⁹⁰ Paper MoD officials, 13 February 2007, 'Iraq and Afghanistan: Balancing Military Effort in 2007' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁸⁹¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 607 – 610 and 658.

⁸⁹² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 938.

presence of a fifth battlegroup at Basra Palace, and it was equally clear quite how much an impact the withdrawal would have on UK operations in the city. Withdrawal was no longer ‘conditions based’, it was time-based: by 2007 even Asquith as the British Ambassador in Iraq was writing instinctively about a ‘planned drawdown timetable’.⁸⁹³ I will examine further below why Blair chose dissonance over transparency, or indeed a change in strategy.

It is worth ending this section on divergence and dissonance by highlighting the unifying power of ‘big ideas’. The ‘surge’ itself was based on a ‘big idea’: that security was the key to stability in Iraq, and only US forces could provide it. ‘Big ideas’ also unified British approaches, but in a far more constraining way. The idea with the widest influence in 2006 and 2007 was one we have heard before: that ‘Basra was not Baghdad’. The concept that the south was separate to the rest of Iraq – and could be dealt with via a wholly separate strategy – became by mid-2007 an internal safety net against concerns around strategic divergence. It was raised in formal correspondence at the highest levels by multiple branches of Government. Beckett raised it at Cabinet the day after Bush’s announcement of the ‘surge’ as a clear mitigation against perceptions that British and American strategies were diverging.⁸⁹⁴ Browne was a great proponent of the idea, making it a *fait accompli* in his advice to Blair at the end of January 2007, stating that ‘of course Basra is different ...’ to the rest of Iraq and that there was ‘no question of us leaving a vacuum in the city’.⁸⁹⁵ He echoed this immediately after he visited Iraq in early 2007 and saw the scale of US divergence, stating in his report to Blair that ‘Basra is still not Baghdad’ and that the ‘broad strategy can and should survive’.⁸⁹⁶

There was one individual who, institutionally and personally, might have had the influence to challenge divergence: the Prime Minister. Blair, however, failed to do so. Blair’s decline in authority around the ‘surge’ stands in contrast to the influence he exerted on the decisions to go to war four years earlier. This marks the next important turning point in the journey of 2007.

Turning Point: the End of the Blair Era

The decision to ‘surge’ was a personal product of Bush as President: decided against the weight of opinion, against the instincts of most of his senior advisors, and enacted through an impressive

⁸⁹³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 489.

⁸⁹⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 418.

⁸⁹⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 471.

⁸⁹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 576.

personal program of strategic manoeuvring.⁸⁹⁷ Bush's boldness cannot be underestimated. Just weeks prior to the 'surge' announcement the Iraq Study Group had recommended a scaling back in US ambitions in Iraq and an acceleration of the reduction of American troops. This was seen by many as a 'tacit plan for withdrawal', which offered Bush an easy pathway out of Iraq in the face of the decisive Republican defeat in the 2006 mid-term elections.⁸⁹⁸ He elected not to take this easy path. Instead he fought to turn around the situation in Iraq through an unpopular, high-risk approach that placed his legacy as President firmly on the line.

Blair also found himself embroiled in late-2006 in an incrementally-failing strategy. Blair, like Bush, recognised this through long experience and a strong sense of strategic insight, and sought to drive policy change to address these failings. But unlike Bush, Blair failed to create any sort of decisive change. In this section I will examine why Blair failed in these attempts, and how his authority steadily drained away in the months leading up to the end of his long tenure as Prime Minister.

The Declining Agency of the Prime Minister: Blair and the Inability to Influence Strategy. In

November 2006 Blair recognised the importance of the coming period, writing to his staff that the 'the next few months are critical for foreign policy. Iraq in particular'.⁸⁹⁹ In the weeks that followed Blair, like Bush, sought bold action on his country's strategy in Iraq. His desires were highly ambitious. Blair foresaw a strategy that focussed on four points: agreement on a non-sectarian 'national compact' acceptable to all groups in Iraq; improvement in the functioning of Iraqi institutions; the filling of capability gaps in the security forces; and, regional actors being brought in to offer effective support to the Iraqi government.⁹⁰⁰ Wrapping around all of this, as it had been in

⁸⁹⁷ There is little doubt in the evidence that the 'surge' was a direct project of Bush himself, albeit enabled by the policy-making machinery beneath him. Stephen Hadley, Meghan O'Sullivan and Peter Feaver (Bush's inner circle as his National Security Team) write in their reflective analysis of the 'surge' process that the 'essential feature of the decision-making process that produced the surge was that from the beginning President Bush was at the center of the process', and that 'the surge ... required the personal effort of President Bush. He had to lay the bureaucratic, diplomatic, and political groundwork for the surge and put in place the key elements that allowed the surge to succeed' (see Brands et al, *The Last Card*, pp. 313 – 314). Kimberley Kagan reinforces this point in her military history of the 'surge' when she states that this was the 'boldest stroke of his presidency' (bolder than the decision to invade Iraq itself), and that Bush 'changed the mission, strategy, force size and entire leadership team of the American war effort in Iraq' (see Kagan, *The Surge: a Military History*, p. 28). Even those who stood in initial opposition to Bush's decision praised it after the fact. Stephen Cambone, the long-standing advisor to Secretary Rumsfeld, later said that Bush's decision to 'surge' was 'one of the model instances of presidential leadership in wartime' (see Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 492). There is no one who was involved intimately in the process who suggests that the decision was anyone's but Bush's, and all agree that it was Bush himself who was central to creating a dramatic policy change that significantly improved American opportunities in Iraq.

⁸⁹⁸ Brands et al, *The Last Card*, p. 435.

⁸⁹⁹ Note Blair, 5 November 2006, 'Note' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹⁰⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 260.

Blair's mind since the start of the war, was the need for a 'whole Middle East' strategy that reframed the debate around Iraq.⁹⁰¹

Blair made it clear that he wanted a qualitative change in British effort to achieve this. In mid-November 2006 he directly tasked Sheinwald and Beckett to develop a comprehensive plan to achieve his four-point strategy, which became the 'Forward Plan' (a plan Blair described as 'excellent' when he read it).⁹⁰² Blair's direction was designed to be a parallel effort to the public US strategy reviews which were ongoing by that stage (although remember that the UK knew nothing of the secret 'surge' option being developed behind these reviews).⁹⁰³ By mid-January 2007, just as Bush was announcing the 'surge', Blair's Private Secretary was relaying his direction that 'we are entering an important new phase in the coalition effort in Iraq ... the Prime Minister judges that our present level of effort should be stepped up in response. He would like to see a qualitative change in our ability to monitor progress in these key areas, to identify blockages to progress, and to take rapid action to fix these'.⁹⁰⁴

But this qualitative change did not follow, in any of the major branches of national power. Military plans remained essentially unchanged. Yes, there was a limited extension of a single-Battlegroup presence at Basra Palace for three months, and a surge of eight to ten officers to support work on 'reconciliation', but no innovative strategic options were offered by the MoD. There was certainly no sense of a bold economic or developmental surge from the FCO or DFID. The third iteration of the 'Better Basra Plan', published on 2 March 2007 by Dr Marsden as Consul General and Shaw as Commander MND(SE), outlined civilian projects in the 2007 to 2008 financial year of a total of £21 million, nearly £10 million less than the £30.7 million committed in 2006 to 2007.⁹⁰⁵ In terms of the political effort on factors such as 'reconciliation', Blair was clearly underwhelmed by the efforts. When presented with a paper on the topic from Whitehall's Iraq Policy Unit (IPU) in April 2007, Blair wrote 'I'm afraid I don't find this at all persuasive. It is essentially the same strategy but trying harder. It won't work'.⁹⁰⁶ It is clear that Blair wanted a change in strategy, to something more innovative and impactful, but he was not getting the options. By the end of April the problem of a

⁹⁰¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 268.

⁹⁰² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 275.

⁹⁰³ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 27 November 2006, 'Iraq Strategy Group, 24 November'; Minute McDonald to Banner, 24 November 2006, 'Iraq Forward Plan' attaching Draft Paper, [undated], 'Iraq: Forward Plan' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹⁰⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 397.

⁹⁰⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 644.

⁹⁰⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 743.

lack of responsiveness became clear when Blair wrote starkly in a private note to his Private Secretary, 'but the FCO and MoD won't respond – we will have to do it'.⁹⁰⁷

An excellent vignette of Blair's declining agency in early 2007 lies back in the desire for a unified approach to strategy in Iraq. Blair directed decisive change in this area. On 29 December 2006 Shirreff, at Blair's request, wrote to the Prime Minister to give his recommendations on fixing the problem of the lack of a 'Comprehensive Approach'. The problem, Shirreff diagnosed, was a lack of 'unity of command and unity of purpose'. Quoting Guderian, Shirreff argued forcefully that the UK needed to 'clout not dribble', and that currently the effort in Iraq was 'dribbling and ... likely to fail'. Shirreff boldly proposed the formation of a 'Joint Inter-Agency Task Force' that would bring together civilian and military effort. This would be under the leadership of a single individual: Shirreff (or his successors). This, Shirreff recommended, would 'deliver concentrated British effect' and would 'improve the prospects of strategic success'.⁹⁰⁸

Sheinwald delivered Shirreff's letter to the Prime Minister on 5 January 2007, making it clear that Whitehall Departments did not agree with Shirreff's views. Indeed, he reported, DFID and the FCO were 'very fed up with Shirreff's disparaging comments about the civilian effort'. But ultimately Sheinwald agreed with Shirreff's assessment. 'The fact is', he wrote, 'that there have been constant problems between the military and civilian people in Basra from the start. We must make a last effort to get a joined-up operation'. The overall recommendation from the ISOG was that any Task Force should be 'civilian led, with strong military input'.⁹⁰⁹

Blair's orders were clear. Presented with both policy options, he hand-wrote bluntly that Sheinwald was to, 'Put Shirreff in charge – the Army gets things done'.⁹¹⁰ This was not a passing fancy. Just a few weeks later he wrote again to Sheinwald, asking 'have we established the Joint Working yet, led by military?'.⁹¹¹ But this order was not executed. When Blair questioned Stirrup in mid-January on the progress of setting up the 'joint structures to deliver assistance in Basra', he was told by CDS that it was 'too late in the day to try to establish a Joint Interagency Task Force', and that 'our focus should be on building Iraqi capability to deliver assistance'. CDS 'did not agree with all of ... Shirreff's

⁹⁰⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 767.

⁹⁰⁸ Letter Shirreff to Blair, 29 December 2006, [untitled] from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹⁰⁹ Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 5 January 2007, 'Iraq: Weekly Update' attaching Note Cabinet Office, 5 January 2007, 'Basra' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹¹⁰ Manuscript comment Blair on Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 5 January 2007, 'Iraq: Weekly Update' attaching Note Cabinet Office, 5 January 2007, 'Basra' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹¹¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 427.

ideas on this issue'.⁹¹² Blair quietly accepted this advice, without showing any of his traditional steel or propensity to probe, and the idea of a 'Joint Inter Agency Task Force' was dead: suffocated by Stirrup's 'law of diminishing returns'.⁹¹³ This is but one example of a pattern in late 2006 and early 2007 where Blair's direction was deflected, or even ignored.⁹¹⁴ Ultimately Blair was right: by May 2007 the MoD and the FCO would not respond to his direction, and he seemed unable to influence British strategy in any instrumental sense.

So, why? Blair as an individual had long been an important influence. Why was it that in late 2006 and early 2007 this influence rapidly drained away? The answer lies in two places: inside the political machinations of the PLP, and within Blair's own philosophical approach.

Blair's political authority arguably began to decline as early as 2005, where his third general election saw New Labour returned but with a markedly reduced majority.⁹¹⁵ Blair's real problems with his own party, however, began in March 2006 centred around two key factors: one domestic, and one foreign. These problems proved politically terminal. On 21 March 2006 the *Sunday Times* broke the story of a domestic scandal within the Labour Party that became known as the '*cash for honours*' affair.⁹¹⁶ For the next eighteen months senior Party members were investigated by the police,

⁹¹² It is worth noting that this was the same meeting where Stirrup optimistically told Blair that the reduction in force numbers to 4,500 troops would have 'no impact, and [there would be] no difference in our ability to create military effect, though this would in future be focused on training and mentoring'.

⁹¹³ Letter Banner to Siddiq, 16 January 2007, 'Iraq: Meeting with Officials' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹¹⁴ An additional example is found in the challenging topic of 'reconciliation'. Blair had been flagging 'reconciliation' as an area for strategic effort since January 2007 (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 460), but it took until April for the FCO to cohere their ideas into a coherent concept for the Prime Minister's consideration. Blair was not impressed. On 25 April his Private Secretary wrote to the FCO to report that Blair had concluded that the Iraq Policy Unit paper on reconciliation did not 'do justice in urgency or scale of ambition to the task in hand', and directing them to produce a 'more ambitious reconciliation plan' by 8 May (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 755). It was this that led to Blair's remarkable comment that 'the FCO and MoD won't respond – we will have to do it'. The IPU did provide another plan, on 11 May (a little after the Prime Minister's deadline). Blair concurred that this was a 'much better paper ... but the key missing element [of the last offering] remains' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 826). He again wanted more. By 17 May (after a VTC with Bush) the Prime Minister was leaning in with clear direction, with his Private Secretary writing to Margaret Beckett that 'the Prime Minister is strengthened in his view that the UK needs to make a concerted push on reconciliation working with the US. He would like a senior British official to be in charge of this who would work closely with the US, and who could be available to undertake dialogue in Iraq and the region'. The FCO was tasked to provide options for this by 25 May. But neither of these tasks were completed: no senior official was identified, and there is no evidence that the FCO met the 25 May deadline (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 853 – 854). Essentially, Blair's direction was ignored.

⁹¹⁵ Under Blair's banner, in 1997 Labour won a remarkable 179 seat majority, which only reduced to 167 four years later in 2001. In the 2005 election, however, this declined to a majority of just sixty-six. While still potentially enough to allow the party to enjoy four or five more years of secure Government, it marked a dramatic decline in national support for Blair's leadership and the Government's performance over the period of the Iraq war. The electoral statistics were more concerning than the overall majority. Labour secured just a 36% share of the vote in the 2005 election; less than that won by any previous majority government, and a drop of eight points since 1997. See Seldon et al, *Blair's Britain*, pp. 38 - 39.

⁹¹⁶ The 'cash for honours' affair was founded in accusations from the Scottish National Party that the Prime Minister, his Labour Party ministers, and Party fundraisers had nominated wealth businessmen for peerages and seats in the House of Lords in exchange for undeclared loans for Labour Party campaigns (of an amount totalling around £14 million).

questioned under caution, and arrested.⁹¹⁷ Blair himself was questioned by police three times, albeit as a witness and not under caution.⁹¹⁸ While no charges were eventually bought, the '*cash for honours*' affair became a constant plague on Blair's standing as Prime Minister throughout 2006 and 2007. He describes it as 'a running sore of the most poisonous and debilitating kind ... eighteen months of absolute hell'.⁹¹⁹ Accusations of corruption were a cancer on Blair's reputation, steadily eating away at his authority.

The second problem – the foreign policy challenge – was more profound, took place simultaneously to the mire of the first, and was yet again connected to the inherent friction of war. In July 2006, following a cross-border raid from Lebanese Hezbollah, Israel conducted a ground invasion of southern Lebanon, resulting in thousands of casualties. A groundswell of international opinion began to view the Israeli response as disproportionate. By 26 July international calls for an unconditional ceasefire were near unanimous. These views reached a peak on 30 July after an Israeli air-strike killed twenty-eight civilians, including seventeen children.⁹²⁰

The British under Blair and the Americans under Bush were prominent – and isolated – voices standing out against the ceasefire calls.⁹²¹ Blair once again took a controversial position on the international stage. His reasons for this were complex, but were clearly grounded in the same binary philosophy that had driven past decisions. Blair was well aware of how unpopular his opinions were becoming: indeed his most trusted advisors were making it clear. Sally Morgan, a Blair senior aide, recalls flatly telling Blair '[t]his will do for you'.⁹²² Morgan was right. The combination of the '*cash*

⁹¹⁷ This included prominent Party officials like Lord Levy (Labour's chief fundraiser), Patricia Hewitt (the Health Secretary), and Ruth Turner (Blair's Director of Public Relations).

⁹¹⁸ For a background and chronology of the '*Cash for Honours*' affair, see Seldon et al, *Blair's Britain*, p. 179 and Reuters, *Chronology: the Case for Honours Row*, 1 Feb 2007 found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹¹⁹ Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 11594.

⁹²⁰ Toby Greene, 'When Conviction Trumps Domestic Politics: Tony Blair and the Second Lebanon War', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Ed 15, 2019, pp. 49 – 55.

⁹²¹ Blair personally declined to directly criticise Israeli actions at the UN Security Council on 14 July, and refused to call for a ceasefire that was 'unconditional' on both sides. At the Rome Conference, Beckett (who, readers may recall, was entirely new to her role in the Foreign Office) faithfully held Blair's line, standing as the lone supporter to Condoleezza Rice as Rice rejected near-unanimous calls for an unconditional ceasefire. UK enablement of Israel's campaign went, at times, beyond just the provision of diplomatic manoeuvre space. American planes resupplying Israeli forces were allowed to land at Prestwick airbase en route to the country. Blair's position shifted after the civilian deaths of 30 July, with him calling for 'an urgent cessation of hostilities' and 'maximum restraint'; but he still did not call for an immediate or unconditional ceasefire. Blair once again took a controversial and unpopular position on the international stage (see Greene, 'When Conviction Trumps Domestic Politics', pp. 49 – 55).

⁹²² In addition to Morgan, former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw told Blair privately that the Prime Minister was making a fundamental mistake (Straw himself broke ranks with Blair and publicly called Israel's actions 'disproportionate'). Cabinet Minister David Miliband warned that Blair was causing damage to the Labour Party's standing during a 27 July Cabinet Meeting. Some even felt that Blair's stance could be terminal for his Prime Ministership (see Greene, 'When Conviction Trumps Domestic Politics', pp. 53 – 54).

for honours’ affair and Blair’s position on Lebanon led to a dramatic collapse in support within the PLP.⁹²³ Dissent went far beyond mere party factionalism: it became clear that Blair had lost the support of the Labour mainstream, even the ‘Blairites’. Blair exacerbated the situation on 1 September in an interview to the *Times* where he refused to discuss the end of his Prime Ministership, and called on ‘people’ to ‘let me get on with the job’.⁹²⁴

Those working closely with Blair agree that this was a tipping point. Morgan stated that this was when Blair ‘lost the mainstream Labour MPs, the core people’. Blair’s director of strategic communications, Ben Wegg-Prosser, stated that ‘Lebanon was the straw that broke the camel’s back in turning them against Blair’s leadership’.⁹²⁵ Blair himself acknowledges this impact in his memoir. ‘If I had condemned Israel’, he wrote, ‘It would have been more than dishonest; it would have undermined the world view I had come to hold passionately. So I didn’t, but I could feel the PLP move more or less en masse to a querulous position’.⁹²⁶

On 4 September 2006 this querulous position became open rebellion. In a move that Blair believed was orchestrated by Chancellor Gordon Brown, tens of Labour MPs began openly publishing letters calling for Blair to either name a departure date, or to resign. This attempted ‘coup’ (as Blair labelled it) included Tom Watson, a Cabinet Minister and Permanent Under Secretary in the MoD. The media furore shifted instantly from Lebanon to the ‘coup’, with multiple newspapers joining the calls for Blair to announce a departure timeline. Blair felt he has no choice but to respond.⁹²⁷ On 7 September he announced that the forthcoming Labour Party Conference would be his last (indicating he would leave within a year).⁹²⁸ On 10 May 2007 Blair announced his intention at the Trimdon Labour Club to resign as both Labour leader and Prime Minister.⁹²⁹ He eventually left office on 27 June 2007. The manner of Blair’s departure was unique in modern British politics at the time. While four other post-war Prime Ministers had resigned while in office (Eden, Macmillan, Wilson and Thatcher), none advertised their departure in advance.⁹³⁰

⁹²³ It is worth noting that in places the two scandals overlapped; Lord Levy, arrested by police on 12 July 2006 as part of the honours investigation, was also Blair’s long-standing envoy to the Middle East (see UK Parliament, *MPs and Lords: Lord Levy* found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23)).

⁹²⁴ The London Times, *Blair Defies his Party Over Departure Date*, 1 Sep 2006, found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹²⁵ Greene, ‘When Conviction Trumps Domestic Politics’, pp. 53 – 54.

⁹²⁶ Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 11146.

⁹²⁷ Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 11732.

⁹²⁸ The Guardian, *Tony Blair’s Statement in Full*, 7 Sep 2006, found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹²⁹ Deutsche Welle, *Blair Resignation*, 5 Oct 2006, found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹³⁰ Oxford University Press Online Resources Centre, *Tony Blair’s ‘Long Goodbye’*, 2016, found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

Blair's decision to execute a progressive resignation had considerable implications for British strategy in Iraq. Lord Adonis, a key Blair policy advisor, showed prescience in the summer of 2006 when he wrote to Blair to say 'once you "name the date", your authority will drain away rapidly and will soon be followed by growing calls for you to bring the date forward to "end the lame duckery"'.⁹³¹ Blair agreed. He knew 'there would be a genuine problem of authority', he wrote in his memoir, 'Gordon ... was the future. He would draw people to him. If he disagreed on matters, even Labour ministers would think twice about siding with me over him'.⁹³² The instincts of both men were correct. From September 2006 Blair's authority as Prime Minister rapidly drained away. Within days Blair reported that chairing Cabinet was 'a bit weird. Everyone knows the plates have shifted but nobody really knew whether they were meant to be the same, different, or indifferent'.⁹³³ Lord Grocott, the Government's Chief Whip in the Lords, was more frank. As Alastair Campbell reports, '[Grocott] said at Cabinet people now basically looked towards GB [Gordon Brown] not [Blair]'.⁹³⁴

With his tenure now measured in months, Blair immediately reassessed his priorities; the intractable issues of Iraq was not high on the list. After the announcement he 'retreated to Chequers to think', and decided that he had to 'go out having taken core, fundamental decisions on policy which embedded completely the New Labour programme on which we were engaged'.⁹³⁵ His aim was to embed his agenda so deeply within the Party's program that Brown – as his increasingly adversarial successor – would be unable to unstitch it. The priorities soon became clear. Domestic issues dominated: law and order, the Ministry of Justice, immigration, and the NHS.⁹³⁶ Iraq found itself heavily diminished in Blair's personal priorities from the time of his September 2006 announcement through to his eventual departure in June 2007.

This was exceptionally bad timing for British strategy in Iraq, particularly when it had been so reliant on Blair's personal influence and the *doctrine of the individual* in the past. Recall that in September 2006, just as Blair's priorities were changing, Shirreff was pleading for Ministerial support from London to prevent Maliki vetoing SALAMANCA: a plea that led, in his mind, to 'absolutely nothing'. Blair did little to address the resource woes placed on the MoD by the dual crises in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving them instead to an inexperienced Secretary of State within whom he had little

⁹³¹ Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 11681.

⁹³² Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 11866.

⁹³³ Alastair Campbell, *The Burden of Power: Countdown to Iraq, The Alastair Campbell Diaries, Vol 6* (London: Biteback, 2017), p. 578.

⁹³⁴ Campbell, *Burden of Power Vol 6*, p. 582.

⁹³⁵ Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 11902.

⁹³⁶ Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 12095.

confidence. Rather than probing and personally leading Iraq strategy as he had in the past, he became far more likely to accept the judgement of others, despite evident issues.⁹³⁷ He sought change, including with his new 'four-point strategy', but then uncharacteristically failed to drive it through. Even his personal directions lost their Prime Ministerial 'teeth' after his departure announcement, and seem to be increasingly watered down.⁹³⁸ Clear strategic direction was lost in the cautious language reflective of a Prime Minister who had higher priorities, and whose authority was waning.

It is worth remembering that it did not have to be this way. With nearly three years to the next UK general election, and still with a reasonable majority, Blair could have remained in place until 2008: a period that would have seen him remain in power through the period of the 'surge'. Thanks to the political machinations of the PLP, and to his own philosophy, Blair never got the chance.

One Last Note: the End of the Blair/Bush Relationship. Blair's declining influence was clearly evident in his personal relationship with Bush. This had been a cornerstone of British strategy since the start of the war. As highlighted earlier, the principal medium by which Blair applied this influence was through his personal 'Notes'. These were injected directly to Bush, usually just prior to a face to face discussion: Blair's way of pre-setting the agenda and tone for such engagements. The most well-known 'Note' is the 'I will be with you, whatever' note of July 2002.⁹³⁹ But there are other notes that prove that Blair's use of this medium was effective and persistent, such as the note sent to shape Bush's decisions around the first battle of Fallujah in April 2004.⁹⁴⁰ The flow of 'Notes' from Blair to Bush was consistent throughout the Iraq conflict, and they were considerably influential.

This influence finally fell into terminal decline in late 2006 to mid-2007. Blair sent Bush five 'Notes' between his departure announcement in September 2006 and his departure in June 2007, with one

⁹³⁷ In early October, for example, he accepted Margaret Beckett's swift judgement on the removal of civilian staff from Basra Palace, and in February 2007 he willingly announced forthcoming plans to reduce troop numbers in Basra, despite his clear personal misgivings.

⁹³⁸ Blair's categorical direction, for example, that Sheinwald should 'Put Shirreff in charge – the Army gets things done' became in Sheinwald's follow on direction that, 'if necessary [the Prime Minister] is content that this should be delivered via a task force under military leadership'. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 397.

⁹³⁹ Note Blair to Bush, 'Note on Iraq', 28 Jul 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

⁹⁴⁰ The British were deeply concerned by US aggressive intentions in the aftermath of the deaths of the Blackwater contractors in Fallujah, worried that simultaneous US action in both Fallujah and against Muqtada al-Sadr would lead to a catastrophic loss of consent in the south of Iraq. Blair injected personally to urge Bush to apply caution, writing a particularly impressive 'Note' to him on 15 April 2004. This 'Note', which messaged unity, caution and the avoidance of a 'two front' war against Sunni and Shi'a communities, helped shape a far-more circumspect approach to the Fallujah problem: much to the frustration of General Mattis. See Note [Blair to Bush], [undated], 'Note' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

face-to-face meeting between leaders at the White House on 7 December 2006 (the peak of British isolation from US decision-making about the 'surge').⁹⁴¹ The themes in these notes are relatively consistent. Blair advocates strongly for an expansive 'political compact' between all Iraqis, focussed on reconciliation, that creates a basis for non-sectarian progress. He focuses on a strategy that aggressively builds Iraqi military and governance capability. He pushes hard for his 'whole Middle East' approach.

These 'Notes', however, lack the sophistication of those of 2003 and 2004, reflective of Blair's changed priorities. They seem hurried and unfocused, without the careful leveraging of strategic influence of the 15 April 2004 Fallujah 'Note' (for example). The one on 20 December 2006 is a particular low point. Sent eight days after British decision-makers first became aware of the possibility of the 'surge'⁹⁴², the 20 December 'Note' is clumsy and contradictory. It emphasises the need to focus on 'three pillars': increasing the speed of the development of the Iraqi Army; on reconciliation and outreach; and, the management system within Maliki's office. It then argues that each of these pillars needs 'one [British or American] person, properly empowered in charge of these' and cautions that 'we can't leave it to the Iraqi system'. But it then later concludes that 'whatever you do, the only ultimate solution is Iraqi'. It is vague in language and intent. It is, Blair writes, 'in stopping stuff coming into eg Sadr City that the problem arises', and that 'road blocks and check points' are the solution.⁹⁴³

Blair's final 'Note' to Bush was sent on 3 May 2007. This 'Note' is better crafted than the 20 December missive. But despite the 'surge' rejection of his ideas, Blair continued to advocate for a strategic broadening in the approach to Iraq. Blair paints Bush and himself as being on the defensive, 'lone voices' against an Islamic extremism that had a 'coherent political strategy for Iraq whereas our problem is that we don't'. The absence of a 'big political strategy for the region' was, in Blair's view, the greatest flaw in their combined plan and that they needed 'radically to upgrade our political approach' in order to change the debate from 'whether we can win' to an 'insistence we have to

⁹⁴¹ The five notes were sent on 5 Nov 2006 (see Note Blair to Bush, 'Note', 5 Nov 06 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23)), on 9 Nov 2006, (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 154), on 27 Nov 2006 (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 311), on 20 Dec 2006 (see Note Blair to Bush, 'Note', 20 Dec 06 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23)), and on 3 May 2007 (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 788). For evidence around the final face-to-face meeting between Blair and Bush, see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 332.

⁹⁴² Recall that the first the British heard of the 'surge' was on 12 December 2006, when Stephen Hadley told Sir Nigel Sheinwald that the US was considering a 'bridging force' in 2007 to help stem the violence. The 'Tank' meeting took place the next day. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 339.

⁹⁴³ Note [Blair to Bush], 20 Dec 2006, 'Note' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 9 Jan 24).

win'. Blair ends with an exhortation to Bush's ideological beliefs. 'Iraq has to be bigger than just Iraq' he wrote, 'it has to be part of a more profound and wider picture. People have to see it as a frontier in a battle across the region and the world. That is a battle, as you always rightly say, between freedom and extremism, democracy and terror. But we have to get back onto the front foot politically. I am absolutely confident it can be done. Even after I go, which will be soon now, I will help in any way I can'.⁹⁴⁴

Bush's Iraq priorities by May 2007, however, were firmly elsewhere and Blair's ambitious plans gained no traction. Rather than seeking to broaden the strategy around Iraq, Bush was intensely focussed on delivering the 'surge', working to link policy, strategy and tactics together, and to wrestle control of the phenomenon of war. He was speaking at least weekly with Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker (his new emissary in Baghdad), with them sat side-by-side. He particularly leaned into the civilian aspects of the 'surge', holding video conferences with PRTs across Iraq. He tracked metrics of 'surge' progress daily.⁹⁴⁵ It is no surprise that the 'surge' dominated Bush's time: he had staked his political reputation – and the lives of US service personnel – on it, a choice that was high-risk and painful. And the price was certainly high. The US military lost 104 soldiers in the month leading up to Blair's last 'Note', and would go on to lose 126 in May and 101 in June (the first time in the whole war, including the invasion, that they suffered triple-digit losses three months consecutively).⁹⁴⁶ Domestic political pressure was mounting.⁹⁴⁷ With casualties soaring, and with the political wolves closing in, Bush was fully focussed on the 'surge' and not on seeking a broader regional strategic solution in Iraq. He was, as Petraeus had observed he would need to be, 'all in'.⁹⁴⁸

There is therefore little evidence that Blair's final 'Notes' had any effect on Bush. The Inquiry archive contains no reflections that US strategic behaviour changed thanks to Blair's injects in that last nine-month period. Bush himself is silent on the matter.⁹⁴⁹ It is possible that Blair knew that he was not having an impact, and finally became resigned to it. While the 3 May 'Note' was the last one sent, it was not the last one prepared. Blair made one final visit to Iraq in mid-May 2007, and on his return

⁹⁴⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 788 – 794.

⁹⁴⁵ Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 381.

⁹⁴⁶ Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 380.

⁹⁴⁷ In February 2007 the Democrat-led House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution condemning the 'surge', and on 1 May (two days before Blair's last 'Note') they passed Bush a war-funding bill that mandated a troop withdrawal by the end of 2007. Bush was forced to veto it. See Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 382.

⁹⁴⁸ Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 380.

⁹⁴⁹ While Blair is a key protagonist in the early phases of the President's personal memoir of the Iraq invasion, he does not warrant a mention in Bush's own record of the 'surge'. Neither Blair nor the UK *writ large* receive any significant mention in the extensive oral history of the 'surge' held within the *Last Card*.

he promised a 'Note' to Bush with a proposed plan to achieve his broader political vision. This 'Note' was duly drafted by Blair's Private Secretary on 22 May 2007. But on 23 May Dominic Asquith met Petraeus and Crocker in Baghdad to trial Blair's ideas; to 'talk through how we might achieve the "political decision" which the Prime Minister was pressing for'. Both US leaders explicitly rejected the ideas, considering them 'unachievable', and this was reported to Blair. When the final draft 'Note' was presented to Blair on the same day, he elected not to send it.⁹⁵⁰ This was an ignoble end to a critical strategic tool that had proved remarkably influential over the years.

Blair's 'Notes' to Bush had always been private; indeed this was one of the reasons they had been so effective. There was one surprising person, however, that Blair's 'Notes' were not shared with in the last months of his tenure: his designated successor. By May 2007 it was beyond doubt that Brown would replace Blair as Prime Minister.⁹⁵¹ Blair and Brown, and their respective teams, had been discussing the transition of power for months, at least since the October 2006 Labour Party conference.⁹⁵² But even in May 2007, just over a month prior to handover, Blair was not sharing his messages to Bush with Brown. He had taken no steps to transition his relationship with the US President to his successor. Brown had never met Bush, despite his many years as Chancellor.⁹⁵³ Blair's determination to guard his personal relationship with Bush sets the tone for the final turning point in Part Four: the end of the long-running Blair era, and the beginning of Brown's brief time as the highest decision-maker in British strategy in Iraq.

Turning Point: a New Prime Minister, a Deal, and the Final Journey to PIC

Gordon Brown finally took the drive to Buckingham Palace to form a Government on 27 June 2007. This, in his mind, was long-overdue. It had been over thirteen years since Blair had made a promise not to stand for a third term as Prime Minister and to pass Brown the torch. The transition between the two had not been amicable. They had started in politics as co-pioneers of New Labour, determined to re-shape Britain together; Brown would later write that he and Blair 'seemed to be of one mind'.⁹⁵⁴ But by 2004 this had started to sour. Divisions over such fundamental policies as joining the Euro, university tuition fees, and NHS reform had driven a schism between them; by 2006

⁹⁵⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 863 – 869.

⁹⁵¹ On 11 May 2007 Brown formally announced his bid for Labour leadership, and by 16 May he had secured sufficient Labour Party nominations to avoid a leadership contest. See The Guardian, *Brown Lays Out Leadership Credentials*, 12 May 2007, found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

⁹⁵² Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 12105.

⁹⁵³ Campbell, *Burden of Power* Vol 6, p. 721.

⁹⁵⁴ Gordon Brown, *My Life, Our Times* (London: Vintage Arrow, 2018), p. 89.

their relationship was at a low.⁹⁵⁵ Blair recalls an incident in his office in March 2006 where Brown told him he should ‘clear the way’, a direction he ‘disdained’. As Blair puts it, ‘he felt I was ruining his inheritance and I felt he was ruining my legacy’.⁹⁵⁶ These frictions came to a head in September 2006 with the ‘coup’, an action which Blair remains convinced was orchestrated by Brown (although Brown denies this).⁹⁵⁷

Trust between the two was absent from that stage onwards, creating insurmountable transition barriers.⁹⁵⁸ Brown saw Blair’s legacy as being at the heart of Labour’s political woes; a set of shackles that had to be cast off. It was clear that change and not continuity with the Blair era was to be a defining feature of Brown’s approach.

As much as he might have wanted to find a new agenda, the war in Iraq gifted the new Prime Minister with a baptism of fire typical of war’s violent and unpredictable nature. On 28 June 2007, just a day after Brown took over, three soldiers were killed in a roadside bomb in Basra.⁹⁵⁹ The following two days saw two terrorist incidents take place in the UK, in London⁹⁶⁰ and Glasgow.⁹⁶¹ One of Brown’s first actions as Prime Minister was to raise the terrorist threat level in the UK to ‘critical’: the highest level.⁹⁶² MI6 later reported to the Inquiry that both the London plot and the Glasgow attack were undertaken by individuals ‘radicalised and motivated by what they had seen reported about Iraq’.⁹⁶³ Like Des Browne and the Lynx incident of 6 May 2006, Iraq was an unpleasant and attention-consuming introduction to the rigours of the highest office.

Brown’s immediate approach to Iraq was one of continuity in a strategy of ‘withdrawal’. This started with his selection of his Secretary of State for Defence. Despite Blair’s reservations, Brown maintained Des Browne in role as the Defence Secretary in his reshuffled cabinet. Browne would

⁹⁵⁵ Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 250.

⁹⁵⁶ Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 11613.

⁹⁵⁷ For Blair’s perspective on the ‘coup’ see Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 11782. Conversely, Brown states that the ‘coup’ was conducted ‘without [his] knowledge’ and that he ‘helped put the rebellion down’; see Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 191.

⁹⁵⁸ Blair talks of how he and his team sought to work collaboratively with the Brown inner circle to establish the foundations for Brown’s Prime Ministership through a forward policy entitled ‘Pathways to the Future’, but that Brown in the end ‘couldn’t see it’. While the Prime Minister-delegate ‘played along’, Blair was clear that ‘behind the scenes his folk ... were denigrating [Pathways to the Future] as a vanity project and treating it with scorn’ (see Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 12119).

⁹⁵⁹ UK Ministry of Defence, Press Release, *Corporal Paul Jozsko and Privates Scott Kennedy and James Kerr Killed in Basra Roadside Bomb Attack on 28th June 2007*, 28 June 2007, found at [link](#) (accessed 6 Jan 24).

⁹⁶⁰ Two car bombs were discovered in Haymarket in the West End of London on 29 June. See BBC News, Online Article, *Two Car Bombs Found in West End*, 29 June 2007, found at [link](#) (accessed 6 Jan 24).

⁹⁶¹ On 30 June a vehicle loaded with propane gas cylinders was driven by two men into Glasgow airport and set on fire. See LA Times, Online Article, *Car is Rammed into Glasgow Airport, Explodes*, 30 June 2007, found at [link](#) (accessed 6 Jan 24).

⁹⁶² A ‘critical’ level indicated that a further terrorist attack was ‘expected imminently’. See UK Home Office, Media Release, *Threat Level Raised to Critical*, 30 June 2007, found at [link](#) (accessed 6 Jan 24).

⁹⁶³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, see box on p. 185.

have been a trusted hand to the new Prime Minister, as the former Chief Secretary of the Treasury. Brown's new Government's perspective of Iraq quickly became clear. The first advice on the topic sent to the new Prime Minister on 29 June included '... draft new language, which you may want to use at PMQs [Prime Minister's Questions] ... which aims to strike a realistic, more downbeat, tone on the situation in Iraq and to put the onus for positive change firmly on the Iraqi Government'.⁹⁶⁴

Brown allocated little time to directly addressing Iraq strategy in his first few weeks. On 3 July his Private Secretary indicated to the Iraq Strategy Group that he would 'stick broadly to the strategy outlined by Mr Blair in [his statement to the Commons] in February [2007]'.⁹⁶⁵ This position was then re-affirmed to the US in mid-July by Simon McDonald, Brown's Foreign Policy Advisor. McDonald's message was clear: there was 'no difference between the approach of Gordon Brown and that of his predecessor'. The 'UK objective', McDonald affirmed, 'was not to change its posture in Iraq until September [2007] ... but the Government was under huge pressure to move after that, and to get ahead of the US'.⁹⁶⁶ It was publicly clear that, under Brown, the pathway to expedient transition and withdrawal was to continue. I will show below that – privately – he wanted to go much further, and much faster.

This decision for continuity in strategy placed three major issues at Brown's door. The first was how to execute one of the most challenging military operations available: a withdrawal in contact from Basra. The second was how to do this while managing the UK's relationship with the US. The third, and so far unconsidered challenge, was then to define the UK's long-term strategy within post-withdrawal Iraq. Time was short. With the Parliament due to expire in May 2010, Brown had less than three years to change the UK population's negative perceptions on Iraq before it became a dangerous election issue for Labour. Expedient (and indeed accelerated) withdrawal was the preferred option, firmly driven by domestic pressures.

The Brown Government, however, soon learned that a change in Prime Minister did not alleviate the strategic challenges. By adopting the February 2007 Blair strategy, the new Prime Minister also adopted *en mass* the flawed assumptions inherent within that strategy. Three issues quickly imposed themselves. UK casualty rates in Iraq were remarkably high as Brown took over. With the three deaths of 28 June 2007 included, the six months of Shaw's tenure as Commander MND(SE) was

⁹⁶⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 12.

⁹⁶⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 30.

⁹⁶⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 110.

well on track to becoming the most lethal overall of Operation TELIC. Forty-one British service personnel were eventually killed on that tour: just shy of a quarter of the fatalities for the whole operation.⁹⁶⁷

In terms of the operational practicalities of withdrawal, many of the flawed assumptions of Blair's February statement were rapidly starting to manifest as Brown settled in; especially around the practical implications of removing British troops from Basra, and the ability of MND(SE) to 're-intervene' after withdrawal to the Contingency Operating Base (COB) at BIA. Reports sent to both Miliband and the Prime Minister on 17 July 2007, for example, threw into disarray Stirrup's assertions from January 2007 that troop reductions and the withdrawal from Basra would have 'no impact, and no difference in our ability to create military effect'. This withdrawal, the reports said, would instead lead to '*de facto* PIC', the reality that 'our diplomatic mission in Basra [would] not be able to continue after UK forces leave', and that the UK's ability to re-intervene would be 'greatly diminished'.⁹⁶⁸

The UK's strategic subordination to both the Americans and the Iraqis also continued to bite. US concerns around British plans remained persistent, most notably in terms of reducing friction around Petraeus's testimony to Congress on the progress of the 'surge' (due for September 2007). Shaw reported in mid-July that he was 'struck by the predominant mood of uncertainty and apprehension' within the US administration regarding the potential for an early and hasty British withdrawal.⁹⁶⁹ Hadley, convinced that a British withdrawal was imminent, immediately pressured the new Brown Government to delay any announcements on Basra until Bush could meet the new Prime Minister, and Brown himself confirms that on their first face to face meeting in July 2007 Bush was 'anxious to press me to keep British troops in Iraq ... this evolved over our private dinner into a friendly but pointed exchange about numbers and timing'.⁹⁷⁰

All put together, Brown took over the Iraq problem-set just as the UK's strategic 'Catch 22' (as Stirrup had labelled it⁹⁷¹) was fully maturing. The situation was dire. By mid-2007 the UK lacked sufficient assets to achieve impactful military actions, and therefore the growing costs in casualties seemed without value. The demand of the 'good war' of Afghanistan was rising exponentially, and it

⁹⁶⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 201.

⁹⁶⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 105 – 115.

⁹⁶⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 111.

⁹⁷⁰ Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 213.

⁹⁷¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 34.

increasingly seemed that the ‘law of diminishing returns’ in Iraq was a truism that should be accepted. But actually extracting was proving exceptionally hard. The Iraqis certainly wanted British troops gone from Basra: General Mohan, the new Iraqi Army commander in Basra, reported to Baghdad in mid-July ‘categorically ... that the security situation in Basra would be greatly improved by a British redeployment out of the city’.⁹⁷² But, paradoxically, Mohan’s message was equally clear that he could not take on security in Basra himself, beset as he was by a ‘bleak picture’ of ‘insufficient manning and equipment in the Iraqi Army, a corrupt police force, 24 heavily armed militias backed by Iran and organised Mafia-style criminality’.⁹⁷³

The US, on the other hand, felt that the very last thing the British should be doing was leaving Basra, and that ultimately their departure was not for the Iraqis to decide. As Shaw also wrote in mid-July, Petraeus ‘considers himself to be the approval authority for PIC in Basra ... currently he does not consider that we are even close’.⁹⁷⁴ Caught between a dearth of resources and competing strategic subordinations, the British urgently – even with a hint of desperation – needed to find a way to reduce the pressure on the withdrawal.

And so was born the ‘deal’. Between mid-2007 and the execution of PIC in December 2007, British military, diplomatic and clandestine agencies negotiated a highly-secretive arrangement with the JAM militia to reduce attacks against British forces in Basra. The price of this was a simple one: the cessation of MND(SE) strike operations, and the release of increasingly high-profile militia detainees from UK internment in Iraq. At the centre of these negotiations was a figure referred to in the Inquiry as ‘JAM1’: a senior militia commander captured by the British in Basra in December 2005, and interred at the Divisional Internment Facility.

The ‘deal’, as it became known, was successful in achieving its raw aim. An initial two-day trial ceasefire from 15 to 17 June 2007 led to a solid reduction in violence⁹⁷⁵, and when a full-scale ceasefire commenced in mid-August it saw an almost complete cessation of attacks against MND(SE) troops (see Figure 8). UK casualties essentially ceased. Between 13 August 2007 (when the ‘deal’ commenced) and PIC in December 2007 there was only one British fatality in Iraq caused by enemy action.⁹⁷⁶ The ‘deal’ then helped create the space for a casualty-free withdrawal of British troops from Basra Palace in September 2007, and allowed the British to completely withdraw from Basra

⁹⁷² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 111.

⁹⁷³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 100.

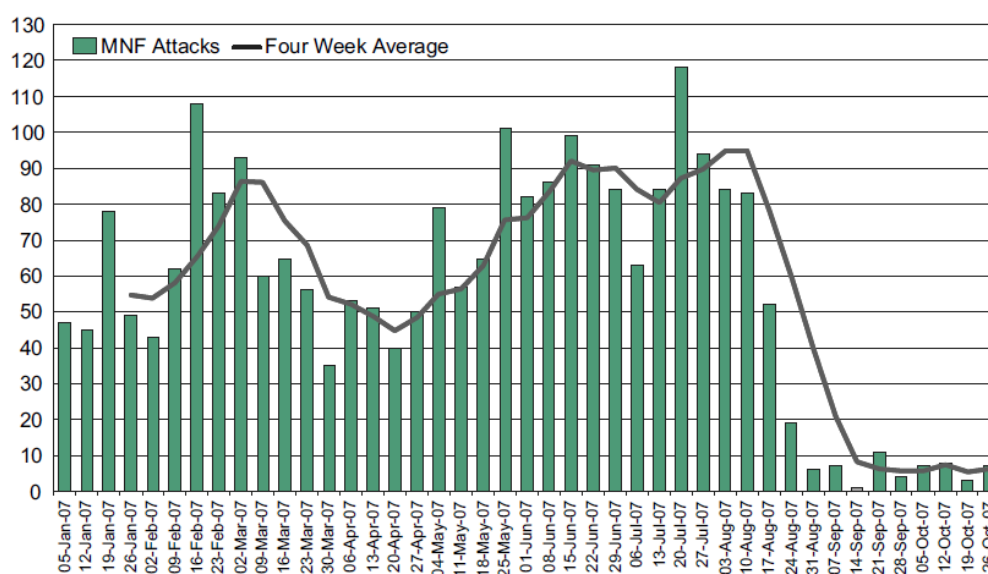
⁹⁷⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 96.

⁹⁷⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 925.

⁹⁷⁶ UK Ministry of Defence, Online Article, *Field of Operation* [undated], found at [link](#) (accessed 4 Jan 24).

largely without incident in December 2007. Some argued, albeit a little more after the fact, that the ‘deal’ had a wider benefit, in that it created a window of reduced violence to allow Iraqi forces in Basra to take genuine control of security. Major General Graham Binns, Shaw’s successor as Commander MND(SE) in August 2007, told the inquiry that, ‘the accommodation got us to the stage where the Iraqis took responsibility for the security of Basra and they wouldn’t have done that if the violence had still been at an unacceptable level’.⁹⁷⁷

Table 3: Attacks on Multi-National Forces in MND(SE), January–October 2007



Source: Ministry of Defence⁵⁴

Figure 8: Table Demonstrating the Scale of Reduction in Attacks Against MND(SE).⁹⁷⁸

The ‘deal’ was, however, as controversial as it was tactically successful. Like many aspects of the UK’s strategy in Iraq, it was fundamentally a bottom-up initiative. Tactics drove strategy, in a way that built significant risk against broader interests. A SIS agent involved in the initial negotiations with JAM1 told the inquiry that the effort was ‘borne of opportunism’.⁹⁷⁹ The ‘deal’ may have looked attractive in Basra and London, but when viewed from Baghdad there was deep scepticism from both the US and the Iraqis. Lamb, sat within the heart of the US system, warned Shaw that ‘if you take one step ahead of the Iraqi Government, the answer is this is absolutely doomed’.⁹⁸⁰ Asquith noted

⁹⁷⁷ Transcript of Private Hearing, Major General Graham Binns, 2 Jun 10, p. 19 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 6 Jan 24).

⁹⁷⁸ House of Commons Defence Committee, *UK Land Operations in Iraq 2007*, First Report of Session 2007 – 2008 (London: the Stationary Office Limited, 2007), p. 16 found at [link](#) (accessed 6 Jan 24).

⁹⁷⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 632.

⁹⁸⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 633.

from his position in Baghdad that ‘the political context for securing Gol and US agreement to this proposal is unhelpful. Maliki’s relationship with Muqtada and JAM is at an all time low ... as for the US side, they remain convinced we are looking for a quick exit from Basra ... they ... will be likely to see this proposal as an attempt by us to create ‘security stability’, for just enough time to justify withdrawal’.⁹⁸¹

But the ‘deal’ was not on the table because it was the best option the British had: it was the only option. A MoD official summed this up well when (in August 2007) he described the negotiations with JAM1 to Browne as ‘the only currently available plan to try and trigger a step change in the security dynamics in Basra’.⁹⁸² Binns, shocked on arrival by the ongoing scale of British casualties (‘almost every time we resupplied’, he told the Inquiry, ‘the price just to deliver the bread and water there was a death’), agreed that there was little choice. He told the Inquiry that he ‘couldn’t think of a better idea ... so I stepped into it rather than stepped back from it and I thought it was precisely the right thing to do’.⁹⁸³ Strategic risks or not, the ‘deal’ was the only choice if British deaths were to be reduced. And so it was that, through a progressive program of detainee releases approved at the highest levels, MND(SE) bargained their way out of the violence. I will return below to analyse in detail the influences that led to this happening.

The ‘deal’ created the space for a British withdrawal, but it did not help with Brown’s second problem: how to manage the impact of withdrawal on the US alliance. The period of mid-2007 was exceptionally sensitive for US strategy, and personally sensitive for Bush. The American political system was railing against the ‘surge’.⁹⁸⁴ As Petraeus put it to Bush, ‘the Washington clock is ticking a lot faster than the Baghdad clock’.⁹⁸⁵ The most proximal culminating point for Bush and his new team in Iraq was the planned September testimony on the ‘surge’ to Congress. This was a clear test – indeed a deadline – for Petraeus and Crocker: prove convincing progress in Iraq, or admit that the sceptics were right and Iraq was a lost cause.

This deadline provided the central context for US influence on British plans throughout 2007. The underlying aim was clear: no matter the intentions of the UK in Basra, they must not be allowed to

⁹⁸¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 49.

⁹⁸² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 180.

⁹⁸³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 226.

⁹⁸⁴ The Democratic Party, in control of both Houses in 2007, were particularly problematic for the US President; making a number of focussed attempts to de-rail his strategy in Iraq, including seeking to constrain funding (which Bush was forced to veto), applying operational constraints to US forces, and forcing early public testimony to seek to show that the ‘surge’ was failing before it had been fully implemented. See Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 334.

⁹⁸⁵ Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 381.

have a negative impact on Crocker and Petraeus's testimony. The implications of the Blair to Brown transition on British strategy became clear to American decision-makers as 2007 progressed. The new Prime Minister states in his memoir that he adopted his 'realistic, more downbeat' approach with Bush from the outset, telling him that he would 'not see an endless British occupation' and that his priority would be the 'British interest'.⁹⁸⁶ Under Brown, national interest would take a priority over alliance interest and the US were increasingly clear-eyed on this.⁹⁸⁷

Petraeus and Lieutenant General Odierno (as Commander MNC-I) therefore used their roles as PIC decision-makers to actively prevent an expeditious, public and large-scale British withdrawal. This was a key lever for the US. Odierno rejected submissions from Shaw in both July and September 2007 that Basra Province was ready for PIC, stating that a transition to Iraqi control might be achievable only as early as October; notably after Petraeus's testimony.⁹⁸⁸ While Petraeus knew that in the end 'politics [would] overcome conditionality'⁹⁸⁹, he also knew that (thanks to the UK's strategic subordination to the US) he personally had the power to control the pace of British outflow. PIC in Basra Province would not even be countenanced before Petraeus had his chance to prove to Congress that the 'surge' was working.⁹⁹⁰ Overall, Petraeus was successful: PIC in Basra eventually took place in December 2007, well after the Congressional testimony that kept the 'surge' alive.

The timing of this US barrier was problematic for the UK, for both practical and political reasons. The next major rotation of British troops into Iraq was due to take place in November 2007, and to keep true to Brown's publicly-declared strategy this rotation had to involve a significant reduction in numbers.⁹⁹¹ The British solution to this dilemma was a simple if high-risk one: to leave Basra city in time for the November rotation anyway, to accept the political and reputation risk of being formally in charge of security in Basra province without actually being able to guarantee it, and then hoping

⁹⁸⁶ Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 260.

⁹⁸⁷ No serious attempts were made to seek a major uplift in British resources once Brown was confirmed at the helm. But the Congressional testimony was vital, so US interlocutors instead increasingly adopted a policy of 'damage limitation' focussed on protecting the September window. Both Condoleezza Rice and Stephen Hadley applied pressure into the British system to delay any announcements on troop reductions and withdrawals until after September 2007, fearing (rightly) a perception of a breakdown in the strength of the international coalition in Iraq. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 112.

⁹⁸⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 88.

⁹⁸⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 178.

⁹⁹⁰ Petraeus was determined to ensure that, in Basra, 'the ISF [were] adequate, that [Basra] Palace was not taken over and ransacked, that Mohan's plans were coherent and, thinking more long-term, that a Hizballah-type organisation did not take over the South' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 173).

⁹⁹¹ See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 150. Brown had also committed to making a follow-up Parliamentary statement in October 2007, where he wanted (and was increasingly expected) to announce not only the withdrawal of troops from Basra (which would enable some reductions), but also his plan for the full transition of UK forces to what he called 'strategic overwatch' from outside Iraq itself (see Transcript of Public Hearing, Gordon Brown, 5 Mar 10, pp. 151-152 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24)).

for the best. This placed the 'deal' with JAM1 at the heart of British strategy in mid to late 2007; the only safeguard against Basra city erupting in violence once the British withdrew. In this case, hope was indeed a method.

British trepidation around this high-stakes plan is clearly evident. A July 2007 MoD and FCO combined paper on transition in Basra paints a stark picture of the risks. The departure from Basra Palace (the final major base in the city) is described – and would be described from that stage on – as '*de facto* PIC', as it meant no MNF-I presence in the city, an almost complete loss of situational awareness, and an exceptionally high-risk environment for any 're-intervention'. The gap between '*de facto* PIC' and formal PIC (or '*de jure* PIC', as it was referred to) would clearly place the British in a 'difficult position: responsible for security in Basra City, but unable to deliver it except at high risk'. 'It would be disastrous for our reputation', the paper argued, 'if our departure were followed by the sort of looting at Basra Palace which happened at bases in Muthanna and Maysan provinces when we handed them to the Iraqis'.⁹⁹² Strategic risks relating to the gap between '*de facto*' and '*de jure*' PIC were serious enough that they were briefed to Brown himself.⁹⁹³ In the days prior to the withdrawal from the Palace, Brown was described as being 'very focused on Basra Palace and worried about US reactions'.⁹⁹⁴

Ultimately, the 'deal' with JAM saved the day, allowing British troops to withdraw from Basra Palace and the other outposts in the city without major incident. There were nervous moments. The 'Warren' site, used for police mentoring, was briefly occupied by Shi'a militiamen once the British withdrew. Mohan was required to deploy his reserve battalion to retake control of the 'Warren',

⁹⁹² See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 89. The Iraq Policy Unit also reinforced these concerns to the Foreign Secretary, writing to him that 'reposturing from the Palace would represent *de facto* PIC. The prospect of this taking place several months ahead of *de jure* PIC is uncomfortable. We would continue to be formally responsible for security, while in reality having very little control' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 106).

⁹⁹³ Des Browne wrote to the Prime Minister in the days prior to the withdrawal from Basra Palace in September that 'following the handover of Basra Palace ... we will *de facto* be at PIC with the Iraqi Security Forces leading on security in Basra City ... it was not envisaged that the gap between the two events [Basra Palace and formal PIC] would be as large as it is now likely to be. Set against the background of the UK technically retaining responsibility for security in the province until PIC, this will entail a period of greater operational risk'. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 277.

⁹⁹⁴ See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 259. Brown had reason to be worried. The US – and the Iraqis – clearly shared these concerns. But given the political context in the UK, both the US and the Iraqis realised that they too would have to accept and bear the risk inherent in the period between '*de facto*' PIC and '*de jure*' PIC. This, however, did not stop a groundswell of criticism against the British within US military and academic circles. General Jack Keane, a retired US General who was a central influence in Bush's decision to 'surge', said to the media that UK 'disengagement' in southern Iraq was 'worsening the security situation and fuelling frustration among American commanders'. The UK had 'never had enough troops to truly protect the population', he said, and that Basra was 'almost gangland warfare' as a result. Well-known US strategic studies analyst Dr Stephen Biddle predicted publicly that the UK would have to execute an 'ugly and embarrassing retreat' from Iraq as a result of their approach. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, see box on p. 229.

forcing a three-day delay in the handover of Basra Palace.⁹⁹⁵ But by 4 September all British troops were outside of Basra city, ‘*de facto*’ PIC was in place, and the ‘deal’ was suppressing violence against coalition forces in MND(SE). Thanks principally to the ‘deal’, the situation in southern Iraq remained calm throughout the rest of 2007. Crocker and Petraeus were able to report as such in their Congressional testimony.⁹⁹⁶ The Prime Minister in turn was able to agree in late September with both Maliki and the US that PIC in Basra would take place within the next two months.

This agreement opened the gates for Brown to give the October 2007 announcement to Parliament that he sought, declaring that troop numbers would fall ‘from 5,500 at the start of September to 4,500 immediately after provincial Iraqi control, and then to 4,000’. Soon, he stated but without being specific on the timelines, numbers would be able to reduce to ‘2,500’. British troops post PIC, he declared, were to have three roles: ‘training and mentoring the Iraqi army and police force; securing supply routes and policing the Iran-Iraq border; and the ability to come to the assistance of the Iraqi security forces when called upon’.⁹⁹⁷ The third of these conditions was an uncomfortable fallacy that caused considerable discomfort amongst British officials (see footnote).⁹⁹⁸ ‘*De jure*’ PIC was finally achieved three nervous months later on the 16 December 2007 as Mohan, and his police colleague General Jalil, formally took control of Basra security. The British had met their timeline, within a very fine margin. The ‘deal’ was the prominent factor in this achievement.⁹⁹⁹

The completion of PIC left the Brown Government with one final unanswered question in 2007: what to do in Iraq in the long-term? The uncertainty around the US ‘surge’ and PIC in Basra had been so

⁹⁹⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 263.

⁹⁹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 339.

⁹⁹⁷ See Hansard Record of Parliamentary Debate, 8 Oct 07, at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

⁹⁹⁸ Senior leaders (including Stirrup as CDS) had been confident in 2006 that ‘re-intervention’ would be possible once the Basra city bases had been closed. But as the realities of withdrawal came into view it was increasingly clear that this was another poor assumption, and that re-intervention was a fallacy. Tim Dowse, Chief of the Assessments Staff at Defence Intelligence, told the Inquiry that the confidence in re-intervention was not true ‘in any meaningful sense’. ‘The idea that we could have gone back into Basra and reoccupied in the event of a crisis ... was extremely optimistic, to say the least’, he stated, continuing that he recalled ‘going to a couple of meetings where I asked the MoD representatives how confident they were of the assertion of re-engagement and was told ... “we recognise we are carrying a risk”’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 316). Major General Binns was more frank in his evidence to the Inquiry, stating honestly ‘did I have the capacity to go back and reoccupy the Palace? Yes, at a stretch, but it never really crossed my mind because I was so glad to get out of it’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 317). A capacity for re-intervention may well have been the Prime Minister’s stated policy, but it was by no means a firm reality on the dangerous streets of Basra post PIC.

⁹⁹⁹ It is difficult to consider how the UK could have extracted from Basra and established the conditions for PIC without the JAM ceasefire. Major General Binns briefed as much to Brown during his visit to Iraq in October, when he said that ‘without [JAM1] the picture would be utterly different’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 459). Shaw agreed, later telling the Inquiry that an attempt to withdraw without the ceasefire would have led to the ‘totemic humiliation of the British forces shot out of Basra’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, see box p. 241). Even JAM1 himself, who was released from detention four days after PIC, had threatened that Basra could become ‘another Fallujah’ if the British did not cooperate and agree to the detainee releases (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 246).

significant as to act as a fundamental barrier against long-term strategic consideration; no one could really think beyond it. Recall that Browne had written to Beckett in October 2006 seeking guidance on the 'UK's medium to long term foreign policy interests in Iraq', and had received no reply. This was a trend that continued through 2007. Blair's 'Forward Plan' of November 2006 contained a range of ambitious (verging on utopian) ideas, but in execution its vision was explicitly capped to the following six to twelve months. No one in the Blair Government could extend their strategic imagination into 2008 and beyond. What would they do after the British war was over, even if the broader war continued?

So it fell to Brown to examine this question. The spectrum of views was broad. Those in Iraq were nervous of disengagement. Asquith, departing as British Ambassador to Iraq, wrote to the Foreign Secretary in August 2007 to remind him that once the UK left Basra, 'the US will still be fighting a war ... the degree to which we continue to contribute to that war effort will determine the influence we can bring to bear on US policy in Iraq ... stepping away I do not see as an option'.¹⁰⁰⁰ Christopher Prentice, who replaced Asquith in mid-2007, agreed strongly. In October 2007 he wrote that a long-term commitment to Iraq was required. 'To ensure that we do justice', he argued, 'to the scale and cost of the UK's commitment to the Iraq project over the last 4-5 years and secure our national interests for the period ahead, we need to accept now that we are in this for some years to come'. He called for an 'approach ... ambitious in its vision', if 'flexible in its implementation'. Overall, however, he cautioned against assumptions of rapid disengagement post-PIC. 'It would be a mistake', he warned, 'to imagine that, in 12 months' time, we might be free to start drawing down UK forces in southern Iraq below the ... figure that we will be at next spring. There remains an enormous amount at stake for the UK in Iraq'.¹⁰⁰¹

But if the views were strong in Basra and Baghdad, they were strikingly non-committal in London. Strategy in practice was painfully slow, even with strong pressure from the Americans for the UK to make their intentions clear. In September 2007 the Iraq Strategy Group concluded that there was a need for 'inter-departmental discussion of the political and military objectives for the UK's continuing engagement in Iraq'.¹⁰⁰² This was undoubtedly true, but such a discussion did not come quickly. When that group met again on 13 December 2007, three days before PIC, they were due to discuss an FCO-led strategy paper setting out the UK's long-term objectives in Iraq. It was not, however,

¹⁰⁰⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 219.

¹⁰⁰¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 534 – 537.

¹⁰⁰² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 360.

ready for Ministers' Christmas boxes. It was instead deferred for consideration in mid-January to finally reach the Prime Minister in mid-March 2008.¹⁰⁰³

This left behind a strategic vacuum in theatre. Without a Whitehall vision, Binns and his colleagues were left within nothing more refined than the Prime Minister's statement to Parliament on Iraq from October 2007. The enthusiasm by which Binns welcomed this statement was indicative of the lack of strategic guidance, and should have been concerning. 'We now', he said in a relieved tone in his weekly situation report to the MoD after Brown's statement, 'have a medium term policy, endorsed by Ministers, for our involvement in Iraq'.¹⁰⁰⁴ They did not have one before, and would not receive any detail before March 2008 at the earliest.

The period between 27 June and 16 December 2007 was an important one for British strategy. A new Prime Minister arrived, the 'surge' matured, a controversial 'deal' was struck, and the British conducted a tactical withdrawal from Basra to achieve PIC. All of this was done in the face of persistent pressure from the US: pressure that would likely, in years past, have had a considerable impact on British decision-making. Three influential factors stand out that are worthy of deeper examination: the change in Prime Ministerial approach following Brown's accession, the influence of expediency and its impact on the nature of the 'deal', and the dangers of strategic short-termism and the impact on plans post-PIC.

Brown's Approach, and a Policy of 'Renewal'. Blair's philosophical approach was clearly a persistent influence on British strategy in Iraq.¹⁰⁰⁵ Given this, his departure from the 'theatre' of the Iraq war, and the arrival of a new protagonist, is an important moment. Blair and Brown were of the same political mould. Both strong believers in a social democratic philosophy, they were exceptionally close in their early years. Brown talks of how, during a visit to Australia in 1991, he and Blair 'started with a blank piece of paper and tried to set down from first principles what a modern social democracy would look like'.¹⁰⁰⁶ Brown, like Blair, was a committed Atlanticist from an early age (as a twelve year-old aspiring politician, he wrote in a youth manifesto of the UK that 'not long ago we were looked upon as a strong country: now our only hope of survival, in an age dominated by nuclear

¹⁰⁰³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 694.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 500.

¹⁰⁰⁵ See Dyson, *Personality and Foreign Policy: Tony Blair's Iraq Decisions*, pp. 289 – 306.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Brown, *My Life*, *Our Times*, p. 81.

power, is to link with our stronger Western allies’).¹⁰⁰⁷ Brown clearly aligned with the *Third Way* principles, if not as passionately as Blair.¹⁰⁰⁸ He supported the invasion in 2003.¹⁰⁰⁹

There were, however, significant differences between Brown and Blair’s personal approaches. In comparison to Blair’s propensity for ambition and risk, Brown’s approach can be summarised as ‘prudence’. This became his personal political watchword. On his arrival into the role of Chancellor, his direction to his staff was for an approach of ‘prudence with a purpose’¹⁰¹⁰, which became the foundation of such signature fiscal policies as the ‘golden rule’ and the ‘sustainable investment rule’.¹⁰¹¹ An approach of ‘prudence’ was such a characteristic of Brown that the most well-known biography of him is titled ‘The Prudence of Mr Gordon Brown’.¹⁰¹² William Keegan (the author) sums this up, writing that ‘there is a very, very powerful thread of pragmatism in Gordon Brown’s character ... [a] willingness to compromise in pursuit of a bigger objective’.¹⁰¹³ Brown’s wariness of bold action and risk led to rifts with Blair that eventually became unrecoverable.¹⁰¹⁴

By the time Brown became Prime Minister he was convinced in turn that risky ‘Blairism’ was at the root of Labour’s ills, and that breaking away from his predecessor’s legacy was the only pathway to another election victory. The idea of ‘renewal’ became central to his transition: the promise of a clean slate from the accusations of ‘sleaze and corruption that had been heaped upon Blair’s government’.¹⁰¹⁵ The era of ‘sofa government’, Brown promised, would be over. He committed on his first day as Prime Minister, for example, to remove the power of unelected advisors to give orders to civil servants. Brown promised that his leadership would ‘rid the country of its moral torpor’ of the Blair era.¹⁰¹⁶

¹⁰⁰⁷ William Keegan, *The Prudence of Mr Gordon Brown* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2004), Loc Cit 301.

¹⁰⁰⁸ This is evident in his policies during his time as Chancellor: his campaign for a ‘New Deal’ for Britain’s unemployed (including a minimum wage) (see Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 105), his commitment to DFID and to spending 0.7% of GDP on international development, and particular his focus on reducing poverty in Africa (see Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, pp. 136 – 137). All of these policies can be wrapped up in the concept that Brown called ‘progressive universalism’.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 496.

¹⁰¹⁰ Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 90.

¹⁰¹¹ The ‘golden rule’ stated that, over the course of an economic cycle, Government would borrow only to invest and not to fund current expenditure. The ‘sustainable investment rule’ said that national debt, in normal times, should never exceed 40 per cent of national income’. See Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 131.

¹⁰¹² Keegan, *Prudence*.

¹⁰¹³ Keegan, *Prudence*, Loc Cit 440.

¹⁰¹⁴ Blair, for example, did not consult Brown on his plans to controversially amend ‘Clause IV’ of the Labour Party Rule Book (the Clause expressing a commitment to nationalisation or ‘public ownership’ of all industry) when Blair became leader of the Party in 1994: a decision that Blair chalks up to Brown being ‘non-committal’ and cautious when the idea was raised. See Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 2222.

¹⁰¹⁵ Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 547.

¹⁰¹⁶ Brown argued this stance in a book he published before he became Prime Minister entitled ‘Courage: Eight Portraits’: a study of eight political leaders that Brown admired (see Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 547).

Brown increasingly considered the Iraq war as one of four villains of a Blairite axis of evil, alongside 'spin', 'sleaze' and 'sofa government'. He sought to deliberately distance himself from the war. He made no mention, for example, of Iraq in his announcement of his candidacy, instead only addressing it under questions where he said that 'mistakes had been made' and that there should be an expectation that the 'emphasis would shift' under his leadership.¹⁰¹⁷ He considered Iraq to be an 'old and intractable issue' to be extracted from.¹⁰¹⁸ Campbell recorded in his diary that 'GB [Gordon Brown] coverage, as entirely predictable, mainly focused on distancing. End of spin, sofa government, review of policy on Iraq'.¹⁰¹⁹

Brown is most explicit about his views on Iraq in his memoirs. He cites Iraq as the 'most controversial foreign policy decision of the generation'¹⁰²⁰, and that while he supported the war on the basis of what he had known at the time, he eventually (having seen the declassified intelligence) felt that they 'were all misled on the existence of WMDs'.¹⁰²¹ Albeit well after the fact, and in a public voice, he writes that 'when I became prime minister, I was of the view that we should end our four-year military presence in Iraq. Privately, I thought we should do so as soon as possible and set myself the task of leaving by the end of 2008'.¹⁰²²

It was clear, therefore, that any chance of an alignment into the US 'surge' was finally gone once Brown was in office. Brown instead actively sought to accelerate the withdrawal plan. Major indicators of this were found in his continuation of Browne as the Secretary of State for Defence, and in his employment of McDonald as his Foreign Policy Advisor. McDonald came to the role from his position as the Director Iraq in the FCO, where he had been the author of the 'Forward Plan' that had commenced the extant pathway to withdrawal.¹⁰²³ These appointments essentially guaranteed continuity in approach as a start-point, and laid the foundations for Brown to accelerate transition.

This acceleration process began with Bush, with whom (unlike Blair) Brown had no personal relationship. 'I told him', Brown writes of his Camp David meeting with Bush in July 2007, 'that I was not willing to see an endless British occupation, and I was clear that while we would not leave until security was improved, our deployments would have to be made in the British interest'.¹⁰²⁴

¹⁰¹⁷ See CSPAN, *Gordon Brown Announcement*, 11 May 2007 found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹⁰¹⁸ Brown, *My Life*, *Our Times*, p. 224.

¹⁰¹⁹ Campbell, *Burden of Power* Vol 6, p. 805.

¹⁰²⁰ Brown, *My Life*, *Our Times*, p. 248.

¹⁰²¹ Brown, *My Life*, *Our Times*, p. 250.

¹⁰²² Brown, *My Life*, *Our Times*, p. 260.

¹⁰²³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 304.

¹⁰²⁴ Brown, *My Life*, *Our Times*, p. 260.

Atlanticist or not, the need to distance his Government domestically from the mire of Iraq outweighed most concerns that the new Prime Minister might have had about damaging the special relationship. The days of influential 'Notes' were certainly over, as were the strident calls for a 'whole of Middle East' strategy. Iraq was rarely a major topic of conversation between Brown and Bush in the Prime Minister's first year. In a telephone conversation with Bush on 20 November 2007 Iraq was only discussed 'very briefly'¹⁰²⁵, and in their next call on 6 December 2007 conversation was limited to the Prime Minister reporting that he was 'looking forward' to PIC in Basra.¹⁰²⁶

Bush, it seems, anticipated the change in the political landscape and – as a seasoned politician – broadly understood Brown's electoral challenges. Bush, like Petraeus, understood that eventually politics would overcome conditionality. But also like Petraeus, Bush knew that the Americans held the core levers that could control the pace of British withdrawal. While Bush never openly criticised, he made sure to reinforce that the British would not withdraw expediently. 'There is no doubt in my mind', Bush said at the press conference after his first meeting with Brown, 'that Gordon Brown understands that failure in Iraq would be a disaster for the security of our own countries'.¹⁰²⁷ Yes, the British could go; but not too soon, and not until enough of the job was done.

Domestically, it was clear to the British bureaucracy that Iraq was not high on Brown's agenda. Yes, terrorism issues dominated his initial days in office, but the delay in the provision of Prime Ministerial direction on Iraq extended over time. A first substantive, Prime Ministerial-chaired meeting on Iraq was scheduled for 19 July 2007 at a new 'Committee on National Security, International Relations and Defence, Overseas and Defence Sub-Committee' (NSID(OD)) (which replaced the DOP and DOP(I)). Significant staff preparation had gone into setting the frame for this, including the co-production of an 'Iraq: Transition in Basra' paper by the FCO and MoD. But at the last moment Brown cancelled the meeting.¹⁰²⁸ The first time a NSID(OD) on Iraq was held was on 8 October 2007, three months into Brown's tenure. This first NSID(OD) was not a forum for discussion: it took place on the day of Brown making an update statement to Parliament on Iraq, and the main aim of the meeting was for Brown to 'inform colleagues of the content of [his] statement on Iraq, focusing on the military plans and economic initiative'.¹⁰²⁹

¹⁰²⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 624.

¹⁰²⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 660.

¹⁰²⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 151.

¹⁰²⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 65.

¹⁰²⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 478.

It was therefore also clear to officials that Brown did not wish for broad input or challenging views on Iraq. Under Brown's tenure, and despite his campaign commitments to transparency, Iraq policy development became if anything even more opaque. Brown was true to his word and stopped unelected advisors giving policy direction to civil servants.¹⁰³⁰ But this by no means led to an end of highly-centralised 'sofa government'. Under Brown there was a notable increase in small-group meetings on Iraq that were either un-minuted or had minimal recordings taken. Brown first met Stirrup as CDS on 27 July 2007, but the Government was unable to provide a minute of this meeting to the Inquiry, and the Inquiry eventually concluded that no minute was produced.¹⁰³¹ A similar meeting with Sir John Scarlett as the Director of the SIS on 29 August 2007 was also un-minuted by Brown's office, with the Inquiry relying on Scarlett's own records.¹⁰³²

William Keegan argues that this was very much part of Brown's political style, stating that Brown experienced a disastrous, large-form Treasury meeting in his first year as Chancellor, and that that 'was about the last large meeting Gordon Brown ever held. After that everything was decided in small groups, often consisting of the Prime Minister and Chancellor with no one present even to take minutes'.¹⁰³³ Given this, it is perhaps of no surprise that NSID(OD) did not contribute to the Prime Minister's October statement to Parliament, but were just informed of it. Brown already had his approach to Iraq, and he was intent on executing it with few distractions.

The new Prime Minister was particularly resistant to calls for ambitious strategies from officials within Iraq. By mid-December 2007 both Asquith and Prentice as the outgoing and incoming Ambassadors had called for a 'major and long term commitment', but received little traction. Brown's views were transmitted by McDonald, who passed on to the Iraq Strategy Group that 'despite some views expressed in theatre, the Prime Minister was clear that we should continue on our path of Iraqiisation set out in his October statement, which should entail a significant reduction in our force levels from November 2008'.¹⁰³⁴

McDonald, at Brown's direction, then ensured that options aligned with Brown's preferences were presented to him (a little like Hadley directing to J.D Crouch in November 2006 that a 'surge' had to be included in the options presented to the President). In December 2007 McDonald commissioned

¹⁰³⁰ On Brown's first day in office he rescinded the decade-old Order of Council that gave advisors like Alistair Campbell and Jonathan Powell the authority to give orders. See Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 199.

¹⁰³¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 142.

¹⁰³² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 258.

¹⁰³³ Keegan, *Prudence*, Loc Cit 2169.

¹⁰³⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 692.

the MoD to produce a paper setting out two options for force levels from November 2008: a reduction by half to around 1,500 or to almost zero: essentially a full removal of UK forces from the south of Iraq.¹⁰³⁵ This was a far cry from Ambassadorial calls for ‘ambition’, and represented the lowest of the scoping options that the MoD had offered as a thought-piece in September 2007.¹⁰³⁶

Rather than leaning into the ‘surge’, Brown’s instincts were instead to diversify Britain’s engagement with Iraq. This is where his core experience stepped in. The former Chancellor decided that the UK’s future pathway in Iraq should lie in the economic and not the security sphere.¹⁰³⁷ One of his first acts on Iraq as Prime Minister was to direct DFID to draft a letter for him to send to Maliki, proposing a number of economic initiatives, including securing new arrangements with the IMF, Iraqi banking sector reform, and establishing a Basra Investment Promotion Agency (BIPA) to promote Basra investment opportunities.¹⁰³⁸ This letter was duly delivered to Maliki on 29 July 2007, who welcomed it warmly; although it took him until 7 October to write back saying so.

McDonald considered this letter ‘sensible and realistic but not particularly ambitious’: an approach that probably reflected the Prime Minister’s intent.¹⁰³⁹ But this sensible and realistic approach was comparatively effective, particularly thanks to the umbrella of reduced violence and improved security being garnered through the ‘deal’. Progress followed. By the time Maliki wrote back to Brown, the Basra Provincial Council had already agreed a new Provincial Development Strategy and had started to establish the framework for the BIPA. They had commissioned a Basra Development Fund and had started to both scope and fund the certification of BIA to meet international standards.¹⁰⁴⁰

Economic momentum continued as the security benefits of the ‘deal’ persisted, and Brown’s personal focus evidently helped.¹⁰⁴¹ By November Douglas Alexander (the new Development

¹⁰³⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 695.

¹⁰³⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 355. On 11 September 2007 the MoD offered four long-term options for force posture: a 250 – 750 strong ‘embedded’ presence within US forces, a 1,500 strong battlegroup, a 1*/2* HQ plus two battlegroups totalling 2,500 as the core of a multi-national brigade, and a 5,000 strong brigade with a 1*/2* HQ. The MoD stated that the third option was the minimum required to maintain their role as the lead US ally in Iraq.

¹⁰³⁷ In one of his first television interviews as Prime Minister, on 11 July 2007, Brown was asked whether he planned to change the UK’s approach in Iraq. His response was to suggest that the UK’s earlier failures in Iraq were due (in no small part) to insufficient resources being applied to support economic reconstruction in the country, and that ‘we can do a lot better in the future’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 796).

¹⁰³⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 811.

¹⁰³⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 810.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 825.

¹⁰⁴¹ Kathleen Reid, the Head of the DFID Office in Basra from August 2007, told the Inquiry that ‘when he [Mr Brown] came in October 2007 ... he came and gave far more impetus to [the economic agenda]. We put more resources towards it, and ...

Secretary who had replaced Benn) had – at the Prime Minister’s urging – gathered together a series of UK business leaders who were willing to support the development of a Basra Development Committee, including Michael Wareing as the CEO of KPMG.¹⁰⁴² All of this effort culminated with a landmark ‘Basra Development Forum’, held at BIA four days before PIC on 12 December 2007, that drew even Maliki to Basra: his first visit in six months.¹⁰⁴³ The dual influences of Brown’s economic push and the security dividend of the ‘deal’ genuinely established a platform for some progress.

But Brown’s refocusing on economic efforts still suffered from the same structural deficits as those of his predecessor, and genuine change was limited. There was no growth, for example, in DFID’s parsimonious budget for Iraq, which had reduced from £45m in 2006/2007 to just £30m in the 2007/2008 financial year, with a plan for ‘further tapering’ over the years to come.¹⁰⁴⁴ It is worth comparing this in scale to the Japanese contribution to southern Iraq, which in 2006 was managing US\$1.2 billion in ‘soft’ loans to the Iraqi Government, along with a modest but effective contribution of 600 troops to their Iraq Reconstruction and Support Group.¹⁰⁴⁵

Beyond the economic, no serious effort was made by Whitehall departments to seize the non-military opportunities presented by Brown’s change of approach, and the stability of the ‘deal’. Military figures pushed hard for other departments to step forward (see footnote¹⁰⁴⁶), but DFID continued to resist all efforts to transition the lead in Iraq to their portfolio. A lack of strategic direction seems to have remained at the core of this. Alexander believed that, ‘in the absence of clear Ministerial guidance about what HMG can and should be trying to achieve, DFID are being landed with pressure to deliver an enormous agenda on economic growth in southern Iraq which a) we are not necessarily best-suited for and in any case cannot be viewed as the responsibility of a

with the ... changing security in the following months, it gave more opportunity to then really deliver some results on the ground’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 836).

¹⁰⁴² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 861.

¹⁰⁴³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 873.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 791.

¹⁰⁴⁵ For a summary of Japanese reconstruction support to Iraq see Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Japan’s Assistance for the Reconstruction of Iraq*, Apr 2010 found at [link](#) (accessed 8 Jul 24).

¹⁰⁴⁶ General Sir Richard Dannatt was one of the first to recognise the chance for an ambitious civilian step-change, wrote to Stirrup after a visit to Iraq in September that ‘sustainability ... will only be possible if we now begin to deliver some results on the ground in terms of reconstruction and development. This effort cannot be delivered by the Army – the FCO and DFID must now be prepared to rapidly increase their overall effort, not draw it down ... perhaps it is even time to consider whether we should be pushing the FCO or DFID into a more leading role?’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 827). Lieutenant General Rollo (who had replaced Lieutenant General Lamb as SBMR(I) by that stage) reinforced the same line, writing that the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister had said that development in Basra needed ‘jump starting’ and that ‘the way that money has been poured into Anbar, by both the US and the GOI [Iraqi Government], to reinforce success is also setting the standard; recognising that in counter-insurgency operations, all the lines of operation must be properly supported’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 872). By December 2007 both Petraeus and Rollo had separately made the suggestion directly to Douglas Alexander for a ‘civilian surge’ into Basra (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 879).

single department, and b) cannot produce meaningful results in the context of a 'broken' politics at the centre in Baghdad and a highly problematic security environment'.¹⁰⁴⁷ The lack of development of a Country Assistance Plan (CAP) for Iraq is a solid example of DFID's continued avoidance of taking responsibility for UK strategy in the country.¹⁰⁴⁸

Overall, the transition from Blair to Brown had important implications for British strategy. Blair's departure severed the long-standing personal connection between the British and American leaders, but in reality Blair's agency as an influence on Bush had begun to decline far earlier. Brown's strong streak of prudence led to him taking an intrinsically conservative approach in Iraq. His long-experience in economic affairs led to a natural focus on economic topics, with some positive results. But overall it was domestic politics that most shaped Brown's initial approach to Iraq in his first months as Prime Minister. Iraq was a prominent villain in the four-part axis of evil of 'Blairism', and Brown concluded that he had to 'distance' himself from this Blair villain if he was to have any chance at the next election.

It was this intent to 'not be Blair' that principally drove Brown's policies of hastened withdrawal pursued from his first days in office. Brown's strategic approach suffered from the same systemic resistance within the Whitehall bureaucracy that Blair had found, especially in DFID; stifling the bureaucratic capacity for change. But Brown was far less concerned about this stifling than was his predecessor. With an election looming and domestic problems dominating, Iraq was simply not that high on his list of priorities.

The Power of Expediency: the 'Deal' with JAM. The 'deal' with JAM was undoubtedly one of the most impactful and controversial actions of the difficult year of 2007, and of the initial phases of the Brown Government. A tactical initiative with strategic implications, it was both notably successful and highly controversial. Its remarkable reduction in violence against British troops fulfilled several key 2007 outcomes for UK decision-makers. First, and most pressingly, it reduced British casualty rates in Basra (which were at the highest rate since the 2003 invasion and were both a moral and political problem) to near zero. Second, it set the conditions for the safe withdrawal of British forces

¹⁰⁴⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 880.

¹⁰⁴⁸ The CAP was the mechanism by which DFID formed a strategic approach to a given country, and in the case of Iraq an 'Interim CAP' was produced in February 2004 at the start of the reconstruction journey. But this I-CAP was never revised or developed into a full CAP. Such a revision was considered in 2007 in the face of Brown's energy, to the extent that direction was given by the DFID Deputy Director Iraq for staff to 'do some form of strategy document/CAP'. But there is no evidence that this work was completed. In the end the February 2004 I-CAP would not be revised for seven years, until DFID produced an 'Operational Plan 2011 – 2012' for Iraq in February 2011; just thirteen months before DFID closed down its Iraq programme completely. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 844 – 846.

from Basra Palace to BIA, allowed a timeline for PIC to be agreed with the US and the Iraqis, and reduced the risk of a major conflagration in Basra between *de facto* PIC and *de jure* PIC. Third, and finally, it helped assure stability in the south through the key period of Congressional scrutiny of the 'surge' in late 2007, thereby protecting the US/British relationship at a time when it was under considerable pressure.

As a solution to British woes, however, the 'deal' was rife with long-term problems and strategic risks. The plan had the potential to be deeply averse to Iraqi Government interests. Shaw sought to label the deal as being similar to US efforts in the 'Anbar Awakening'¹⁰⁴⁹, but in reality the similarities were few (see footnote).¹⁰⁵⁰ The 'deal' certainly helped British interests, but it did little for either the representatives of the Iraqi Government in Basra, the Iraqi Security Forces, or the Baswaris (who were not included in the 'deal'); indeed it empowered the militias against them. This represented an important break for the British from their subordination to Iraqi sovereignty and interests.

The 'deal' also made the Americans nervous, especially at the outset. The principal US concern rested on the implications for Iranian influence in southern Iraq. Lamb, who by 2007 was at the heart of Petraeus's effort on 'reconciliation' and was exceptionally well-placed to offer a view, wrote in July of that year that 'the suggestion of a no-strike agreement in the South was at loggerheads with the active targeting policy conducted against Iranian proxies ... elsewhere in Iraq'. As such he concluded that 'he did not believe that either the GoI [Government of Iraq] nor US would support the proposal'. Lamb himself was concerned about the potential outcomes of the 'deal', expressing his fears that 'we might be giving up broader strategic interests for the future of Basra' and that this would be seen as a 'hollow victory, gained for fixed British rather than strategic interests'.¹⁰⁵¹

¹⁰⁴⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, see box on p. 242.

¹⁰⁵⁰ The 'Awakening' sought to co-opt the Sunni tribes against the common enemy of al-Qaeda, redirecting the violence away from the US and Iraqi Security Forces and towards a common and fundamental threat to all protagonists in Iraq. The 'deal', by comparison, was a far simpler arrangement that bargained a reduction in violence against British forces for the release of increasingly-prominent Shia militia members, and a cessation of British targeting of those militias. This provided both agency and freedom-of-action to these militias, which they used to advance their position against the Iraqi Government in the struggle for Basra politics. It is worth noting, for example, that the provisions of the 'deal' did not extend to Basra's civilians: the reduction in attacks against MND(SE) was obvious, but there was no concomitant reduction in violence against civilians. This was clearly noted by the UK's Defence Select Committee in a visit to Basra in July 2007, when they wrote in their report that 'despite the reduction in attacks on UK and Coalition Forces in South Eastern Iraq ... there has been no corresponding reduction in the number of attacks aimed at civilians. The MoD's statistics reveal that the number of attacks on civilians in Basra city have "remained broadly the same"' (see House of Commons Defence Committee, *UK Land Operations in Iraq 2007*, p. 21 found at [link](#) (accessed 6 Jan 24)).

¹⁰⁵¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 24 – 25.

Beyond US concerns, the British also increasingly struggled with the implications of the 'deal' morally and (in turn) domestically. The most prominent JAM detainees had been labelled as 'red' by MND(SE), in that they had been directly involved in the killing of British soldiers. JAM1 made the release of 'red' detainees a pre-condition for the ceasefire.¹⁰⁵² The domestic, public and media handling of the 'deal' therefore became a prominent factor in the latter part of 2007.¹⁰⁵³ The principal solution was secrecy. The 'deal' remained highly classified for as long as possible: the Defence Select Committee, for example, were given no insights into the 'deal' when they visited Iraq in mid-2007, and Brown made no mention of it to Parliament in October. The drop in violence was instead, and probably unreasonable, equated to the 'antibody' theory; used as evidence to prove that it had been the presence of British soldiers that was causing violence.

So, what influenced the British to choose this high-risk venture from the albeit-narrow range of strategic options in 2007? To understand the 'deal' one needs to start with the individuals who instigated it. The 'deal' was a tactical initiative, driven from the bottom by those at the heart of the troubles in Basra, and firmly shaped by the expedient need to reduce British losses. Shaw was responsible for its genesis. The SIS had actually been discussing JAM1 since late 2006, in relation to an apparent request by al-Sadr to seek his release, but the view was that JAM1's detention was not up for negotiation as there was 'evidence he was behind recent attacks on British troops in MND(SE) and [was] linked to Lebanese Hizballah and the Iranians'.¹⁰⁵⁴

Shaw, however, perceived opportunity. A former Director of Special Forces with a degree in politics and philosophy from Oxford, Shaw arrived as Commander MND(SE) in January 2007 determined to apply a more oblique mindset to Basra. 'I can tell you from my perspective where it began', he told the Inquiry, 'it began right in January when I arrived, the germ of the idea had probably been in my head before I got there'. Shaw records that he quickly concluded that 'trying to annihilate JAM in a kinetic attritional confrontation was a bit futile' and that instead the British needed to 'kill the irreconcilable and ... take the reconcilable on board'. Shaped by his extensive experience in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, he decided on arrival that he 'had to start looking for someone to talk to'.¹⁰⁵⁵ JAM1 immediately became an attractive option: highly regarded in the militia hierarchy, and already in British detention.

¹⁰⁵² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 125.

¹⁰⁵³ By September 2007 the Secretary of State was grappling with the issue of whether the bereaved families of soldiers should be informed if a detainee related to a soldier's death was being released (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 358).

¹⁰⁵⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 256.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 445 – 447.

Shaw found allies within the SIS and in the Consul General, and soon a dialogue had begun with JAM1 about a potential 'deal'. Shaw remained personally involved as the process deepened, and his views remained central and persuasive. He found that there was a surprisingly level of alignment between his personal views on Iraq and those of JAM1. Shaw told the Inquiry that, in July 2007, he concluded that JAM1's 'motivations entirely agreed with mine. He wanted the place to prosper. He was a strong Iraqi nationalist'.¹⁰⁵⁶ Shaw was consistently enthusiastic about the potential of the 'deal'. He recorded after one meeting with JAM1 in August that 'the meeting exceeded my expectations and left me more optimistic about [JAM1]'s intent and the potential scope of the success this proposal might engender'.¹⁰⁵⁷ Shaw's enthusiasm was infectious, and it undoubtedly supported institutional acceptance of the 'deal'; it certainly led to its adoption by his successor. Shaw saw (and continues to see) the 'deal' as a core success of his tour: an effort that prevented 'the totemic humiliation of the British forces [being] shot out of Basra'.¹⁰⁵⁸

Shaw's views remain controversial. In a clear split from Shirreff (his predecessor and the patron of SINBAD), Shaw categorised the problems in Basra as being criminal rather than insurgent, describing the city as being like 'Palermo, not Beirut'. It has been argued since that this was deeply wrong-headed, in that it ignored the clear links between criminality and the funding of JAM's nationwide insurgency: the former being the life-blood of the latter.¹⁰⁵⁹ Shaw's perspective that his views on Iraq aligned with JAM1 is also contested, with an SIS official stating to the Inquiry that JAM1's 'motivations were of course wholly different'.¹⁰⁶⁰ Controversial views or not, Shaw's personal impact on the 'deal' demonstrates just how influential individuals could continue to be on British strategy under the pressures of 2007. Yes, the 'deal' was reliant on support up through the tiers of British decision-making; including Browne and Miliband. But Shaw was the key catalyst for an effort that was, as the SIS official put it, 'borne of opportunism'.¹⁰⁶¹

But what of the bureaucratic influences on the 'deal'? Shirreff, as Shaw's predecessor, had seen just how suffocating British bureaucratic resistance could be in advancing signature efforts in Iraq. Part Three showed how Shirreff's efforts on SALAMANCA fell afoul of three simultaneous crises, two of

¹⁰⁵⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 127.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 186.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, see box p. 241.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Iron, *Charge of the Knights*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 128.

¹⁰⁶¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 632.

which (the ‘crisis of resources’ and the ‘crisis of perspectives’) had a strong bureaucratic bent.¹⁰⁶²

The ‘deal’ experienced no such issues. The risks of a negotiated truce with JAM were routinely articulated in the proposals that worked their way through the Whitehall machinery; a submission to Browne at the end of August, for example, confirmed that the British faced ‘risks of accusations that we have done deals with terrorists’.¹⁰⁶³ But at no stage did the British system stymie such a high-risk activity as the ‘deal’, including the institutions surrounding the Prime Minister (who, despite his protestations to the contrary in his memoirs, was well aware of the effort and was highly supportive of it, with Sir John Scarlett recalling that Brown ‘spoke very strongly on the cease-fire in Basra and the dramatic improvement in the security situation ... [it] represented a huge opportunity’).¹⁰⁶⁴ Instead, in a rare moment of coordination, the ‘deal’ gained bipartisan support from the MoD, the FCO, the intelligence services, and from Downing Street.

This broad institutional support for the ‘deal’ was borne of several factors. The first, and likely most prominent, was sheer expediency. The period from January 2007 was a desperate one: violence in Basra was growing, UK casualties were escalating, SINBAD was having limited success, pressures in Afghanistan were mounting, and the US were decisively diverging their strategy. When viewed with a short-term and increasingly pressurised lens the ‘deal’ looked to be the most – indeed the only – viable option to provide strategic breathing space. This momentum of expediency only increased after the success of the initial ‘trial’ ceasefire from 15 – 17 June, and as the month-long ceasefire from 13 August held and endured.¹⁰⁶⁵ The timely success of the ‘deal’ in reducing casualties, aiding withdrawal from Basra, reducing pressure on Brown’s new government, and in setting the conditions for PIC outweighed any long-term institutional concerns about reputation and the power dynamics in Basra.

The second factor influencing institutional support for the ‘deal’ was its cost-neutral nature. SALAMANCA had been resource-intensive, requiring an investment that, institutionally, neither the MoD, the FCO nor DFID had the capacity or the will to provide. SALAMANCA was also linked to ambitious long-term aims; the ‘Rooseveltian new deal for Basra’ that Shirreff pursued. The ‘deal’ with JAM, in comparison, could be advanced with almost no tangible cost. The detainees were

¹⁰⁶² Shirreff’s ‘crisis of resources’ was beset by the deeply-ingrained institutional resistance found within DFID and (to a lesser extent) the FCO against increasing resources in a relatively wealthy country like Iraq. Shirreff therefore had no success in encouraging a ‘civilian surge’. The wholesale changeover of leadership across Whitehall in 2006 then led to the ‘crisis of perspectives’ amongst the ‘New Guard’; a crisis that led to the deep embedding of the idea of the ‘law of diminishing returns’ across the collective institutional psychology of British decision-makers.

¹⁰⁶³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 279.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 483.

¹⁰⁶⁵ See Sir John Scarlett comments at Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 193.

already in British custody, and therefore represented a standing ‘currency’ that could be expended without additional risk or cost. In addition, there was a sense that this currency was one that would have to be ‘spent’ eventually; a senior official wrote in July 2007 that ‘all of the detainees held by MND(SE) would have to be released at some point’¹⁰⁶⁶, including JAM1. This further reduced the perceptions of tangible cost in the ‘deal’.

The final attractive factor of the ‘deal’ was its secrecy. The negotiations with JAM1 were given a highly-classified status. This institutional-deniability increased the appetite of decision-makers to push forward with the negotiations. Indeed some were comfortable to use the reduction in violence from the ‘deal’ as vexatious evidence for other arguments related to Basra, concealing the real reason behind the veil of secrecy. Brown, for example, made no reference to the ‘deal’ in his statement to Parliament on 8 October 2007, but made emphasis of the calmer situation in Basra and linked it to British mentoring efforts, stating ‘the security situation became a great deal calmer ... because we are training up the Iraqi Security Forces, they are in a position to police and provide security to that area. On the basis of that calmer security situation, we can build a better future for Iraqi people’.¹⁰⁶⁷

Similar obfuscation was evident when Browne and the MoD gave evidence to the Defence Select Committee in late October 2007. The Select Committee were not briefed on the negotiations and no mention of the ‘deal’ was made in written evidence; instead the Ministry suggested that the handover of Basra Palace to Iraqi control was a ‘significant factor’ in [the] reduction of violence, providing false reinforcement to the ‘antibody’ theory underpinning British strategy. Browne himself reinforced this obfuscation in his personal evidence to the Committee, where he implied that the drop in attacks from ‘401 to 19 in September’ was due to the British withdrawal from Basra, making much of the fact that the forces then at BIA were not coming under attack.¹⁰⁶⁸ The institutional cloak of secrecy provided a useful space for strategic manoeuvre by many. I will return to the Inquiry’s views of Browne’s truthfulness as Defence Secretary in the conclusion to this Part on pages 266 and 267.

In terms of strategic subordination, one might have expected that US and Iraqi views would have been an influential factor within the ‘deal’. This was also not really the case. US and Iraqi concerns

¹⁰⁶⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 126.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 495.

¹⁰⁶⁸ House of Commons Defence Committee, *UK Land Operations in Iraq 2007*, paras 37 - 41 found at [link](#) (accessed 6 Jan 24).

around the negotiations had been made clear to British decision-makers in the build up to the 'deal'. In addition to Lamb's warnings to Shaw, Miliband was advised in July 2007 that the proposed negotiations 'may well raise difficult issues in our relations with the US and Iraqi Government'.¹⁰⁶⁹ But at each stage these concerns were not sufficient to garner caution in British decision-makers: both Miliband and Browne accepted the risks against the relationship with the US and Iraqis. British expedient interests, in this case, took clear priority.

Eventually both the US and Iraqi Governments begrudgingly supported the JAM1 initiative. Lieutenant Generals Lamb and Rollo were the key interlocutors bridging the gap, and by mid-August MoD officials were able to report that 'after some initial reluctance', Petraeus had agreed for the negotiations to proceed; as had Mohan as the local Iraqi commander, and Dr Rubaie as Maliki's National Security Advisor.¹⁰⁷⁰ But both countries remained suspicious of the plan. Shaw reported – also in mid-August – that there was 'widespread scepticism within the ... US and Iraqi systems over JAM1's ability to deliver and his motives'.¹⁰⁷¹

This scepticism, however, did little to temper UK enthusiasm for the negotiations, and direct injects from the US and Iraqis into the 'deal' were resisted. No Iraqi or American, for example, was allowed to sit on the committee controlling the JAM1 operation: it remained a wholly British affair. Petraeus, as perhaps the most important interlocutor, did maintain support for the 'deal' as it garnered success, but this support was no more than tepid. When asked about Basra in his vital testimony to Congress in September 2007 he said that 'interestingly, there have been deals there recently, and the violence level has just flat plummeted. It's included some release of some Jaysh al-Mahdi figures – again accommodations between all of them ... for the Shia south, that's probably ok'.¹⁰⁷² But Petraeus's tepid support seems likely to have been more pragmatic than genuinely practical; as Shaw records, Petraeus understood that, for the British, 'politics [would] overcome conditionality', and that there were few other options available.¹⁰⁷³

Iraqi support for the 'deal' also seems to have been strongly driven by pragmatism. Throughout 2007 Maliki and his inner circle were focussed heavily on Baghdad, on the 'surge', and on maintaining political stability. They were therefore willing to accept a plan that temporarily reduced violence in Basra and allowed the withdrawal of the distrusted British from the city. For practical as

¹⁰⁶⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 51.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 179.

¹⁰⁷¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 185.

¹⁰⁷² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 339.

¹⁰⁷³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 178.

much as political reasons, Maliki was in no position to act in Basra at that time. Actions taken after the British withdrawal, however, indicate that Iraqi support for the 'deal' was but another temporary turn in the tangled battle for power within Iraqi sectarian politics. Despite apparently giving tacit support for the negotiations, by February 2008 Maliki had signed an order to replace Mohan as the Basra commander based on reports that he (along with the British) had signed a 'non-interference pact' with JAM.¹⁰⁷⁴ By late March 2008, with the situation in Baghdad more under control, Maliki felt confident in his own position to order the execution of Operation *Saulat al-Fursan*, or *Charge of the Knights*: a decisive military operation to re-assert Iraqi government authority over the Basra militias. Maliki makes it clear that this high-risk action, covered in detail in Part Five, was a necessity as a direct result of the British 'deal'.

Overall, the 'deal' represents a notable example of British divergence from the dual strategic subordinations under which they had laboured since 2005. Driven by the expedient need to reduce British casualties and encouraged by the withdrawal strategy of the new Brown Government, the 'deal' saw the British accept significant risk against their reputation and relationships with the US and the Iraqis. The outcomes in the short-term were highly successful, but in the long-term the results are doubtful. US perceptions are perhaps best captured by Colonel Mansoor, who wrote in his book *Surge* that through pursuing the 'deal', 'British political and military leaders had abdicated responsibility for the city's security. Shi'a militia leaders had contested control of the city and outlasted the British will to continue the fight'.¹⁰⁷⁵ Iraqi views became clearer much quicker, expressed in Maliki's open anger and his decision to execute *Saulat al-Fursan* in March 2008.

The Inquiry formed its own conclusions on the 'deal'. They found that the agreement with JAM1 was 'based on the commendable intention to safeguard the lives of members of the UK military as they defended, and then withdrew from, Basra Palace', which was a 'pragmatic tactical response to immensely difficult circumstances' that were 'at least in part of the UK's own making'. It was however, in the eyes of the Inquiry, 'humiliating that the UK reached a position in which an agreement with a militia group which had been actively targeting UK forces was considered the best option available'.¹⁰⁷⁶

¹⁰⁷⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 816.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 237.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.8, see box on p. 496.

And what of the British long-term relationship with JAM1? It is highly likely that JAM1 was Ahmed Al-Fartoosi, the prominent commander of JAM in Basra detained in late 2005.¹⁰⁷⁷ Once released by MND(SE) in December 2007 he returned back into JAM's networks in Basra and maintained contact with the British for a time. But the UK's withdrawal from Basra, the loss of the detainee 'currency', and Maliki's decision to execute *Saulat al-Fursan* severed any useful relationship between the British and Al-Fartoosi. By April 2008 JAM1 was being described by Browne to the Prime Minister as a 'spent force', and it was clear that the British were done with him.¹⁰⁷⁸ It really had been a short-term initiative for expedient purposes. But Al-Fartoosi was not done with the British. In November 2008 he engaged the UK-based law firm *Public Interest Lawyers* to sue the British Government for compensation related to unlawful detention and human rights breaches.¹⁰⁷⁹ JAM1 continued to blight British reputation for some time to come.

Considering Life Beyond PIC: the Challenges of Short-termism. The final challenge of 2007 was the demand for British strategy to consider life beyond PIC. This proved hard. The strategic uncertainty that grew after the US decision to 'surge' tightly limited the horizons of UK strategic planning and made it increasingly difficult to develop longer term vision. Robert Tinline, the Deputy Consul General in Basra in 2007, told the Inquiry that 'once we got to PIC and we could hand over control, at that point you could sort of take a deep breath and say; then what? Until we had got to that point and had got out of the city, I think we were very focused on: okay, how do we get to that point?'.¹⁰⁸⁰ But throughout 2007 – as PIC approached – the pressure grew on British decision-makers to articulate a strategic script for the UK long-term relationships with, and presence within, the post-Coalition Iraq.

This resulted (as this section's introduction highlights) in a slow, fragmented process which garnered few timely or effective results.¹⁰⁸¹ As the diary turned on 2008, with *de jure* PIC completed, there were no clear conclusions as to UK long-term strategic intentions. Papers that were due to be ready for Ministers' boxes over Christmas were missing, and British officials in Iraq continued to grapple with their problems in the absence of clear strategic guidance.

¹⁰⁷⁷ JAM1 is likely to be Ahmed Al-Fartoosi, the commander of JAM in Basra arrested by British forces in late 2005. The timelines for detention and release, and JAM1's background, conform with descriptions of Al-Fartoosi as described by Tom Tugendhat in the *Fog of Law* policy exchange papers (see Tom Tugendhat and Laura Croft, *The Fog of Law: An Introduction to. The Legal Erosion of British Fighting Power* (London: Policy Exchange, 2013), p. 35 found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24)). Marisa Cochrane also identifies 'Ahmed al-Fartousi' as the commander of JAM in Basra arrested by the British in late 2005, see Cochrane, *Sadrist Fragmentation*, p. 21. Major General Shaw also identifies 'Ahmed al-Fartosi' to Tim Ripley as the lead insurgent he negotiated with for the 'deal' (see Ripley, *Operation TELIC*, Chapter 23, Loc Cit 8954 – 9018).

¹⁰⁷⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 926.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Tugendhat and Croft, *Fog of Law*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 708.

¹⁰⁸¹ See p. 247.

Why was it so hard for the British to formulate long-term strategy in this window? The ‘deal’ and JAM1 proved that strategic decisions – even controversial, high-risk decisions – could be made in the summer of 2007 under the new Brown Government. But the long-term remained elusive. The evidence suggests that, unlike in the considerations of the ‘deal’, it was concerns over long term damage to the US/UK relationship that arrested strategy – at the highest level. This was underpinned by domestic and internal issues; including the pressures of the British electoral cycle, and the bureaucratic inertia that had dogged British strategy throughout its latter years.

The UK first began to seriously consider its long-term strategic position post-PIC in mid-July 2007, and it was clear from the outset that US and UK perceptions were far apart. The US were forthright that they intended to sustain a long-term strong civilian/military footprint in Iraq, and (as an Iraq Strategy Group paper highlighted) they tended to assume that the UK would do the same.¹⁰⁸² A follow-on paper confirmed this view, especially in the military sphere, assessing that the US was ‘likely to expect ‘overwatch’ in the South to be delivered through a long-term (one year plus), substantive UK military commitment’. But this, the paper quickly observed, was ‘at odds with much UK military thinking ... the military does not want an open-ended commitment’.¹⁰⁸³ This was not just a military view. Both the FCO and DFID sought in 2007 to reduce their prominence in any long-term Iraq strategy. Few were willing to voluntarily accept the Iraq burden in the long term.

US pressures for a substantial British commitment post-PIC grew steadily. Petraeus consistently pushed British officials for decisions into 2009 and beyond. He was markedly direct. On 18 September 2007 Petraeus and Crocker sat down with Brown and his team to discuss PIC. Petraeus was bold, directly asking the British Prime Minister to sustain a Divisional HQ in Basra for the long term (a major commitment). Petraeus pushed again in October 2007 in the margins of another Brown engagement, asserting to Rollo that the UK’s line ‘had always been “in together, out together”’¹⁰⁸⁴, and quoting Blair as his authority.¹⁰⁸⁵ While Petraeus welcomed the clarity around British intentions for 2008 delivered in Brown’s statement to Parliament in October 2007, he was ‘quick to query the UK’s longer term intentions in Iraq, for 2009 and beyond’.¹⁰⁸⁶ Other pressures were more subtle. As Rollo reported in mid-September, US briefing slides depicting the long-term

¹⁰⁸² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 91.

¹⁰⁸³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 107.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 477.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 477.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 505.

coalition posture continued 'to show a brigade in Basra bedecked with the Union Jack when coalition/US force levels have reduced to only five brigades'.¹⁰⁸⁷

A British brigade in Basra into 2009 was certainly not Brown's intention. Indeed it was in the longer-term that Brown's plans fundamentally diverged from those of the US. As we have heard, Brown is clear in his memoirs that it was his view on his accession that the UK should leave Iraq completely, as soon as possible and no later than the end of 2008. Like Stirrup, or perhaps because of Stirrup, Brown was persuaded on his arrival that, to quote him, "'the law of diminishing returns" was firmly in play and that there was an increasing risk that UK forces would become part of the problem, rather than the solution'. Brown's chosen strategy was to seek 'a more rapid transition to Iraqi control than the US did, not least as a means of forcing the Iraqis to step up to the plate'.¹⁰⁸⁸ In Brown's mind, there was no British flag in Iraq towards the end of the decade.

Brown, however, was not transparent in these long-term intentions, either with the Americans or with his own team. There are no indications that he provided explicit guidance to senior officials on his goal to fully withdrawal by the end of 2008. It is difficult (given gaps in record-keeping) to validate Brown's claim that he told Bush in their first meeting that he was 'not willing to see an endless British occupation', but it is reasonable to conclude that he did not tell Bush openly of his intention to withdraw by the end of 2008. Fear of American displeasure, resulting delays in US decisions about PIC in Basra, and nervousness of potential long-term damage to the 'special relationship' were the driving force behind this lack of transparency: proof that the influence of the alliance still had valence, even under the domestic pressures of 2007. Brown records in his memoir that he 'would not explicitly position our departure as a break with the US and refused to convey the impression that we were distancing ourselves from America even at a time when the Iraq intervention was becoming more and more unpopular'.¹⁰⁸⁹ But Brown's decision to conceal his intention for strategic divergence did not mean that divergence did not exist; it instead passed the risk onto his senior officials, who unknowingly needed to conceal it.

This was one of the principal influences on the slow, fractured nature of British strategy in practice in 2007. Brown did in fact toy with the idea of making his intentions clear to officials in July 2007, but he soon realised the potential impact and pulled back. Desmond Bowen, the MoD Policy Director, wrote to Des Browne on 11 July 2007 to advise him that 'No.10 was keen [at the planned NSID(OD)

¹⁰⁸⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 295.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 260 - 261.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Brown, *My Life, Our Times*, p. 260.

on 19 July] to reach a decision in principle on the UK's longer-term engagement in Iraq', which might include the announcement of a withdrawal timeline. Bowen, who had been engaged in the Iraq effort from the start, recognised this as a 'seductive picture', but highlighted the 'substantial risks' it entailed. The biggest problem, he argued, was 'how we handle the very significant political fall-out that would follow a decision and announcement of UK terms for MND(SE). There is a serious risk of major damage to US/UK relationships ... Moreover, we run the risk of undermining our trustworthiness as a close ally ... in a way which would do lasting damage to our security'. Bowen concluded starkly that 'the problem with reaching a decision next week is that: a. it is difficult to see how the PM could not tell the President ... b. although we might plan to delay any announcement ... there is a strong chance that the decision in principle could leak'.¹⁰⁹⁰

Bowen's warnings were heard loud and clear. The NSID(OD) scheduled for 19 July was cancelled by Brown, and while there is no direct evidence that this was related to the need to avoid making a decision, there is a reasonable chance these factors were linked. What is clear is that Brown did not want anyone working on issues that, if they had to be revealed to the US, would cause relationship damage. This became explicit at the Iraq Strategy Group on 2 August when McDonald directed that Departments 'should not actively take forward any work on our post-PIC military presence' other than exploring 'economic deliverables'.¹⁰⁹¹ Departments dutifully followed this direction, and it was thanks to this that Rollo, Prentice and Binns laboured in Iraq in the latter half of 2007 without a long-term strategic vision of the UK's role in Iraq.

It would be almost another year (in July 2008, after *Saulat al-Fursan*) before Brown felt he was in a strong enough position to make his longer-term intentions clear to the Americans.¹⁰⁹² The 'special relationship' still had enduring power to influence Prime Ministerial decision-making. Brown could not avoid all damage to the relationship, even by being opaque. The result of his opacity, perhaps unsurprisingly, was a lack of trust. In September Prentice wrote to Miliband to report that 'uncertainty and therefore anxiety over UK long-term intentions is widespread [emphasis from original]'. The US were interpreting the UK's lack of transparency to mean that the British were 'set on full military withdrawal in the shortest order possible'. As much as Prentice and Rollo could provide reassurance, 'their confidence in [the British] is becoming more fragile. The reputational risks in this for the UK are clear'.¹⁰⁹³ Divergence, even secret divergence, damaged relationships.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 69 – 70.

¹⁰⁹¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 197.

¹⁰⁹² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 136.

¹⁰⁹³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 364 – 366.

It was international legality, in the end, that forced short-termism to have an expiry date. On 18 December 2007 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1790. This agreed to extend the Chapter VII mandate for MNF-I in Iraq until 31 December 2008. But it also agreed that this would be the ‘final request to the Security Council for the extension of the mandate of the Multi-National Force’.¹⁰⁹⁴ On the first of January 2009, just twelve months hence, the British had to have a different mandate for their presence in Iraq, or they had to be gone. The clock was ticking. But as Ministers broke for Christmas in December 2007, they did so without any strategic vision for the British presence in Iraq beyond 2008. That consideration waited until early 2008 itself, when Iraqi Government decision-making once again unexpectedly drove deep impacts into British freedom of action in Iraq.

Part Four Conclusion: A Low Point in British Strategic Agency in Iraq

The year 2007 marked a low point in British strategic agency in Iraq. At no other time was British strategy so vulnerable and exposed to the decisions of others. The US decision to execute a decisive change in strategy – to ‘surge’ – and the concomitant decision to isolate the UK from this plan marked a major shift for the British: one for which they were unprepared. Just as in Part Two with the decision to move from a short to a long occupation in May 2003, British considerations barely registered in the American strategic conscience.¹⁰⁹⁵ When this shift came to light in early 2007, the British soon found that contingent decisions made in 2006 ruthlessly reduced their freedom of manoeuvre. Blair did try. He sought a ‘qualitative change’ in the face of this wholly unexpected shift. But multiple factors prevented success. The resources available for any form of British ‘surge’ had been consumed by the escalating war in Afghanistan. And Blair’s own declining authority, discussed more below, played a major role in reducing his agency to respond to Bush’s decisions. The fact that he had to write to his Private Secretary in April 2007 that ‘the FCO and MoD won’t respond – we will have to do it’ is telling of just how much Blair’s personal influence had fallen since 2003.

The outcome of the American decision to ‘surge’ without consulting the UK was strategic divergence and dissonance. The divergence was initially on the part of the US, who altered their path: from the failing ‘stand up/stand down’ approach of Rumsfeld and Casey to the ‘secure the people where they sleep’ approach of Gates and Petraeus. With no options to ‘surge’ in response, the British had little

¹⁰⁹⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 709.

¹⁰⁹⁵ See Part Two, pp. 121 - 122.

choice but to hold to what they believed to be the agreed strategy of transition. It is therefore fair to say that it was initially the US that diverged, not the British.

But the dissonance that then developed inside the UK system was very much a British invention, symptomatic of the UK's inability to adapt strategy in practice. The combined 'big idea' fallacies of 'Basra is not Baghdad', the 'law of diminishing returns' and the 'antibody theory' set an environment where decision-makers increasingly defaulted to dissonant – even dishonest – views. This started with Browne's assertions that British strategy was 'entirely consistent' with the US, continued with Stirrup's false confidence that the drawing down of troops numbers from 7,100 to 4,500 would have 'no impact ... in our ability to create military effect', and finalised with Blair himself when he reassured Petraeus in February 2007 that the UK would ensure 'the ability to re-intervene quickly and effectively' in Basra post withdrawal.

None of these things were true and, over time, what could be excused as a lack of strategic foresight crossed the line to dishonesty. I mentioned above on page 259 that I would return to the Inquiry's view of Browne as Defence Secretary. The Inquiry identifies Browne as a particularly egregious proponent of an 'optimism bias' that characterised British strategy in 2007, identifying four instances where he 'failed to ensure the dissemination of a full and unvarnished version of the truth on the ground in Iraq'. These occasions included: his depicting of UK and US strategies as being 'entirely consistent' in January 2007; his extremely positive depiction of the conditions on the ground in Basra; his reassuring reports to DOP following his visit to Basra in early 2007; and finally his overly positive reports on the reduction of corruption in the Basra police in April 2007. The last of these reports was given direct to Parliament: a notable act in terms of the duties of Ministers to be honest with the public.¹⁰⁹⁶ Browne may have been one of the worst proponents of this strategic dissonance – nay dishonesty – but he was by no means alone. The phenomenon was widespread in the British echelons in 2007: a direct reaction to the UK's inability to adjust to the divergence of the 'surge'.

The lack of British strategic agency in 2007 was ill-timed and unfortunate. For it was in 2007 that the influence of war truly started to decline in Iraq, with a resulting opportunity for strategic coherence. Part Three identified how the persistent presence of 'war' (in terms of Hackett's definition of 'collective killing for a collective purpose') in 2006 undermined all attempts at coherent British strategy-making, highlighting the al-Askari attack and the resulting surge in sectarian violence as a key disrupter. It was the very unpredictability and friction held within the nature of war that

¹⁰⁹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.8, paras 187 – 189.

inhibited British strategy. But 2007 saw the presence of ‘collective killing’ decline significantly across Iraq thanks to two influences: the US ‘surge’, and the British ‘deal’ with JAM. The decline in violence was dramatic, both nationally and locally. Odierno reported that sectarian attacks decreased by 90 percent over 2007, and that civilian deaths across Iraq dropped by 70 percent.¹⁰⁹⁷ In Basra, the ‘deal’ led to a remarkable, almost instantaneous drop in attacks against British troops, such that British casualties essentially stopped.

If the conclusions to Part Three were correct, this reduction in violence – and the resulting increase in the predictability of the environment – should have increased the space for coherent decision-making. And in many ways, it did. The reduction in violence allowed the British to extract from Basra without conducting a violent ‘withdrawal in contact’. It also allowed the British to make a reasonable and ultimately successful case for PIC in Basra: an outcome that would have been impossible had violence remained high.

British decision-makers, however, were in no position to take full advantage of the opportunity presented by the reduction in violence. The explosion of violence in Afghanistan, described in Part Three, removed any flexibility to surge resources into Iraq. But the real problem was one of legitimacy, and perceptions. By 2007 Iraq was seen, both institutionally and individually, as a poisoned chalice which no one was willing to carry. The inherent belief in the ‘law of diminishing returns’, the institutional aversion in the FCO and DFID to seek additional responsibility in a tainted campaign, and the views of a new Prime Minister all conspired against any sense of opportunity or desire for new or energetic strategy in Iraq. Overall one can draw the conclusion that there was a clear connection in Iraq between reduced violence and the opportunity for coherent strategy, but such a reduction does not guarantee that the opportunity will be taken up.

The miasma around the Iraq campaign also tolled the bell for the New Labour philosophy that had defined their approach to international relations since Robin Cook first proposed in 1997 that ‘our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension’.¹⁰⁹⁸ By 2007 the Iraq war had become synonymous with Blair’s failures, plagued as it was by an illegitimacy that amplified his seemingly-flawed world view of the Lebanon crisis. The ongoing crisis in Iraq had come to signify all that was wrong with New Labour’s approach after a decade in power, and typified Blair’s legacy. Blair’s dilemma is perhaps

¹⁰⁹⁷ Kagan, *The Surge: a Military History*, p. 196.

¹⁰⁹⁸ For the background of Labour’s new internationalist approach to foreign policy, see Stephen Deakin, ‘Britain’s Defence and Cosmopolitan Ideals’, Sandhurst Occasional Papers, No. 3 (2010), p. 7.

best summed up by the Commons Liaison Committee, who argued in June 2007 that, ‘but for Iraq [Blair] would be leaving Downing Street able to make an unambiguous claim to be one of the most successful world leaders of all time and one of the most successful British Prime Ministers of all time. But for Iraq, he would probably not be leaving No 10 at all’.¹⁰⁹⁹

The outcome of this was simple. Brown, faced as he was with winning an election in relatively short order, established Iraq as one of the four villains of Blairism. While cut from the same original ‘*Third Way*’ cloth as Blair, Brown was far more of a pragmatist in his approach. His decision to frame the transition as one of ‘renewal’ made it clear that he would distance himself from Blair and Iraq. As he says in his own memoir, Brown arrived into office with the intention of ending the British involvement in Iraq as soon as possible. One liberal intervention in Afghanistan was enough.

Blair was the last of the original protagonists of the Iraq war, and his departure marked the end of an era. Gordon Brown immediately adopted a subtle but quietly aggressive approach of disengagement in Iraq once he was Prime Minister. His first step was to establish a far more distant relationship with Bush. The practice of passing ‘Notes’ immediately ceased, and Brown’s messaging from the outset was that British national interest would be the priority. He then sought to quietly but aggressively accelerate the transition pathway that Blair had established. He deprioritised Iraq in his policy agenda, cancelled major opportunities for debate (including the NSID (OD) on 18 July 2007, and resisted calls for an ambitious approach from those in Iraq. He embraced the ‘deal’, accepting all the strategic risks it entailed. His theory of prioritising domestic and national interest in Iraq was rapidly put into practice: a discrete if secret plan to accelerate withdrawal is clearly identifiable.

Brown’s personal refocus on national interest created the conditions for a concomitant resurgence in the influence of other individuals as key influences in strategic decision-making in 2007. Perhaps the most significant of these was Shaw, the instigator of the ‘deal’. Shaw was as bold a commander as Shirreff was before him, and arguably far more successful in achieving national intent. In SALAMANCA/SINBAD, Shirreff created a plan that was operationally-cogent, but strategically incoherent. His plan needed resources that simply were not available, and he was reliant on a non-existent appetite for aggressive action in London and Northwood. Most notably, Shirreff’s timing did not match Maliki, who was neither willing nor ready in 2006 to openly challenge the Shi’a militias. Shaw, on the other hand, developed an operational plan that could immediately reduce British casualties, allow UK troops to withdraw from Basra, and set conditions for PIC: all without the need

¹⁰⁹⁹ See Hansard, Select Committee Minutes, *Select Committee on Liaison*, 18 Jun 2007, found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

for any additional resources. All he required was for individuals above him to accept the (albeit very high) strategic risks of the 'deal'. Shaw found willing individuals in Prentice, Browne, Miliband and ultimately Gordon Brown himself. It was this grouping, led by the Prime Minister, that deliberately placed national interest over international interest in 2007.

The 'deal' itself therefore remains one of the most powerful examples of how the British were able to resist their strategic subordination to the US and the Iraqis when it mattered enough to them, or when they had little choice. As controversial and 'humiliating' as the 'deal' was, it was markedly effective: perhaps one of the most effective operational-level initiatives in the Iraq war.

But even the 'deal' – and Brown's immediate focus on national interest – could not escape the pressures of strategic subordination entirely. The Prime Minister knew that there were some risks he could not accept. He could not, for example, allow the British to apply risk to Crocker and Petraeus's testimony to Congress in September 2007. He knew that Bush's legacy was inextricably tied to the results of the 'surge', and that any British action that compromised this legacy would have serious ramifications. He knew that there was no way he could escape US and Iraqi dual-ownership of the decisions around PIC, tied as these were to the UN authority which the British relied on for legitimacy. And he knew that he could not, at this stage, be honest (or even transparent) in his intentions to extract from Iraq by the end of 2008: to do so would risk a fracture in the 'special relationship' that still underpinned British defence.

The result of this was a deliberate policy of short-termism. It seemed to Brown and his inner-circle that the best way to avoid having difficult conversations with the US about long-term plans was to avoid having those plans at all. McDonald made this clear on 2 August 2007 when he forbade Government Departments from conducting forward planning for the period post PIC, and this was further borne out as Ministers left for their Christmas break in December 2007 without FCO plans to be considered. This certainly did not make life easy for those in theatre. The fact that Binns was reliant on Brown's public (and shallow) statement to Parliament in October 2007 for his understanding of the UK's 'medium term policy, endorsed by Ministers, for our involvement in Iraq' is telling. This short-termism may have been the preferred political option available to Brown in 2007, but it was steadily and surely building strategic risks for the British in Iraq. These would come back to bite the UK in the final phases of the Iraq war.

This brings Part Four to an end. The situation for the British looked far more positive on 17 December 2007 than it had a year before. The British under Brown had mostly resisted the pressure

to 'surge' alongside their US allies, placing national self-interest to the forefront. The combined reduction in violence of both the 'surge' and the 'deal' had allowed the British to extract from Basra without loss of life or public humiliation. The uncomfortable three-month gap between *de jure* and *de facto* PIC had passed nervously, but without issue. Security in Basra had been formally passed to Mohan, Jalil and the ISF, with the concurrence of both the US and the Iraqi Governments. Miliband had shaken hands warmly with Rubaie as the UK transitioned its last province to Iraqi control. Maliki himself had attended the Basra Development Forum at the Basra International Airport on 12 December; his first visit to southern Iraq in months.

The ceasefire with JAM, so critical to the British withdrawal, was holding: a quiet and still relatively secret bastion of protection for British reputation in Iraq. The 'deal' was, as Binns reported in his end of tour report, 'more successful than we dared imagine'.¹¹⁰⁰ Thanks to all of this, Brown had been able to report to Cabinet on 11 December that UK force levels would reduce from 4,500 to 2,500 by March 2008: a major milestone on his opaque personal plan for withdrawal.¹¹⁰¹ The positive results of a more pragmatic approach, focussed on national interest, seemed clear to see. Brown had reason to be satisfied with what he had achieved.

But below the surface all was not well. The British had indeed made short-term gains in Iraq. The methods used, however, had not only failed to reduce the deep-seated structural risks, but had steadily increased them. As Sheinwald later told the Inquiry, the British had adopted a 'doctrine of sufficiency' in Iraq; a deliberate choice to leave Basra as 'rough and ready and difficult'.¹¹⁰² But they did not realise how difficult it was about to become. Yes, the 'deal' had reduced attacks against British soldiers to almost nothing, but it was the Defence Select Committee that identified the most telling statistic: that attacks against civilians in Basra had remained the same, despite the arrangement.¹¹⁰³ Ordinary Baswaris were not part of the 'deal'.

Behind the smiles and the handshakes, the realities of life in Basra under JAM were starting to come to light. 'The Jaysh al-Mahdi', Mansoor records, 'assumed control of large sections of Basra, inflicting on its residents a severe brand of Shari'a law that forced women to wear the jibab on pain of death, closed barber shops and music stores, and generally made life miserable for city residents. The situation proved yet again that without protection of the population, counter-insurgency efforts

¹¹⁰⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 790.

¹¹⁰¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 677.

¹¹⁰² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 678.

¹¹⁰³ House of Commons Defence Committee, *UK Land Operations in Iraq 2007*, para 39.

would fail and the Iraqi people would suffer. For his part, Muqtada al-Sadr took credit for forcing the British out of Iraq'.¹¹⁰⁴

By February 2008 the JIC was reporting that there had been about 80 murders and 40 kidnapping in Basra since PIC, and that ten women were being murdered each month in Basra City. Accounts in local media were suggesting that the Shi'a militias were increasingly punishing and sometimes killing women for 'contravening strict interpretations of Islamic mores'.¹¹⁰⁵ The British had ceded the ground in Basra to militant JAM, 'law and order' was degrading, and this could only be an acceptable situation for the Iraqi Government for so-long. Operation *Saulat al-Fursan* – or *Charge of the Knights* – and the final phase of the British story in southern Iraq was about to begin.

¹¹⁰⁴ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 237.

¹¹⁰⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 822.

Part Five

***Saulat al-Fursan* (Charge of the Knights), and
Extraction**

19 February 2008 – 28 June 2009

'We will be judged on how we depart, not on how we arrived'

Ambassador Ryan Crocker, US Ambassador to Iraq¹¹⁰⁶

Both the British and American governments viewed Iraq with a renewed sense of satisfaction as 2008 commenced. It seemed that Bush's gamble had worked. Sectarian violence across Iraq was undeniably falling. Crocker and Petraeus had passed their Congressional test in September 2007. The British in the south were also in a very different position. Fully extracted from Basra, and protected at the airport by a mixture of the 'deal' with JAM and a sophisticated array of hardened accommodation and autonomous 'Phalanx' counter-IDF guns, the British were postured in a defensive crouch; awaiting next steps from London. As Rollo put it in a letter to CDS on the last day of 2007, 'a visitor to Iraq would certainly find it in a much better condition than it was a year ago'.¹¹⁰⁷

Rollo, with three months left as the SBMR-I, was thinking hard about British strategy. He sought in his letter to give a broader sense of the 'state of the nation' as 2008 began. Yes, Iraq was better, but the situation was intensely fragile. Violence was still too high, and political progress was progressing at a 'glacial pace'. 'We do not yet', Rollo warned, 'have "irreversible momentum"'. Rollo's core advice to Stirrup was unsurprising. He acknowledged the external pressures on British commitments to Iraq (the campaign in Afghanistan to say the least), but reminded Stirrup that 'with 15 brigades deployed here, even in 2008, against two in Afghanistan' the US main effort 'unquestionably remains Iraq'. The US wanted the British to stay the course. As Petraeus was fond of saying, the UK position had always been 'in together, out together'.¹¹⁰⁸ 'To say that the next six months in Iraq will be critical is a truism', Rollo concluded. 'What is clear is that the Iraqis, and their allies, have been given a chance to move decisively in the right direction, which if squandered is [not] likely to be reproduced'.¹¹⁰⁹ There had been many decisive periods in Iraq in the last four years; but from Rollo's perspective the first six months of 2008 would be decisive in defining the British legacy.

Rollo was right. Early 2008 held one final surprise: Operation *Saulat al-Fursan* – a no-notice decision by Maliki to wrestle Basra back from the Sadrist militias. This action, for good and ill, opened the final gateways for the British withdrawal twelve months later; with *Saulat al-Fursan* acting as the

¹¹⁰⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1012.

¹¹⁰⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 726.

¹¹⁰⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 477.

¹¹⁰⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 726 – 729.

entry point into a comparatively calm final phase marked by a lack of violence in stark contrast to the proceeding years.

Part Five – the final part of this thesis – examines these two phases. It considers how *Saulat al-Fursan* exposed the British shortfalls in Basra: confirming British irrelevance, and damaging the UK's reputation. But it will also show how *Saulat al-Fursan*, even triggered as it was by British flaws, helped set the conditions for genuine progress in the last twelve months of the campaign: leading to a profound reduction in violence that reduced unpredictability, advanced political reconciliation, and laid the foundations for the decision to end Operation TELIC.

Bounding the Fifth Decision in Time: from *Saulat al-Fursan* to the End of the Campaign

The notion that decisive action was needed to secure Basra for the Iraqi Government began building in late 2007, but amongst the Americans and the Iraqis rather than the British. Mansoor recalls a conversation with Petraeus in September 2007. 'I suggested', Mansoor records, 'that at some point MNF-I needed to shift its main effort from destroying the local branch of al-Qaeda ... to combating Shi'a militias that presented the longer-term political and economic threat to Iraq'.¹¹¹⁰ A month earlier Maliki – carrying his AK47 – had personally led an Iraqi military operation against JAM and the Badr Organisation, after Shi'a infighting at the holy shrine in Karbala killed more than fifty bystanders.¹¹¹¹

This impulsive move by Maliki was important. It marked a growing confidence to confront the Sadrists, and a rapid collapse in Maliki's patience for militia actions that threatened his authority. By December 2007 Rollo was reporting back to London of 'rumours of a major [Iraqi] offensive in Basra'.¹¹¹² The security situation worsened on 18 and 19 January 2008 when there were major clashes between the ISF and a Shi'a group called the 'Soldiers of Heaven' in Basra during the Shi'a festival of Ashura. By the end of January Binns was reporting that, post Ashura, 'ominously, both generals [Mohan and Jalil] mentioned their preparation for the "next battle"'.¹¹¹³ Something was brewing, but the British (beset as they were by their lack of post-PIC situational awareness) had little sense of what was to come.

¹¹¹⁰ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 237.

¹¹¹¹ Mansoor, *Surge*, pp. 174 – 175.

¹¹¹² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 675.

¹¹¹³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 764.

The concrete date where these rumours started to coalesce was 19 February 2008. Colonel Richard Iron, an erudite Cambridge-educated infantry officer with several tours of Northern Ireland, was serving as the chief mentor to Mohan. Mohan approached him on 19 February with a stark confession: the situation with JAM in Basra was now untenable, and he was under considerable pressure from Maliki. He had to act – else he would be replaced and shamed – and he asked Iron to help develop a plan to wrestle Basra back. Mohan's approach to Iron set in motion a chain of events that led just over a month later (to the surprise of Mohan as much as everyone else) to *Saulat al-Fursan*. 19 February 2008 is therefore a suitable marker for the start of analysis of Part Five.

So, where to end this Part? Operation TELIC actually formally ceased on 22 May 2011, when a final contingent of eighty-one Royal Navy trainers left Iraq as their mission finished. But this final relationship was far more representative of routine military engagement and should not be viewed as explicitly linked to British strategic decision-making during the war. Instead we need a moment when the British ceased to have a prominent strategic role in Iraq, and when Iraq conversely ceased to be a major consideration in British strategic analysis.

This moment is best represented by 28 June 2009. It was on this day that Prentice, as British Ambassador to Iraq, announced to the Iraqi National Security Council (NSC) that he would no longer attend their meetings. A British representative had been attending the NSC for over five years. This privileged position was a marker of British equities, allowing the UK to lean directly into considerations of Iraqi national security. But by June 2009 this was no longer appropriate: the final UK combat patrol had been completed on 30 April, and on 30 June 2009 the US were to transfer security responsibility for all urban areas to the Iraqis. While the UK had 'greatly appreciated the privilege of being part of the NSC over the previous five years ... it was the right time for [the British] to bow out'.¹¹¹⁴ And so, with a brief nod, the British ceded their last major influence on Iraqi strategy. This move came as a surprise to the Iraqis but they welcomed it. It was time for them to stand alone.

Prentice's NSC withdrawal took place two weeks after another announcement: the decision by Brown to appoint a committee of Privy Councillors to inquire into the Iraq war. This 'Iraq Inquiry' was to have an 'unprecedented scope'. It would go further, the Prime Minister stated on 15 June 2009, than even the exemplar 'Franks Inquiry' into the build-up to the Falklands War. Brown's decision to commission the Inquiry is a clear marker that he considered the Iraq war to be complete.

¹¹¹⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 438.

The UK was ready, Brown believed, to ‘ensure that, by learning lessons, we strengthen the health of our democracy, our diplomacy and our military’.¹¹¹⁵ The combination of these dual decisions makes June 2009 – and specifically 28 June 2009 – a suitable place to end analysis around the Iraq war.

I will examine Part Five through two turning points. First I will examine *Saulat al-Fursan* itself, from 19 February to 8 July 2008 (when the operational phases of *Charge of the Knights* finished). Then I will turn to the final eleven months of the war, examining the manner in which the British negotiated the end of Operation TELIC with both the US and the Iraqis.

Turning Point: *Saulat al-Fursan*, or *Charge of the Knights*

The assumption that the ‘deal’ with JAM would hold, and that violence in Basra would remain low, was a fundamental belief in early 2008: all options being presented to the Iraq Strategy Group in February 2008 ‘assumed ... that the threat in Basra would not deteriorate significantly’.¹¹¹⁶ But in reality the ‘deal’ started to fall apart immediately on 5 January 2008, as the last of the militia detainees held by the British were released. Violence in Basra spiked. The unrest during the Ashura festival was serious; part of a spate of intra-Shi’a attacks across Iraq that posed a major challenge to Iraqi Government authority. The frequency of IDF attacks against British troops now at BIA rose rapidly, reaching a crescendo on 31 January when the COB received the fiercest attack on record. Four separate attacks saw tens of 107mm rockets fired, including one salvo where twenty-three rockets fell within the base.¹¹¹⁷ The British, however, could do very little about this without risking breaching the ‘deal’. ‘There were problems in targeting [the militias] directly’, Binns reported, ‘as it would require UK forces to re-commence strike operations in Basra ... [an] action that would prejudice the accommodation process with the mainstream of JAM’.¹¹¹⁸

Militia violence continued to build into February as the British failed to act.¹¹¹⁹ By the end of the month the British Service Chiefs were getting increasingly nervous. They were not the only ones. Maliki, already suspicious of British intentions, was becoming incensed with what he was hearing from Basra post-PIC. His immediate anger focused on the reported treatment of local Baswaris by

¹¹¹⁵ See Hansard Record of Parliamentary Debate, 15 Jun 09, found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹¹¹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 793.

¹¹¹⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 767.

¹¹¹⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 765.

¹¹¹⁹ The COB was attacked six times in the week building up to 22 February 2008, including the first 240mm rocket attack in seven months (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 813 – 819).

the militias: Maliki had heard stories (which the British would later say were exaggerated) of the rape and murder of women for breaches of strict, militia-imposed religious laws.¹¹²⁰

But Maliki's concerns were equally political, and far longer-term. Thanks to the 'surge' his Government were finally making some legislative progress, and on 13 February 2008 the Iraqi Council of Representative passed the Provincial Powers Law; paving the way for elections in the provinces. In this context, Maliki believed he was losing control of the heart of the Shi'a homeland at a critical time. Marisa Cochrane argues that militia control of the south was a significant long-term threat to Maliki. Thanks to the British departure, Shi'a groups had taken control of Basra port by early 2008, removing a major income stream from the Government. Iranian influence through the 'Special Groups' and weapon smuggling continued to grow. Most of these weapons, Cochrane argues, were being moved into caches in Baghdad's 'belts', in what seemed to be preparations for a major offensive (one cache near Baghdad contained over 1,000 IED parts and 3,000 pounds of explosives).¹¹²¹ Militia confidence was surging. On 22 January, also during Ashura, they had been bold enough to try and kidnap Dr Rubaie; an act that was a final straw for both Maliki and Rubaie.¹¹²² Basra was coming to signify everything that was weak about Maliki as a leader, and flawed about his Government. 'If the government security forces were unable to secure the city', Cochrane concludes, 'they surely would not be able to secure the polling stations and prevent voter intimidation' in the forthcoming provincial elections.¹¹²³

By mid-February 2008 Maliki was applying ruthless pressure on Mohan towards action. The Inquiry evidence provides additional depth into the history of what followed, the core of which is already well captured by Mansoor in *Surge*, by Iron in *British Generals in Blair's Wars* and other articles, by Cochrane in the *Battle for Basra*, and by Marston and Freedman in the works cited in the literature review. Mohan and Iron worked together to develop a security plan for Basra with echoes of the 'security framework for Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s'. This plan was designed to be progressive, taking place over several months and with decisive military operations not starting until August 2008. Mohan and Iron knew how hard it would be to penetrate the Baghdad and MNF-I bureaucracies to approve the plan, so Mohan asked Iron if he could bypass the system. Iron contacted Mansoor directly: sending him a one-page summary. Mansoor briefed Petraeus, who sensed opportunity and 'acted with typical decisiveness'.¹¹²⁴

¹¹²⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 860.

¹¹²¹ Marisa Cochrane, 'The Battle for Basra', *Institute for the Study of War*, [undated], found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24), p. 6.

¹¹²² Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 238.

¹¹²³ Cochrane, *Battle for Basra*, p. 6 – 7.

¹¹²⁴ The details and quotes in this paragraph are drawn from Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, pp. 188 - 189.

By 5 March 2008 Mohan and Iron were in Baghdad briefing their plan to Petraeus, Lieutenant General Austin (by then Commander MNC-I), Lieutenant General Dubik (Commander of MNSTC-I), Dr Rubaie, and various Iraqi Ministers. There was strong resistance, both from US officers (including Austin, who believed he did not have the troops to open up a second front from the battle against AQ-I in Mosul¹¹²⁵) and from Iraqis (tangled in their own personal sectarian interests). The Iraqi response was to argue that the situation in Basra was far more criminal than militia-centric, and that Mohan was the issue. Previous British arguments that Basra was like 'Palermo, not Beirut' did not help. But Petraeus brought them round, and it was agreed that a joint commission would be formed to work out how to support Mohan's plan.

It was on 22 March 2008, the day after the first joint commission meeting, that Maliki dropped his bombshell. Mohan's plan was too slow for Maliki's needs, and he had decided to assert his authority. He had ordered Mohan to execute *Saulat al-Fursan* immediately and had directed the equivalent of two Iraqi army brigades to deploy to Basra within thirty-six hours. Buoyed by his successful intervention into Karbala the previous August, he also decided to deploy to Basra himself 'with his AK47' to lead the battle.¹¹²⁶

The Inquiry evidence confirms that the British had no warning of Maliki's actions, and no sense of the scope of his intentions. Lieutenant General John Cooper, who had replaced Rollo as the SBMR(I) just two days before *Saulat al-Fursan*, initially reported Maliki's move as a 'trip to Basra', ostensibly to replace Mohan due to 'concerns about ... [the Basra ISF's] alleged deal-making and (arguably prudent) unwillingness to take action early against the militias'.¹¹²⁷ But the implications of Maliki's plans quickly came to light. Iraqi forces successfully deployed to Basra, and Maliki himself arrived on 24 March with a number of his senior ministers. But this was where the initial success stopped. Mohan and Iron had expected to spend months conditioning Basra for the entry of ISF forces in strength; instead Iraqi battalions who entered Shi'a strongholds like Al-Tamiyah immediately found themselves in heavy contact.¹¹²⁸ On 27 March the militias launched a major counter-attack, executing (according to Jalil) twenty-eight simultaneous dawn attacks. The 14th Division of the Iraqi Army, ostensibly trained by the British, collapsed due to a lack of mentoring and coalition air support.

¹¹²⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 837.

¹¹²⁶ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 241.

¹¹²⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 862.

¹¹²⁸ Cochrane, *Battle for Basra*, p. 8.

Mohan estimated that more than 1,200 soldiers from the Division deserted that day.¹¹²⁹ Even Maliki found himself under fire, holed up in Basra Palace under attacks serious enough that the head of his security detail was killed.¹¹³⁰

This constituted a no-notice test of British plans for ‘operational overwatch’. In just forty-eight hours security in Basra collapsed, albeit thanks to Iraqi and not militia actions. But British reactions were not swift, nor sufficiently robust for either the US or the Iraqis. Despite reports that militias were ‘in control of the majority of the city’ and that both Mohan and Jalil were under ‘intense’ attacks at the Basra Operational Command, British combat forces remained on standby to provide ‘emergency support’. They were not deployed.¹¹³¹ British forces reported that they had ‘given considerable support to the Iraqis’ in terms of non-kinetic air, medical and logistical support, but that ‘kinetic’ support had ‘necessarily been limited ... as requests have fallen beyond what our rules of engagement allow’.¹¹³² The British bar for re-intervention was clearly set high.

The Iraqis were reported to be ‘frustrated at this “lukewarm” support’, and senior US officials in Washington were briefed that the UK was refusing to provide ground support to the Iraqis.¹¹³³ This may not be true (it is possible that the Iraqis did not ask for British help, or that the requests were incoherent), but either way suspicions around the British inability to respond in Basra – already high as they were – seemed to be confirmed. In a remarkable moment, Maliki refused point blank to even meet Brigadier Julian Free, who was Acting Commander MND(SE) at the time, when Free visited Basra Palace alongside General Austin. Maliki made it ‘abundantly clear that he will not meet with a British officer ... he sees us as responsible for releasing the very criminals responsible for destabilising Basra’.¹¹³⁴ With this the case, it seems unlikely that Maliki would have asked for British help in Basra anyway.

The US responded to the crisis with alacrity: their speed directly reflective of their deep investment in the ‘surge’. A comparison between the pace of US and UK reactions is telling. By 27 March Bush had been sufficiently briefed that he was able to incorporate public support for Maliki into a speech in Ohio, stating that ‘Maliki’s bold decision ... to go after the illegal groups in Basra shows his

¹¹²⁹ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair’s Wars*, p. 190.

¹¹³⁰ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 242.

¹¹³¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 877.

¹¹³² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 879.

¹¹³³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 879.

¹¹³⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 881.

leadership, and his commitment to enforce the law in an even-handed manner'.¹¹³⁵ Prentice, in comparison, was still flagging to London on 27 March the 'increasing need for a formal UK public response to the Basra operation [emphasis in original] in order to manage US perceptions as well as Iraqi public and GoI attitudes'.¹¹³⁶ Petraeus, with his fingers firmly on the Iraqi Government pulse and in close contact with Bush, immediately saw the strategic risks *Saulat al-Fursan* presented to Iraqi political stability, and invested accordingly. On 25 March he deployed Rear Admiral Edward Winters, a Navy Seal, to Basra to act as Maliki's personal advisor. Austin followed (albeit temporarily) and immediately directed his deputy, Major General Flynn, to deploy the Corps' Forward HQ to Basra (with all of the communications and IT capability that entailed) where it merged with HQ MND(SE).¹¹³⁷

US combat capability rapidly followed. US special forces and a company from the 82nd Airborne Division immediately deployed to Basra to bolster the weakening Iraqi forces through access to intelligence and air support. Petraeus then 'piled on firepower assets, including U.S. Air Force fighters, AC-130 gunships, Apache attack helicopters, and armed Predator drones to overwhelm the militia forces in Basra'.¹¹³⁸ The US provided transport planes to surge even more Iraqi forces south; including the experienced Iraqi Army 1st Division, who arrived with their embedded US Marine Corps mentors. Combined Iraqi and US 'Border Enforcement Teams' deployed to the border to reduce the flow of Iranian weapons.¹¹³⁹

By early April Austin had formally re-ordered MNC-I's priorities such that Basra was higher than Mosul, and second only to Baghdad.¹¹⁴⁰ This turned the tide. On 2 April 2008 combined Iraqi and Coalition forces executed a decisive series of operations, securing all intended objectives. As Iron reports, 'by the end of the day, it was obvious to all who had won'. *Saulat al-Fursan* continued for nearly three months (until 8 July¹¹⁴¹), but 2 April was decisive. 'After that day', Mansoor records, 'the Jaish al-Mahdi never again contested control of Basra'. By the end of April Iraqi forces had regained control of both the Um Qazr port and the oil facility at Zubayr, severing JAM's finance streams.¹¹⁴²

¹¹³⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 870.

¹¹³⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 875.

¹¹³⁷ Cochrane, *Battle for Basra*, p. 8.

¹¹³⁸ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 242.

¹¹³⁹ Cochrane, *Battle for Basra*, p. 9.

¹¹⁴⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 944.

¹¹⁴¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 110.

¹¹⁴² Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 243.

Military dominance then enabled Maliki to apply a typically-Iraqi political track to Basra's problems. With his reputation at stake he had little choice but to lean in hard. He ordered several Government ministries to temporarily establish themselves in Basra Palace and directed an immediate US\$100 million surge of funds into Basra development issues. Maliki then used a ceasefire to enter into fierce political negotiations with local tribal leaders, buying their loyalty with suitcases of cash and ordering them to swear allegiance to the Government on local television.¹¹⁴³ On 3 April Maliki announced a plan to create 25,000 jobs in Basra, and troops from the 1st Division distributed food in Basra's most at-need and Sadrist-controlled neighbourhoods.¹¹⁴⁴ Maliki also announced that he would raise 10,000 local security forces in a 'Sons of Iraq'-style program.¹¹⁴⁵ Perhaps most controversially for the British, fierce negotiations were also going on in Iran, possibly without Maliki's knowledge, designed to pressure al-Sadr into a ceasefire (see footnote).¹¹⁴⁶ The extent of the ground ceded by the British to Iranian influence in Basra was fully exposed, dismaying Petraeus.¹¹⁴⁷ Maliki left Basra for Baghdad soon after the 2 April successes, but he left behind a number of ministries to continue political work with the Baswaris over the following months.

Saulat al-Fursan continued until 8 July 2008, when Phase XIV of the operation finished. What began as an impulsive decision by Maliki eventually became a clear success, shifting the strategic environment in southern Iraq and arguably across the country. Mansoor suggests that *Charge of the Knights* was 'at least as important as the [Sunni] Awakening', labelling it as 'one of the greatest victories' of the Iraq war.¹¹⁴⁸ In practical terms it dramatically altered the military dynamics in Basra. Flynn and the MNC-I forward HQ eventually returned to Baghdad, but they left behind a significant contingent of US forces, along with enhanced ISR and air/aviation capabilities. The ISF, with their backbone stiffened, began to perform better: there was a clear sense of liberation amongst Basrawis, and thousands turned out for Maliki's 'Sons of Iraq' recruitment drives.¹¹⁴⁹ Most senior Sadrist militia leaders fled *Saulat al-Fursan*, and never returned in strength; the Basra militias were marginalised,

¹¹⁴³ Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, pp. 386 – 387.

¹¹⁴⁴ Cochrane, *Battle for Basra*, p. 10.

¹¹⁴⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 937.

¹¹⁴⁶ Marisa Cochrane argues that some of the most profound negotiations during *Saulat al-Fursan* were going on in Iran, where Hadi al-Amiri (the head of the Badr Organisation) and Ali al-Adeeb (a high profile member of Maliki's own Dawa Party) were in direct counsel with the notorious Qassem Suleimani, the head of the IRGC-QF (who trained and funded the Special Groups in Iraq). Al-Amiri and al-Adeeb successfully argued to Suleimani that a direct confrontation between the Government and Iranian agents went far beyond the interests of either group, and that the best option was for Suleimani to pressure Moqtada al-Sadr to accept a long-term ceasefire and arrangement (see Cochrane, *Battle for Basra*, p. 7).

¹¹⁴⁷ Petraeus reportedly told his staff that 'the level of [Iranian] participation, the centrality of their role, should give everyone pause ... the degree to which they have their hands on so many levers was revealed very starkly during this episode' (see Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), p. 341.

¹¹⁴⁸ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 258.

¹¹⁴⁹ Cochrane, *Battle for Basra*, p. 13.

and violence dropped to nearly nothing. By June 2008 Major General Barney White-Spunner (then Commander MND(SE)) was able to report that 'a new confidence has emerged in the city, with people openly speaking of life being better than it has been for years and a mood of optimism equal to that experienced in 2003'.¹¹⁵⁰ Mohan was not shamed but promoted to Baghdad: both he and Jalil were replaced with high-quality officers who continued the rejuvenation of the Iraqi forces.

The outcomes were even more significant in political terms. Maliki's bold move to execute *Saulat al-Fursan* forced many parties into making a choice. His direct confrontation with al-Sadr meant that Shi'a politicians only had two options: back Maliki or back al-Sadr. They chose to throw their weight behind Maliki, announcing on 5 April that no Iraqi party with a militia would be allowed to stand in the forthcoming provincial elections.¹¹⁵¹ Maliki's actions in Basra improved his reputation as a 'strong man' leader, and proved to the Kurds and the Sunnis that he was willing to directly confront Shi'a destabilising the country. There could be no greater proof of Maliki's commitment to nationalism over sectarianism than his action against the very forces that held him in power.

Maliki's moves against JAM in Basra, and then in Sadr City and Amara, proved to be the last straw for al-Sadr's commitment to armed struggle. On 13 June 2008 al-Sadr declared that JAM would be 're-organised from a militia into a primarily civilian, religious, social and cultural organisation, called "Mumahiidun" (Showing the Way), and its members would be banned from carrying weapons'.¹¹⁵² Overall Maliki, who in late 2007 was in very real danger of being unseated, found himself in a much strengthened position. As Prentice put it, the 'tectonic plates of central Iraqi politics have shifted'.¹¹⁵³

The implications of *Saulat al-Fursan* for the British were considerable. Maliki's rash decision exposed the weak assumptions of UK strategy, and the British were forced to react. There were two immediate outcomes for the UK, and these also became the key influences on British decisions. The first was the stark exposure of British irrelevance in Iraq, and the concomitant spike in risk against UK reputation. The second was the forced reconnection of US and British strategy, as the invisible barrier between the 'fiefdom in the south' and the rest of Iraq was decisively swept away.

¹¹⁵⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 82.

¹¹⁵¹ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 248.

¹¹⁵² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 84.

¹¹⁵³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 906.

The Risks of Irrelevance: The Terminal Decline of British Agency in Basra. The risk of the British being ‘irrelevant’ was at the forefront of Brown’s mind when he first found out about *Saulat al-Fursan*. The UK, he stated to NSID(OD) on 1 April, ‘could not afford to be perceived to be irrelevant to the situation in Basra’.¹¹⁵⁴ But it is clear that ‘irrelevance’ is exactly what beckoned. Some of this was about British standing as contributors to Iraq’s security. British reputation with the Iraqis at the end of March could not have been lower. Maliki genuinely blamed them for the situation in Basra, but he also saw them as a convenient scapegoat. There had been many low-points in the British/Iraqi relationship over the years, but Maliki’s refusal to meet with Brigadier Free while under fire in Basra Palace marks a nadir in British standing. The US reaction to this, in asking Free to stay out of the meeting rather than pushing for his inclusion, clearly demonstrated American priorities. Free bore this well, reporting that it was ‘the right call’, but this was still a humiliating outcome.¹¹⁵⁵ It was also not a short-term one: British officials were still not welcome in Basra Palace as late as 25 April 2008, three weeks after Maliki’s departure.¹¹⁵⁶

British irrelevance grew as *Saulat al-Fursan* continued, and they struggled to have any influence. The UK had, for example, stood consistently against a ‘Sons of Iraq’ program in Basra; but when Maliki announced he was forming such a program White-Spunner’s advice was that ‘our voice carries little weight and there is little that we can and ought to do other than support the MNC-I in developing recommendations’.¹¹⁵⁷ Much of the British irrelevance was rooted in the outcomes of PIC: their detached posture, minimal capability, and their lack of situational awareness on the streets of Basra itself. By 3 April the British Embassy Office in Basra was reporting that it was ‘clear that the US ... feels that we moved to PIC in Basra too early’.¹¹⁵⁸

The reputational risk of irrelevance forced the British to make difficult decisions in April 2008. The most notable of these was the immediate suspension of withdrawal plans. Brown had little choice; warnings about withdrawal began flooding in from all angles as soon as Maliki’s operation started. It was the potential damage to the US relationship that was flagged most stridently. On 31 March 2008, just five days after the start of *Saulat al-Fursan*, Sheinwald in Washington sounded the alarm. Notably he did so direct to McDonald (and therefore to the Prime Minister), rather than to Miliband as the Foreign Secretary. ‘Over the past five years’, Asquith wrote to McDonald, ‘we have said

¹¹⁵⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 925.

¹¹⁵⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 880 – 881.

¹¹⁵⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1037.

¹¹⁵⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 938.

¹¹⁵⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 947.

repeatedly that we will draw down our troops as fast as conditions and Iraqi capabilities allow ... it would be difficult, in the US and elsewhere, to justify a draw down under present conditions in these terms ... if anything, the recent deterioration would suggest that we consider the reverse'. His warning was clear and stark: 'our reputation in the US will be significantly damaged if we are seen to leave Basra in chaos or if UK forces have to be backfilled by US troops'.¹¹⁵⁹ So, on 1 April 2008 the Prime Minister and his senior advisors agreed that UK forces should remain at 4,100 for the foreseeable future and that no decisions should be taken on longer-term military commitments until the situation in Basra became clearer.

But in reality the decision to suspend troop withdrawals was a bare minimum action, and it had limited effect on British relevance. They still, for example, did not have enough troops to secure the permanent border crossings into Iran at places like Shalamchah and Sheeb, where it was believed the bulk of lethal aid crossed.¹¹⁶⁰ There was no appetite in London for any form of troop increase, despite the spike in risk presented by *Saulat al-Fursan*. If anything, the shock of Maliki's operation reinforced to Brown and his senior team that they should be extracting from Iraq as soon as the cost to their reputation would allow. When Brown asked for advice from his Private Secretary on 30 March, the Secretary responded that the Defence and Foreign Secretaries were likely to conclude 'that [*Saulat al-Fursan*] makes it more important that we accelerate the drawdown of UK troops once we are through the current crisis'.¹¹⁶¹

Brown's agreement to pause British withdrawals in the face of *Saulat al-Fursan* did not therefore indicate a change in his overall withdrawal strategy. On 11 April (at the height of Maliki's operation), Brown quietly sought advice on whether the UK could even further reduce troop numbers in 2008 to 1,900 (the advice was that this was impossible without 'inevitable damage to UK/US relations' and 'damage to the domestic reputation of the armed forces').¹¹⁶² Rather than practically addressing the issues in Basra through additional capability or forces, and therefore increasing 'relevance', the focus of No. 10 was instead on defending British reputation. The first contact between Brown and Maliki after the start of *Saulat al-Fursan* was as much to protest at the lack of consultation as it was to offer assistance, with Brown being advised that he should 'register our concern at lack of consultation in advance of the operation'.¹¹⁶³ As I will cover further below, it is clear that Ambassador Prentice was

¹¹⁵⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 918.

¹¹⁶⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 27.

¹¹⁶¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 898.

¹¹⁶² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 997 – 1001.

¹¹⁶³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 883.

placed on a mission to refute claims of British deceit in Basra.¹¹⁶⁴ Defending British reputation during *Saulat al-Fursan* was a significant priority at the highest levels.

In the end, British officials made much of *Saulat al-Fursan* as a positive expression of Iraqi sovereignty. There is some truth to this. Petraeus intimated as much to Gates, stating that ‘in some sense, Maliki is doing what we have sought to empower him to do: use Iraqi forces to respond to an Iraqi security problem in a province that has been transitioned to Provincial Iraqi Control’.¹¹⁶⁵ Des Browne took a similar line in his statement to the House of Commons on 1 April, saying ‘what we have seen over the last week is action being taken by the Government of Iraq to fulfil their responsibilities for security in a province that has transferred to Iraqi control’.¹¹⁶⁶ But as much as *Saulat al-Fursan* was an expression of Iraqi sovereignty, it is equally true to say that Maliki’s actions in Basra were not part of a careful strategic design from the British; Maliki’s actions were instead an impulsive response to British failings. The Iraqi Prime Minister succeeded, but by the skin of his teeth and not thanks to British support.

The scale of British irrelevance was made clear during a scheduled telephone call between Bush and Brown on 1 April: right at the peak of the crisis and on the day that the British had suspended their withdrawal plans. Instead of entering into a detailed strategic discussion on Basra, both Brown and Bush elected to entirely avoid the topic. Brown’s Private Secretary recorded that they ‘did not discuss Iraq, but looked forward to a “full discussion” in the future’.¹¹⁶⁷ Bush knew that the British were irrelevant in Basra, and it was only a US intervention that could change the dynamic in southern Iraq. He had already given direction to Crocker and Petraeus to do what was required to ensure Maliki’s success: to forcibly re-connect US and UK strategy in the south.

No Longer the ‘Fiefdom in the South’: The Forced Reconnection between US and British Strategy.

In Part Three I examined how a distinct separation developed between MND(SE) and the rest of Iraq. From as early as mid-2004 and the First Battle of Fallujah, the British had fiercely protected the independence of their ‘fiefdom in the south’ as a foundational ‘big idea’ of British strategy. The expedient US response to Operation *Saulat al-Fursan* swept away that idea away in hours. US forces deployed in strength to southern Iraq for the first time since 2003.

¹¹⁶⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 952 - 953.

¹¹⁶⁵ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 248.

¹¹⁶⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 932.

¹¹⁶⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 939.

There is minimal evidence that the British were consulted prior to this taking place: Petraeus and Austin simply asserted their authority. The deployment of Flynn to Basra as the Corps Deputy Commander, along with the Corps forward HQ, was a decisive moment: a clear expression that HQ MND(SE) was insufficient for the task. By 14 April Cooper was reporting that 'it is clear ... that the US view of the current HQ MND(SE) is that it is not a proper two star HQ'.¹¹⁶⁸ Significant US combat capabilities followed; between 25 March and 4 April more than 1,100 American troops moved into southern Iraq from elsewhere.¹¹⁶⁹ The invisible division between MND(SE) and the rest of MNC-I was gone, and British and US strategies for southern Iraq were forcibly reconnected.

This reconnection revealed painful facts to the British. The narrative from the US in the months prior to *Saulat al-Fursan* was that the situation in Basra was sufficiently stable for their needs, if only just. They had, after all, agreed to the British withdrawal from Basra City, and had authorised PIC in December 2007. But this narrative was not really true. Genuine American views came to light soon after the start of *Saulat al-Fursan*, as did the plans they were developing to deal with Basra once the British had fully disengaged. On 8 April 2008 the Chiefs of Staff were told that it had 'now become clear that the US had always considered Basra to be "ungoverned space" which MNC-I had planned to address towards the end of 2008'.¹¹⁷⁰ Cooper was equally blunt. 'We have to be honest', he wrote to Houghton, 'about US perceptions ... they see Basra as they found it as ungoverned space. They are determined it will not revert'.¹¹⁷¹

It soon became evident that *Saulat al-Fursan* had not led to the development of new US plans, it had simply brought those plans forward by eight months. MNC-I's intention had always been to fight the battle against the militias in the south in late 2008 as a sequel to the campaign against AQ-I in the north. Maliki had forced them to fight these campaigns simultaneously, and it was only thanks to the 'surge' that they had the capability to do so. It should have been no surprise to the British in early 2008 that Crocker and Petraeus saw the south as the front line in the battle against intra-sectarian conflict and Iranian influence; they had been clear on their views. If anything, UK decision-makers should have been surprised (and uncomfortable) at how willing the US were to accept the situation in Basra as the British were leaving it. But the acceptance of a British 'doctrine of sufficiency' (as Sheinwald called it) hid the true scale of the rift in expectations.¹¹⁷²

¹¹⁶⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1012.

¹¹⁶⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 959.

¹¹⁷⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 981.

¹¹⁷¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 965.

¹¹⁷² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 678.

It was soon clear that the US presence in the south, once established, was not going to be temporary. As early as 4 April Brown was being informed that the US considered that 'a return to the status quo ante' was not feasible.¹¹⁷³ On 14 April Cooper reported that 'there seems little doubt that MND(SE) has changed for good. I think there is also an increasing consensus around the UK's options to respond to this – probably best described as "lead", "follow" or "get out of the way"'.¹¹⁷⁴ The first US priority was stiffening the capabilities of HQ MND(SE) 'in order to achieve greater situational awareness and an enhanced planning and fires capability', but it was soon clear that the Americans also intended to better secure the troublesome border with Iran, and to improve the development of the Iraqi army and police.

US determination to surge investment in Basra was not limited to the military sphere. Petraeus was explicit to Cooper that he believed 'economic progress is fundamental to underpinning the security line of operation ... if the UK will not leverage Iraqi money to delivery rapid progress, the US will use their own expertise' to do so.¹¹⁷⁵ Cooper was clear what he thought the UK should do, and advised London as such. 'Taking the opportunity for the UK to lead this', he argued, 'will be important for our collective self-esteem'.¹¹⁷⁶ Dannatt, who visited MND(SE) in mid-April, agreed, saying he came away from Iraq 'confident that we have *another* opportunity [emphasis in original] to be successful in Basra – we must not let this one go ... we must ensure that we are giving GOC MND(SE) the resources that he requires'.¹¹⁷⁷

The Prime Minister, however, had limited interest in such an approach, and instead enthusiastically accepted more US leadership in the south; it clearly advanced his own withdrawal strategy. When Bush and Brown finally did discuss Iraq in a face-to-face meeting on 17 April 2008, the two leaders commissioned Petraeus and Stirrup to 'come up with proposals for how to work together in Basra'. From that stage onwards it was formally considered that southern Iraq was a 'joint endeavour', and it was a shared assumption that there would always be considerable US troop numbers in the south.¹¹⁷⁸

¹¹⁷³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 959.

¹¹⁷⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1012.

¹¹⁷⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 965.

¹¹⁷⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1012.

¹¹⁷⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1028.

¹¹⁷⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 1020 – 1021.

Brown was then consistent in his approach. He sought to leverage the expanded American presence to return as quickly as possible to his desired withdrawal pathway. As early as 28 April McDonald reported to the Iraq Strategy Group that ‘the Prime Minister had stated his intention to resume a downward trajectory’.¹¹⁷⁹ Houghton as CJO was then deployed to Iraq to negotiate with Petraeus on troop numbers. His instructions were strict. The British would accept no additional tasks, and no expansion of contingent size beyond 4,100. If the US sought to take the opportunities presented by *Saulat al-Fursan* they would need to take on additional tasks, including an extensive list of ‘a commitment of around 50 staff to the composite headquarters; MiTTing [mentoring] of 10 Division; border security; reform and retraining of the Iraqi Police Service; and, a package of enablers amounting to around 750 US personnel’. The UK would focus on completing the training of 14th Division by the end of 2008 but would then rapidly drawdown to a contingent of no more than a few hundred troops. Petraeus’s response was that the situation was ‘not optimal’ but he could ‘live with it’. He also ‘reluctantly agreed’ to the UK’s drawdown proposals, although he would have preferred a ‘gentle glide path rather than rapid draw down’.¹¹⁸⁰ *Saulat al-Fursan* or not, Brown’s intentions remained clear and there was little Bush or Petraeus could do to change them. Better, Petraeus concluded, for the US to take the task on themselves and ensure it was done right. By early May 2008 the Americans were therefore on the path of fully taking over MND(SE), and US and British strategies were even more interwoven in the south.

Despite the many frictions of *Saulat al-Fursan*, the reconnection of British and US strategies in the south did have several highly positive outcomes; ones that set the stage for the relatively smooth British departure in mid-2009. These outcomes highlight just how disruptive the disconnection of MND(SE) from the rest of MNF-I had been over the years. The most obvious positive outcome was in the improved security situation in Basra, thanks to the re-designation of southern Iraq as an MNC-I ‘main effort’ and the resulting surge of both US and Iraqi capabilities. As discussed in Part Three, Basra had always been an ‘economy of effort’ task in comparison to Baghdad.¹¹⁸¹ British institutional resistance to the presence of US troops in the south had not helped: recall Shirreff when he told the Inquiry that ‘the idea of American troops on the streets of Basra did not go down particularly well in London’.¹¹⁸²

¹¹⁷⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1045.

¹¹⁸⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 1040 – 1049.

¹¹⁸¹ See Part Three p. 144.

¹¹⁸² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 131.

Saulat al-Fursan, however, decisively changed Basra's position in the relative prioritisation for resources, a fact that Prentice later described to the Inquiry as a 'key turning point'.¹¹⁸³ One of the most notable shifts was in the sudden provision of 'continuous ISTAR coverage over the city which ... dramatically improved situational awareness'.¹¹⁸⁴ This unblinking eye provided a decisive edge for the Iraqi forces over JAM.¹¹⁸⁵ The provision of such high-end capabilities, which the UK had not been willing or able to provide, was critical to Iraqi success during *Saulat al-Fursan*.

But it was the example set by US forces that moved to Basra, and the longer-term change this prompted in British tactics and behaviours, that was perhaps most impactful. The presence and impact of the USMC mentors working with the Iraqi 1st Division – formed into Military Transition Teams (MiTTs) fighting at Battalion-level – broke down a key conceptual barrier in the British approach. The MoD and PJHQ had made the decision some time before that it was too risky to provide combat mentoring to the Iraqi 14th Division, limiting their contribution to planning, training and enabling activities only. British commanders in theatre had recognised that a change to this policy was likely needed, and had been developing options with the support of advisors such as Marston. The highly-visible, highly-positive benefit of the USMC MiTTs set a decisive example of the advantages of such an approach, especially after the desertions of the 14th Division. USMC MiTTs not only provided a robust professional backbone to the Iraqis, they also gave them access to coalition intelligence and airpower; the edge they needed to overmatch the militias.

Their example was also one Mohan could not dismiss. The Iraqi commander was a staunch believer in the 'antibody' theory; 'your presence', he had told British officials, 'confused the nationalism of the Iraqi Shia'. But as he saw the difference in professionalism between the 1st and 14th Divisions, and as he watched local Baswaris cheering the USMC MiTTs, he realised his error. In early April, Mohan asked Iron to coordinate the embedding of British MiTTs into the 14th Division. Free was already reconfiguring his Brigade to provide them.¹¹⁸⁶ Free's decision was a brave one. It clearly went against the direction of travel of British strategy, and – as White-Spunner was out of the country at the time – Free was holding responsibility as acting commander of MND(SE). Petraeus

¹¹⁸³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 946.

¹¹⁸⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 982.

¹¹⁸⁵ In preparation for the Iraqi-led clearance of the Hyyanniyah district of Basra on 19 April, for example, the Coalition 'conducted intensive aerial surveillance ... and was able to provide a detailed map to Iraqi forces showing the locations of militia defences, including their IED chains' (see Strachan et al, *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, p. 192).

¹¹⁸⁶ For a detailed description of the evolution of British training and mentoring of the Iraqi Army, especially during *Saulat al-Fursan*, see Marston, *Adaptation in the Field*, pp. 78 – 84.

reports that Free only asked for permission from London after the fact; an act that made him Petraeus's 'kind of guy'.¹¹⁸⁷

Within thirty-six hours British MiTTs were providing combat MiTTs to the 14th Division; an example of how flexible British forces could still be. This eventually developed into over 1,000 embedded British mentors (nearly a quarter of all British forces), who remained in place throughout the rest of the UK's commitment to Operation TELIC.¹¹⁸⁸ By placing the 1st and 14th Iraqi Divisions side-by-side, and reconnecting British and US strategies, *Saulat al-Fursan* exposed the shortfalls in the British operational approach and forced a fundamental change in behaviour in just forty-eight hours.

The forced reconnection of British and US strategies was by no means smooth. White-Spunner reported, for example, that he and his staff were 'all learning enthusiastically how to speak American, although the military dialect does take time to master' (a remarkable statement after five years of coalition operations). Even then MND(SE) was still struggling to make a mark on the Corps' daily statistics, which had a direct impact on the allocation of resources.¹¹⁸⁹ But the benefit of the reconnection was unmistakable. By July 2008 the Prime Minister was able to report to Parliament that the security situation in Basra and the south had been 'transformed'.¹¹⁹⁰ As I will discuss further below, the long-term absence of violence almost immediately created a window for progress in other areas; June 2008 saw the first visit in ten months, for example, from UK police mentors to the Joint Police Command Centre in Basra.

The combined surge in strategic alignment, capabilities and posture from US, Iraqi and UK forces fractured the deep-set malaise within both the Baswari people and the ISF. The markers of improved civilian morale were evident in polling: in just one month over *Saulat al-Fursan* confidence in the ISF increased by eighteen percent, and the percentage of Baswaris who considered they had 'enough to live on' jumped from sixty to ninety percent as life in Basra recovered.¹¹⁹¹ The markers in Iraqi military confidence were found in graffiti. As the Iraqi Army cleared Amara they found that a departing JAM member had scrawled 'we'll be back' on the Yugoslav bridge. An Iraqi Army soldier added underneath, 'we'll be waiting'.¹¹⁹² The bolstering of the moral component of the Iraqi Army was unmistakable.

¹¹⁸⁷ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 243.

¹¹⁸⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 149.

¹¹⁸⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 42.

¹¹⁹⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 157.

¹¹⁹¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 93.

¹¹⁹² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 98.

Saulat al-Fursan was a remarkable turning point for the British campaign. Des Browne may have exaggerated many things in his time as Secretary of State, but he was not exaggerating when he announced that Maliki's operation had 'transformed' the security situation in southern Iraq. Most profound for the British was the sweeping away of the intangible barriers of the 'fiefdom in the south'. This forced a reconnection of US and UK strategy that not only proved to be a turning point for Iraqi forces, but changed British tactical behaviour in terms of mentoring. *Saulat al-Fursan* was also, however, highly damaging. Maliki's high-risk if decisive actions in Basra took place not thanks to British strategy, but in response to the perceived failings of it. The continued weak nature of British assumptions was once again exposed, and British reputation and relationships degraded as a result. Repairing both would be a real challenge. Such a dilemma set the stage for the final British strategic decision: when to end Operation TELIC? Could they get the politics right to depart from Iraq with their reputation and relationships intact, both internationally and domestically? They had just one more year in which to find out.

Turning Point: The Final Decision to End Operation TELIC

The end of *Saulat al-Fursan* in July 2008 marked the start of the end game of the British war in Iraq. The situation in southern Iraq had changed remarkably. The ISF were clearly in control. Al-Sadr had announced that his organisation was turning away from violence. The 'fiefdom of the south' was no more: by October 2008 the US had three times as much combat power in southern Iraq than the UK.¹¹⁹³ Tactics had changed. British troops were embedded back in with the Iraqi Army, executing a campaign approach intrinsically tied into the rest of MNF-I. Some of the previous damage of PIC had been repaired. This success was once again enabling development staff to set foot in Basra, which had been a no-go just months before. White-Spunner put it well when he reported that 'a new confidence has emerged in the city, with ... a mood of optimism equal to that experienced in 2003'.¹¹⁹⁴ Basra had turned a corner, and the rest of the south was following.

In London, minds were rapidly turning back to an extraction plan. Brown's intentions from Part Four remained consistent. Iraq was one of the 'four villains' of Blairism, an election was coming, and it was time for the UK to extract. The challenge remained whether this could be done without causing unacceptable damage to the UK's reputation and relationships; could the British leave Iraq after six

¹¹⁹³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 63.

¹¹⁹⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 82.

years with their national head held high? The chances of such a feat, once so unlikely, certainly seemed a little higher. But a strategy that dealt with both transition and long-term strategy was urgently needed.

Long-term strategy making was certainly overdue. Recall that at the end of 2007 the FCO, DFID and the MoD had failed to co-develop papers for Ministers to consider over their Christmas break. *Saulat al-Fursan* then put on pause any substantive considerations of long-term strategy; the NSID(OD) of 1 April 2008 formally deferred such decisions until after the dust had settled from Maliki's operation.¹¹⁹⁵ As July 2008 rolled round there was just six months left before the expiry of the last UN Security Council resolution, which left a very short period of time for the UK to establish a suitable legal framework for any continued UK presence in Iraq. The wider situation remained uncertain. The US Presidential election (scheduled for 4 November 2008) was looming and Iraq remained a key issue. So when NSID (OD) met on 15 July 2008 with Brown as the chair, the pressure was on to get the next steps right; Britain's legacy relied on it.

The paper prepared by the Cabinet Office for NSID (OD)'s consideration was succinct at just three pages. Unlike the papers for the NSID(OD) on 1 April 2008, which deliberately sought to defer decisions to beyond *Saulat al-Fursan*, the July paper was full of short-term recommendations. Ministers were asked to agree to three immediate 'key tasks' for the UK in 2008/2009: the 'training and mentoring of 14 Division Iraqi Army' until it was capable of independent operations (by this stage believed to be achievable by April 2009); 'supporting provincial elections, due by the end of 2008'; and, 'supporting economic development in Basra, based on Michael Wareing's outline Economic Development Strategy'.

Troop numbers, the paper proposed, should be kept at 'about 4,000' until the training of the 14th Division was completed, at which stage British forces would move to a 'different future military role', requiring fewer troops (detailed options were not offered). Two political priorities were proposed: the negotiation of a bilateral arrangement with Iraq to provide legal cover to military operations, and the passage of the Hydrocarbons Law. Notably, there was still no vision or script for the UK's 'post-drawdown' relationship with Iraq in the July paper; this was once again deferred to later in 2008. The NSID(OD) paper was met with agreement by Ministers, and its aims were adopted.¹¹⁹⁶ The UK's

¹¹⁹⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 914.

¹¹⁹⁶ Paper FCO and MoD, 12 July 2007, 'Iraq: Transition in Basra' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

policy direction – if only until May 2009 – was now agreed, and this was the position that Brown took to Maliki, Crocker and Petraeus when he visited Iraq the following week.¹¹⁹⁷

Execution remained challenging (as Petraeus once said, ‘Iraq is all hard, all the time’)¹¹⁹⁸, but nowhere near the preceding years. The closest crocodile to the British boat was undoubtedly the bilateral agreement with the Iraqi Government to replace the UN Security Council Resolution framework. Here the UK was once again at the mercy of their dual strategic subordination. The Iraqis were clear that all junior partner arrangements would rest in the shadow of an overall US/Iraqi agreement. US/Iraqi negotiations on a ‘Status of Forces Agreement’ (SOFA) started smoothly, but by late August 2008 Prentice was reporting they had ‘reached an impasse’ over Maliki’s ‘fundamental concerns over Iraqi sovereignty’.¹¹⁹⁹ It was not until mid-November that this impasse was unlocked, and then until 28 November when the Iraqi Council of Representatives passed the US SOFA. No discussion on a UK agreement was possible in the interim: as Cooper reported on 24 November, the US SOFA was the ‘only political game in Baghdad’.¹²⁰⁰

So, the British had a nervous four months in late 2008 as the US and Iraqis negotiated. Maliki’s statement to Brown in July 2008 that he ‘did not want to agree to the continuation of any coalition forces other than the US beyond the end of 2008’ did not help matters.¹²⁰¹ Concerns were significant enough that British officials planned for an ugly, emergency extraction of all troops from Iraq by 31 December 2008.¹²⁰² The November 2008 agreement of the US SOFA left the UK just over a month to negotiate and agree a similar UK/Iraqi arrangement. Nerves were, understandably, running high.

But British officials need not have worried. By mid-October Maliki was shifting his position, telling the new British Defence Secretary (John Hutton succeeded Browne on 3 October 2008) that he ‘was keen to start bilateral discussions on the UK SOFA as soon as possible to ensure that an agreement was in place by the end of the year’.¹²⁰³ Brown sent McDonald to Iraq on 1 December to negotiate personally with Maliki.¹²⁰⁴ Discussions were ‘delicate’, and negotiations went right to the wire. But

¹¹⁹⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, paras 139 – 145.

¹¹⁹⁸ Mansoor, *Surge*, p. 177.

¹¹⁹⁹ The Iraqi Prime Minister was demanding the US compromise in three key areas: the application of Iraqi legal jurisdiction to US civilians and service personnel; the detention of Iraqi nationals by other nations; and, the declaration for a timeline for US troop withdrawals (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 175).

¹²⁰⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 256.

¹²⁰¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 136.

¹²⁰² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 181.

¹²⁰³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 232.

¹²⁰⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 263.

ultimately they were successful; at half-past ten at night on 30 December, just over twenty-four hours before Resolution 1790 expired, Prentice signed a MoU between the UK and Iraqi Government to authorise British operations in the country until mid-2009.¹²⁰⁵

Negotiations with the US on the withdrawal of British troops from southern Iraq were also delicate, but ultimately successful. The large-scale presence of US troops in southern Iraq – and the agreement at the highest levels of a ‘joint endeavour’ – made the idea of a complete British withdrawal far less dramatic. In this way *Saulat al-Fursan* genuinely set the conditions for UK extraction. By September 2008 a combined US and UK plan was firming up that saw: the UK’s three historic provinces of Maysan, Muthanna and Dhi Qar transferred by the end of November 2008 to an expanded US-led MND (Centre); Basra transfer to a new Basra-based US division by March 2009 (with the US taking residual UK troops under command); US forces deploying to Basra to take over mentoring and security tasks in May 2009; and then the UK withdrawing completely by the end of June 2009.¹²⁰⁶ Hutton visited Iraq in October 2008, and was able to report back after a meeting with Odierno (who by that stage had replaced Petraeus as Commander MNF-I) that Odierno was ‘fully content’ with the plan to withdraw British troops by mid-2009, agreeing that ‘the phased movement south of additional US forces will help to ensure that the withdrawal of our own combat troops is as seamless as possible’.¹²⁰⁷

Basra remained remarkably violence-free throughout late 2008 and early 2009, and so these plans were able to be executed ahead of time. The transition of MND(SE) to US command took place on schedule on 31 March 2009 and, unlike PIC in Basra, both the US and UK agreed that the final ‘Transfer of Authority’ should be marked with a fulsome ceremony to acknowledge UK efforts. Odierno, alive to the presentational needs of the British Government, argued that this was ‘the easiest and best moment to shape the public story over the British achievement and legacy’.¹²⁰⁸ Stirrup travelled to Basra for the ceremony, where he received ‘clear positive public and private messages ... from all Iraqi and US participants’.¹²⁰⁹ Hutton had a similar experience when he travelled to Iraq for the final handover ceremony between UK and Iraqi/US forces on 30 April 2009; even media coverage in the UK was broadly positive.

¹²⁰⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 321.

¹²⁰⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 193.

¹²⁰⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 231.

¹²⁰⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 356.

¹²⁰⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 386.

In the end the flag of the UK's 20th Armoured Brigade was lowered a month early then planned as the last British combat patrol ended. Brown declared on 30 April 2009 that 'today Iraq is a success story. We owe much of that to the efforts of British troops. Our mission has not always been an easy one, many have said that we would fail. Britain can be proud of our legacy that we leave there'.¹²¹⁰ His words ran far truer than they would have done just twenty months earlier when he became Prime Minister. The wholesale departure of British combat troops in the weeks that followed left behind just the small Royal Navy training contingent. The British war in Iraq had ended.

The development of – and transition to – a long-term UK strategy towards Iraq beyond mid-2009 remained slow, but this too made marked progress in the last six months of the British war in Iraq. It was not until 13 January 2009 that Miliband as the Foreign Secretary finally circulated a coherent, long-term strategy paper for consideration. The paper was, however, comprehensive and impressive. It sought to establish objectives, priorities and inputs for a three-year window once the military transition had taken place (certainly the most far-sighted document on Iraq to be received at NSID(OD) so far). It established the UK's 'strategic national interest in a strong, stable and non-hostile Iraq' that met a number of conditions: an Iraq that acted in accordance with international law and was not a threat; that acted as a regional counter-weight to Iran as part of a pro-Western 'arc of stability'; that denied AQ-I and other terrorist groups a safe-haven; and that contributed positively to stable world energy markets.

The January 2009 strategy paper then laid out in detail an approach to achieve these goals. At its heart was a shift from a southern Iraq-focus to a whole-of-Iraq focus. Proposed action areas were comprehensively cross-government: ranging from commercial, economic and energy interests through to defence and security. Targeted activities across these areas of focus were defined, with a lead department and minister allocated to each area. Perhaps most importantly, funding lines were identified for approval: the paper was clear that the UK would 'only retain influence in these areas if the Iraqis believe we take the relationship seriously'. Influence required investment and therefore the paper was crystal that 'despite the high costs of operating in Iraq ... [the strategy] will require the right degree of commitment across HMG (Her Majesty's Government)'. All of this was to be enabled by an ambitious FCO network, focussed on a British Embassy in Baghdad but also now including enduring Embassy Offices in both Erbil and Basra.¹²¹¹ Overall, the January 2009 FCO strategy paper

¹²¹⁰ The Guardian, *British Troops Officially End Combat Operation in Southern Iraq*, 30 Apr 2009, found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹²¹¹ Miliband confirmed in the January strategy paper a decision to maintain a four-person presence in Basra at least until 2010, at a cost of £9.6 million per annum.

was an impressive piece of work that laid out a clear strategic script for the UK's relationship with Iraq for the following three years.¹²¹²

Chances of failure, however, were still high. There had been numerous articulations of strategy over the years, but most of them had fallen short in one of several critical areas: a lack of articulation on the instruments that would enable execution; a lack of funding; or a lack of agreement amongst senior decision-makers. But this paper seemed different. It had been extensively socialised during drafting, and just five days after its initial circulation Alistair Darling as the Chancellor, Hutton as the Defence Secretary, and Alexander as the International Development Secretary all confirmed that they would resource it.¹²¹³ On 9 February 2009, in the aftermath of successful Iraqi provincial elections, Brown endorsed the plan.¹²¹⁴ Wheels were already turning, particularly in the economic sphere. Here there was incremental success, thanks principally to Wareing's signature 'Basra Economic Development Strategy'.

Wareing's work set the foundation for the engagement of one final, new player in the Iraq theatre in 2009: Lord Mandelson as the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, who headed up the UK's Trade and Investment (UKTI) organisation. Mandelson, who had a long-reputation as a decisive businessman and politician, was directed by the Prime Minister to surge UKTI effort in Iraq. Mandelson acted immediately, deploying staff within days, leading a major business delegation to Iraq, and setting the stage for a visit by Maliki and his Iraqi National Investment Commission to the UK (Maliki's first ever visit to the UK).¹²¹⁵

¹²¹² Letter Hickey to Catsaras, 13 Jan 2009, 'Iraq: Strategy', enclosing Paper 'Iraq: A Review of Strategy' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹²¹³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 335.

¹²¹⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 340.

¹²¹⁵ The Prime Minister had written direct to Mandelson after Brown's visit to Iraq in December 2008, where Brown had discussed economic investment with Prime Minister Maliki. The Prime Minister was 'convinced of the urgent need for a significant UKTI presence in both Baghdad and Basra'. Mandelson was to establish 'a long-term presence which can be in place in time to capitalise immediately' on trade opportunities, particularly in oil (see Letter APS/Prime Minister to Abel, 18 Dec 2008, 'UKTI presence in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24). Mandelson, who had a long-reputation as a decisive businessman and politician, acted immediately. A first International Business Specialist from UKTI deployed to Iraq by the end of January 2009, with a second joining by mid-February (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 1026).

By 6 April 2009 Mandelson was personally leading a delegation of twenty-three companies to Iraq, a trip that included a collective meeting with Maliki which was reported to be a 'powerful demonstration of the new civilian focus to our bilateral relationship'. This visit, timed to coincide with the TOA ceremony of British troops, was a clear demonstration of a transition to a different relationship, and it set the stage for a major reciprocal visit to London by Maliki and the Iraqi National Investment Commission (which included more than 100 Iraqi Ministers and business officials) at the end of April 2009. This was Maliki's first visit to the UK, and the fact that he chose to do so for an economic relationship was telling (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, paras 1042 – 1045).

Overall, therefore, when Prentice declared to the Iraqi NSC on 28 June 2009 that it would be his last meeting, he was entirely correct to do so. The UK by that stage had neither the right nor desire to be so deeply enmeshed in Iraqi national security. British troops were no longer patrolling the streets of Basra. Military relationships had transitioned to a something resembling far more of a normal defence relationship, based on a legal framework of mutual respect. Control of BIA's airspace had even been passed to Iraqi air traffic control for the first time since 2003.¹²¹⁶ Both Governments had begun to find the pathway to a new relationship, one between two democratic countries that would work together where they had common interests; the priority of which, unsurprisingly, was economic.

Three major influences shaped the way that UK decision-makers reached this point. First was the remarkable disappearance of violence from the strategic environment. Second, and directly linked to the first, was the final achievement of a more 'comprehensive approach' in Iraq. Finally, the UK's determination to secure their reputation – and to defend their legacy – made a major difference to the way decisions were made.

The Benefits of an Absence of Violence. The reduction in violence across Iraq in 2008 and 2009 was profound. In July 2008 Bush was able to announce that violence was 'down to its lowest level since the spring of 2004'¹²¹⁷, and by September 2009 Odierno was able to report to Congress an overall decrease in violence of 85% over the previous two years.¹²¹⁸ British officials concurred, reporting to Brown in March 2009 that violence across Iraq was at a 'six-year low, a 90 percent decrease since the US surge began in 2007'.¹²¹⁹ Southern Iraq was no different. On 29 February 2008 the British suffered their last combat fatality (Sergeant Duane Barwood)¹²²⁰, and in November 2008 the UK hit the milestone of forty days without an attack on a British base, the 'longest unbroken period of calm since January 2006'.¹²²¹ Unlike in the period of the 'deal', this time the peace included Iraqi civilians; sectarian violence overall fell 88% between August 2007 and August 2009. It is fair to say that by late 2008 violence was no longer a defining factor of the strategic environment in southern Iraq.

¹²¹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 410.

¹²¹⁷ White House Press Release Archive, *President Bush Discusses Iraq*, 31 Jul 2008, found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹²¹⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman, 'The Uncertain Security Situation in Iraq: Trends in Violence, Casualties, and Iraqi Perceptions', *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 17 Feb 2010, found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Feb 24).

¹²¹⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 380.

¹²²⁰ UK Ministry of Defence, Online Article, *Field of Operation* [undated], found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹²²¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 251.

This was a significant change, unseen at any other stage in the war (less perhaps in the first tentative weeks after the invasion). In the conclusion to Part Three I examined how the continued presence of violence in the environment was an unpredictable and chaotic influence that ‘undercut the ability for the execution of coherent [British] strategy’.¹²²² The presence of persistence violence made the execution of effective British strategy highly challenging, if not impossible. So, what happened when the violence was removed from the strategic environment?

The sharp reduction in violence in 2008/2009 enabled a far more effective application of British strategy. This was the case across all facets of strategy in practice. The most obvious benefits were found in the military and security sphere. The reduction in British casualties was the most welcome factor, for both practical and moral reasons. Domestically it was vital in reducing pressure on the Government, allowing them to pursue a broader and more diverse set of objectives. But reduced violence also improved practical military effectiveness. It helped, for example, encourage the military system (which had been historically risk-averse) to accept the longer-term embedding of British mentors into the 14th Division for the last year of the campaign, providing a far better output.

Reduced violence and increased effectiveness then led to a wholesale improvement in morale. When Dannatt visited Iraq in December 2008, he found troops in Basra ‘marked by a sense of great optimism: attacks are now the exception rather than the rule; the Iraqi security forces are demonstrating impressive, albeit nascent, ability. And there are early signs of a bustling city attempting to return to normality’.¹²²³ This uplift also reached the ISF and the Baswari people. As White-Spunner summarised, ‘there is a sense that the city is just waking from a nightmare and rubbing its eyes as it contemplates what could turn out to be a fine day, although it is too early to be sure’.¹²²⁴

Reduced violence and improved morale set the foundation for broader progress. Development work was able to re-commence; May 2008 saw the opening of a UK/Iraqi co-funded market in the Jameat area of Basra. This was, according to reports, ‘the first time in over a year that a UK diplomat [had] gone into the city ... nobody can remember when we last visited the Jameat, hitherto a JAM

¹²²² Recall that 2005 represented a comparative lull in violence across the country, but the violence was still there; normalised in the strategic environment in a pattern of 600 – 700 incidents a week (see Anthony H. Cordesman, *Trends in Iraqi Violence: Casualties and Impacts of War 2003 – 2015 (Working Draft 4 Sep 2015)*, p. 47 for ‘CENTCOM SIGACTS’, found at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23)). Violence then exploded in 2006 after the as-Askari bombing; the chaotic spark that drove a self-perpetuating, self-expanding cycle of ‘collective killing’ that submerged any chance of political progress in a ‘flood of violence and division’.

¹²²³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 282.

¹²²⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 82.

stronghold'.¹²²⁵ But perhaps most importantly, the stark reduction in sectarian violence – and the concomitant increase in the stability of Maliki's Government – allowed steady political progress: unlocking some of the key sectarian issues. Cooper summed this up in March 2009 when he wrote that, 'despite frequent and frustrating in-fighting, a good deal of positive progress was made politically in the last year. The political parties cobbled together a mini 'grand bargain' to pass the 2008 budget and the amnesty and provincial powers law; ... and the GoI pushed the US back over successive red lines before concluding the Security Agreement. In many ways, the political class came of age'.¹²²⁶ The passing of the Provincial Powers Law was particularly important to British efforts in the south, in that it enabled local elections (a key marker in the British pathways to withdrawal). It seems impossible that such progress would have been achieved had violence remained at the same levels as 2006 and 2007.

Five years earlier, in April 2004, Blair had expressed his views on the problems in Basra and the south. His conclusion was that the problem was 'not multi-faceted. It is simple: security [emphasis in original]. It casts its shadow over everything'.¹²²⁷ The evident progress in 2008 and 2009 suggests that Blair was entirely right. Only once security improved, and violence declined, was strategic progress possible.

So, what does this tell us about war and strategy? At the end of Part Two I considered the difference between 'theories of force' (ala Howard, Gray, Betts and Yarger) and 'theories of power' (ala Freedman and Nye). I argued that 'theories of force' were insufficient to enable British decision-makers to achieve strategic outcomes in Iraq. The British instead needed to engage a broad range of instrumental strategic tools to have a chance of success. This led to considerations of a broader concept of strategy: one that, as Freedman proposes, focussed on the 'art of creating power'.

Parts Four and Five, however, reinforce the unique defining nature of the presence of force – or violence – in a strategic environment. For the British, it was the very presence of violence that prevented them from 'creating power', and therefore generating strategic progress. Once the violence was removed in 2008/2009, British decision-makers were far more effective at achieving strategic effect. I will return in my overall conclusion to the role that violence plays in the nature of strategy in the Iraq war.

¹²²⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 26.

¹²²⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 369.

¹²²⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 936.

Beyond the Wit of Man? Finally Succeeding in a ‘Comprehensive Approach’. The influence of the decline in violence on strategy is reinforced by the apparent successes in the British ‘comprehensive approach’. At the end of Part Three General Walker had suggested that such an effort was ‘beyond the wit of man’.¹²²⁸ Yet this was not the case by 2008 and 2009. In February 2008 Binns wrote in his end of tour report of the improvement in military and civilian cooperation. ‘Inter Departmental co-operation in theatre is superb’, he reported.¹²²⁹ This was not just a military view. Frank Baker, the Head of the FCO Iraq Group, reported the same in February 2009. ‘It would have been easy’, he wrote, ‘to have taken that opportunity [after *Charge of the Knights*] to disengage with Basra. Instead, we recognised that we could take advantage of the improving security situation ... the last year in Basra has been a model of co-operation between the GOC, Consul General and the Head of the PRT’. In a signature demonstration of a more ‘comprehensive approach’, the three Permanent Secretaries of the FCO, the MoD and DFID all visited Iraq together in late February 2009: a direct product of the FCO’s impressive January 2009 strategy paper, and the first time this had happened.¹²³⁰ Strategy – otherwise known as the ‘comprehensive approach’ – had come some way since the first, stumbling efforts to create the PCRU in late 2004.

Where did this improvement come from? The dividend of peace and stability from *Saulat al-Fursan* certainly helped. Nigel Heywood, the UK Consul General in Basra from April 2008, reported that the previously insurmountable barriers for inter-agency engagement with the Iraqis simply dissolved after the operation. ‘When [Major] General Salmon [who had replaced Binns] and I jointly went to call on the Governor in his office in August [2008]’, he testified, ‘that was the first time anybody had called on the Governor’s office for two years, nobody had been out really operating in the town [since] October 2006’.¹²³¹ But the absence of violence was not the only facilitator for a more ‘comprehensive approach’. Structural changes were finally being directed by Whitehall to improve the effectiveness of the agencies in Basra. In August 2008 the FCO commissioned the Whitehall ‘Stabilisation Unit’ (which had replaced the PCRU) to conduct a review of the Basra PRT’s effectiveness. The Stabilisation Unit highlighted one principal issue; that since January 2007 the Head of the PRT had been double-hatted as the Deputy Consul General. This, the Unit argued, was part of a ‘dysfunctional structural legacy’. In an atypical move, action was immediately taken in London and when Keith MacKiggan arrived in Basra in late September 2008 he took over only as the Head of the Basra PRT: ending the practice of double-hatting.¹²³²

¹²²⁸ Transcript of Public Hearing, Gen Walker, 1 Feb 2010, p. 64 from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 23 Oct 23).

¹²²⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 789.

¹²³⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, paras 345 – 347.

¹²³¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 986.

¹²³² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 998.

Steps like these made a real difference; laying the foundations, for example, for the arrival of the UKTI staff in early 2009 and genuine progress in economic relationships. The situation was by no means perfect; the three key protagonists of Commander MND(SE), the Consul General and the Head of the PRT still lacked clear guidance from London (even in late 2008/early 2009). ‘There was no comprehensive strategic plan that I ever saw’, Salmon told the Inquiry, ‘so what we decided to do ... [was] ensure that we had much more collective consensus, joined-up approach, because nobody was in charge’.¹²³³ But the situation was certainly better. Baker therefore had some justification when he reported in February 2009 that ‘this excellent example of joined up government has allowed us to reach our objectives across the board, which in turn means we will be able to leave a lasting positive legacy, something that would not have been the case even six months ago’.¹²³⁴ Late 2008 and early 2009 suggest that a ‘comprehensive approach’ – or indeed strategy – was not ‘beyond the wit of man’; it had always just needed a more stable environment, additional focus, the right leaders, and more investment.

The Final Battle for Reputation and Legacy. The final factor that influenced British decision-making in these last months was the drive to protect British reputation, and to secure a positive legacy. This was a focus held at the highest of levels. In general, British reputation with both the Iraqis and the US was damaged by *Saulat al-Fursan*. Vitriol on the Iraqi side came most strongly from Maliki himself. As discussed in Part Three, Maliki had a historic distrust of the British¹²³⁵, and the outcomes of the ‘deal’ in Basra seemed to confirm his worst suspicions. British shortfalls were a convenient scapegoat for his own failings. Either way, Maliki was exceptionally and publicly vocal in his criticism of the British. His refusals to meet British officials in Basra was a low point, but this was a long-standing trend that persisted. On his return to Baghdad after *Saulat al-Fursan* Maliki ‘loudly blamed the British for treating with the JAM ‘criminals’ and, hence, handing Basra over to them’.¹²³⁶

Maliki particularly denied all knowledge of the 2007 ‘deal’ with JAM, and widely publicised his dissatisfaction with British support to the ISF in Basra. In late April 2008 he met Miliband, a meeting which staff reported was ‘held in a bad atmosphere, with Maliki blaming us for all of Basra’s

¹²³³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 1000.

¹²³⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 347.

¹²³⁵ Recall Condoleezza Rice’s warning to Jack Straw that there was a ‘latent suspicion that the UK would repeat the history of the 1920s and undercut agreements reached with the Iraqis’ (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 144).

¹²³⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 969.

shortcomings, and criticising our dealings with JAM'.¹²³⁷ In October 2008 Maliki took his attacks onto British shores, giving an interview to the Times where he said that the JAM 'accommodation' was 'a disaster' and that, in his view, 'at a critical juncture, British forces put their own security ahead of Basra's'. British troops, he argued, were 'definitely ... no longer necessary' in Iraq.¹²³⁸ The situation with Maliki became bad enough by October 2008 that Brown was advised not to visit Iraq due to the risk that this would 'annoy' Maliki when the UK SOFA was being considered.¹²³⁹ Brown, the prudent pragmatist, did not visit.

Maliki, however, was not alone in having negative views of British outcomes. As we have seen, *Saulat al-Fursan* also exposed a more honest picture of US views.¹²⁴⁰ The need to re-intervene early due to *Saulat al-Fursan* was unwelcome, as was the requirement to then permanently backfill MND(SE): but the US had little choice. Petraeus tactfully put it to Cooper that that situation was 'not optimal', and Cooper separately reported that the US/UK relationship was 'polite but bruised ... suspicions about the Accommodation with JAM in Basra are not far below the surface'.¹²⁴¹ 'We should not underestimate the [resourcing] pain that will fall to ... Austin's MNC-I', Cooper reported in the aftermath of *Saulat al-Fursan*, 'but I am confident that [Austin] will learn to live with it'.¹²⁴² Sheinwald in Washington was particularly concerned about British reputation, reporting to Brown in April 2008 that in the White House 'they know we are irritated, but 'a lot of people here think the UK has failed in Basra''.¹²⁴³ By May 2008 Des Browne was reporting that British reputation in the US was 'undoubtedly tarnished'.¹²⁴⁴

This dual damage to British reputation was a significant problem. It was important in the international sphere. As a 'P5' member of the UN Security Council and an EU power, the UK took pride in being an influential member of the international community. Brown may have been more willing than Blair to place domestic interests over his relationship with the US, but he remained a committed Atlanticist and knew that he had to protect the UK's standing: with the US as a reliable

¹²³⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1055.

¹²³⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 218.

¹²³⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 228.

¹²⁴⁰ As the introduction to this section explains, American officials in Iraq had portrayed themselves as being comfortable with the situation in December 2007, but the reality (as later reported by Cooper and White-Spunner) is that the US considered that the British had left the south as 'ungoverned space' in which they were always going to have to re-intervene. The US plan had always, it seemed, been to execute this re-intervention in late 2008, sequential to what they considered to be the final battle against AQ-I in northern Iraq.

¹²⁴¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 911.

¹²⁴² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1043.

¹²⁴³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 996.

¹²⁴⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 34.

ally and, more broadly, internationally. Maliki's public views were particularly challenging, given the Government's commitment to liberal values; to have the Prime Minister of a sovereign country the UK had committed to help be so vocal in his criticism was damaging.

Brown's challenges were, however, as much domestic as they were international. By late 2007 polling showed that a remarkable 83% of Britons opposed the war, and in mid-2008 Labour trailed the Conservatives by 15%.¹²⁴⁵ Trust in Government was a major issue; polling suggested that only 28% of Britons believed that the Labour had 'kept their promises' overall.¹²⁴⁶ It was a genuine domestic problem when Maliki spoke in a leading British newspaper of the 'disaster' of UK actions in Basra. The final challenge rested in the reputation of the Armed Forces, and the impact this would have on societal trust, internal morale, retention and recruitment. After six years of operations, the legacy of Iraq was a major factor in the long-term health of the British military.

The need to protect reputation and legacy therefore significantly shaped British decision-making in the war's final phase. It was the principal factor in the decision to maintain troop levels at 4,100 until the end of 2008; something the military could ill afford against the pressures of Afghanistan. We have already seen that Sheinwald's advice from Washington was key to the immediate suspension of UK withdrawal plans in April 2008, when he wrote directly to McDonald that 'our reputation in the US will be significantly damaged if we are seen to leave Basra in chaos or if UK forces have to be backfilled by US troops'.¹²⁴⁷ It was 'reputation' that then persisted as a central influence as British decision-makers considered their options.

Troop numbers are an excellent vignette of this. True to his word, Brown was keen to return to troop reductions as soon as possible after the dust had settled on Maliki's operation, and he quietly sought advice on the potential for even faster reductions; down to as low as 1,900 troops by the end of November 2008. But the return advice was explicit that the damage to the UK's reputation and legacy would be exceptional. Such an option would make British forces 'very much the junior partner in MND(SE)' and it as expected that the 'US would take over command of the division'. British officials 'could not present a coherent military rationale' for such a reduction. Longer term damage to the UK's military and diplomatic reputation in the US would be 'considerable' because 'both

¹²⁴⁵ For opposition to the Iraq War, see IPSOS MORI, *The Iraq War Damaged Britain's Reputation in the World*, 19 Mar 2013, found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24). For the Conservative lead over Labour, see IPSOS MORI, *Political Monitor October 2008*, 22 Oct 2008, found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹²⁴⁶ IPSOS MORI, *End of Year Review 2007* [undated], found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24), p. 4.

¹²⁴⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 918.

Washington and General Petraeus believe they have a commitment from us that we will stay the course until 14 Division has been fully trained’.

The advice concluded that ‘domestically we could not present a credible military case for the reduction nor argue that it is conditions-based. Our contribution would be portrayed as a token sop and would be especially difficult to explain if we began to take casualties. We should expect an adverse and long-lasting impact on morale across Defence’.¹²⁴⁸ Brown met Petraeus days after he received this advice and, based on its weight, there was no discussion on reduced force levels.¹²⁴⁹ UK forces were maintained at around the 4,000 level until the 14th Division was fully trained in early 2009; reputation and legacy were sufficient to outweigh even the Prime Minister’s determination for expedient withdrawal.

The need to defend British reputation is also clearly represented in UK diplomatic priorities in Iraq. Ambassador Prentice’s highest priority after *Saulat al-Fursan* was to defend the British legacy, particularly by countering Maliki’s negative narrative about the ‘deal’. Maliki had been particularly vocal about the ‘deal’, telling Brown directly when they spoke on the phone on 3 April 2008 that he had never been informed or even consulted on the British accommodation.¹²⁵⁰ It was after this call that Prentice was given clear instructions from the Prime Minister’s office to refute these claims.

Prentice brought this task to the top of his list and acted quickly. By 7 April he was in Tariq Abdullah’s office, Maliki’s Chief of Staff, expressing his surprise at Maliki’s comments to Brown, and seeking to ‘correct the prevailing misconceptions about a lack of UK military assistance in Basra and nefarious deals between the UK and JAM’. Prentice was forceful. Allegations of a conspiracy between the UK and JAM were, he expressed, ‘very damaging, unfounded and not understood in London’, and Prentice expressed his surprise in the tone of the conversation between Prime Ministers; ‘a number of points had arisen that PM Brown had found difficult to accept’.¹²⁵¹ He reminded Abdullah that it was Maliki himself who had blocked operations against JAM leaders during SALAMANCA, and reinforced that British officials had been (mostly) open with both Petraeus and Rubaie as the ‘deal’ was being developed. All of which was true – although Prentice perhaps under-emphasised US and Iraq objections and nervousness over the plan – and Abdullah had little choice but to accept it as such.¹²⁵²

¹²⁴⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, paras 214 – 215.

¹²⁴⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 217.

¹²⁵⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 952 – 953.

¹²⁵¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 973.

¹²⁵² Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, paras 974 – 976.

Prentice next step, taken on the next day, was to call on Rubaie to discuss ‘how best to correct PM Maliki’s misapprehensions about the UK’s relationships with JAM in Basra and the support that MND(SE) had given during recent operations’. He again refreshed on the history of the ‘deal’, and the pre-‘deal’ engagement with Rubaie personally. He emphasised the damage that could be caused by ‘misapprehensions’, noting that there was a ‘delicate political atmosphere in the UK over Iraq’ and that major decisions on Iraq policy were yet to be taken. Negative perceptions, he warned, could ‘undermine political will to maintain engagement’.¹²⁵³

Prentice’s engagement with Rubaie opened Maliki’s door, and on 12 and 13 April 2008 Prentice had two hours with the Prime Minister to challenge his concerns. In these discussions, described by the Embassy as ‘frank and open without a hint of animosity’, Maliki laid a wide range of accusations at Prentice’s feet: the British had released detainees without informing the Iraqi Government; had provided ‘no training and equipment’ to Iraqi troops in Basra; had allowed JAM to re-arm and regroup; had withdrawn from Basra Palace without consultation; and, finally, had refused to allow US helicopters to fly during *Saulat al-Fursan*. Prentice steadily refuted these claims. By the end of the meeting Maliki had acknowledged that his office had been informed about the ‘deal’, and the Prime Minister acknowledged UK support and thanked Prentice for it. He committed to communicating a true picture of UK support when he met Browne on 18 April.¹²⁵⁴ Prentice had done well, and the scale of his efforts shows just how important reputation and legacy was to the British in the challenging aftermath of *Saulat al-Fursan*.

Collective efforts to protect British reputation and legacy in the final phase of the Iraq war can, therefore, be said to have met with some success. There is a sense that relationships with the US improved in the final months, although it is difficult at times to discriminate between genuine US admiration and alliance-politicking. In September 2008 Petraeus paid tribute to British efforts in a meeting with Brown, describing work to capitalise on opportunities in Basra as ‘superb’.¹²⁵⁵ Cooper, in his end of tour report in March 2009, concluded that ‘2008 was a difficult year in Iraq for the UK-US relationship, but it has recovered to a degree since then’.¹²⁵⁶ Major General Salmon (his replacement) was more optimistic, writing two months later that, ‘our in-Theatre relationships with the US are very strong and there is widespread US and Iraqi acknowledgement of the UK’s

¹²⁵³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 979.

¹²⁵⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1004 – 1009.

¹²⁵⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 217.

¹²⁵⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 372.

contribution ... UK Defence can withdraw from Iraq having delivered on this promises and with its professional reputation intact'.¹²⁵⁷

But such efforts to protect reputation and legacy could only go so far, and damage endured in the long-term. This was particularly the case domestically. Labour failed to regain the trust of the public and were defeated in the 2010 election. By 2013 (ten years after the invasion) polling indicated that 70% of people thought Britain was 'wrong to get involved' in the Iraq war, and over half (52%) believed it had damaged the UK's reputation. As the Managing Director of the IPSOS Polling Company concluded, 'over the ten years since the start of the Iraq war, we've seen public opinion shift significantly from initial support to clear opposition ... people are also clear that this damaged our reputations round the world'.¹²⁵⁸

In terms of US relationships, it would be difficult for a single affair to destroy decades of alliance relations, but it is certainly fair to say that Iraq created a dent. Mansoor is clear in his criticism of British effectiveness, and his voice is joined by others; including retired US General Jack Keane (a key advisor to Bush on the 'surge'), who criticised the British in the US media in 2007, and continued to do so in 2010 in the documentary 'Secret Iraq'.¹²⁵⁹ Even Petraeus is reported to have been quietly critical; Simon Akam reports that a British officer asked Petraeus in Kabul how long it would take for the US to forget what happened in Basra. 'A generation', the officer asked? 'Slightly longer', Petraeus is reported to have replied.¹²⁶⁰

Even Maliki, who seemed much more disposed to the British once their focus became economic, could not resist one final public jab. On 30 June 2009 the US finally handed over responsibility for security in all urban areas to the ISF. Maliki declared the day a national holiday, entitled the 'Day of Dignity', and he gave a rousing speech where he compared it to the Arab Revolt against the British in 1920. No thanks were given to the Coalition on that day. Prentice may have been able to overcome misapprehensions about the 'deal', but he could not outweigh British history in Iraq. And nor could British officials *writ large* overcome the spectre of illegitimacy and failure from the campaign, which dogged it for many years after it had finished.

¹²⁵⁷ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.7, para 410.

¹²⁵⁸ IPSOS MORI, *The Iraq War Damaged Britain's Reputation in the World*, 19 Mar 2013, found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹²⁵⁹ For Keane's negative commentary in 2007, see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, see box on p. 229. For his commentary in the 'Secret Iraq' documentary, see British Broadcasting Corporation, 'Secret Iraq', 30 Nov 2010, found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹²⁶⁰ Simon Akam, *The Changing of the Guard: the British Army Since 9/11* (London: Scribe, 2021), Loc Cit 5560.

Part Five Conclusion: Confirming and Finalising Trends

Saulat al-Fursan sits as the culmination of the UK's dual strategic subordination to the US and Iraqi Governments, an important vignette as to just how irrelevant the British had become to the situation in Iraq in 2008. The decision to take decisive action in Basra was wholly an Iraqi one, a by-product of the unsatisfactory position the British had left Basra after PIC. It took place despite British strategy, not with credit to it. *Saulat al-Fursan* upturned the shaky peace that the UK had established in the city, and the British then lacked the strategic currency to either respond or to seek to exploit the opportunity. This lack of currency was both tangible and intangible. They lacked the tangible assets in force numbers and military assets to ensure Iraqi success. But they also lacked the intangible assets of trusted relationships, professional reputation, and diplomatic influence with which to respond.

The Iraqis, who by that stage had no trust for the British, turned to the Americans for all these things. Petraeus, thanks not just to the 'surge' but also to years of intellectual investment, was able to respond with alacrity: turning an initially-failing operation into perhaps one of the most decisive moments in the Iraq war. It is a sad culmination that British strategy ultimately became so subordinate to Iraqi and US decision-making in *Saulat al-Fursan* as to become, in line with the fears of the British Prime Minister, wholly 'irrelevant' to the outcome.

The aftermath of *Saulat al-Fursan* reinforces the influence of the chaotic and unpredictable nature of war, and indeed what can happen when it declines. The reduction in violence of all brands as a result of the 'surge', the 'deal', and *Saulat al-Fursan* represented a profound change in the strategic environment, which had a commensurate impact on the ability of the British to execute coherent strategy. The absence of violence in the last twelve months of the campaign enabled an improvement across almost all areas of British performance. In the military sphere, the forced reconnection of British and US strategy in southern Iraq, and the resulting change in mentoring force posture, rescued (at least in part) the morale and reputation of the British military. It enabled development work of a manner that had not been seen in two years. It increasingly allowed a successful shift from a military-dominated strategy to an economic one.

But perhaps most importantly, the reduction in violence removed some of the stigma of Iraq: the miasma of casualties, distrust, and failure that had made most Departments institutionally shy away from engagement. Whitehall agencies were much more willing to engage with Iraq once the 'collective killing' had ended. Miliband's January 2009 strategy paper, and Lord Mandelson's

engagement through UKTI, showed just how much could be done in a strategic environment not dominated by political violence. I will save reflection on what this might tell us about the nature of strategy – the relationship between ‘theories of power’ vice ‘theories of force’ – for the final conclusion.

In term of individuals, 2008 marked the maturation of Gordon Brown’s approach to the Iraq problem. Extracting the UK from Iraq was a key part of his ‘renewal’ strategy from the villains of his predecessor in 2007, and Brown’s influence grew steadily. During the initial days of *Saulat al-Fursan* he pragmatically allowed the strategic subordination to the US to dominate; making the immediate decision to sustain troop numbers at around 4,000. But he then resolutely returned to his extraction plan, seeking every opportunity to accelerate British military withdrawal and strategic diversification. Rather than protecting UK ownership in Basra, he embraced the reconnection of US and UK strategy and negotiated a ‘joint endeavour’ that all but guaranteed a rapid handover of the south to US command. Brown’s increasingly clear direction to extract as expediently as possible, combined with the reduction of violence across the country, opened the pathways for the diversification he sought. A ‘comprehensive approach’ finally seemed possible under Brown’s script: the advancement of inter-agency strategy under Miliband, and economic diversification under Mandelson, were notable. Brown looms increasingly large in the cast of individuals who influenced British strategy in the final phase of the Iraq war, re-gaining some of the authority that Blair lost in his final months in power.

But Brown could not entirely escape the influence of the international system. He was aware that he held the responsibility for the final tally on British honour, and on the impact Iraq would have on the UK’s long-term international reputation. He was unwilling, therefore, to burn the relationship with the US too much: for example by reducing troop levels down to 1,900 in November 2008. He equally invested considerable diplomatic energy in refuting Maliki’s accusations of perfidy and betrayal. The long-term UK’s relationship with Iraq was but one effort. Far more important was the UK’s standing as a reliable partner, a responsible member of the international community, and a capable military power. Accusations of UK incompetence and betrayal could not be allowed to stand. Prentice did well in the short term, but in the end even these efforts could not mask the overall scar of years of obfuscation and underinvestment.

Conclusion

'Never, never, never believe that any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The statesman who yields to war fever must realise that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events'.

Winston Churchill, 1930¹²⁶¹

The British war in Iraq lasted two thousand, two hundred and ninety-four days. It was a single war, but its character changed many times over the years. The physical war was preceded by a theoretical one. Politicians, civil servants, lawyers and military officers spent many hand-wringing months considering the theory of how to threaten or apply violence in Iraq, mostly focused on its legality in a world where the authority for such things no longer rested with nations, but with the UN. Iraq and the Iraqis themselves played a surprisingly minor role in the initial theory, focused as it was on the abstraction of diplomacy, international law and policy.

The first phase of the physical war – the shift from abstraction to reality – was then a conventional invasion that played to all the technologically-enabled strengths of the western coalition. It sought a decisive battle, one that was Napoleonic in its simple aim to crush the Iraqi military and remove Saddam and his regime. It succeeded. But there the theory of strategy ended, with no concept for translating political violence into a lasting peace. The moment of stillness and shock that followed the invasion rapidly transformed into a violent insurgency against an occupation widely viewed as illegitimate (in Iraq and in the court of global opinion), and then into a vicious sectarian civil war that lasted years. The US and the UK had envisaged a short war, a simple extension of policy by other means, but the war itself – eventually involving the clash of many wills – decided otherwise. The cost in blood, treasure, political standing and reputation exceeded all predictions. Overall, it was poor strategy, which left long scars in the fabric of the United Kingdom.

This thesis has examined the influences on British strategic decision-making in the Iraq war. Unlike other studies, which have examined single phases of the war, it has looked at the war as a whole, analysing how influences ebbed and flowed as its character evolved. To conclude, I will first briefly return to the extant literature on the prominent themes of influence, reviewing it in light of my new analysis. I will show how these themes cannot be viewed in isolation, or in a predictable fashion;

¹²⁶¹ Winston Churchill, *My Early Life: 1874 – 1904* (London: Eland Books, 2002).

instead I will show how they interacted with each other in tense, unpredictable reciprocal relationships, and how no influence can be seen as the 'principal' influence. There are few identifiable patterns.

I will then focus on the most under-appreciated influence on British strategic decision-making: the unpredictable nature of war itself. I will show how this unpredictability was the result of the presence of violence in Iraq, expressed through signature episodes of killing, and how British decision-makers consistently failed to take this unpredictability into account in either theory or practice. This was, I will argue, at the centre of British strategic failures in Iraq. I will evidence this by examining the pattern of poor assumptions that characterised British decision-making, and the shortfalls of both individuals and the machinery of government. I will end by considering what British decision-makers might have done differently, to make more successful strategy in Iraq.

Reconsidering the Extant Literature. The extant literature highlights four prominent themes of influence on British decision-making: the ideology argument, the individuals argument, the military argument, and the alliance argument. The archive of the Iraq Inquiry allows new conclusions to be drawn around these prominent influences, testing their valence across the full surface area of the war.

The ideology argument certainly stands as a prominent, foundational influence on the British war in Iraq. The set of ideas encapsulated in New Labour's political philosophy (loosely based on the '*Third Way*') set the conditions for Britain's entry into the war. Robin Cook's 'memorable phrase' formed the baseline for the 'foreign policy-led' 1998 *Strategic Defence Review*, which created the energy behind an expanding interventionist defence policy. This in turn led to Blair's 1999 Chicago speech and the *doctrine of the international community*. Successful interventions in Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, based on this doctrine, built a momentum of confidence within New Labour that they could use war as a logical and predictable extension of policy in Iraq.

The desire to adhere to the New Labour philosophy – the idea that 'ubi societas, ibi ius' ... 'whenever there is society, there should be laws'¹²⁶² – was then at the heart of almost all of the UK's strategic contradictions and issues, especially in the first year of the war. The centrality in the British debate of the legality of the invasion, the concerns over proportionate targeting, the instinctive acceptance of a legal role as an 'Occupying Power', legal concerns around investing in the CPA, and the collapse

¹²⁶² Giddens, *The Third Way*, Loc Cit 1790 – 1803.

of legitimacy as the intelligence failed, all of these were rooted in the UK's dilemma of balancing modern internationalist values with more traditional and urgent national interests.

The philosophy of New Labour then returned to haunt Iraq in the remarkable decision to expand into Helmand in 2006. The entanglement of British interests into the graveyard of empires in southern Afghanistan removed the last vestiges of the UK's strategic flexibility. From that stage onwards, withdrawal plans for Iraq (as initially set in the June 2005 'Op Telic: Operational Transition in Iraq' paper) could no longer be 'conditions-based, flexible, phased and adjustable'. Nor were they 'reversible'.¹²⁶³ The 'Helmand decision' displayed New Labour's dogged determination to prove that the war in Iraq was an aberration, and that liberal intervention could work. The Government and the Iraq-era military leadership together were the greatest advocates for British expansion into Helmand: the 'good war' that could draw the US back to an UN-sanctioned, multilateral approach. All success needed, they argued, was determination, optimism, and a more 'comprehensive approach' – an aspiration for strategy by another, more complex name. Ideology remained a prominent influence right up to 2006.

Ideology, however, is expressed through individuals, and it is clear that this second argument also carries weight. Blair is certainly the most prominent individual: the protagonist of the British war. If (as Strachan argues) politicians are the strategists in the modern age, then Blair stands as the UK's chief strategist in Iraq.¹²⁶⁴ The longest serving Prime Minister in Labour political history, the duration of his influence on Iraq exceeded all of the other major British players: Jack Straw, Robin Cook, Clare Short, Alistair Campbell, Lord Goldsmith, Sir Hilary Synnott, Admiral Boyce, General Walker, and General Reith, to name but a few.

The evidence places Blair at the centre of the majority of the major turning points throughout the first four Parts of the thesis. He was the true acolyte of New Labour's political philosophy, telling the party after 9/11 that, 'it's worse than you think ... I really do believe in it'.¹²⁶⁵ He was responsible for added the interventionist edge to the '*Third Way*', writing to his Private Secretary as early as 2002 that 'the case should be obvious' about Iraq, and that 'a political philosophy that does care about other nations ... should be gung-ho on Saddam'.¹²⁶⁶ Having decided war was inevitable, he was

¹²⁶³ Letter Reid to Powell, 18 July 2005, 'Operational Transition in Iraq' attaching Paper Secretary of State for Defence, [undated], 'Operational Transition in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

¹²⁶⁴ Strachan, *Strategy in Theory; Strategy in Practice*, p. 179.

¹²⁶⁵ See The Guardian Archives, *Full Text: Tony Blair's Speech (Part One) Labour Party Conference*, 2 Oct 01 found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

¹²⁶⁶ Minute Prime Minister to Powell, 'Iraq', 17 Mar 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

central to achieving the ‘big job of persuasion’¹²⁶⁷ in 2002, and then in 2003 he opened the gateway to war by certifying its legality, writing to Goldsmith that ‘it is indeed the Prime Minister’s unequivocal view that Iraq is in further material breach of its obligations’.¹²⁶⁸ This last of these stands out as one of the most fateful (and egregious) of the Iraq decisions.

Blair then set the vision for the future of Iraq, both pre and post invasion, and pushed hard for the British to accept an expansive role as a ‘Joint Occupying Power’. He personally led the charge in 2004 in expanding the NATO mission in Afghanistan (although his interest later waned). The enduring valence of Blair’s influence is best captured in his personal ‘Notes’, which acted as the most direct British strategic inject into the very top of the US system. This was the case right up till 2006 and Bush’s decision to ‘surge’, when Blair’s direct influence finally began to decline. In considering Bush’s role in Iraq, Eliot Cohen concluded that ‘it is clear that had not President George W. Bush been firm in his determination to go to war and engaged in its diplomacy and preparation, it would not have occurred’.¹²⁶⁹ The same conclusion must be drawn for Blair.

Blair was prominent, but he was however by no means alone, and arguments that place the war solely at his feet are far too simplistic. Many other individuals played critical roles on the winding pathways through the Iraq war. It was a personal decision of Lord Goldsmith, for example, to come to his ‘better view’ on the legality of the war, a fascinating moment driven (in the view of this thesis) more by the traditions of civil / military relations in Britain than by any form of political pressure. Clare Short’s own philosophical approach to the war as the International Development Secretary played a key role in inhibiting British strategic considerations of post-invasion Iraq, as did the reactions of others in the Cabinet Office to her views and the in-fighting that followed.

The *doctrine of the individual* was therefore strong with Blair, but it was not a manifestation of him alone. As Paul Fawcett and R. A. W. Rhodes tell us, the centralisation of power was part of the agenda of the broader New Labour leadership well before they came into power.¹²⁷⁰ The ‘hyperactive’ machinery of the Blair government was a group effort, not one limited to the Prime Minister himself. One must also then consider the influence of the individuals in uniform on the other side of the civil / military relationship. The CDSs of both Boyce and Stirrup, for example, played exceptionally prominent roles in the journey of the Iraq war, Boyce in certifying that the US plan

¹²⁶⁷ Note Blair to No.10 officials, ‘Extract Iraq’, 4 Jan 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18).

¹²⁶⁸ Letter Rycroft to Brummell, ‘Iraq’, 15 Mar 03 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jul 24).

¹²⁶⁹ Cohen, *Supreme Command*, p. 231.

¹²⁷⁰ Seldon, *Blair’s Britain*, p. 80.

would ‘work’, and Stirrup in his development of the ‘law of diminishing returns’. So yes, individuals were a prominent influence, but as a concatenation; agency was shared, not singular. Even Blair’s authority was not absolute – it disappeared rapidly in the aftermath of the 2007 ‘coup’, proof that his valence was underpinned not by sheer personality, but by the power of the prime ministership.

This brings us to the military argument. With 89% of the £11.83 billion overall cost of the war spent on military operations, the British military clearly played a disproportionate role in Iraq. This thesis highlights a number of incidents where the military – both institutionally and individually – drove strategy. It was the ‘Pigott Group’ under Lieutenant General Pigott that first operationalised the *strategy of influence* as a viable military task, establishing in May 2002 the achievement of ‘influence’ as the central aim for any military contribution to the invasion. The isolated operational level of command (led by Reith as CJO) was then the key gateway for the uncontrolled escalation of British commitment to OPLAN 1003V, advocating hard as it did for an expanded role for the British in the south so as to achieve influence.

In January 2006 it was then Walker as the CDS and the Chiefs who gave overly optimistic advice to John Reid that the resourcing challenges of the dual theatres of Iraq and Afghanistan would be ‘manageable’¹²⁷¹, driven by a desire for professional redemption, and despite privately expressing far more serious reservations. Reid showed atypically sharp strategic instincts, but these were overwritten by highly-optimistic military advice: the profession of arms must bear a heavy burden of responsibility for the decision to go to war in Helmand. Shirreff and Shaw, as successive Commanders MND(SE), both developed tactics with strategic implications in 2006 and 2007, albeit with very different outcomes. And it was Stirrup’s ‘law of diminishing returns’, inclusive of his skewed advice in January 2007 that the withdrawal from Basra would have ‘no impact ... in our ability to create military effect’, that closed the final doors for any option of a British surge in 2007.¹²⁷² Tim Ripley’s conclusion that the British military ‘were not hapless bystanders to a car crash’ is borne out by the Iraq Inquiry evidence.¹²⁷³ At times, they not only shaped strategy, but dictated it.

The final of the traditional views of influence is the alliance argument. This thesis finds that this must be approached through a different lens. It was not so much the US alliance, or alliances in general, that applied influence. It was instead the subordination of British strategy to others – initially the US

¹²⁷¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, para 532.

¹²⁷² This became formal military advice when Des Browne wrote to the Prime Minister in late January to state ‘the clear military advice ... is that re-posturing and the associated drawdown will not adversely affect our capacity to provide support to the Iraqi Security Forces’. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 435.

¹²⁷³ Ripley, *Operation TELIC*, Loc Cit 10033.

and then also the Iraqi government – that shaped British decisions. Both of these subordinations were done willingly, unconscious of the breadth of potential consequences. The first subordination was to the US: a direct outcome of the New Labour *strategy of influence*, with the commitment of military forces as the key currency. While this garnered some political success in the achievement of UNSCR 1441, the subsequent entanglement led the British down a long path of contingent decisions that began with the occupation of Basra, expanded with the establishment of ‘Joint Occupying Powers’, and endured all the way through to the US control on decisions of PIC and withdrawal.

British influence on the conduct of coalition strategy in Iraq in return was, in general, a fallacy. Outside of the rare occasion like the *First Battle of Fallujah*, and the impact of niche individuals like General Lamb on ‘reconciliation’, there is little evidence that British decision-makers influenced the US approach at any stage of the war. On two key occasions, the US even chose to fundamentally shift their strategy without consulting the British, first with the decision in 2003 to shift from a short to a long occupation (including the establishment of the CPA and Orders One and Two), and then with the decision to ‘surge’ in 2007. The second of these can only have been deliberate, which speaks much of the poor nature of the relationship by 2007.

The second subordination was to the Iraqi government in December 2005. While not as impactful as the first, this subordination drew the British deep into Iraqi sectarian politics, allied as they were to a clearly sectarian government. The election of Maliki placed the quiet British ‘fiefdom in the south’ as key terrain in the growing sectarian civil war. It also created a set of contradictions and frictions between British, US and Iraqi interests that British decision-makers found intensely difficult to navigate. Beset by history and long-memories, the British and the Iraqis were never happy bedfellows. *Saulat al-Fursan*, a genuinely Iraqi-led operation, may well have set the conditions for a peaceful British extraction, but it did so despite British strategy, not as a result of it. It is unlikely that the British will be remembered with warmth in southern Iraq, just as they were not in the aftermath of the 1920s.

The Unpredictable, Reciprocal Relationships of Influence. All four of the traditional themes of influence are therefore borne out in this thesis. The longitudinal nature of the study, however, allows me to draw important additional conclusions. The first is that influences on British strategic decision-making were highly unpredictable, interacting with each other in tense reciprocal relationships as strategy in theory iterated with strategy in practice. None of these themes are dominant throughout the Iraq war, and no one theme stands out as being ‘first in the order of importance’. It is not possible to examine the themes in isolation; they are mutually interdependent,

and a reductionist approach is destined to be ineffective. Each must be examined in the context of the others. There are few predictable or repeatable patterns in the relationships between influences.

Ideology, for example, cannot be seen as dominant throughout the war. New Labour's political philosophy certainly shaped how British decision-makers thought about going to war in Iraq, encouraging a theory of strategy built on a belief that war could be used in a logical, controllable manner. It is surprising how sticky this theory remained once abstraction had turned into reality, and once the many strategic contradictions inherent in the theory emerged in the aftermath of the war. But sticky it remained, shaping as it did the UK's willing second subordination of strategy to the Iraqi government in 2005, and leading British decision-makers down the path to the 'Helmand decision' in 2006.

This stickiness, however, was intrinsically tied to the Blair premiership. In 2007 Gordon Brown decided that Iraq, as a manifestation of New Labour politics and the *doctrine of the international community*, was one of the four villains of 'Blairism', and had to be sacrificed on the altar of 'renewal'. Brown met no practical or philosophical resistance in excising Blair's approach. The application of a *strategy of influence* on the US broadly ceased, and the strident calls for a 'whole Middle East approach' immediately ended. The political philosophy of New Labour played little to no role in the final phase of the Iraq war, subsumed by the legacy of an illegitimate war and the tensions of domestic politics. Under Brown's personal influence it was replaced with a strategy of aggressive withdrawal, strategic diversification (particularly into the economic sphere), and a clear willingness to accept increased (but never absolute) risk against both the US and Iraqi relationships, and against British reputation over Iraq.

The same can be said for strategic subordination. This set the context for much of the British experience in Iraq, but it cannot be said to be universally dominant. On at least three important occasions – in the incidents around the *First Battle of Fallujah*, in the 'deal' with JAM, and in resistance against a continued UK role in Basra post *Saulat al-Fursan* – British decision-makers proved that they could resist the influence of the subordination to both the American and Iraqi governments, if other pressures were strong enough. Strategic subordination was powerful, so a variety of other influences had to come into play to resist it. The military played a strong role in the first two occasions. The carving of a path of resistance at the time of the *First Battle of Fallujah* began with Major General Stewart's refusal of General Metz's order on 11 April 2004 to close the *Office of the Martyr Sadr* (OMS) offices in southern Iraq (an action that has echoes of General Mike

Jackson's refusal of General Wesley Clarke's orders to confront Russian forces in Kosovo, but without gaining so much prominence). The 'deal' was then firmly a tactically-driven initiative 'borne of opportunism', started in Basra by Major General Shaw and continued by Binns as his successor.¹²⁷⁴ But on the third occasion military advice from Dannatt, which emphasised seizing '*another* opportunity to be successful in Basra' after *Saulat al-Fursan*, was wholly dismissed by the Brown government, who moved in the entirely opposite direction: welcoming escalating US leadership in southern Iraq, and accelerating withdrawal.¹²⁷⁵ So the military was also by no means dominant as an influence. There are few logical patterns here. Instead, unpredictability was the dominant factor in the interplay and reciprocity between influences.

The Most Under-Appreciated Influence: the Unpredictable Nature of War. This insight brings us to what is arguably the most under-appreciated and persistent influence on British strategic decision-making in Iraq: the unpredictable nature of war itself. This was the root cause of the tense, uncertain interplay between influences. British decision-makers consistently failed to take this unpredictability into account, in either theory or practice: to understand the nature of war, and its reciprocity with strategy. The inability to recognise or acknowledge war's nature, or indeed its evolving character – and to adjust strategy accordingly – was at the centre of British strategic failures in Iraq. The results of this, and how it might have been addressed, will be discussed below.

The evidence shows that the primary cause of this unpredictability was the presence of violence in Iraq – as part of the enduring nature of war. One should always be cautious of quoting Clausewitz selectively, or in separating out single elements of his trinity, but it seems that war as a phenomenon, composed of (as Clausewitz defined it) 'primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force' played an outsize role in British strategic woes.¹²⁷⁶ This blind natural force, which I have expressed throughout this thesis as the act of 'collective killing for some collective purpose', applied a consistent and powerful seam of unpredictability in the dynamics of the Iraq war.

My analysis exposes a series of occasions where signature expressions of war as a 'blind natural force' decisively and unexpectedly shifted the character of the war. Each one of these 'unique episodes' (as Clausewitz might have called them¹²⁷⁷) in turn created a crisis for British strategy:

¹²⁷⁴ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 632.

¹²⁷⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 1028.

¹²⁷⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 89.

¹²⁷⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 120.

undermining assumptions, applying friction and driving a shift in the tense dynamics of influence on decision-making. War, as Clausewitz explains, is 'a pulsation of violence, variable in strength and therefore variable in the speed with which it explodes and discharges its energy'.¹²⁷⁸ When war discharged its energy intensely, or at the right moment, its influence became profound.

The invasion itself was obviously the first of these episodes: the deliberate decision by the Coalition to inject war into the environment of Iraq. But others were far more unexpected. The next such episode was the sudden murder of Sergio Vieira de Mello and 21 other UN staff by actors linked to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi on 19 August 2003. This shocking and unexpected act of violence caused a catastrophic reaction within the international community in Iraq, leading to the withdrawal of almost all UN and NGO staff from the country. With all options for multinational diversification gone, the British had no choice but to deepen their strategic subordination to the US within the CPA. The death of Sergio de Mello did much to tarnish the legitimacy of the occupation of Iraq; a clear indication that the war was not over, just changing character.

In 2004 the incidents around the *First Battle of Fallujah*, and the CPA's attempts to remove al-Sadr as a threat, were another such episode, sparking an unexpected surge in violence that Major General Stewart attested 'was like a switch had been flicked': the accelerant that fed the insurgency against the occupation.¹²⁷⁹ The February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine is then the exemplar. This lit the tinder on the already smouldering sectarian civil war in Iraq, fundamentally shifting the importance of the British AO in the vicious knife-fight of Iraqi secretariat politics. Even small acts of violence, at the right time, could have a disproportionate effect. The shooting down of the Lynx helicopter in Basra on 6 May 2006 so consumed Des Browne as the Secretary of State for Defence that the significance of the '*charge up the valley*' wholly escaped him. Each of these crises shifted the dynamics of British influence. Violence, it seems, was the greatest form of friction in the Iraq war: something that cannot be learned in theory, and is unimaginable to those who have not seen it.¹²⁸⁰

In many ways this inherent link between war, violence and unpredictability had been lost in British strategic thinking by the end of the 20th Century. In *New Makers of Modern Strategy*, Strachan warns of the dangers of applying or assuming linearity in the nature of war, using as an example how Peter Paret and Michael Howard, in their 1976 translation of *On War*, emphasised a tangible connection

¹²⁷⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 87.

¹²⁷⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.2, para 859.

¹²⁸⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 119 - 120.

between Clausewitz's 'primary trinity' with that of the so-called 'secondary trinity', reinforcing war as a political instrument directly subordinate to policy. This matched the narrative of the time, where strategy was firmly drawn away from the battlefield in the nuclear age. Such thinking, Strachan tells us, offered a lure of regularity in war. It removed the possibility, for example, of 'a rational population or a passionate government' in considerations of war.¹²⁸¹ Each part of the trinity had its predictable part to play. This linguistic nuance of war's subordination to policy quickly gained traction in western strategic thought, a traction that arguable remains today.

The British experience in Iraq, however, reinforces Strachan's focus on the purity of the primary trinity: on the 'violence of [war's] essence', on the 'play of probabilities and chance ... a free activity of the emotions', and on war's 'subordinate character of a political tool'.¹²⁸² It is war itself that combines these three in a single phenomenon. This elemental primary trinity influenced British strategy in Iraq in ways that defies Paret and Howard's nuance of subordination. The Iraq war was, at times, prosecuted despite a dispassionate people and even a dispassionate military. As the '*charge up the valley*' shows, probability and chance applied themselves as much to the Government as they did to the military – it would have been hard for anyone to foresee the confluence of chaos of May 2006, as the 'changing of the guard', a Cabinet re-shuffle, the Lynx incident in Iraq, and the Iran nuclear crisis came together to open the gateway for the decision to 'charge' (a tactical decision with strategic implications) to slip through. And in terms of politics, the Iraq war cast its net far and wide, from the United Nations to the *Jaysh al Mahdi*: a clash of wills that exceeded all expectations, and an engagement of political communities well beyond just governments. The Iraq war draws to the fore Clausewitz's purest characterisations of war – as the 'realm of uncertainty', a phenomenon that defies prediction.¹²⁸³

Ignoring War's Nature: The Persistent Pattern of Poor Assumptions. The theory of British strategy in Iraq, however, rarely took this unpredictability into account. Instead it consistently relied on a foundation of underpinning linearity and logic within the Iraq theatre, a linearity and logic that did not exist. This manifested itself most persistently in the development of poor assumptions, and a failure to recognise when those assumptions were failing in practice. As I have argued throughout this thesis, assumptions are the lifeblood of good strategy in practice: the ability to add clarity to an unknown future by grasping the uncertain, accepting a version of it, and managing the resulting risk.

¹²⁸¹ Brands (Ed.), *The New Makers of Modern Strategy*, pp. 133 – 134.

¹²⁸² Brands (Ed.), *The New Makers of Modern Strategy*, p. 132.

¹²⁸³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 101.

But time after time British decision-makers failed to successfully apply foresight or intellectual rigour to this vital practice, or to act when assumptions failed.

This is best evident in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. The British (and US) plan made bold assumptions around the military campaign: that it would be decisive, the security environment would be stable, the Coalition would be greeted as liberators, Iraqi ministries would continue to function, and that the nation's infrastructure would remain largely intact. As a March 2003 paper to Hoon pointed out, these were 'best case assumptions' and that 'there is at least a credible possibility that none of these conditions will obtain'.¹²⁸⁴ None of them did, thanks to the fracturing of the tense equilibrium between Sunni and Shi'a, and the eruption of violence that followed it.

The trend of poor assumptions is then a thread that weaves its way throughout this thesis, common across and linking together all levels of tactics and policy. The Inquiry highlights how British decision-makers after the invasion made the dangerous assumption 'that the US could act as guarantor of the UK's objectives in Iraq'.¹²⁸⁵ The Inquiry wholly rejects Blair's suggestion that the weakness of this assumption was not foreseeable, stating that the lack of US preparedness 'did not require the benefit of hindsight'.¹²⁸⁶ In the initial months of the occupation, the British assumed that 'the threat from Al Qaida associates in Northern Iraq has been significantly reduced'.¹²⁸⁷ They were therefore rocked on their heels by the infiltration of al-Zarqawi, and the sudden assassination of both Sergio de Mello and then Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim.

Poor assumptions persisted as the character of the war evolved. At the tactical level, the assumptions made by Shirreff in his development of Operation SALAMANCA in 2006, be they related to resources or political support, were intensely optimistic to the extent of being unrealistic. In February 2008, all options being presented to the Iraq Strategy Group for the post-PIC period 'assumed ... that the threat in Basra would not deteriorate significantly'.¹²⁸⁸ The 'deal', however, was already collapsing, violence was surging, and *Saulat al-Fursan* was just weeks away. The British consistently relied on an optimistic perception of stability in Iraq, with poor assumptions as the result.

¹²⁸⁴ Minute Sec(O)4 to PS/Secretary of State [MoD], 6 March 2003, 'Iraq: Aftermath – Medium to Long Term UK Military Commitment', 6 Mar 03, para 22 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 31 Jul 18).

¹²⁸⁵ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.1, para 17.

¹²⁸⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Executive Summary, para 623.

¹²⁸⁷ JIC Assessment, 16 Apr 04, 'Iraq: The Initial Landscape Post Saddam' from Iraq Inquiry evidence at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

¹²⁸⁸ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.6, para 793.

The months of June and July 2005 stand as the textbook example of the dangers of these poor assumptions, and the hubris of believing that war was predictable and controllable. June 2005 saw the MoD develop the 'Op Telic: Operational Transition in Iraq' paper that established the withdrawal glidepath for British troops out of Iraq. This was the plan that applied the 'discipline of a time-based approach'.¹²⁸⁹ By the time this was staffed through the Whitehall machinery to DOP(I) for consideration, the plan had three well-founded strategic risks attached: 'a deterioration in the security situation resulting from a change in Shi'a quiescence', 'a failure to deliver an effective ISF', and 'a prolonged delay in the political process'.¹²⁹⁰ It was then on the 21 July 2005 that both DOP(I) and DOP met sequentially, both with the Prime Minister in the chair, to consider operational transition in Iraq, and the developing plan to expand British troops into Helmand in 2006. The Afghanistan proposal paper warned that 'if drawdown in Iraq were to slip significantly, the MoD would be able to resource [the packages] ... but the effects would be exacerbated significantly'.¹²⁹¹

Readers will recall that there was no record of discussion at either committee about how the two campaigns might interrelate, despite the risks and overlapping timelines, and despite the common membership of the panels. Readers will also recall that evidence was already mounting that the three strategic risks in Iraq were being realised, and that the plan in Afghanistan was based on a dangerous lack of intelligence. Both plans were approved, at the highest level. 21 July saw British decision-makers assume predictability in not one but two wars. Within a year, thanks to the violence triggered by al-Askari and the '*charge up the valley*', both sets of assumptions had collapsed, and the British were dangerously and irrecoverably exposed.

The Challenges of Strategy in Practice. Why did British decision-makers struggle so much to manage the unpredictable nature of the war? There were three factors. First, as expressed in the introduction to this thesis, strategy had lost its way at the turn of the 21st Century. Clausewitz speaks of theory as 'a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgement, and help to avoid pitfalls'.¹²⁹² Clausewitz's theory of strategy was closely tied to war, and the unpredictable nature of the violence inherent within it. But by the late

¹²⁸⁹ Minute CJO to COSSEC, 22 June 2005, 'Op Telic: Operational Transition in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

¹²⁹⁰ Letter Reid to Powell, 18 July 2005, 'Operational Transition in Iraq' attaching Paper Secretary of State for Defence, [undated], 'Operational Transition in Iraq' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 10 Sep 22).

¹²⁹¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.4, paras 100 – 110.

¹²⁹² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 141.

1990s this connection between strategy and war had been severed, the result of the Cold War and a long hiatus in inter-state conflict. The guide had effectively been lost.

New Labour therefore arrived into power in 1997 without a working theory for the use of political violence, and with no experience in doing so after eighteen years in opposition. Strategy for Blair's Cabinet Office was that of the boardroom, not the battlefield: recall that while a 'Prime Minister's Strategy Unit' did exist, it worked entirely on domestic issues, none of which were related to the use of force.¹²⁹³ The quick series of seemingly-successful military actions in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan then built an unreasonable confidence that war could be wielded as a logical and predictable tool of policy. Lacking the historical context of a working theory of strategy, the New Labour government approach Iraq as if it was just another limited action, not a venture that might fracture the tinder-dry sectarian power balance across the Middle East, and lead to hundreds and thousands of deaths. The British built and executed a plan for a battle, but without realising the potential realities of the war.

This was then worsened by the second factor: the machinery of government and strategy-making. The systems and processes established by New Labour for the making of strategy consistently struggled to grapple with the unpredictability and reciprocity of the Iraq war. Three issues were key. Centralisation and the *doctrine of the individual* in the New Labour administration meant that Iraq strategy was reliant on the personal attention and energy of a small number of decision-makers. Differences in opinion or ideology had a major impact on strategy: witness Clare Short's flat refusal in Part Two to align DFID to either the direction of her Prime Minister, or to the urgent national interest.¹²⁹⁴ Strategy then suffered when the attention of these decision-makers then waned or was drawn elsewhere. Blair is at the centre of the two most prominent examples of this, first in his holiday to Barbados in August 2003 when many of the key decisions around ORHA and the CPA were being made, but then most notably in September 2006 after the announcement of his departure. His decision in 2006 to apply nearly all of his focus on 'embedding completely the New Labour programme' (almost all of which was domestic) left Iraq strategy languishing just as Shirreff was seeking Ministerial support for a 'winning strategy', just as the '*charge up the valley*' was taking place, and just as Bush was musing on the surge.

¹²⁹³ Seldon, *Blair's Britain*, p. 84. The PMSU worked in project teams organised around five domestic-agenda clusters: public service reform, home affairs, economy and infrastructure, welfare reform, and social justice and communities.

¹²⁹⁴ See Part Two, pp. 122 - 123.

Successful strategy in practice required persistent scrutiny and contestation. Blair's determination to keep Iraq close despite his waning attention, rather than to sub-delegate the war to an empowered 'Minister for Iraq' (or similar), had a significant impact. Blair also refutes the broader idea that greater Cabinet engagement by him or his inner circle would have made a difference in Iraq, arguing that neither Winston Churchill nor Margaret Thatcher had run wars through Cabinet.¹²⁹⁵ This may be true, but it is of note that none of his twenty-nine personal notes to Bush were consulted with Cabinet colleagues. The additional scrutiny of his more expansive entanglements might well have shifted the British pathway.

Exacerbating this was the decision to treat Iraq as 'business as usual'; just one of the many policy problems on the New Labour agenda. Even at the height of the initial crisis in 2002 and 2003, the war did not dominate in the manner that it might have done, given the gravity of the decisions. Sir David Omand, the Cabinet Secretary in 2002 and 2003, told the Inquiry that 'there was a certain sense the government [in 2003] was trying to do everything as well as manage this very major military operation – I don't think that's possible ... in a sense, one of the lessons ... is that you can't continue business as usual'.¹²⁹⁶ While Government departments did surge to twenty-four-hour operations for the duration of the invasion, the decision that the war was over in May 2003 quickly rolled this back to standard Whitehall procedures. Thinking about Iraq strategy reverted to ad-hoc groups and cabinet sub-committees, which (as 21 July 2005 amply shows) did not have a strong record in providing strategic foresight or reasonable assumptions. Iraq was naturally high on the MoD's agenda, engaged as they were in daily combat operations. But as the tarnish of illegitimacy built, Iraq fell further and further down the priority list of other departments, who were increasingly adverse to placing their fingerprints on the problem. By 2005 Iraq was seen as an issue primarily for No. 10 and the MoD: a reflection of the pottery barn rule that, 'if you broke it, you bought it'.

This business-as-usual approach meant that the most fundamental building blocks of Iraq strategy were rarely scrutinised or reconsidered from first principles as the character of the war changed. The overall policy aim for Iraq for example, first articulated by Peter Ricketts of the FCO in April 2002, remained essentially unchanged for nearly four and a half years, despite the remarkable evolution in the war's character.¹²⁹⁷ It was only in October 2006 that the 'Medium Term Prospects' paper (a

¹²⁹⁵ Blair, *A Journey*, Loc Cit 8712.

¹²⁹⁶ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 2, paras 52 - 53.

¹²⁹⁷ The initial aim of British involvement in the Iraq war was defined by Ricketts as 'a stable and law-abiding Iraq, within its present borders, cooperating with the international community, no longer posing a threat to global security or to its neighbours, and abiding by its international obligations on control of its WMD' (see Minute Ricketts to Private Secretary FCO, 'Iraq: Contingency Planning', 25 Apr 02 from Iraq Inquiry evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 30 Jul 18)). When the

notably frank piece of work in the broader context of DOP staffing) finally advised DOP(I) that this policy aim was 'unlikely to be achieved', and should be amended for a less ambitious one. As Strachan tells us, 'war is a reactive process, which itself can change policy'.¹²⁹⁸ It took a long time for British decision-makers to engage in such pragmatic reciprocity.

This is not to say that the British bureaucracy stood idle throughout the war; far from it. The Inquiry identifies over twenty instances in which UK Iraq strategy was reconsidered in one form or another between May 2003 and May 2007. But in almost all of these cases the output focused on only one element of strategy: a desired outcome.¹²⁹⁹ This reflects strategy in theory. What was lacking at each turn was the detailed plan and resources to turn that desired outcome into reality ... to turn theory into practice. Blair in his final days in 2007 is one of the most prominent example of this, exhorting in his last 'Notes' to Bush his ambitious vision for a 'big political strategy for the region', a 'frontier in a battle across the region and the world ... between freedom and extremism, between democracy and terror'.¹³⁰⁰ Bush understandably paid little attention, committed as he was to more genuine strategy: converting the theory of the 'surge' into reality through a detailed application of leadership, personal influence, command guidance, ideas, and the application of resources across the tools of national power. In many ways this example typifies Blair and his inner circle. Strategic vision and instinct, but without the dogged determination and attention to detail to drive it through.

The health of the civil / military relationship also proved insufficient for the long-term demands of the war. Starting at the top, the centralisation of authority in the CDS achieved its goal of ensuring a single point of military advice to Ministers, but it reduced the exposure of those same Ministers to contesting views and expertise around the unique frictions and challenges of the Iraq war. The observation from the First Sea Lord that he 'never felt ... included in the strategic decision-making apparatus for these wars' is an important one, and General Dannatt's frustrations as the CGS were clear in 2006. Government was also at times inadequately served by the quality of this centralised advice. The disparity in General Walker's formal advice to DOP and his private views to General Richards on the military's ability to co-resource Iraq and Afghanistan is highly troubling, as is Stirrup's

'Medium Term Prospects' paper reviewed this aim in October 2006, it recorded it as 'democratic, stable, united and law-abiding Iraq, within its present borders, co-operating with the international community, posing no threat to its neighbours or to international security, abiding by all its international obligations and providing effective, representative and inclusive government for all its people' (see Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, para 205). The language remained fundamentally the same from April 2002 to October 2006.

¹²⁹⁸ Strachan, *Strategy in Theory; Strategy in Practice*, p. 186.

¹²⁹⁹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.8, paras 175 – 178.

¹³⁰⁰ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 9.5, paras 788 – 794.

advice around the impact of withdrawing from Basra. The evidence suggests neither of these views represented best military advice.

The operational level of command then further degraded strategy, acting to disconnect tactics and policy. With the Government's aim remaining stubbornly static in the face of a changing war, those at the tactical level improvised without unity. Each successive six-month commander at MND(SE) developed his own operational design, often only loosely connected to his predecessor. The differences in the sequential approaches of Shirreff and Shaw are a stark example of just how much perspectives could change in a short time. The Inquiry identifies a conspiracy of optimism that existed at the operational level, the result of the 'can do' attitude of the British military. 'At times', the Inquiry concludes, 'the bearers of bad tidings were not heard. On several occasions, decision-makers visiting Iraq (including the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Chief of the General Staff) found the situation on the ground to be much worse than had been reported to them'.¹³⁰¹

The disconnection of the UK AO from the rest of MNC-I in the 'fiefdom in the south' (a decision mostly of policy) certainly exacerbated this issue. Disconnected from both London and Baghdad, MND(SE) found itself isolated from both its political and operational masters. From 2006 onwards, even the MoD considered Iraq to be a secondary effort to Afghanistan, the 'bad war' to be sacrificed at the altar of the 'good'. In all, the dialogue between the politician and the military – so essential to effective strategy – was never a healthy one. It was instead stilted, fractured and at times lacking in transparency. While both sides of the civil / military relationship must bear some responsibility for this, the weight of it must lie with the military. Educated in war and strategy from Sandhurst to the Staff Colleges, they had the professional expertise (and indeed responsibility) to identify the shortfalls. They could not have fixed British strategy alone, but it was their professional obligation to speak truth to power.

The third and final factor that made it difficult for the British to grapple with war's unpredictable nature was the way Iraq was perceived both within the Government and by the British public. Characterised (perhaps accurately but certainly detrimentally) as a 'war of choice', Iraq was an effort distant from the British public, being fought by a military that was also increasingly separate from society.¹³⁰² The war did not darken the public's daily door, be it in terms of rationing, conscription, or markedly increased defence budgets. Even the casualty rate, while high in recent context, was not

¹³⁰¹ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Executive Summary, para 863.

¹³⁰² Hew Strachan, 'The Civil-Military 'Gap' in Britain', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 26:2 (2003), pp. 43 - 63.

sufficient to garner significant public interest. This situation only worsened as the *casus belli* of the war faded with the failure to find WMD, and Iraq became increasingly tarnished and unpopular. Incidents like Abu Ghraib fatally undermined the moral authority of the coalition, and Iraq increasingly gained the character of a failing and toxic endeavour. It became in the Government's domestic political interests to minimise public exposure to Iraq, rather than engage them deeper with it. Increasingly only the Government and the military were at war: the people – and therefore the nation – was not.

Government departments in turn reacted in a similar way, seeking to minimise their own exposure to this tarnished endeavour, and avoiding taking responsibility for the problem. This lasted all the way through to 2007, when DFID under Douglas Alexander resolutely refused to take over the lead for Iraq from the MoD.¹³⁰³ DFID declined to even develop a full Country Assistance Plan for Iraq, avoiding the risk of being held to account for the 'enormous agenda for economic growth' the Government seemed to aspire to.¹³⁰⁴

The most impactful result of this tarnished perception of the Iraq war was the dearth of resources. This dogged the campaign from as early as May 2003, lasting all the way through to the end of Op TELIC. Admittedly much of this was initially systemic. Peacetime Britain in the early 2000s lacked the pre-prepared, expeditionary bureaucracies and resources to take on the task of rebuilding wartime Iraq: the first occupation and reconstruction of another nation by the UK since the Second World War. This was particularly the case in the provisioning of civilian expertise in governance and reconstruction (recall Sir Hilary Synnott's struggles to gain staff for CPA (South) in 2004).

But as time passed, the failure to invest national resources to build these capabilities became a matter of choice. Ministers – especially at the FCO and DFID – avoided or simply refused to reprioritise funds within already tight budgets to the Iraq war effort, and the Treasury increasingly declined to find new money for Iraq at the cost of more positive domestic priorities. Human resources were equally hard to generate. Military numbers were guaranteed by the contract of unlimited liability between the soldier and the state, but no such contract existed for civil servants

¹³⁰³ Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, para 880.

¹³⁰⁴ The CAP was the mechanism by which DFID formed a strategic approach to a given country, and in the case of Iraq an 'Interim CAP' was produced in February 2004 at the start of the reconstruction journey. But this I-CAP was never revised or developed into a full CAP. Such a revision was considered in 2007 in the face of Brown's energy, to the extent that direction was given by the DFID Deputy Director Iraq for staff to 'do some form of strategy document/CAP'. But there is no evidence that this work was completed. In the end the February 2004 I-CAP would not be revised for seven years, until DFID produced an 'Operational Plan 2011 – 2012' for Iraq in February 2011; just thirteen months before DFID closed down its Iraq programme completely. See Iraq Inquiry, *Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Vol. 10.2, paras 844 – 846.

and few could be motivated to volunteer for such an unpopular and dangerous war. The Government was never truly willing to hang the nation from the 'cross of iron' (as Eisenhower would have called it¹³⁰⁵) in order to achieve success in Iraq. With this in mind, the aspirations of those like Shirreff who sought a 'Rooseveltian new deal' for Basra seem all the more utopian and unrealistic in the cold light of day.

The Final Lessons: Acknowledging War's Nature and a Pathway to Better Strategy. What could the British have done different, to make more successful strategy in Iraq? This brings me to the final conclusion of this thesis: that the use of traditional concepts of strategy that focused principally on the use of military force (i.e. what might be called 'military strategy') inhibited British outcomes in Iraq. British decision-makers may not have had a defined concept of strategy to work with in the early 2000s, but what they did do was clearly dominated by the use of the military throughout. They were instinctively (but not deliberately) approaching strategy as it had been traditionally-defined: as the province of the General and the battle.

The use of this traditional approach to strategy was and remains incongruous. The policy aim for the British effort in Iraq was to achieve 'democratic, stable, united and law-abiding Iraq, within its present borders, co-operating with the international community, posing no threat to its neighbours or to international security, abiding by all its international obligations and providing effective, representative and inclusive government for all its people'.¹³⁰⁶ Such an aim clearly went well beyond the military's jurisdiction, requiring the application of a far broader toolset of national power. By 2006 those who thoughts deeply about strategy in Britain, such as Smith and Strachan, were making this clear, and to some credit British institutions did respond. But they did so not by rescuing strategy through simple clarity, but by developing the complex concept of the 'comprehensive approach'. This overly confused the issue, making the new doctrine intensely vulnerable to both Departmental infighting and the tarnished and toxic character of the Iraq war. As Holmes once said, 'doctrine is not just what is taught, or what is published, but what is believed'.¹³⁰⁷ There was little collective belief in the 'comprehensive approach' in either London or Basra, and as such the fledgling idea was defeated in detail. The 'comprehensive approach' was dead before it could even be understood.

¹³⁰⁵ Eisenhower Presidential Library, *Speeches: The Chance of Peace (also Known as the Cross of Iron) Speech*, 16 Apr 53, found at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

¹³⁰⁶ Iraq Inquiry, Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Vol. 9.5, para 205.

¹³⁰⁷ UK MoD, *Army Doctrine Publication: Army Doctrine Primer* (Shrivenham: UK MoD 2011), p. 1-1 found at [link](#) (accessed 1 Jan 20).

The lesson of Iraq is that strategy cannot simply be about applying aligned effort in single specialisations, such as the military, or diplomacy, or international development. Nor is it about separating strategy into bespoke 'Post-Conflict Reconstruction Units'. As Freedman says, it is instead about weaving together all tools available to 'create power' for the pursuit of national goals. This is an intensely practical business, made far more the province of an art than a science by the unpredictable and chaotic nature of war.

Effective strategy in Iraq needed to go well beyond the military, but it also needed to remain connected to and conscious of war's enduringly violent and unpredictable nature, wary of assuming logic or linearity. It needed to realise that war is the province of contingency: that one set of decisions may well be the commencement of a pathway of which there is little escape, such as the British shift to the role as the 'lynchpin' in the south leading to six years of operations in Basra, or the way in which the 'Helmand decision' removed strategic flexibility in Iraq. It needed to recognise Iraq as the realm of many unpredictable and passionate motive forces, of both adversaries and allies. Above all, strategy in Iraq needed to realise that war – once commenced – would not remain quietly subservient as an extension of policy by other means. It would instead resist, dragging policy down into the uncompromising mire of the battlefield. War would lie, cheat and deceive, and policy had to change in response. Strategy in theory, and the plans borne of it, needed to be developed with a ruthless eye on the realities and reciprocity of strategy in practice.

The experience of Iraq demonstrates that strategy often coalesces, for both good and ill, around what I have referred to in this thesis as 'big ideas'. These are simple, capstone concepts that tend to shape and unify thinking and action. The 'surge' is a strong example of this. More than just an addition of troops, it was a shift in the US 'big idea' for Iraq: from the failing 'stand up/stand down' concept to a determination to 'secure the people where they sleep'. The story of the 'big ideas' of British strategy in Iraq is an unhappy one. It began with the *strategy of influence*, an idea that fundamentally disconnected the British military from the very instrumentality of political violence for which it exists. The occupation was then coloured by a series of negative 'big ideas' that constrained rather than enabled strategy: the 'bad war', the 'fiefdom in the south', the determination that 'Basra is not Baghdad', Stirrup's 'law of diminishing returns', and the 'antibody theory'. These ideas, most of which evolved organically rather than deliberately, came together over time to steadily choke British strategy imagination. Far more positive and instrumental strategic ideas, carefully considered and resourced, were needed to achieve genuine progress.

Was a better approach to strategy even possible in Iraq, given all the cultural challenges of the British bureaucratic system? The very last phase of the war in 2008 and 2009, in the aftermath of the 'deal', the 'surge' and *Saulat al-Fursan*, suggests that it might have been. The last eighteen months of the UK effort in Iraq saw marked improvements in British strategic performance. In January 2009 (for example) the FCO developed the impressive 'Iraq: A Review of Strategy' paper that created an aligned, modest and credible strategic script for the UK's relationship with Iraq for the following three years.¹³⁰⁸ It weaved together multiple tools of national power for the achievement of British ends. This paper had support at the highest levels, including the Prime Minister and all senior Ministers responsible for its delivery. Most importantly it was resourced. It was strategy in theory, focused on a pragmatic timeframe, that was being executed in practice even before it was being approved. 2008 and 2009 demonstrated what was possible for British strategy. But as Part Five shows, this demonstration only took place thanks to the removal of violence from Iraq's strategic environment: the end of 'collective killing for some collective purpose'. The removal of war from Iraq allowed an element of logic and linearity to return, an opportunity that the British seized, and which allowed strategy to improve. The challenge would be to achieve the same such alignment within war, not after it.

What this implies is that modern strategy needs to broaden beyond its traditional military definition, but it must remain intimately connected to war and violence. Williamson Murray once cogently described war as 'an incredibly complex endeavour which challenges men and women to the core of their souls. It is, to put it bluntly, not only the most physically demanding of all the professions, but also the most demanding intellectually and morally ... the cost of slovenly thinking at every level of war and translate into the deaths of innumerable men and women, most of whom deserve better from their leaders'.¹³⁰⁹ The environment of war is unique, unlike any other situation of politics or human interactions. It is within this environment that strategy must thrive. To do so strategy must therefore be ruthlessly focused on war – not on international relations, or academia, or business. Strategy must always be about the art of creating power in war, if it is to succeed in times of war. As Michael Howard advised in the 1970s, the strategic approach must continue to be one that is focused on the part which is played by force, or the threat of force, in the international system.

Ultimately, the war in Iraq stands as a cautionary tale. Decision-makers who elect to use war as a tool of policy may well be able to predict the sorts of influences that will be applied upon their

¹³⁰⁸ Letter Hickey to Catsaras, 13 Jan 2009, 'Iraq: Strategy', enclosing Paper 'Iraq: A Review of Strategy' from Iraq Inquiry Evidence found at [link](#) (accessed 7 Jan 24).

¹³⁰⁹ Williamson Murray, *War, Strategy, and Military Effectiveness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 2 – 3.

decisions, however they will not be able to anticipate the manner by which these influences will apply themselves, and they will certainly not be able to predict the path of the war itself. As Jomini put it, war is 'a great drama, in which a thousand physical and moral causes operate more or less powerfully, and which cannot be reduced to mathematical calculations'.¹³¹⁰ War rejects logic, and dealing with it must be more art than science. Marechal de Saxe wrote in 1732 that 'the human heart is the starting point of all matters pertaining to war'.¹³¹¹ This is true. But Iraq reminds us that once war is decided upon, and sparked, it becomes an entity all unto itself: a violent one, born of 'primordial violence, hatred and enmity'.¹³¹² It is not slave to coherent policy, it is more often an adversary of it. Churchill knew this, the result of many years of experience living within and alongside war itself. Blair and New Labour did not, and when they yielded to war fever, they found themselves the slaves of events that while uncontrollable, were arguably foreseeable. The connection between strategy and war must be re-discovered, in both theory and practice, if similar mistakes are to be avoided in the future.

¹³¹⁰ Baron Antoine-Henri de Jomini, *Précis de l'Art de la Guerre: Des Principales Cominaisons de la Stratégie, de la Grande Tactique et de la Politique* first published 1838, found online at [link](#) (accessed 13 Jan 25).

¹³¹¹ Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. v.

¹³¹² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 89.

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