

Government and the Armed Forces in Britain 1856-1990

Edited by Paul Smith



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EDITED BY
PAUL SMITH

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Preface

The relationship between civilian Ministers and the high command of the armed forces is a topic central to the study of British government. It is also an index of the organisation and functioning of Britain as an imperial and world power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Government and the Armed Forces in Britain, 1856–1990* provides the first broad survey of it over nearly a century and a half, illustrating its nature and operation in peace and war, as well as its evolution from the loose and ad hoc arrangements of the Palmerstonian era to the elaborate bureaucratic structures of today.

This book forms one part of a collaborative project, the research for which was made possible by the generous support of the Leverhulme Trust, to which all those concerned wish to express their thanks. Members of the project have also to thank for their indispensable services the three colleagues who served successively as research assistants, and contributed substantially to the organisation and administration of the enterprise as well as to the gathering of materials. Dr Charles Esdaile, formerly Wellington Research Fellow in the University of Southampton, now Lecturer in History in the University of Liverpool, contributed especially to chapters 1 and 3. He also conducted, with Dr Rory Muir, work on the Wellington era which, excluded by the chronological limits finally adopted for the present volume, will be published elsewhere. Dr William Philpott, in addition to writing chapter 5 and co-authoring chapter 1, contributed extensively to chapters 2–4, 6 and 11. Dr David Boren, as well as writing chapter 10 and assisting with chapter 11, organised the conference held by the project at King's College, London, in March 1993.

The authors are grateful to the respective custodians and owners of copyright for permission to use and to quote from the materials employed in these studies; to the respective editors and publishers for permission to reproduce matter which has appeared elsewhere; and to the staff of the numerous libraries and archives in which research has been conducted. They also wish to acknowledge the invaluable help of Martin Sheppard of Hambledon Press in bringing the work to publication.

The second part of the project, undertaken by the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King's College, London, and the Archives and Manuscripts Section of the University of Southampton Library, consists in a comprehensive survey of the nature and location of private papers bearing on the military and naval affairs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The aim is to bring

together, on linked computerised databases in London and Southampton, information about papers held publicly and privately; and to publish a series of location guides, containing entries for all defence personnel who achieved ranks above and including Major-General, Air Vice-Marshal and Rear-Admiral, as well as their opposite numbers in the civil service, between the years 1793 and 1975. Further details can be obtained from the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS; and Archives and Special Collections, Hartley Library, University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton SO17 1BJ.

Paul Smith

January 1996

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Abbreviations

BL	British Library
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff
CDP	Chief of Defence Procurement
CDS	Chief of the Defence Staff
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
COS	Chiefs of Staff
COSC	Chiefs of Staff Committee
CSP	House of Commons Sessional Papers
DGMA	Directorate General of Management and Audit
DOAE	Defence Operational Analysis Establishment
DOE	Department of the Environment
DSWP	Defence Studies Working Party
FMI	Financial Management Initiative
FMU	Financial Management Unit
FPMG	Financial Planning and Management Group
HLRO	House of Lords Record Office
MCD	Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence
MOD	Ministry of Defence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
PDC	Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons
PDL	Parliamentary Debates: House of Lords
PRO	Public Record Office
PUS	Permanent Under Secretary
SEATO	South-East Asia Treaty Organisation

Introduction

Brian Bond

Students familiar with the remarkable growth of the British decision-making institutions and their supporting defence bureaucracy in the later twentieth century will be astonished by the rudimentary nature of arrangements for the 'Defence of the Realm' and Britain's global strategic interests after the Napoleonic wars. One might indeed hazard the paradox that as Britain's industrial and commercial power rose to its peak during the nineteenth century, so governments' ability to co-ordinate the Armed Services' strategies, in order to formulate a national defence policy based on the participation of all the departments concerned, sank to its nadir. Then, as Britain's problems grew and its great power status was increasingly threatened, during the first half of the twentieth century, there evolved an impressive apparatus for what has been aptly named 'defence by committee', expanding after 1945 into 'defence by ministry'.¹

It should not surprise British scholars, though it should cause some embarrassment, that the boldest attempt to date to survey this grand subject of imperial defence should be that of an American professor of government, Franklyn Arthur Johnson. But, invaluable though Johnson's pioneering work remains, his first volume was researched before many official documents were available under the former 'fifty year rule'; and also a great deal of research on specific periods, defence problems and individuals has been published since 1960.²

The early 1990s therefore seemed an appropriate time for an inter-university group of scholars to build on the existing foundations in the form of the related case studies which constitute the core of this volume. It proved impossible, mainly due to questions of space, to provide continuous chronological coverage from the early nineteenth century to the present, but the contributors address the main issues while indicating comparatively neglected aspects on which further work needs to be done.

As a recent study has demonstrated,³ British strategy during the Napoleonic Wars was largely improvised at Cabinet level with minimal input from the Army and Navy leaders and with only spasmodic inter-Service co-operation. Certainly

¹ Franklyn Arthur Johnson, *Defence by Committee. The British Committee of Imperial Defence, 1885–1959* (London 1960); and the same author's *Defence by Ministry* (London, 1980). See also Norman H. Gibbs, 'The Origins of Imperial Defence', in John B. Hattendorf and Robert S. Jordan (eds), *Maritime Strategy and The Balance of Power* (London, 1989), pp. 23–36.

² Notably the completion of the British Official History series on *Grand Strategy* and on *Intelligence* in the Second World War.

³ Christopher D. Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic Wars, 1803–15* (Manchester, 1992).

no formal or regular arrangements existed after 1815 for the discussion of strategic issues in either of the Services or for decision-making in government. Since the succeeding decades marked an era of peace and growing prosperity for Britain there was little pressure on government to remedy these deficiencies in the organisation of defence; the overwhelming concern was rather with financial economy in which the Treasury's role was dominant. As the industrial revolution began to affect military and naval technology, the Cabinet's inability to adjudicate on technical matters was exposed, but no remedy was found. No institution was created to co-ordinate the Services and even within them there was a marked absence of professional competence and efficient organisation.

The Army's plethora of civil and military departments, with over-lapping and ill-defined responsibilities for such vital matters as transport, weapons and medical arrangements, contributed to its well-publicised difficulties in the Crimean War; its many weaknesses have since been exposed by historians.⁴ But the Royal Navy's rapid decline – in both numbers of ships and men and in efficiency – has received less notice and criticism. While the nation became the mightiest in the world, the fleet shrank to its smallest size since the 1680s. After its outstanding performance in the Napoleonic Wars the Royal Navy had 'gained an empire, and lost a role'.⁵ Not only was there an excessively drastic reduction of ships and sailors after 1815, but the service also suffered from a succession of mediocre political chiefs (First Lords of the Admiralty), and by the 1840s the majority of admirals were elderly and without combat experience.

By this decade routine and humdrum administration had completely stifled any discussion of larger issues of policy and strategy. 'In the passage of thirty years, unnoticed by contemporaries in and out of the Service, the central direction of naval policy had almost evaporated.' Even the Cabinet, 'knew and cared little for the Navy'.⁶ Consequently, when he returned to the Admiralty as First Lord in 1853, Sir James Graham regarded himself as sufficiently expert to ignore professional advice and to by-pass Cabinet control in taking crucial decisions. Preoccupied with financial restraints and fear of France, he adopted a dangerous strategy against Russia and sent the Navy to war 'scandalously ill-prepared'.⁷

Despite its lack of 'a brain' to determine policy and war plans, the Royal Navy responded reasonably well to the technological revolution of the 1860s, but suffered the equivalent of a paralytic stroke in 1869 when the arrogant and

⁴ See, for example, Hew Strachan *The Reform of the British Army, 1830–54* (Manchester, 1984); John Sweetman, *War and Administration: The Significance of the Crimean War for the British Army* (Edinburgh, 1984).

⁵ N.A.M. Rodger *The Admiralty* (Lavenham, Suffolk, 1979), p. 93.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 103–05.

⁷ Andrew Lambert, 'Preparing for the Russian War: British Strategic Planning, March 1853–March 1854', *War and Society*, 7 (1989), pp. 15–39.

impetuous First Lord, Hugh Childers, effectively abolished the Board of Admiralty, thus leaving the Service without a policy or even the machinery for reaching one. Hence the Navy 'entered an age of unprecedented change largely unfitted to cope with it'.⁸ Only in the later 1880s with the emergence of new threats to Britain's command of the sea, raising the nightmarish possibility that the Royal Navy might not be able to prevent an invasion, was there a change of political mood towards naval expansion and far-reaching reforms. However even these stopped short of establishing a naval staff. As Paul Smith's contribution shows,⁹ in the 1880s and 1890s great improvements took place in financial control and accounting, and more generally in the development of professional competence; but at the highest level of policy-making little had changed. Hence, the Navy 'entered the new century with the engines running sweetly, and no one at the helm'.¹⁰

As for the War Office, despite the burst of reform activity after the Crimean War which effectively amalgamated the numerous political defence departments under the Secretary of State for War, it continued to be regarded as a 'citadel of mismanagement, inefficiency and administrative chaos'.¹¹ The establishment of the Secretary of State's overall responsibility for the Army vis-à-vis Parliament did not put an end to rivalries and continuous bickering within the War Office; while the Queen's cousin, the Duke of Cambridge, put up a determined, if ultimately futile, rearguard action during his interminable tenure as Commander-in-Chief at the Horse Guards (1857–1895) in defence of the royal prerogative in matters of military appointments, discipline and command. More generally, the congeries of virtually autonomous regiments which comprised the notional 'Army', despite various anomalies such as the purchase of commissions (until 1871), seemed just about adequate to perform the routine duties of 'imperial policing' with the almost unceasing 'small wars' against poorly-armed natives. Above all, military reform was overshadowed by the overwhelming priority accorded to financial economy. One notable casualty was that the War Office had no planning staff, no regular contacts with the Admiralty and consequently nothing remotely resembling an institution for joint planning.

In general terms, the form of oligarchic Cabinet government which put domestic politics and Treasury control above national defence, and possessed no strategic decision-making body or secretariat to ensure continuity of record, had somehow managed to muddle through in the comparatively stable and secure environment (for Britain and its empire) up to 1870. This transitional

⁸ Rodger, *The Admiralty*, pp. 111–12.

⁹ Chapter 2, pp. 21–52.

¹⁰ Rodger, *The Admiralty*, p. 118.

¹¹ Johnson *Defence by Committee*, p. 14. I am greatly indebted to this source for the following discussion of the period up to 1914.

period is the subject of Edgar Feuchtwanger's admirable survey which opens this volume.¹²

Gradually, however, between 1870 and 1885, governments felt obliged to react to the emergent danger posed by the German empire, and the more immediate threats presented by France and Russia, singly or in combination. Despite the recurrent and over-publicised invasion scares, it was the perceived vulnerability of Britain's far-flung colonies and trading interests which initially prompted a low-key government reaction. This was to set up an ephemeral, sub-cabinet level Colonial Defence Committee in 1878 to consider immediate steps to provide some security for Colonial ports. A far more extensive enquiry was launched in 1879; namely the Carnarvon Commission which, under the eponymous Colonial Secretary, examined the defence of British possessions, coaling stations and commerce. While the Commission's reports were by far the most comprehensive to date, anti-imperialist objections entailed that two key issues were neglected: the need to co-ordinate the roles of the two Services in imperial defence; and the creation of Cabinet-level machinery to formulate imperial strategy.

Renewed fears of Russian aggression led to the revival of the Colonial Defence Committee in 1885. This marked a step forward in bringing together representatives of all the main departments involved, including the two Services, but it still operated below ministerial level and was essentially a forum of discussion to advise the colonies on defence matters. Significantly no staff were provided for research and planning. Even though it lacked any executive authority, the Committee's deliberations were resented by some of the main departments involved, including the Admiralty, as a threat to their independence.

In 1888 the darkening European situation, added to the anxiety already being caused by rapid technological change, prompted the setting up of the Hartington Commission which at last confronted the crucial issue; namely

'to inquire into the Civil and Professional Administration of the Naval and Military Departments, and the relation of these Departments to each other and to the Treasury, and to report what changes in the existing system would tend to efficiency and economy in the Public Service'.¹³

The nine-member Commission collected a mass of expert testimony which pointed to the necessity of providing both Services with 'thinking departments', and with a regular forum for the collaboration of their professional chiefs.

The Commission's main recommendation was, however, the modest suggestion that a Naval and Military Council might be set up, probably to be chaired by the Prime Minister, and including the political heads of the two Services, their principal advisers and one or two eminent retired officers. The Council's

¹² Chapter 1, pp. 1–19.

¹³ Johnson, *Defence by Committee*, p.27.

main tasks would be to advise the Cabinet on the Service estimates in relation to each other, and *authoritatively decide* on unsettled questions of joint naval and military policy. Provision would be made for keeping permanent records.

Although the exclusion of the Foreign Secretary and other Cabinet ministers signalled a failure or unwillingness to grasp the need for a full integration of defence and foreign policy, this was potentially a most important step towards a government-level institution for the planning, formulation and execution of a national defence policy.

Several explanations may be advanced for the failure to implement the Hartington Commission's main recommendations, both as regards the individual services and a National Defence Council. But the main reason was surely that the dominant wing of the Liberal Party was vehemently opposed to any strengthening of military influence or efficiency.¹⁴

In the event it took the humiliating defeats at the outset of the South African War, and the deplorable consequences resulting from lack of inter-Service co-operation, to produce the more urgent and extensive post-war enquiry of the Elgin Commission. The final impetus for a really drastic reform of defence institutions was supplied around 1900 by ominous developments in Europe. Britain's lack of continental allies and isolation from European commitments was clearly no longer 'splendid' (if indeed it had ever been in the past), and German naval expansion constituted a new and worrying threat to the Royal Navy's dominance in home waters. In short, a few statesmen and 'defence experts' now began to 'think the unthinkable' of Britain's need to prepare for possible participation, by land and at sea, in a great European war.

Between 1902 and 1904 tremendous progress was made through the establishment of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID). There is no need to chart this institutional experiment in detail since it provides the basis for John Gooch's contribution. The chief significance of the CID lay in the following points: its only ex-officio member was the Prime Minister who would regularly bring together the political heads of the Services and other departments concerned, with the professional chiefs and other experts summoned to particular meetings. The CID's role was to advise the Cabinet whose collective responsibility remained unimpaired: executive action in defence matters rested with the departments. The responsible politicians and their professional service advisers would sit around the table as equals. Lastly, but not least important, the CID would be serviced by a Secretary and an inter-Service secretariat.

Despite the undoubted improvements which the CID heralded, particularly in the informed discussion of strategic issues, serious defects and limitations also became evident in the decade before 1914. The Army, with its advantage of a newly-formed General Staff, and the increasing likelihood of a European

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 30–31. Henry Campbell-Bannerman, a future Liberal Secretary of State for War and Prime Minister, opposed the creation of an Army Chief of Staff on the grounds that no such post was necessary since Britain had no designs upon her neighbours. A General Staff would cause mischief by making contingency plans for war. No such advance planning was necessary.

role on which to focus its planning, participated more positively in the affairs of the CID than did the Royal Navy, which lacked a naval staff until 1912, and in Admiral 'Jackie' Fisher possessed a chief who was temperamentally opposed to staff work, joint planning and co-operation with the 'rival service'. John Gooch charts the bumpy course of inter-Service relations, on such important subjects as home defence and intervention on the Continent, to the complete impasse reached between 1909–1911.¹⁵ Political intervention then theoretically resolved the latter issue in the Army's favour, but the CID had by no means succeeded in healing inter-Service differences by the outbreak of the war in 1914. In Gooch's words 'civilian politicians played the role of referee in a series of hard-fought bouts in which the Army proved the stronger contestant'. In war the contest would continue as a triangular struggle 'as the civilians entered the strategic ring along with the two services'.

In a masterly survey, David French discusses the unsustainable tensions which Britain's (and the Dominions') unprecedented war efforts between 1914 and 1918 created for the high level co-ordination and execution of policy and strategy.¹⁶ Essentially at the beginning of the war the Services thought that they should be permitted to conduct operations largely independent of each other and with minimal political interference. Anticipating a short war, the politicians acquiesced in a manner that mirrored the Liberal government's adherence to laissez-faire principles in domestic matters. In a similar spirit, British statesmen and service leaders assumed that the war could be won in association with, rather than in co-operation with, their allies. On both counts, French argues, the need for full co-operation had been realised by 1916, even before the advent of the Lloyd George Coalition, with all the changes that brought in the institutional arrangements for the higher conduct of the war. French, however, concludes with the reflection that the formal machinery of government provides only a partial explanation of how British civil-military relations developed during the war: the part played by the personalities of the leading *dramatis personae* was also immensely important.

Quite apart from personal rivalries, there was a general lack of understanding and empathy between 'frocks' and 'brasshats': to make co-operation really effective politicians would have to acquire some of the knowledge of soldiers and sailors, whilst the latter had to demonstrate some of the politicians' skills, such as fluency in debate. In the First World War Churchill was exceptional in his knowledge of the Services, and General Sir Henry Wilson was unusual in his unashamed practice of the politician's wiles.

The CID was revived after the First World War and remained under the firm guidance of its Secretary (since 1912), Sir Maurice Hankey, who continued in office until 1938. In the 1920s and early 1930s the CID's sub-committees proliferated to deal with various special issues of home and imperial defence: by 1936

¹⁵ Chapter 3, pp. 53–74.

¹⁶ Chapter 4, pp. 75–107.

there were approximately one hundred military and civil sub-committees.¹⁷ By far the most significant development for the co-ordination of defence at a high level was the establishment of the Chiefs of Staff sub-committee in 1923. This innovation brought the professional chiefs of the three Services into regular contact, assisted by a small inter-Service secretariat, and also entitled the chiefs to initiate enquiry into any defence matter which they considered critical. While the COS committee undoubtedly led to greater inter-Service understanding on some issues, and at least a façade of unity in response to government or CID questioning, it failed to produce a real consensus on national strategy or service priorities. This was not surprising given the intense friction that resulted from the establishment of the RAF as the third service and fierce competition for a steadily diminishing defence budget through the 1920s. Another important consideration inhibiting defence organisation at the top was that in peacetime it was most unlikely that Prime Ministers would have the time or inclination to give continuous, energetic leadership to the CID. To meet these and other obvious weaknesses in the co-ordination of the Services and the development of a unified national strategy, the answer for many critics seemed to lie in the solution adumbrated by the Hartington Commission in 1890: the creation of a Ministry of Defence.

In his excellent analysis of this topic, William Philpott shows why a Ministry of Defence was not established in the inter-war period, despite strong support for it just after the First World War and on several subsequent occasions.¹⁸ Although serious constitutional and Service traditions were at issue, Philpott's research suggests that Hankey's obstructionism (or 'hanky panky') was the crucial factor in preserving his own spider-like control at the centre of the CID web. In short, while an MOD was attractive in theory, 'no one was brave enough to try it in practice given Britain's political and constitutional circumstances'. After a lengthy and sometimes bitter controversy a typically British solution was adopted (in 1936) of appointing a Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence without a ministry or the power to have any real impact on the actual working of civil-military relations.

Sean Greenwood takes up the story of the short-lived experiment of a minister without a ministry in his illuminating account of the original occupant, Sir Thomas Inskip.¹⁹ Greenwood challenges the jibe that this was the worst appointment since the Roman emperor Caligula made his horse a consul, showing that Inskip's two reports did bring some rationality into the priorities of defence expenditure at a critical point early in 1938. Unfortunately, the rehabilitation of Inskip cannot be pushed too far because his attempt to ration and rationalise defence spending was based on the erroneous assumption that the most acute and immediate threat to Britain's security was a 'knock-out blow'

¹⁷ See Lord Ismay, *The Memoirs of Lord Ismay* (London, 1960), p. 78, for a diagram of the Cabinet and CID Sub-Committees.

¹⁸ Chapter 5, pp. 109–54.

¹⁹ Chapter 6, pp. 155–89.

by the Luftwaffe. The fact that this myth was widely believed in the Treasury and the Cabinet can only mitigate criticism of Inskip's decision to give home defence, both in the air and on the ground, top priority, largely at the expense of an Army Field Force to support continental allies. It would be interesting to learn more about the intelligence available to Inskip and the strategic – as opposed to financial and economic – advice which he sought. On a broader view, this compromise solution of a Minister to co-ordinate defence as an adjunct to the Treasury was already seen to be inadequate by the outbreak of war. After further unsatisfactory experiments during Chamberlain's months of war-time premiership, in which his own personal distaste for conflict and strategic-decision making deprived the existing machinery of dynamic leadership, Churchill took the next great step forward by making himself Minister of Defence on assuming the premiership in May 1940. He also made arrangements to participate directly, or be represented by a trusted senior staff officer, in regular meetings with the Chiefs of Staff.

Alex Danchev contributes a scintillating chapter on the main issues in British civil-military relations, and relations with her American ally, during the Second World War.²⁰ As the title suggests, his focal point is essentially Winston Churchill; his personality, methods of doing business and the handling of his chief military advisers, notably Dill and Brooke. Other historians, and indeed Danchev himself, have covered these matters before, so it would be unwise to expect startling revelations. None the less the treatment is fresh and lively and reinforces the emphasis noted in other contributions; namely that no matter how streamlined and efficient the institutions, the ultimate key to success or failure lay in the personalities of the leading actors. Churchill, for all his limitations and infuriating methods, was a resounding success. As Danchev concludes, Churchill retained the affection as well as the respect of his military advisers. 'Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff needed each other. But they needed him more.'

After 1945 the strategic and political components of the 'Defence of the Realm' changed rapidly and drastically. Britain became an atomic, and later nuclear power, but clearly could not compete economically with the Super Powers. Her great power status was seen to have been permanently undermined by her exhausting war effort and her decline was evident in the speedy retreat from empire. Previously unthinkable sums of money were now devoted to technological research and development projects, many of which failed to deliver. The nature of defence management and administration was transformed and vastly expanded. The problems of creating, and then operating, a Ministry of Defence were central issues in post 1945 civil-military relations. They are covered from various angles in the final four contributions to this volume.

²⁰ Chapter 7, pp. 191–216.

*Civil-Military Relations in a Period without Major Wars,
1855–85*

Edgar Feuchtwanger and William J. Philpott

The Crimean War turned out to be the only major war to be fought by Britain between the battle of Waterloo and the Boer War. The thirty years following the Crimea were also a period when the label 'splendid isolation' was broadly appropriate to describe the country's position within the European power system. Most of the discussion by historians of civil-military relations during this period has usually focused on the problems inherent in the professionalisation of the army's officer corps brought about by Cardwell's reforms, in particular by the abolition of purchase of commissions. At the centre of this issue was the fear expressed by Palmerston, when he was defending the purchase of commissions before the Committee of Inquiry in 1856, that

if the connection between the army and the higher classes of society were dissolved, then the army would present a dangerous and unconstitutional appearance. It was only when the army was un-connected with those whose property gave them an interest in this country, and was commanded by unprincipled adventurers, that it ever became formidable to the liberties of the nation.¹

These fears proved largely groundless, for the officer corps of the army continued to be recruited from the same classes of society as it had been before 1871. It remained true of the British Army, more than of the armies of other major powers, that it never became an alternative centre of power to that of the established government. This did not preclude harsh and fiercely fought conflicts between civilian and military office-holders, such as that between the Duke of Cambridge and successive Secretaries of State for War, discussed below. These conflicts did not, however, pose a military threat to the political order, such as was presented by, for example, General Boulanger or Count Waldersee to the political establishment in France and Germany. In Britain the conflicts were between different military schools of thought, reformers and anti-reformers. The fact that the Ministers controlling the Army were generally on the side of the reformers did not make these conflicts into civil-military ones. They took place within a context where there could not be any realistic challenge to political supremacy. The Navy could not in any case pose the kind of political threat which in other countries might emanate from the Army.

¹ Jasper Ridley, *Lord Palmerston* (London, 1970), pp. 442–43.

Historians have had less to say about the way in which political and military personalities intermeshed in arriving at strategic decisions in this period. It is never easy to determine clearly how a national strategy is arrived at, not least for the reason that there may be no such clearly formulated overall strategy. In the twentieth century there were at any rate an increasing number of bodies, the Committee of Imperial Defence, the Chiefs of Staff, and so on, which by their very existence had to articulate from time to time the broad strategic context within which specific policy decisions had to be made. In the nineteenth century, even when there were committees or commissions working in the defence field, their concerns were almost entirely with matters of detail; how many troops or ships were required here or there; how recruiting was to be organised, how Portsmouth and other bases were to be fortified. This was particularly so in the period under review here, when, as it turned out, there was no major conflagration that might have concentrated the mind wonderfully. Contemporaries could not of course foresee that the crises they faced, in 1859, 1861, 1864, 1870, 1878, 1882 or 1885, might not turn into great conflagrations. On the whole, these crises did not go on long enough to lead to major considerations of strategy in official circles. Discussions of the overall strategic situation are therefore more easily found in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review* or *Quarterly Review* than in the records of the Admiralty or War Office or in private papers.

Such public discussions of national strategy were naturally determined by the wider views taken of the world situation and of the place of Britain within it. This was controversial ground and two broad schools of thought can be distinguished.² They can be roughly labelled Cobdenite and Palmerstonian, to be continued as Gladstonian and Disraelian. The Cobdenite-Gladstonian view was that in an industrial age major wars were becoming inappropriate and unlikely. Free trade and the decline of aristocracy were driving the world in that direction. The Palmerstonian-Disraelian view was more traditional and emphasised the unchanging predominance of national interest. There was a good deal of overlap between these views. Cobdenites were liable to take the Pax Britannica secured by British naval supremacy for granted. Both Palmerstonians and Cobdenites tended to believe in the superiority of the British liberal, commercial and industrial system.

The British victory in the Crimean War had bolstered this feeling of superiority, but the set-backs in the war had also given rise to serious doubts. How to exercise naval supremacy was itself highly controversial. The traditional British position was to recognise no limit to the right, particularly in time of war, to interfere with commerce on the high seas, and to exercise the right of search and blockade, even in relation to neutral nations. There was, however, growing doubt whether this was any longer the right policy, either morally or even from the point of view of national interest. Radicals had opposed the unrestricted

² Bernard Semmel, *Liberalism and Naval Strategy: Ideology, Interest and Sea Power during the Pax Britannica* (Boston, 1986), pp. 68ff.

exercise of British seapower ever since the Napoleonic Wars. They were supported by commercial and shipping interests. In an age of free trade and with merchant shipping dominated by Britain it might be morally inevitable, as well as politic, to recognise the immunity of shipping on the high seas. Against this, the desire to end the slave trade, particularly strong on the Radical side of politics, as well as the need to combat piracy, supplied arguments in favour of retaining the right of search and blockade. There was yet another view, not associated with Radicalism, that naval supremacy depended on fighting decisive naval battles rather than on blockade or attacks on commercial shipping.³ The Palmerston government had, in spite of its general stance of asserting national interest, accepted the Declaration of Paris in 1856, which laid down considerable concessions to the doctrine of immunity of shipping on the high seas. The public and parliamentary debate on defence and service affairs was naturally much influenced by these issues. It was part of the wider ideological divide between the internationalism at this stage associated with Radicals like Cobden, and the believers in the primacy of national interest. It formed a seamless web with the antagonism to aristocratic government animating a great deal of middle-class opinion.

Palmerstonianism always commanded a wider consensus than the pure milk of Cobdenism. Later Disraeli's assumption of the Palmerstonian mantle probably gave him the edge in terms of popular support over Gladstone. Britain's vast overseas possessions posed a separate but related issue. The trend of events made it increasingly difficult to subscribe to the 'Absence of Mind' school of the British Empire. In particular the importance of India in sustaining the status of Britain as a great power could not be denied, even by Gladstonians. Gladstone himself wrote to his newly appointed Viceroy, Lord Northbrook, in 1872:

My own desires are chiefly these, that nothing may bring about a sudden, violent or discreditable severance, that we may labour steadily to promote the political training of our native fellow-subjects, and that when we go, if we are ever to go, we may leave a good name and a clean bill of account behind us.⁴

Such general public discussions as there were of the national situation within the international system did not often descend to the nuts and bolts of defence strategy. Even if contemporaries did not frequently put their thoughts on the strategic problems of the country on paper, we can attempt to do so in retrospect. Immediately after the Crimea France, under another Napoleon at his zenith, returned to the position of a major potential adversary, who could threaten the security of the home base. Palmerston wrote in March 1860 to Sidney Herbert, his Secretary of State for War: 'We have to deal with a man being uncertain of his conduct, wielding an immense power, and acting on his decision, when

³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴ Northbrook Papers, privately deposited, 15 October 1872.

it is made, with great rapidity and vigour . . .'⁵ This potential danger was aggravated by the fact that it coincided with several imperial emergencies, in China, in North America and, most alarming of all, in India. The Mutiny spread doom and gloom all round: 'for the present we are reduced to the condition of an insignificant Power', wrote the diarist Greville.⁶ In the 1860s the threat from France receded, partly because of France's own overseas entanglements, partly because of the increasing volatility of power relationships on the European Continent. This volatility also affected Britain, particularly at the time of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis in 1864.⁷ The major British defence problem in the 1860s was, however, posed by the United States, in the backwash from the Civil War and through the threat to Canada. Unlike France the USA could not threaten the British home base, but could stretch Britain's overall capability severely. The American threat was reduced through accommodation, disengagement and by turning over the problem to the Canadians.⁸ The fact that the Americans reduced their defence establishments drastically after the Civil War meant that, contrary to expectation during the war, the threat itself diminished. In Britain perceptions of the American problem gradually changed among politicians and among the military.

In many ways the major shifts in the European power constellation that culminated in the French defeat of 1870 eased British defence problems at least temporarily. Even before this had happened, the first Gladstone government had started to carry out a policy of retrenchment. Gladstone had long taken the view that France could be neutralised as a potential danger by strengthening commercial ties with her. After the French defeat of 1870 he felt that it had disabled 'the only country in Europe that has the power of being formidable to us'. Others were not so sure. Disraeli concluded: 'The balance of power has been entirely destroyed, and the country which suffers most, and feels the effect of this great change most, is England.'⁹ Historians remain divided in their views on how the great European changes culminating in the French defeat of 1870 affected the security situation of Britain. Some stress the damaging long-term consequences of the disturbance of the balance of power, others emphasise the immediate relief derived from the collapse of a power that had but recently been regarded as a serious threat. Before long there was a recrudescence of the Russian threat which, in spite of the relative success of 1878, continued into the 1880s. It reached a climax in the middle 1880s, when Russia again posed a foreign policy problem in the Balkans and an imperial problem in Central Asia. This coincided with the serious and

⁵ University of Southampton, Palmerston Papers, GC/HE/63, 27 March 1860.

⁶ Quoted by Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion* (London, 1976), p. 71.

⁷ Kenneth Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England, 1830–1902* (Oxford, 1970), p. 108.

⁸ Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815–1908* (London, 1967).

⁹ Marvin Swartz, *The Politics of British Foreign Policy in the Era of Disraeli and Gladstone* (London, 1985), pp. 24ff.

prolonged military involvement in Egypt and the Sudan. In 1885, just before the second Gladstone government fell, there was a serious Russian war scare.¹⁰ Russia could, however, hardly be a threat to the home base, though even this was occasionally envisaged when alarm about the possibilities of invasion was at its height in mid century. Nevertheless it could be maintained, gloomy contemporary prognostications to the contrary notwithstanding, that the two decades after 1870 were a period when, from a strictly defence point of view, Britain enjoyed a high degree of security, superior in many respects to that prevailing in the middle years of the century.

Cutting across these considerations, which were obviously a lot less clear to contemporaries than they may seem now, was the question how these defence commitments might be met with the available resources. Naval supremacy continued to be the most important British defence asset, but there were serious doubts about the effectiveness of the Royal Navy in the middle decades of the century. These doubts arose mainly from three major technological developments, steam propulsion, the advent of rifled guns and, as an antidote, of ironclads. It was feared that the Navy could no longer guarantee the immunity of the British Isles from invasion. This appeared to throw a greater burden on land defences in the form of more manpower and better fortifications. The shuffling around of limited forces, naval and military, between overseas commitments and the security of the home base became more complicated. Palmerston wrote to Sidney Herbert amidst worries about France and China in 1859: 'Nor do I like sending even a couple of batteries away from home in the present precarious state of European politics . . .'¹¹ It seems in retrospect that the fears of an invasion of the British home base were greatly exaggerated, and that steam and ironclads did not really make an amphibious operation against the British Isles any easier. Nevertheless, as the invasion scare of 1859 shows, both informed opinion and public opinion at large were seriously alarmed. British naval supremacy was, however, swiftly restored and the set-backs experienced by Napoleon III in the early 1860s made a threat from him appear even less real than it had ever been. Even at moments of alarm, such as the war scare of 1859, the counter-pressures were strong: the persistent drive for economy, the belief in international peace based on commercial interdependence, and the deep-seated fears of a standing army. The remarkable support for the volunteer movement shows the extent of public alarm, but the volunteer movement was more of a cosmetic exercise than a real contribution to solving defence dilemmas.¹² The Commander-in-Chief, the Duke of Cambridge, wrote to Lord Panmure, the Secretary of State for War, that volunteer corps 'are unmanageable bodies and would ruin our army':

I dismiss from my mind all the ideas I see stated in the public prints about Volunteer

¹⁰ Bourne, *Foreign Policy of Victorian England*, pp. 143–44.

¹¹ Palmerston Papers, GC/HE/53, 7 October 1859.

¹² M.J. Salevouris, *'Riflemen Form': The War Scare of 1859–1860 in England* (New York, 1982), pp. 152ff.

Corps. If such a system were to be adopted, the spirit of the regular army would be destroyed, jealousies would at once be engendered, the Volunteers would do as much or as little as they liked, and, in fact, they would be an armed and very dangerous rabble.¹³

In normal times the pressures for economy put a severe limit on what could be done, particularly as far as the Army was concerned, in spite of its small size by international standards a more expensive service than the Navy. If Britain had moved any distance towards acquiring a continental-type mass army, she would have had to abandon her still almost unique characteristics as a liberal, commercial and industrial nation. It was in these characteristics that her superiority, both in reality and in sentiment, resided. When the service estimates settled down after the exceptional Crimean War expenditure, the annual cost of the Navy hovered somewhere above the £10,000,000 level, excluding the shipbuilding vote, that of the Army above the £15,000,000 level. The shipbuilding vote was closely affected by the switch to steam and ironclads in the early 1860s. Manpower in the Navy declined to below 60,000 in the early 1880s, that of the Army was usually somewhat over 130,000. The year 1878 formed a peak of expenditure, the late 1860s a low point. After 1885 expenditure and manpower in both services were on a rising trend, naval expenditure rising particularly steeply.¹⁴

Strategic issues were often publicly debated, but for those immediately concerned with providing for the defence of the country, politicians and their civilian, naval and military advisers, they were taken for granted rather than specifically applied to their problems. A Prime Minister like Palmerston, who took a close interest in defence, would from time to time call relevant Ministers and some Service Chiefs together and attach to such a meeting the label War or Defence Committee. When the *Trent* incident was causing a war scare with the United States in December 1861, Palmerston wrote to George Lewis, the Secretary of State for War;

Some of our colleagues suggest that as in former cases of war imminent or actual, a Committee of Cabinet assisted by the Commander-in-Chief [the Duke of Cambridge] should meet from time to time to share responsibility with the Minister for War and if you see no objection such Committee might consist of Russell [Foreign Secretary], Somerset [First Lord], Newcastle [Colonies] and myself with perhaps Granville as Leader in the Lords and we might if you were to summon us meet at your office at two on Monday.¹⁵

It might not even be necessary to consult the Cabinet to 'undertake a little war', as Somerset put it to Palmerston, when two months earlier he was asking

¹³ *The Panmure Papers*, 2 vols (London, 1908), ii, pp. 444–45, 2 October 1857.

¹⁴ Figures based on research by Dr W.J. Philpott; see also M.S. Partridge, *Military Planning for the Defence of the United Kingdom, 1814–1870* (New York, 1989), p. 16.

¹⁵ Palmerston Papers, GC/LE/239, 6 December 1861.

about a naval expedition against Vera Cruz.¹⁶ The purpose was always to consider immediate problems, not long-term planning. The Royal Commission on National Defences appointed in 1859 was mainly concerned with fortifications. There was also a War Office Defence Committee, again a product of the invasion scare of the late 1850s, to consider 'the best means of repelling an invasion of the United Kingdom'. The two latter bodies consisted of serving officers; there was no coordination between these three bodies and they gradually drifted out of existence again.¹⁷ A Prime Minister like Gladstone, not particularly interested in defence, stumbled into major commitments like Egypt and the Sudan in the 1880s. Much was left to individual ministers or to ad hoc consultations between the Prime Minister and other Cabinet Ministers. Fortunately for Gladstone, perceptions of a threat to the home base had by this time died away.

At the beginning of the period, and to a large extent right into the 1880s, the primacy of the civilians in the making of defence policy was undisputed. This arose very largely from the fact that the purely technical aspects of decision-making in defence, matters on which any one who was not a professional or technical specialist might find it difficult to intervene, were very limited in scope. This was more the case with the Army than it was with the Navy. The Crimean War had just shown again the extent to which the officer corps of the Army consisted of aristocratic amateurs, but a naval officer had to spend time at sea and at least know something about working a ship. But even the distribution of the Navy could be decided by the politicians with little reference to the Board of Admiralty. Corry, Derby's First Lord, told the House of Commons in 1867 that the distribution of ships,

depended upon considerations with which even the Lords of the Admiralty themselves were sometimes unacquainted, and which were kept within the bosom of the Cabinet. The Admiralty implicitly obeyed the instructions they received from the Cabinet on this point.¹⁸

Palmerston as Prime Minister was still in a position to exercise a personal judgement on the relative merits of Whitworth and of Armstrong as gun-makers or about the suitability of Cannock Chase as a central arsenal. He attended test firings on the Shoeburyness gunnery range. As a man who had held the office of Secretary at War for some twenty years, he may have had a personal interest which subsequent Prime Ministers did not share. Sir John Burgoyne, Inspector-General of Fortifications from 1845 to 1868, came closest to being a defence expert, who in his particular field could not be gainsaid. In practice he worked closely with Palmerston. The fact remains that there was always a sufficient number on both the front- and back-benches who could fully enter into defence

¹⁶ Ibid., GC/SO/63, 6 October 1861.

¹⁷ Partridge, *Military Planning*, pp. 63–64.

¹⁸ *Hansard*, 186, 1 April 1867.

problems; while, on the other hand, the degree to which military or naval men could claim that they were the guardians of an arcane science was limited. This comes out clearly in the correspondence between the civilian and service officials both at the Admiralty and the War Office and in the debates on Service matters in Parliament. 'Scientific men', so Somerset confided to Palmerston, '... whenever they range beyond the scope of their particular ... are not more infallible than ordinary mortals'.¹⁹

In the absence of any central machinery for making defence policy, the two separate Services went their own way from day to day, making policy by default. There were no Chinese walls between administration and the making of policy. The Navy was administered by what was on paper a logical system, the Board of Admiralty. Reforms originally instituted by Sir James Graham in the 1830s had allotted specific duties to each of the Sea Lords.²⁰ Nevertheless the Admiralty itself was relatively impotent as an instrument for getting a grip on naval policy. Leading naval officers were scathing about in public. Admiral Sir Charles Napier, a major naval figure, but notoriously alarmist and pessimistic about the state of naval affairs, remarked in the House of Commons in 1858 'the Admiralty never did anything advantageous for the service: it commonly came from without';²¹ and Captain Lord Clarence Paget said 'no naval man ever went within its gates without feeling a certain amount of trepidation'.²²

Naval officers thus had very limited input into the making of naval policy, for there was no official apparatus for it. Thus when Childers, on becoming First Lord in the Gladstone Ministry of 1868, decided on a policy of reducing ships on foreign stations, in order to save money, and replacing them by a flying squadron, he was putting into effect a policy he had worked out in opposition. He had consulted with his political colleagues Stansfeld, Shaw-Lefevre and Sir John Hay, and of these only the last had any kind of naval service experience. There was a small group of naval 'experts' in Parliament, retired or serving officers, former Admiralty officials, shipowners and shipbuilders. The best known were Sir Charles Napier and later Lord Charles Beresford. Others were Admirals Walcott, Duncombe and Erskine, Sir James Elphinstone, and Captains Mackinnon and Pim. Their influence was counterbalanced by the internationalists of the Cobden school; indeed some of the shipbuilders and owners were of the latter persuasion, for example W.S. Lindsay, the MP for Tynemouth. Among Tories William Laird, the shipbuilder and MP for Birkenhead, was influential and came under consideration as a potential Parliamentary Secretary at the Admiralty.

In 1861, when the scare about a French invasion had passed and Palmerston was no longer in what Bright called his most 'Rule Britannia mood',²³ a concerted

¹⁹ Palmerston Papers, GC/SO/28, 16 March 1860.

²⁰ N.A.M. Rodger, *The Admiralty* (Lavenham, Suffolk, 1979), pp. 98–100.

²¹ *Hansard*, 150, 18 May 1858.

²² *Ibid.*, 149, 12 April 1858.

²³ *Ibid.*, 163, 23 May 1861.

effort was made to reduce the naval estimates. Lindsay tabled reductions amounting to £486,000 from the vote for naval stores (vote 10) of £3,850,000 (out of a total estimate of £12,276,000). In a sparsely attended House, 153 members voting in the largest division, Lindsay's proposals were comfortably defeated.²⁴ Such parliamentary pressure must, however, have been useful to Gladstone in his internal Cabinet battles to contain defence expenditure. Debates on naval matters and estimates were often thinly attended. Frederick Bentinck complained in 1858 during a debate on the manning of the Navy that only fifteen Members were present on a matter 'involving not merely the honour and reputation but the very existence of this country, a very curious spectacle for the senate of the first maritime country in the world to present'.²⁵

At the end of the day financial control by the House of Commons was a blunt instrument for influencing the government's naval policy nor could the mood of the House as a whole be characterised as hostile to the government's defence expenditure. In 1864 the prospect of intervention in Schleswig-Holstein strengthened the hand again of those who argued for a powerful Navy. While earlier Disraeli had expressed some sympathy with the advocates of economy, Sir John Pakington, a former Tory First Lord, now supported the critics who claimed that the Navy had been left in an inadequate state to intervene in a European war. In the debates on the naval estimates in March 1865 Pakington returned to the attack. He asked:

Is it or is it not true, as I have heard it rumoured on all sides, that at this moment, if we should become involved in a maritime war, England could not send an effective fleet to sea?²⁶

Lack of professional advice resulting in waste of the expenditure freely voted by the House was again complained of. These parliamentary pressures and counterpressures were part of the structure of defence decision-making, but they still left the First Lord and the Cabinet a fairly free hand.

As far as the Army was concerned, it accounted after the Crimean War for approximately three-fifths of defence estimates and still over half if the shipbuilding vote is included. Defence expenditure was roughly one-third of total government expenditure. Whig governments had for many years pressed for a rationalisation of army administration at the top, something that would achieve better efficiency and economy and at the same time more effective civilian control of the military. The appointment of a Minister of War on the continental model, or something along the lines of the Board of Admiralty, had been under discussion from time to time. Such developments had usually been resisted by the military, with the powerful support of the Duke of Wellington, and had never been implemented.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23 May 1861.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 150, 18 May 1858.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 177, 6 March 1865.

The Crimean War and its vicissitudes had at last brought about a reorganisation of the control of the Army. The office of Secretary at War was abolished at the end of 1854; its parliamentary functions were absorbed by the Secretary of State for War, whose functions of controlling the colonies had been hived off to a separate Secretary of State in June 1854. The office of Master General of the Ordnance, in the past frequently in the Cabinet, was abolished in May 1855 and the Board of Ordnance was brought under the aegis of the Secretary of State for War, who thus became responsible for the artillery, the engineers and the supply of weapons and ammunition.²⁷ The office of Commander-in-Chief, the abolition of which was also under consideration, was, however, confirmed by the Royal Patent of 18 May 1855, which placed the 'administration and government' of the Army into the hands of the Secretary of State for War,

excepting always so far as relates to and concerns the military command and discipline of our army and land forces, as likewise to the appointments to and promotions in the same, and so far as by our Royal Commission the military command and discipline thereof shall have been . . . committed to . . . our Commander in Chief of our forces . . .²⁸

This meant that the Commander-in-Chief now actually took over appointments, promotions and discipline for artillery and engineers, previously under the Master General of the Ordnance.

The opportunity to rationalise the administration of the Army, the cause of so much heart-searching and official inquiry over the years, was therefore not fully taken, largely because of the pressure to maintain the special relationship between the Sovereign and the Army. It was in fact strengthened by the appointment of the Queen's cousin, the Duke of Cambridge, as Commander-in-Chief. Whenever during the forty-year tenure of the post by the Duke friction arose between him and others, no one could afford to ignore the easy access he had to the Queen. Nevertheless, when a few years later a select committee enquired into the effects of the reorganisation of 1854–5, it was clear, and even the Duke of Cambridge himself admitted it, that the control of military affairs and strategy was firmly in the hands of civilian politicians. Sidney Herbert, the Secretary of State for War, said that the reservations of power left to the Commander-in-Chief were in practice 'inoperative', because the Secretary of State held the purse strings.²⁹ Sidney Herbert wrote somewhat apologetically to the Duke of Cambridge about his performance before the committee:

I have stated exactly what I think throughout. I attach the greatest importance to the maintenance of the just position of the Commander-in-Chief, and I am satisfied

²⁷ John Sweetman, *War and Administration: The Significance of the Crimean War for the British Army* (Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 93–94.

²⁸ *Report of the Select Committee to Inquire into the Effects of Alterations in Military Organization regarding the War Office and Board of Ordnance* (1860, Cmd 441, vii, p. 5).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

that to attempt to magnify his theoretical power is the sure way practically to undermine his position. The prerogative of the Crown is also best maintained by never being strained.³⁰

It could therefore be argued that the reorganisation had done nothing to change the balance of power between civilians and the military in defence decision-making. Much depended, however, on the interplay of personalities. Lord Hardinge, the Duke of Cambridge's predecessor, had little say in the strategy and conduct of the Crimean War. He was not even informed of the orders that were dispatched to the armies and did not expect to play a major role. On 3 June 1854 he wrote to Newcastle, the Secretary of State for War: 'I hope it is settled that you conduct the war.'³¹ Hardinge provided Newcastle with information on basic military organisation and on the structure that should be given to the expeditionary force, and gave the Minister his opinion on the various generals mentioned in connection with the expedition.

When the question of appointing a general for the proposed expeditionary force to the Baltic came up, Newcastle asked for Hardinge's advice. The Secretary of State pointed out that Sir Charles Napier, the naval commander in the Baltic, 'is not content with being a great admiral, but thinks himself a great general'; therefore the officer appointed 'must be both able to "hold his own" and to do it without quarrelling with the Admiral'.³² The correspondence between Newcastle and Hardinge also covers many other subjects besides appointments, including military organisation, the state of readiness and armament of particular regiments, the transportation of horses to the Crimea, the replacement of officer casualties and recruitment generally. There was obviously regular verbal communication between the Secretary of State and the Commander-in-Chief. Hardinge, however, took virtually no part in the discussion of strategy. He was not a member of the special War Committee of the Cabinet set up by Palmerston in August 1855.³³ Even on technical matters his authority was shared by others, for example the Inspector-General of Fortifications. The third Earl Grey, who had been Secretary at War and Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, said a few years later: 'with regard to the question as to the armament of fortresses, I find that until very lately the Commander-in-Chief had no control over it . . .' In part, Hardinge's inability or unwillingness to interpose in the decision-making process was the product of age and infirmity – he died in 1856.

The situation was considerably transformed when the Duke of Cambridge succeeded Hardinge in July 1856. This was not only due to his close relationship with the Queen and to his determination to uphold the connection between the Throne and the Armed Forces. He was also much younger and more

³⁰ Cambridge Papers, reel 9, 2707, Herbert to Cambridge, 25 May 1860.

³¹ University of Nottingham, Newcastle Papers, UN.Nec 10069, Hardinge to Newcastle, 3 June 1854.

³² Ibid., UN.Nec 10781, Newcastle to Hardinge, 4 April 1854.

³³ Olive Anderson, *A Liberal State at War: English Politics and Economics during the Crimean War* (London, 1967), pp. 40–41.

enthusiastic and determined to play an active part in affairs. In the early days of his long period of office we find him complaining to Panmure, the Secretary of State, in March 1857 that he had not been shown dispatches from China and the Persian Gulf, in spite of Panmure's promises:

I cannot help bringing to your notice that I think it would be most desirable to make it the rule that all despatches of a decidedly military character . . . should be communicated to the Commander-in-Chief. It can hardly be thought right that the only information the Commander-in-Chief at present obtains on these matters is either by private letters or by the public journals.³⁴

Apparently the hint is taken, for in returning the Persia papers the Duke thanks Panmure for agreeing 'with my view that the Commander-in-Chief should see all military dispatches in cases in which the Queen's troops are concerned'.³⁵ The Duke bombarded Panmure with advice about the sending of troops, sometimes recommending the dispatch of reinforcements, sometimes warning about the dangerous state of home defence if troops were sent out of the country. In March 1857, for example, he urged the need to send reinforcements to India and China;³⁶ in May 1857, despite the outbreak of the Mutiny, he warned that no more troops could be spared from the home base, or else there would have to be an increase in the size of the Army.³⁷ In August, having earlier agreed that more troops could be sent after all, he wrote:

As regards infantry, my most decided opinion is that so very large a force has already been sent of that item that for the moment no more is needed, whereas at home it is *dreadfully wanted*, and in fact till the militia are fully out and drilled it is quite impossible with safety to dispense of these four additional regiments. Bear in mind that not alone I have no troops to put in garrison and give daily duties, but what is far worse I shall have no regiments to aid me in drilling my own [second] battalions, from whence to take my non-commissioned officers, etc. In fact I shall be run so dry that the machine will not work any more. Give me only a little time more to get up the militia and a few of my second battalions, and you shall have the four regiments of infantry, but do not ask for them at this moment, for I do not feel myself in a position to give them with safety to the country or the future prospects of the army.³⁸

These views were not shared by the Cabinet. Clarendon, the Foreign Secretary, wrote to Panmure: 'I am . . . in no fear of any danger threatening us at home, and as to our national reputation . . . the best way of maintaining that, and of

³⁴ *Panmure Papers*, ii, p. 365, Cambridge to Panmure, 18 March 1857.

³⁵ Palmerston Papers, GC/PA/164, 27 October 1857; Willoughby Verner, *The Military Life of HRRH George, Duke of Cambridge* (London, 1905), i, p. 116.

³⁶ *Panmure Papers*, ii, pp. 361, 365, 369, Cambridge to Panmure, 17, 18 and 29 March 1857.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 386, Cambridge to Panmure, 19 May 1857.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 420–21, Cambridge to Panmure, 30 August 1857.

detering any foreign power from presuming on our supposed weakness, will be to crush the Indian revolt as soon as can be done.'³⁹

The Duke of Cambridge regularly attended meetings of the War or Defence Committee of the Cabinet when such a body was in existence. He was in constant contact with successive Secretaries of State, with whom he had regular face-to-face meetings at the War Office. Asked by the Select Committee of Enquiry on Military Organisation in 1860 as to the frequency of these meetings the Duke of Cambridge replied:

Constant; there is a great deal of personal intercourse, and, indeed, I think that that is the best way of doing business . . . I suppose hardly a day passed that I did not call on him. Of course it depends to some extent what is going on; during the time that General Peel was in office there was the Indian Mutiny, and there were various matters that necessitated, perhaps, more intercourse than at any other time, but the same intercourse goes on with Mr. Herbert, and did so with Lord Panmure.⁴⁰

The Duke fully recognised, however, the severe limits on his influence exerted by Cabinet and Parliament. When the Indian Mutiny started, Cambridge became convinced that the forces of the East India Company should be amalgamated with those of the crown. Panmure agreed with him, but the decision of the Cabinet was otherwise. The Secretary of State expressed his regret to Cambridge 'that you should have entered an official protest against it, as, after all, it is a decision of a collective government, taken with a full knowledge of Your Royal Highness' opinion, and to which in our individual capacities we must bow'.⁴¹ Palmerston commented: 'We cannot gag a Commander-in-Chief, nor prevent him from stating any objections which he may feel to any decision taken by the Cabinet on a military question, but we can tell him civilly that we abide by our own opinion.'⁴² On the other hand the Duke of Cambridge was on many occasions not above bringing into play the one constitutional element that might reinforce him, the Queen.

Responsibility for Army affairs thus remained divided between the Secretary of State for War and the Commander-in-Chief, between the War Office and the Horse Guards. The constitutional supremacy of the Secretary of State and of the Cabinet was not in question. On the other hand, the Commander-in-Chief had to be consulted on all matters of personnel and discipline and in fact could not be left out of the execution of policy. The ultimate supremacy of the civilians and its acknowledgement by the Duke did not mean that his relations with successive Secretaries of State ran smooth, whatever the impression given to the Committee of Enquiry in 1860. The Duke's relations with most Secretaries of State, certainly from Cardwell onwards, became strained. His opposition to the Cardwell reforms and his dogged rearguard action against

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 423, Clarendon to Panmure, 31 August 1857.

⁴⁰ *Minutes of Evidence, Select Committee on Military Organization*, 1860, p. 293.

⁴¹ *Panmure Papers*, ii, p. 448, Panmure to Cambridge, 28 October 1857.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 449, Palmerston to Panmure, 30 October 1857.

them are well known. Just because a civilian politician, aided by Young Turk officers, could master the details of army organisation, the Duke had to ensconce himself behind the barricades of superior knowledge of detail. The Queen wrote in her diary on 15 August 1870: ‘Saw George and found him greatly excited. He told me of all his difficulties, of the obstinacy of Mr. Cardwell and want of knowledge of military matters in detail.’⁴³ At the end of the day the Duke could not stop the reforms from being implemented.

The Gladstone government’s policy of retrenchment and reform was in the meantime causing similar tensions at the Admiralty. H.C.E. Childers became First Lord and initiated a determined programme of cost and manpower reductions, fully backed by the Prime Minister, Gladstone described him as ‘a Man likely to scan with a rigid Eye the civil Expenses of the Naval Service’.⁴⁴ He got the naval estimates just below the psychologically important figure of £10,000,000. Childers strengthened his own position as First Lord by reducing the role of the Board of Admiralty to a purely formal one, making meetings rare and short and confining the Sea Lords rigidly to their administrative functions. These changes, although soon partially reversed, left their mark on the Admiralty for a generation. It became even more difficult for a coherent view of naval policy to emerge from the professionals. Milne, the First Sea Lord, wrote to Childers’ successor: ‘There is no *cohesion* between the *Naval Element in the Board*’.⁴⁵ Childers also cleared the back-log of over-age senior officers from the Navy List by increasing pensions. It was a necessary but unpopular move.

Initially Childers had the support of the influential Controller of the Navy, Vice-Admiral Sir Spencer Robinson, but soon he and the Chief Constructor, Edward Reed, later an MP, resigned in acrimonious circumstances. The resignations were connected with the loss of HMS *Captain* and with the way in which Childers tried to shift responsibility for the loss on to others. HMS *Captain* was built with rotating gun-turrets as a result of a long campaign fuelled by public suspicion that the Admiralty was obscurantist and backward-looking in refusing to adopt such a design.⁴⁶ In fact warnings from within the Navy and Admiralty about the ship’s stability should have been heeded. Childers was strongly in favour of building the *Captain* and could therefore not escape personal responsibility for the disaster. His own son went down in the ship, as did the relatives of a number of other prominent men. The loss of HMS *Captain* and of HMS *Megaera*⁴⁷ and other incidents in these years cast a shadow over the

⁴³ 15 August 1870, quoted in Giles St Aubyn, *The Royal George* (London, 1963), p. 143.

⁴⁴ P. Guedalla (ed.), *The Palmerston Papers: Gladstone and Palmerston* (London, 1928), 7 November 1864.

⁴⁵ N.A.M. Rodger, ‘The Dark Ages of the Admiralty, 1869–85’, pt 1, ‘Business Methods’, *Mariner’s Mirror*, 61 (1975), p. 343.

⁴⁶ Stanley Sadler, ‘“In Deference to Public Opinion”: The Loss of HMS *Captain*’, *Mariner’s Mirror*, 59 (1973), p. 57.

⁴⁷ Norman McCord, ‘A Naval Scandal of 1871: The Loss of HMS *Megaera*’, *Mariner’s Mirror*, 57 (1971), p. 115. See also *Commission to Inquire into Case of HMS Megaera*, Report (1872, Cmd 507, xv).

Admiralty's administrative and technical competence. The 1870s have been called the Admiralty's 'Dark Age'. The regime of rigid economy had become so deeply ingrained that no officer was prepared to advocate even necessary repairs and refurbishments because any expenditure was so much frowned upon. A Royal Commission brought out some of these shortcomings. The unpopularity of the Gladstone government in the early 1870s was due not only to the feeling that it had shown itself impotent in foreign policy, but also to its apparent neglect of the nation's defences.

Childers was succeeded by Goschen at the Admiralty in 1871, but returned to the defence field as Secretary of State for War in Gladstone's Second Ministry in 1880. Relations between the Duke of Cambridge and Childers reached a peak of unpleasantness in 1881 over the appointment of Wolseley as Adjutant-General. The antagonism between the Duke and the most prominent of the military reformers had gone on for a decade. The Duke's refusal to have Wolseley as Adjutant-General could be seen as merely a matter of personal incompatibility. Harcourt remarked that the Duke and Wolseley could not live 'conjugally' together. It was not long before questions of policy arose, especially as the Duke was ill-advised enough to let the cat out of the bag that his objection to Wolseley was not just a personnel matter, but that he could not work with him as the most conspicuous exponent of military reform. Childers pointed out to the Duke that the reforms were now established policy 'unconnected with party politics'. At a later stage of what Gladstone called one of the most 'entangled' questions he had ever known 'in the region of personal matters', the issue arose how far the Duke's prerogatives in the making of appointments really extended. Childers pointed out to Gladstone that the Duke had the right of recommendation only 'for regimental appointments and even then the Secretary of State has the right of veto. He has no pretension to do so for important offices at Headquarters'.

Gladstone became alarmed that any such pretensions of the Duke might be admitted; and furthermore that the Duke might veto the grant of peerages to officers who as members of the House of Lords might speak in a contrary sense to him on military matters. The Prime Minister had reason to be alarmed, for in the meantime public discussion, brought on by leaks to the press and club gossip, had raised the larger civil-military question: who governs the Army, the government or the Commander-in-Chief with his royal connections? Childers complained to his colleague Dilke about the Duke, that he 'went chattering about the place, refused to behave as a subordinate, and wrote direct to the Queen'. An unsuccessful attempt was made to trap the Duke into putting his objections to Wolseley on policy grounds into writing. In the end, however, Wolseley did become Adjutant-General and the Duke did not resign.⁴⁸

Relations could be just as bad with Tory Secretaries of State. Lady Geraldine Somerset wrote in her diary on 16 January 1889:

⁴⁸ Most of the information on the Wolseley case comes from box 5, 'Political Correspondence', in the Childers Papers, formerly deposited at the Royal Commonwealth Society.

[C] had the most unpleasant meeting at the War Office today! That little *beast* Stanhope more nasty than ever! No War Minister has yet *ever* assumed the insolence of tone towards him personally of this *beastly* little whippersnapper who might be his son. Nasty filthy little prig! Childers and Cardwell were always, at least outwardly, civil, courteous and deferential to him personally! To schoolmaster him as a child-den schoolboy was reserved for a Conservative Government to do!! He told him plainly today if it goes on it is quite impossible for him to stay.⁴⁹

The difficulties which the Duke's position placed in the way of implementing the recommendations of the Hartington Commission for the appointment of a Chief of Staff are well known. It remains a moot point whether all the long drawn-out difficulties over the Duke of Cambridge are really a matter of civil-military relations or merely a personal problem. Wolseley had the reputation of being the Liberal Party's tame senior officer and this undoubtedly made intervention in Egypt in 1882 more tolerable for Gladstone. 'Wolseley in Cairo: Arabi a prisoner: God be praised', he wrote in his diary on 15 September 1882. In private Wolseley could be as vitriolic about the Liberal government as the Duke of Cambridge had ever been about any politician.

The *modus operandi* in defence matters, as sketched here also led to a certain disjunction between foreign and defence policy, though it might be argued that such a distinction has little validity. Foreign policy was unequivocally a Cabinet matter on which service officers had little contribution to make, except possibly as *ex post facto* executants. Foreign policy was in the main concerned with relations with the other great powers. Defence policy was concerned with certain ongoing realities, particularly in the colonial and imperial sphere. It was governed by the slower rhythms of expenditure, for which parliamentary approval was necessary, by recruitment and the procurement of equipment, particularly of ships for the Navy. The potential conflicts with other major European powers that might arise out of the conduct of foreign affairs could, however, call in question the shuffling around of naval and military assets that were the normal routine of defence decision-making.

The extent to which this whole system could allow foreign and defence policies to get out of step can be seen in especially acute form in the Schleswig-Holstein crisis in 1863–4.⁵⁰ It was a foreign policy problem involving relations with all the great powers of the European concert. The way in which Palmerston and Russell played the British hand had defence implications which were not considered until they became too obvious to be ignored. Only 20,000 men could have been mustered for a continental expedition and Somerset told Palmerston that 'if we get into a naval war with German powers we must expect that *Alabamas* will be fitted out in America and elsewhere to prey on our com-

⁴⁹ St Aubyn, *The Royal George*, p. 279.

⁵⁰ Bernard Porter, *Britain and the World, 1850–1986: Delusions of Grandeur* (2nd edn, London, 1986), p. 19.