

# DEFENDING THE REALM?

The politics of Britain's small wars  
since 1945

AARON EDWARDS



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Manchester University Press



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For Jennifer



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## Preface and acknowledgements

This book was born out of a growing frustration with the current state of conventional wisdom on the politics of British military intervention since the end of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> It was spurred on by a belief that there has been a general failure amongst public servants and public intellectuals to fully appreciate the complex relationships between military commanders and civilian officials in Britain's 'small wars'.<sup>2</sup> If this failing were of purely academic concern it could quite easily be dismissed as a 'dialogue of the deaf' between the chattering classes. However, I have seen first-hand how this has had injurious effects on my own students' understanding of the role of the military instrument in serving government policy at the 'sharp end' of operations.

If that was not bad enough, skewed snapshots of Britain's post-war military interventions unfortunately seem to be informing the decision-making processes of policymakers, politicians and soldiers in today's global security environment.<sup>3</sup> This is worrying. If we do not have a firm understanding of the nuances of our own past, then how can we possibly make informed decisions, either in the present or in the future? *Defending the Realm* seeks to address this knowledge deficit by examining the historical record, as far as possible in light of the available archival source material and oral testimonies of those who were actually involved in Britain's small wars since 1945.<sup>4</sup>

Given my teaching responsibilities at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS), I have continuously sought to frame my lectures and seminars in the broader conceptual framework of strategic studies. An appreciation of the overlapping political, international, strategic and legal contexts within which British forces operate (and the lessons they have learned from this experience) is something Officer Cadets are expected to take away from the RMAS Commissioning Course. However, a hectic vocational-based training regime means that they are rarely afforded the opportunity to immerse themselves in this vast literature. Indeed, it was the absence of a single-volume strategic history

of Britain's military experience in countering irregular adversaries<sup>5</sup> since 1945 that persuaded me to put pen to paper.

This book is also written with my other students in mind; commissioned officers who have soldiered in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan. I only hope that it will enable these seasoned veterans to make sense of how their actions fitted into the 'bigger picture'. The ability of British military commanders to think conceptually and imaginatively, often under considerable constraints, is impressive. What is even more reassuring, however, is that they, like me, appreciate the importance of Field Marshal Montgomery's timeless aphorism that all 'uninformed criticism is valueless'.<sup>6</sup>

*Defending the Realm*, therefore, attempts to blend a close reading of the empirical data – the unpublished archives, interview transcripts and secondary sources – with a theoretical reflective account of the politics and strategy behind military events as they have unfolded on the ground. It applies a realist reading of Britain's strategic position in international relations since 1945. As such, it borrows heavily from the work of Hans Morgenthau, amongst others, who defined 'politics' as 'a struggle for power over men, and, whatever its ultimate aim may be, power is its immediate goal and the modes of acquiring, maintaining, and demonstrating it determine the technique of political action'.<sup>7</sup> Above all, this book attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice at a time when, it is claimed, that 'we have all but lost the capacity to think strategically'.<sup>8</sup>

There are clear benefits of reading Britain's role in international security from a strategic perspective; as some defence professionals have observed, 'Strategic thinking is partly in someone's nature, but it is also a function of how we select, educate, train, stream and mentor the right people – nurturing them within defence and within wider government – to think at the right level and in a strategic way'.<sup>9</sup> This is echoed in the words of Professor Colin S. Gray, who articulates the view that 'education in strategy is a conceptual enabler; it is theory or education for practice'.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it has also been necessary to situate these small wars in the broader historical context of the rapid decolonisation of Britain's empire, the Cold War confrontation between East and West, and, increasingly, amidst debates on the so-called 'changing character of conflict'.<sup>11</sup> However, what the book does not attempt to do is to provide tantalising detail about each of the eight cases examined. There are two main reasons why: first, it would be both impossible to do justice to the complexity of all of Britain's small wars since 1945 in a single volume, and, second, because it would be unwise for me to claim an encyclopaedic knowledge of each of the cases. The reader is,

therefore, pointed in the direction of the expert literature on each case in the endnotes and bibliography.

The subject matter of Britain's small wars has fascinated me since I was a young boy, when I was privy to first-hand accounts of family members and friends who recalled, in vivid detail, their soldiering exploits in combating irregular opponents. One vignette from my own family history illustrates this well. My late great-uncle, Bill Graham, served in the 1st Battalion, the Royal Ulster Rifles, during the Second World War, landing by glider near Ranville in Normandy on D-Day. Within a matter of months Bill and his unit had probed deep behind enemy lines, advancing to contact towards the Rhine in a bid to secure the bridgeheads for Allied advance into Germany. At the end of the war he accompanied the Ulster Rifles to Palestine as part of the 6th Airborne Division, where he subsequently transferred into the Palestine Police, adapting his conventional war-fighting tactics to the rigours of Internal Security operations against Jewish terrorist and insurgent groups.

Like all good soldiers, Bill found that he could adjust his infantry skills and drills to fight what Montgomery once referred to as 'a lot of gangsters'. These 'gangsters', mainly found in the ranks of Jewish armed groups, nevertheless, proved formidable opponents for British forces in Palestine. Thus, Bill, like so many of his comrades, spent the remainder of his service as a battle-hardened soldier in an imperial policeman's uniform. Bill's story is indicative of the experiences of countless other British soldiers who found themselves having to adapt their big-wars skill-set to small-wars circumstances. In many respects Bill's personal story is reflective of the British military's ability to maintain a flexible and adaptable posture when applying armed force in the service of political aims.

I wish to thank a number of people for their advice and assistance during the research and writing of this book. It was my late grandfather, Jackie Graham, with whom I spent endless hours recalling 'wee yarns' about his brother Bill's military experiences. My father, James Edwards, has always been a constant source of encouragement in all of my work: he is my inspiration. My mother, Barbara, and my sister, Stephanie, make me feel at home each time I return from England. My brother, Ryan, also deserves a mention for keeping my feet firmly on the ground – even when we have bumped into each other amidst one of Britain's recent 'small wars'! David Ullah gave me an excellent first-hand account of his time in Aden in the 1960s, recalling vividly his experiences in Khormaksar, Crater and Radfan. His daughter Jennifer, my wife and soul-mate, has borne the brunt of my many days and nights

toiling away on this book – and kindly cast her meticulous eye for detail over the entire manuscript. Jenny’s continuing support for my intellectual pursuits is unparalleled and I dedicate this book to her with all my love.

My colleagues at Sandhurst have been outstanding in spurring me on in my academic endeavours. The RMAS Sabbatical Committee awarded me a term off in 2010 to complete much of the research and writing for this book. Drs David Brown, Martin Smith and Donette Murray recommended that I take additional time with the manuscript for quality-assurance purposes, and David and Donette kindly read over early drafts. My Head of Department, Dr Francis Toase, has been a huge supportive influence in all of my research endeavours, as too has his deputy Alan Ward. Tim Bean has been a fantastic friend and colleague, reading copious drafts enthusiastically and helping to hone my thinking over some well-earned ‘brews’. Drs Ed Flint, Jenny Medcalf and Alieus Parchami also intervened to spur me along when a heavily ‘kinetic’ teaching load threatened to derail my research and writing. The RMAS Director of Studies, Sean McKnight, was excellent in approving (and, in many cases, helping to fund) my trips to the various archives, as well as to academic conferences to present findings from my research.

Colleagues beyond Sandhurst have also provided much support. Professors Graham Walker and Richard English facilitated my Visiting Research Fellowship at Queen’s University Belfast in 2010–11. The Fellowship afforded me the intellectual breathing space to present research findings at guest lectures. Meanwhile, Dr Thomas Hennessey has been on hand to encourage me in broadening my intellectual horizons in our increasingly corresponding research interests. Dr Eamonn O’Kane kindly selected me to present a paper on the securitization of peacebuilding in Britain’s ‘new wars’ at a convivial workshop at Falstad Memorial and Human Rights Centre, Norway, in June 2009, which fed directly into [Chapter 8](#). Dr Cillian McGrattan kindly read over the manuscript and provided some invaluable criticism. I also wish to thank the editors of the scholarly journal *Small Wars and Insurgencies* for allowing me to use material from my article on the Army’s counter-insurgency strategy in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the incredibly constructive feedback from Manchester University Press’s two anonymous reviewers was extremely helpful in refocusing my attention on what I wanted to accomplish by writing this book. Tony Mason and the team at Manchester University Press have been terrific in permitting the deadline to lapse while I succumbed to a range of other academic pressures.

The assistance afforded to me by General Sir Roger Wheeler and Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Trousdell was invaluable. Billy Brown and

Jim Evans at PRRT in Belfast facilitated numerous crucial interviews with former members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary/Police Service of Northern Ireland, who included senior Counter-Terrorist officers, all of whom gave me candid insights into police-army cooperation at various levels. Together with an eclectic mix of people from police, military and paramilitary ranks, who cannot be named, I was provided a rare glimpse into the inner-workings of the strategic, operational and tactical aspects of Counter-Terrorist operations in Northern Ireland during 'our troubles' from all possible angles.

Without the assistance of a range of archivists and trustees of numerous collections across the UK the book would not have been written. Staff and Trustees at the Department of Documents at the Imperial War Museum, London; the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London; the Special Collections section at the London School of Economics and Oxford University; as well as the National Archives, Kew, were also helpful. Staff at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland searched out files relating to Operation Banner at a time of great transition for them. Last, but by no means least, I wish to thank Andrew Orgill, John Pearce, Ken Franklin and Mel Bird at the RMAS Central Library: without their assistance – and endless cups of tea – *Defending the Realm* would certainly have remained, to paraphrase Clausewitz, 'pointless and devoid of sense'.

The views expressed here are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, The Ministry of Defence, or any other United Kingdom government agency.

### Notes

- 1 I was mindful while writing this book of Professor Lord Hennessy's caveat that one needs to '[b]eware conventional wisdoms; search for the lessons of history where you can find them'. Hennessy, Peter, *The Secret State: Preparing for the Worst, 1945–2010*, second edition (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 394.
- 2 'Small wars' are defined here as those conflicts which involve a state power and an irregular adversary, such as a terrorist or insurgent group.
- 3 For a similar argument see Porch, Douglas, 'The Dangerous Myths and Dubious Promise of COIN', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2011), pp. 239–257. In a stinging attack on the mythology that has been built up around counter-insurgency, Porch (p. 253) argues that 'the certainty is that predictions for success of COIN doctrines anchored in mythologized history and selective memory are perilous propositions'.
- 4 There are a series of books on the history of Britain's small wars, such as Michael Carver's *War since 1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980);

Charles Townshend's *Britain's Civil Wars: Counter-Insurgency in the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber, 1986); Thomas R. Mockaitis' *British Counterinsurgency, 1919–1960* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Thomas R. Mockaitis' *British Counter-Insurgency in the Post-Imperial Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); John Newsinger's *British Counterinsurgency: From Palestine to Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); and more recently Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon's *Imperial Endgame: Britain's Dirty Wars and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). While Townshend and Grob-Fitzgibbon engage in a close reading of archival source material on Britain's small wars, the others do not.

- 5 'Irregular warfare is an exceedingly inclusive concept', argues Colin S. Gray, '[t]he noun matters more than the adjective . . . Irregular warfare is warfare between regulars and irregulars. As a general rule, please note the qualification, such warfare is between a state with its legally constituted official armed forces, and a non-state adversary'. Gray, Colin S., *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), pp. 214–215.
- 6 Law, Bernard, Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein*, KG (London: Collins, 1958), p. 466.
- 7 Morgenthau, Hans, 'The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil', *Ethics*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (October 1945), p. 14.
- 8 House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, *Who Does UK National Strategy?*, First Report of Session 2010–11, 12 October 2010 (London: TSO, 18 October 2010), p. 3.
- 9 Newton, Paul, Paul Colley and Andrew Sharpe, 'Reclaiming the Art of British Strategic Thinking', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 155, No. 1 (February 2010), p. 48.
- 10 Gray, Colin S., 'War – Continuity in Change, and Change in Continuity', *Parameters: The US Army's Senior Professional Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (summer 2010), pp. 8–9.
- 11 Arguably, an understanding of history is important if we are to make informed judgements in the present. In the words of French philosopher Albert Camus, 'If, in fact, to ignore history comes to the same as denying reality, it is still alienating oneself from reality to consider history as a completely self-sufficient absolute'. Camus, Albert, *The Rebel*, translated by Anthony Bower (London: Peregrine Books, [1951] 1962), p. 252.

## Abbreviations

AQI	Al Qaeda in Iraq
ATUC	Aden Trades Union Council
BLSC	Bodleian Library Oxford Special Collections
CDS	Chief of the Defence Staff
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
COB	Contingency Operating Base
COIN	counter-insurgency
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
CT	Communist Terrorists
DFID	Department for International Development
EOKA	National Organization of Cypriot Combatants
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FLOSY	Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen
FNG	Federal National Guard
GOC	General Office Commanding
HUMINT	human intelligence
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IS	Internal Security
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
IWM	Imperial War Museum
JAM	Jaish Al Mahdi
JDP	Joint Defence Publication
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee
KAR	King's African Rifles
KAU	Kenya African Union
LCMA	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives

LSE	London School of Economics
MACA	Military Aid to the Civil Authority
MACP	Military Aid to the Civil Power
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MPAJA	Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army
MRF	Military Reconnaissance Force
MRLA	Malayan Races Liberation Army
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIO	Northern Ireland Office
NLF	National Liberation Front
NSC	National Security Council
NSS	National Security Strategy
ORBAT	Order of Battle
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
PORF	Popular Organization of Revolutionary Forces
ProExComm	Province Executive Committee
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
PSO	Peace Support Operation
PSP	People's Socialist Party
RAF	Royal Air Force
RMAS	Royal Military Academy Sandhurst
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
SAA	South Arabian Army
SAS	Special Air Service
SBA	Sovereign Base Area
SDR	Strategic Defence Review
SDSR	Strategic Defence and Security Review
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service
TAOR	Tactical Area of Responsibility
TCG	Tasking and Co-ordination Group
TNA	The National Archives
TTPs	Tactics, Techniques and Procedures
UDA	Ulster Defence Association
UDR	Ulster Defence Regiment
UN	United Nations
UNP	United National Party
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCOP	United Nations Special Committee on Palestine
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WO	War Office





# Introduction

That questions of policy remain vested in the civil government must be loyally carried out. It is however the duty of the soldier to advise the Government and its subordinate officers as to the effect of the policy, contemplated or pursued, on military action.<sup>1</sup>

All nations will continue to be guided in their decisions to intervene and their choice of the means of intervention by what they regard as their respective national interests.<sup>2</sup>

War is an instrument of government policy: it is a means to a political end. The use of force is thus subject to political control. Political control of operations from the seat of government is much stronger today than it has been before; improved communications and the speed of political reaction to military events make a close control of operations by ministers inevitable, however remote the theatre. Political control may not affect the lower formations directly but it will certainly be an important factor for a higher commander and its effects will be felt throughout his command.<sup>3</sup>

## **A strategic history of Britain's small wars**

Britain is often revered for its first-hand experience of waging 'small wars'. Its long imperial history, over the course of which this diminutive island-based nation once controlled territory covering approximately one-fifth of the world's surface and 25 per cent of its population, is littered with high-profile internal security campaigns, thus marking it out as perhaps the most seasoned practitioner of this type of warfare. Britain's 'small wars' typically involved fighting irregular adversaries, whether in the form of Communist insurgents in the bamboo-laden Malayan jungle, marauding Mau Mau gangs rampaging across Kenyan game reserves or Irish republican terrorists in the back alleys and rural hamlets of Northern Ireland. In contrast to 'big wars', which involve a conventional clash between uniformed armies on a clearly demarcated battlefield, small wars are fought by states against (typically clandestine) non-state

adversaries and rarely lead to a definitive knockout blow being administered by one side or the other.<sup>4</sup> Often, small wars degenerate into protracted conflicts that threaten to exhaust the former while emboldening the latter.

Small wars have been an integral part of British military experience for hundreds of years. Indeed, one can trace the intellectual genealogy of formal doctrine (i.e. the guide to best practice) on battling irregular opponents to the work of British warrior-scholar Colonel (later Major-General Sir) Charles Callwell. Writing amidst the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle*, which coincided with the height of Britain's imperial prowess, Callwell defined 'small wars' as a term 'simply used to denote, in default of a better, operations of regular armies against irregular, or comparatively speaking irregular, forces'.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, small wars have become synonymous with insurrection and the tactics of guerrilla warfare. Interestingly, the term *guerrilla* is itself derived from the Spanish *guerra*, and translated literally means 'little war'. However, in this book the term is taken to mean more than insurgency, as not all of the irregular groups detailed here sought to overthrow an existing government.<sup>6</sup> This is in keeping with Callwell's use of the term, insofar as 'in small wars guerrilla operations are almost invariably a feature of some phase of the struggle'.<sup>7</sup> That Britain has a long and distinguished history in this type of warfare was highlighted in the work of one of the best-known theorists of war, Colonel (later Major-General) J.F.C. Fuller. Writing in the shadow of the First World War, Fuller observed how:

We, as the inheritors of a world-wide Empire, possess an all but unlimited knowledge of the nature of small wars; we have engaged in them for over two hundred years, and throughout this long period our difficulties in winning them have been very similar.<sup>8</sup>

Even though the types of combat experiences shared by state forces and their irregular opponents throughout the ages may have striking similarities, the political and military dynamics underpinning these armed engagements are rarely analogous.<sup>9</sup> Britain's armed forces therefore have had to remain vigilant, maintaining a flexible and adaptable posture in light of extremely fluid circumstances. Moreover, they have also tended to apply a model of counter-insurgency, since the 1950s, which has evolved from imperial policing tactics employed in far-flung colonies where the co-ordination of the joint civil-military response was vitally important in combating terrorists and insurgents.<sup>10</sup>

While this book details some of the tactical and operational dynamics underpinning how Britain fought these small wars, it is much more concerned with the wider strategic and political context within which they

have been conducted.<sup>11</sup> This should come as no surprise as politics has always shaped the direction war takes and the kind of peace that comes once it has ended.<sup>12</sup> As Thomas Schelling prudently observed, ‘Small wars embody the threat of a larger war; they are not just military engagements but “crisis diplomacy”’.<sup>13</sup> In other words, states have surreptitiously recognized the need to marshal all available resources towards ensuring success on the broader political front, of which these armed conflicts are the most accentuated elements. Schelling, a Noble Prize-winning economist, is often credited as being one of the leading lights of strategic theory, a conceptual framework of analysis that can trace its roots to the work of Prussian general and philosopher of war Carl Von Clausewitz, who did much in his posthumous masterpiece *On War* to explain the political connotations of war.<sup>14</sup>

‘War’, as Clausewitz famously declared, ‘is the clash between major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed’. Yet war is more than this, as Clausewitz went on to argue; it is ‘the continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means’.<sup>15</sup> Despite the latter excerpt remaining Clausewitz’s best-known dictum, many commentators misleadingly employ it to imply the culminating point of departure between ‘peaceful’ politics and ‘aggressive’ war. Rarely, though, is there a linear trajectory in armed conflict, wherein political intercourse, having been exhausted, simply runs its course and war takes over as a means of reaching a more decisive outcome.<sup>16</sup> In the sense that it is employed here, in the sense that Clausewitz himself understood it, war is understood as a dialectical process in which ‘moral factors’ and ‘physical ones’ interact, ‘each penetrating and acting upon the other’.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, while the objective may very well be to recalibrate the equilibrium in favour of some idea of ‘peace’, war is continually shaped by politics and inevitably defines the peace which follows. Clausewitz illustrated this point well:

Politics, moreover, is the womb in which war develops – where its outlines already exist in their hidden rudimentary form, like the characteristics of living creatures in their embryos.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, it is politics that gives war its purpose, which shapes its character, and which sets the preconditions for its termination.<sup>19</sup> Put more emphatically, argues Anglo-American strategic theorist Colin S. Gray, ‘War is about politics, and politics is about the distribution of power – who has how much of it, what they do with it, and what the consequences are’.<sup>20</sup> For hard-headed realists, including renowned British historian Correlli Barnett, ‘[p]eace and war in history flow continually in and out of each other, alternative aspects of the single

phenomenon of the struggle for power'.<sup>21</sup> It is in this violent competition between belligerents – when, arguably, power is in its rawest form – that we see the political essence of war most clearly.

The central argument of *Defending the Realm?* is that the politics of Britain's small wars have been shaped by the decline of its empire amidst a fundamentally anarchic international setting and the re-distribution of power,<sup>22</sup> just as much by the actions of military commanders and civilian officials 'on the spot' and the politicians and their apparatchiks formulating government policy in Whitehall.<sup>23</sup> This observation may seem glaringly obvious, but it nonetheless demands further scrutiny, especially since it can again lead to the mistaken view that politics is in some respects disconnected from warfare. In many ways, *Defending the Realm?* takes its cue more from the work of Antoine-Henri Jomini, Clausewitz's 'contemporary and rival',<sup>24</sup> than from the master himself, in so far as it posits the theory prominent in Jomini's writings that the phenomenon of war can be understood as a science more than an art, a process which requires much more than blunt force trauma and blood-letting to win the clash of wills between belligerents. Warfare also involves gaining a psychological edge, claims Jomini, insofar as 'other combinations not less important are absolutely necessary in conducting a great war, but they pertain more to the government of empires than the commanding of armies'.<sup>25</sup> Britain's handling of its security, whether amidst the *realpolitik* of the Cold War<sup>26</sup> and the decolonization of its empire, or, in the post-Cold War world, which Lawrence Freedman informs us is 'no longer . . . a dialectic between imperialism and socialism, but of order and disorder',<sup>27</sup> was carefully choreographed and more scientific, despite campaigning being characterized as chaotic and desperate.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Britain's approach to its small wars paid homage to Jomini's dictum that 'it is absolutely necessary to know that science . . . consists of a mixture of politics, administration, and war'.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, these wars provide us with an opportunity to examine at close quarters how Britain managed its decline from 'great power' status at the end of the Second World War to its 'middling power' status by the end of the Cold War.<sup>30</sup> This is especially important given the tendency to see Britain as having been successful in these small wars and insurgencies, despite its loss of relative power in the world.

### **A uniquely British approach?**

Britain's distinctive application of force has always reflected the truism that the political class make policy decisions in the build-up to war, while soldiers design and implement the military activities that will

ultimately serve the political will.<sup>31</sup> Even though many commentators have scrutinized the drumbeat of warfare as it gathers rhythm and pitch in Whitehall or Westminster, few have analysed how these policy 'ends' as stipulated by the government are actually accomplished on the ground when military intervention becomes unavoidable. How civilian and military leaders set out to fulfil the obligations of policy by strategizing (i.e. applying military 'ways' and 'means' in the service of 'ends'), especially in battling irregular adversaries, remains the leit-motif of this book.

Therefore, this book is concerned with explaining how the complex, dialectical relationship between civilians and military commanders played out across all of the eight cases explored. In so doing it concentrates much more on how, why and with what consequences these conflicts were fought, and whether one can discern a uniquely British strategic approach – or 'way of warfare'<sup>32</sup> – to explain how ends, ways and means were related to one another in the prosecution of Britain's small wars. Gray explains this process more eloquently:

Strategy is the bridge between politics and soldiering, but it is neither of those activities. Excellence in the military arts is no guarantee of superiority in strategy, which is why even an unblemished career in tactical and then operational levels of command provides no assurance of fitness for the highest of commands, where politics and force meet.<sup>33</sup>

Put another way, writes Hew Strachan, '[s]trategy is therefore the product of the dialogue between politicians and soldiers, and its essence is the harmonisation of the two elements, not the subordination of one to the other'.<sup>34</sup> There is much in Strachan's analysis that one might agree with. An important conclusion drawn by *Defending the Realm?* is that this dialogue was fundamentally important to the shaping of British strategy during the campaigns under study. It therefore frames discussion of Britain's small wars in their correct historical context and emphasizes the personal convictions and motivations of politicians and soldiers at the sharp end, just as much as the political debates over military intervention in London. It explores the politics of withdrawal in Palestine and Aden amidst growing Soviet and American influence in the Middle East, the sometimes-uneasy civil-military relations in Kenya, the appointment of a military supremo in civilian clothes in Palestine, Malaya and Cyprus, the failure of military primacy in Northern Ireland, as well as the strategic drift in Iraq, and the search for a more realistic (and limited) strategy in Afghanistan.

Full consideration is given throughout the book to the consequences of the political constraints placed upon the military by politicians, as

well as the impact of the broader international context on each of the case studies. In this Clausewitz is no less explicit in his view that 'The main lines along which military events progress, and to which they are restricted, are political lines that continue throughout the war into the subsequent peace'.<sup>35</sup> Based on detailed research in the historical archives and the careful collation of eyewitness testimonies from those who fought in Britain's small wars, the book weaves together the complex strands of British strategy after World War Two. Indeed, the eight case studies were chosen primarily because it is in small wars, perhaps the most political form of military activity,<sup>36</sup> that one can see civil-military relations at their most strained, when decisions have been taken that tell us much about the strategy being followed, if any. The book also argues that, regardless of the political complexion of the party in office, successive governments have had to take into consideration both the challenges posed by a changing security environment and the political, economic and military reality of Britain's declining power in the world.<sup>37</sup>

More fundamental perhaps to the safeguarding of British prestige has been the need to preserve the corporate memory of our institutions of state. Here we see the experiences and memories of individuals who became involved in these small wars colouring the ensuing dialectical process of civil-military relations. Though they might not have been the most optimal or rational ones to apply in a different context, they were purely subjective points of view that influenced actions in subsequent campaigns. The British Army, for instance, has developed its own internal intellectual and doctrinal culture to capture its varying experience in modern warfare, typically undertaking such introspection that has been occasioned by a traumatic military crisis and the subsequent cathartic experience which follows.<sup>38</sup> Each generation has faced new adversaries and dutifully marshalled all available economic, political, diplomatic and military resources towards mitigating the threat to our national interests. It has been argued that the Army itself leans heavily on the 'lessons identified' from its past involvement in various theatres of war;<sup>39</sup> however, the Army has often had to learn lessons 'on the fly' to offset humiliating defeat in the face of a much weaker enemy.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the culture of learning the lessons of the 'last war' has consistently influenced Britain's military doctrine, especially since the end of the Second World War. An early example can be found in the memoirs of one of the most famous British commanders, Field-Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery. One of the first housekeeping matters Montgomery undertook when he replaced Field-Marshal Sir Alan Brooke as Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) in 1946 was to

ensure that the soldiers under his command studied the ‘conception of modern war’. He argued that ‘a clear doctrine [had] to be evolved from the lessons from the past and to be taught throughout the Army’.<sup>41</sup> However, *Defending the Realm?* argues that it is the often-skewed snapshots of what have been unique circumstances and the misapplication of lessons in another totally different set of circumstances that has increased the likelihood of strategic failure for the British Army.<sup>42</sup>

The process of subjecting one’s strategy to scrutiny underpins the drive by senior defence practitioners in the UK to encourage innovative thinking within the military. Some senior defence professionals have openly admitted that ‘Revolutions and active debate both entail friction, and it is not in our organisational culture to welcome friction. But without friction, as basic physics tells us, there is no traction.’<sup>43</sup> The debate over Britain’s need to encourage and nurture ‘a community of strategically literate officials in Whitehall’<sup>44</sup> is ongoing, however, and this book is a contribution to our historical understanding of this process since the end of the Second World War.

For the historian fascinated by the ebb and flow of civil–military relations one does not have to see how the ‘hidden wiring’ of politics has infected all aspects of war, its termination and the peace that follows. As Barnett notes, ‘The incidental unpleasantness of imperial retreat, like the pains of expansion earlier, fell not on the British at home, but on the army’.<sup>45</sup> The historical record is besmirched with examples of politicians who are prone to forget their impulsive reliance on the military to secure strategic goals, particularly at times when frugality – rather than strategy – has dictated the direction a small war has taken. How far unity of effort has existed in terms of civil–military relations in these small wars is perhaps a moot point. Arguably, as Frank Hoffman suggests, the contribution of civil–military relations to strategic effectiveness remains an ‘underdeveloped area for military historians’.<sup>46</sup>

Traditionally, the distribution of power in Britain, as in so many other liberal democratic states, is hierarchical and the military instrument has been, therefore, always subordinated to the policy direction of a civilian government.<sup>47</sup> In Samuel P. Huntington’s enduring words, ‘[t]he military profession exists to serve the state’.<sup>48</sup> As the question mark in the book’s title intimates, the author remains sceptical about the health of civil–military relations when too rigid a model like that suggested by either Strachan, Huntington or Hackett has been followed. The conclusions reached in *Defending the Realm?* point towards a worrying trend: that politicians and military commanders have sometimes worked towards divergent ends in securing Britain’s national interests. When this has happened, the inharmonious working relationship between



civilians and the military has had an injurious effect on the utility of the military instrument. Admittedly, the jury is still out on whether recent operations in Afghanistan point to a new departure in the conduct of Britain's small wars. However, a report published in July 2011 criticized the way in which politicians placed constraints on the initial deployment to Helmand.<sup>49</sup>

### **Britain's changing strategic priorities**

Britain's political aims in its small wars have been largely dictated by its wider strategic priorities. At the close of the Second World War the Soviet Union had been transformed from a partner in the fight against Fascism, to a competitor, and finally to a sworn enemy in the eyes of British defence planners. Meanwhile, the United States (US) was wary of the growing threat posed by Communism and sought to check its advance by sponsoring a Marshall Aid programme for those European countries that had suffered devastation during the war and which were seeking to reconstruct their societies.<sup>50</sup> The Truman Doctrine saw Washington provide aid to Greece and Turkey in 1947 in order to prevent these Mediterranean countries from slipping into the Soviet orbit. It was named after President Harry S. Truman, who continued to request further financial assistance from Congress, in the main because '[t]he overriding priority was to keep the power centers of Europe and Asia outside the Soviet orbit and linked to the United States'.<sup>51</sup> This continued to be the case well into the 1950s; the Soviet Ambassador to the US, Nikolai Novikov, dutifully reported back to Moscow that the aim of the Truman Doctrine, 'according to its advocates is to check "communist expansion"'.<sup>52</sup>

Against the backdrop of the US's rising power, Britain was anxious to construct her own grand strategy in order to shield her ever more malleable power from future Soviet aggression, though this had not been given much thought during the war, something greatly 'compounded by Churchill's lack of serious consideration of postwar planning'.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the Second World War had exhausted the British war chest, bleeding it to the point of bankruptcy. It had no other choice than to apply for a loan from its American allies.<sup>54</sup> There were other structural handicaps too, Barnett reminds us, as 'a dream turned to dank reality of a segregated, subliterature, unskilled, unhealthy and institutionalised proletariat hanging on the nipple of state maternalism'.<sup>55</sup> Just as Britain was adjusting to the gloom, which would characterize much of the post-war period, the Soviet Union began to make inroads into its sphere of influence, particularly in the Middle East.

Taking note of a dalliance in British strategic interests, the Soviets moved quickly to capitalize on Britain's waning influence in the Middle East. One British diplomat, Christopher Warner, 'who had been optimistic about the post-war world, now concluded that the UK had been chosen by the Soviets for a political and diplomatic onslaught'.<sup>56</sup> A Top Secret assessment prepared by the Security Service, MI5, acknowledged how, eight months before the end of the war:

This increased diplomatic activity is only the outward sign of Soviet interest in Middle East affairs. Secret diplomacy, commercial dealings, and espionage, in which every Power, great or small, engages – and which are not necessarily evidence of hostile intentions or moral obliquity – all play their part in the Soviet penetration of the Middle East.<sup>57</sup>

Britain nonetheless continued to maintain a tenuous foothold in the Middle East beyond 1945, despite Clement Attlee's Labour government remaining fixated on presiding over imperial decline and withdrawal from the region.<sup>58</sup>

Senior military officers 'on the spot', such as the Chief of Staff of Middle East Land Forces Major-General Harold 'Pete' Pyman, became increasingly alarmed by the challenge posed by the Soviet Union. '[T]he plain fact today', Pyman told an audience at the Army's Staff College in Camberley, 'is that unless the BRITISH COMMONWEALTH and the UNITED STATES hold the balance . . . RUSSIAN domination will prevail in the MIDDLE EAST'.<sup>59</sup> This view was shared by the CIGS in London, Field-Marshal Montgomery, who had been briefed on the intensity of Soviet penetration of the region by the Foreign Office prior to a visit to Moscow in October 1946. The Middle East was close to Montgomery's heart, given his wartime successes there, and as CIGS he actively sought to check the Communist advance in the region. However, the Army hierarchy remained hamstrung by Attlee, who, in his ideological pensiveness, lost no time in reminding his Chiefs of Staff that he had 'serous misgivings about their Middle Eastern strategy, which he thought far too costly and unnecessarily provocative towards the Soviet Union'.<sup>60</sup>

Responsibility for Labour's foreign policy outlook rested squarely on the shoulders of Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, who was further constrained, in what Attlee called 'the heaviest burden', by the realities of foreign and economic affairs being closely intertwined. Attlee recognized that even a region as important to British interests as the Middle East 'presented us with a very difficult problem . . . Britain had a long connection with this region, and vital strategic interests to sustain, interests which also concerned the Commonwealth'. Somewhat evasive in

his memoirs about the purpose of government policy in the Middle East, Attlee later complained only that it was Britain's 'thankless task to try to reconcile many competing interests'.<sup>61</sup>

Having beaten Attlee at the 1951 Westminster general election, Churchill and his team could only lament what Labour had given away when they were returned to office.<sup>62</sup> By now decolonization was in full swing, resulting in the US 'taking over what remained of the old imperial hegemony of the former colonial powers. In return, it did not intervene in the zone of accepted Soviet hegemony'.<sup>63</sup> It soon became apparent that East and West were going to great lengths to keep the Cold War from going hot. As the risk of nuclear fallout increased, particularly after the Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons in 1949, 'both superpowers plainly abandoned war as an instrument of policy against one another', opined Eric Hobsbawm, 'since it was the equivalent of a suicide pact'.<sup>64</sup> While one can certainly see the attractiveness of downplaying the risk of nuclear holocaust from a position of hindsight, the prospect did loom large in the minds of many public intellectuals, politicians and military commanders at the time. Some social scientists, like sociologist C. Wright Mills, were even prone to arraign the hopelessness of it all:

War is no longer 'a continuation of politics by other means'. No political aims can be achieved by means of it. No truly 'national interests' of any nation can be served by it. No agenda that reasonable men can 'believe in' makes the preparation for war sensible or promises to achieve peace in the world.<sup>65</sup>

Doom-clad warnings were also reflected in the popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s, as spy novels flooded the market and Hollywood 'B movies' encapsulated the fear instilled in many people in the West that invasion and mutually assured destruction was just around the corner. For their part, the US and Soviet governments abandoned total war in favour of war by proxy. In places as diverse as Korea and Vietnam the superpowers sought to entice subversion, espionage and the financial recompense of friendly belligerents in order to weaken broader enemies.

Meanwhile, Britain had been advocating a position of coercive diplomacy since 1952. It was that year when Queen Elizabeth II ascended the throne, the Korean War had been raging for almost two years, and Britain tested its first atomic bomb. The acquisition of nuclear weapons signalled the turn towards a radical downsizing of the armed forces, while relying heavily on new and emerging technologies, later crystallizing in Duncan Sandys' 1957 Defence White Paper. It was thought

that long-range weapons with devastating firepower could substitute bases and overseas territories. Yet it could not disguise the reality of Britain's strategic impoverishment. In Barnett's caustic words, Britain was in denial:

All this in pursuit of a Middle East strategy that only made sense if the British were still a great power in the Indian Ocean. In the 1950s and 1960s British world strategy still followed the basic patterns of the nineteenth century: a chicken that had lost its head – India – but still ran round in circles.<sup>66</sup>

To make matters worse, the conflagration of nationalist insurrection was now gripping Britain's colonies, in large part actively fomented by the USSR, which presented its own direct ideological threat to British values. However, the much broader confrontation between the diametrically opposed blocs of East and West meant, as Professor Michael Howard observed, was 'between two sides with incompatible visions of world order, each believing that peace could be established only by the elimination of the other'.<sup>67</sup> Adhering to the rationality of the bipolar system often conferred upon them by strategic thinkers, the nuclear-armed states 'neither erupted into overt war nor ended with unilateral disarmament, but . . . softened with time', argued Howard, thus facilitating, first, Cold War détente after the death of Brezhnev and, second, its long drawn-out move towards termination.<sup>68</sup> In the meantime, Britain chose to align herself with the US policy of anti-Communism – though not, for obvious reasons, its anti-colonialist trappings – with varying degrees of success. Here Britain sowed the seeds of the ensuing strategic eclipse that would relegate her to the role of older, wiser Greek *consigliere* to the young, impetuous Roman emperor America.

There was tension too between politicians, civil servants and military commanders, particularly in terms of colonial security. Before taking over as CIGS from Field-Marshal Sir John Harding, General Sir Gerald Templer was awarded a sabbatical by the then Minister of Defence Harold Macmillan to write a report on colonial security. Templer had been lauded for his extraordinary skill in bringing the Communist insurgency in Malaya to heel, and his confirmation as the new head of the Army marked a hiatus in colonial security for Britain. Templer summed up perfectly the problem facing British imperialism in its latent phase, when he observed how 'One is reminded, firmly and correctly, that the Governors exist to govern, that the Colonial Office does not run Colonial territories, and that their job is to advise; if necessary, to exhort; but rarely, if ever, to command'.<sup>69</sup> Imperial hubris, seemingly, had not yet taken hold.

The Colonial Office maintained more than a healthy scepticism of Templer's fixation with reorganizing security and intelligence machinery in Whitehall at a time when Britain faced a double-fronted assault:

The J.I.C. has in recent years concentrated its effort on (a) the 'hot war' threat from the Sino-Soviet bloc and (b) the so-called 'cold-war' threat. (a) is no doubt essential: but (b) has been pursued and interpreted in such a way as to make the J.I.C. completely myopic, and almost to ignore the essential field of (c) political developments unconnected or only indirectly connected with the 'cold war', but vitally affecting H.M.G.'s position in the world.<sup>70</sup>

A collective sigh rang out as they sensed an emerging tendency amongst the military hierarchy to see the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) 'as an instrument primarily of the Chiefs of Staff instead of the Ministers responsible for its Charter'.<sup>71</sup> In an ever-changing world, the Colonial Office nevertheless remained at the epicentre of political developments, as it struggled to manage the choppy transition from Empire to Commonwealth. As Labour, no more than the Conservatives, came to realize, calls for colonial independence had to be balanced against the malign intentions of world Communism.

For former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Britain was experiencing something akin to strategic flux. In perhaps one of his most famous remarks on Britain's imperial decline, he argued:

Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role. The attempt to play a separate power role – that is, a role apart from Europe, a role based on a 'special relationship' with the United States, a role based on being the head of a 'commonwealth' which has no political structure, or unity, or strength, and enjoys a fragile and precarious economic relationship by means of the Sterling area and preferences in the British market – this role is about played out. Great Britain, attempting to work alone and to be a broker between the United States and Russia, has seemed to conduct policy as weak as its military power.<sup>72</sup>

While there is some dispute over the extent to which Acheson's remarks actually reflected US policy at that time, he was at least being consistent with his earlier complaint that 'Britain, which once had the training and capability to manage a world system, no longer has the capability'.<sup>73</sup> Responding much later to Acheson's remarks, historian Niall Ferguson pointed out that '[p]erhaps the reality is that the Americans have taken our old role without yet facing the fact that an empire comes with it'.<sup>74</sup> Political heavyweight Denis Healey may have been closer to the mark when he said that Acheson 'misled a generation'.<sup>75</sup> Whatever American motivations, the eclipse of British power had begun. That

Britain was losing the ability to project its power unilaterally in the world gave sustenance to its irregular adversaries as they sought to challenge its authority. Interestingly, as Anne Deighton points out, ‘The quest to sustain the image and the reality of great powerdom through leadership, influence, and “punching above our weight” was part of the mentalité of British planners, the military, and the politicians’.<sup>76</sup> The illusion of great power status continued to colour the strategic outlook of British elites, particularly when faced with a mosaic of armed challenges in its colonial territories.

Britain’s imperial retreat was in full swing by the 1960s. However, the independence granted to Cyprus after a four-year insurgency did not mark a clean break with British intervention. In 1964 Britain deployed a peacekeeping force, which was to become one of the longest-running UN commitments since the formation of the organization in 1945. Meanwhile, the rumblings of an anti-colonial movement in Aden would soon place Britain’s Middle Eastern hub in danger. Sensing a groundswell of nationalist opposition, which was armed by weapons from the Soviet-backed Yemeni government, and facing an economic squeeze at home, Britain began withdrawing from its last foothold in the Arabian Gulf. By 1968, Britain had given up its east of Suez role amidst a deteriorating security situation. Denis Healey spoke for several of his Labour ministerial colleagues when he told MPs:

We were very conscious that in some cases our imperial history might make the presence of our forces an irritant rather than a stabilising factor, particularly in the Middle East, where the events of 1956 still cast a long shadow.<sup>77</sup>

Healey’s determination to limit defence spending to make it more affordable was based on the notion that Britain should play a leading role in Europe, rather than continue with its limited role east of Suez. Indeed, Labour’s decision to curtail Britain’s power and influence in the world would have long-term strategic repercussions. During the next decade and a half, argued Michael Dockrill, ‘she continue[d] to be faced with the problem of reconciling her means to her less extensive but still onerous ends’.<sup>78</sup>

As it transpired, the ‘economic dividend’ expected by Labour ministers, like Healey, did not fully materialize. Indeed, the complete disregard for rumblings closer to home placed Harold Wilson’s government on the back foot. Its claims to know nothing about the ethno-national conflict underpinning Northern Ireland society, prior to the flare up of the ‘troubles’ in the late 1960s, rang hollow.<sup>79</sup> While politicians publicly expressed surprise at the violence between Protestant unionists and

Catholic nationalists, defence planners claimed to have seen it all before and that they must, therefore, relate '[a]ttitudes and actions . . . to previous experience'.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, the tendency was to view the domestic schism between British citizens through a colonial prism, 'which the Northern Ireland position was rapidly in danger of becoming',<sup>81</sup> would have profound effects on the Army's intervention in the province. In any event, cabinet ministers had to 'walk a tightrope', Barbara Castle confided in her diary, as 'nobody wanted to take over political control, with all the trouble that implies – indefinite embroilment in Northern Ireland'.<sup>82</sup> Strategically, as Labour's 1975 defence review made clear, the main business lay in opposing the Soviets, not in providing a limited number of troops to a gendarmerie role in Northern Ireland. For Defence Secretary Roy Mason, the review was necessary in order to 'tailor our defence commitments and capabilities to our economic and political position as a middle-rank European Power'. There was no question that this could only be done 'by realistic planning for defence in the longer term so that political and economic realities always march in step'.<sup>83</sup>

Though defence policy played less of a role in the 1979 election, the Conservatives were officially committed to improving the capabilities of the armed forces.<sup>84</sup> As Francis Pym told MPs in February 1980:

Our present intention is not to increase at as great a rate as the Soviet Union, but to ensure that we have an adequate capability to deter aggression and to preserve peace.<sup>85</sup>

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had been concerned by the build-up of Warsaw Pact forces and sought to persuade the other members to increase their defence spending. Pym continued:

We want to increase our defence capability throughout the Alliance, and make our contribution. The increased imbalance is of great concern. At the same time, we would be wise to remember that we cannot go faster than the strength of our economy, and that is why we cannot increase our strength as quickly as some of us would like.<sup>86</sup>

Defence assumptions changed again in the early 1980s as NATO set about rebalancing its nuclear capabilities. For its part, the Tories decided to press ahead with the replacement of the Polaris force with the new Trident C-4 system. Talk of the eventual rundown of regular units in Northern Ireland would allow cuts to the size and shape of the armed forces. John Nott, Secretary of State for Defence under Margaret Thatcher, informed the House of Commons that Britain's strategic outlook would maintain a balance between its maritime and central force capabilities. 'The stark choice between the two', he informed David Owen,

would be ‘frankly unrealistic’.<sup>87</sup> In any event, Nott’s proposals to reduce the Navy and Royal Marines would soon suffer a strategic shock, however, when Argentinean forces invaded the Falkland Islands on 2 April 1982. For the remainder of the 1980s the armed forces remained chronically under-funded and increasingly busy, confirming that, indeed, ‘the history of British defence policy’, as Lawrence Freedman once suggested, ‘is an attempt to reconcile the mismatch between resources and commitments’.<sup>88</sup>

As the Berlin Wall crumbled in 1989, ministers at the MoD were telling their generals that there would never be another armed conflict in which conventional means would be needed on any sufficient scale.<sup>89</sup> Within weeks the Commander of the UK’s 1st Armoured Division, General Sir Rupert Smith, had been sent to the Gulf to take part in military operations to liberate Kuwait. Britain’s contribution to peace-support missions continued for the remainder of the decade, with contingent forces sent to Bosnia and Kosovo. Meanwhile, the security agenda widened, to include threats and risks beyond the ideological and geographically specific conflict between West and East.

Returned to power in May 1997 the New Labour government immediately commissioned a Strategic Defence Review (SDR), which one of its main architects, George Robertson, said would ‘put the foreign policy priorities of this country first and then give a sense of clarity and direction to our forces as to how their roles can be properly and economically carried out for the future of our country’.<sup>90</sup> The SDR reaffirmed Britain’s commitments to existing strategic priorities, suggesting that it had dealt with ‘tomorrow’s threats, not yesterday’s enemies’. Robertson informed Parliament that:

NATO remains the basis for defence and security, but, while the threat of major war in Europe is now a remote prospect, new threats confront us: terrorism; the international drugs trade; the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons; information warfare; ethnic rivalries; population pressures; and the break-up of existing states.<sup>91</sup>

Though New Labour was later attacked for not forecasting the real threat posed by transnational terrorism, there was at least an acknowledgement that the end of the Cold War had altered the strategic context significantly. Nonetheless, it was the attacks in the US by Al Qaeda on 11 September 2001 that heralded a more profound transformation in the strategic context. The return of irregular opponents to the centrifuge of the British strategic calculus had begun.

New Labour’s defence policy between 1997 and 2010 was characterized by its liberal interventionist outlook. For Tony Blair and Gordon



Brown, Britain's armed forces were 'a force for good in the world' and ought to be deployed only as an option of last resort. Contrary to this proviso, however, the armed forces were used as the first port of call, especially since, in Lawrence Freedman's words, the British 'attitude to the use of armed force was more confident and assertive, as exemplified by Sierra Leone'.<sup>92</sup> New Labour relied heavily on bayonet-cushioned diplomacy to impose its liberal interventionist policies. The shifting international context since the end of the Cold War had been noted in the SDR, which, above all, maintained that in order to protect Britain's national interests one needed to go to the problem in order to tackle it at its root cause. As such, defence-planning assumptions reflected the preference for expeditionary warfare, with the SDR stating that in terms of 'scales of effort' Britain could either 'respond to a major international crisis which might require a military effort and combat operations of a similar scale and duration to the Gulf War' or 'undertake a more extended overseas deployment on a lesser scale (as over the last few years in Bosnia) while retaining the ability to mount a second substantial deployment'. Although, crucially, it admitted that 'We would not, however, expect both deployments to involve warfighting or to maintain them simultaneously for longer than six months'.<sup>93</sup> There are multiple problems with such planning assumptions, not least that they assumed, wrongly, that short-term, one-off interventions would become something of a norm in the post-Cold War global security environment. Sadly, this was to prove overly optimistic, as the British soon found in the new battlegrounds in Afghanistan and Iraq.

### **Success or failure in Britain's small wars?**

Acclaimed military historian Sir John Keegan once observed, about British forces: '[in] none of the dozens of small wars they have fought since 1945 have they been defeated'.<sup>94</sup> While this is broadly correct, Keegan overlooked the fact that Britain's armed forces have not always emerged victorious from these small wars either. Andrew Mack makes the point well:

In every case, success for the insurgents arose not from a military victory on the ground – though military successes may have been a contributory cause – but rather from the progressive attrition of their opponents' political capability to wage war. In such asymmetric conflicts, insurgents may gain political victory from a situation of military stalemate or even defeat.<sup>95</sup>

Indeed, in only one of the case studies examined in *Defending the Realm?* – Malaya – can Britain claim a decisive win over its irregular opponent.

Rather, one can find much evidence to account for Britain's lack of 'political capability to wage war'. Nevertheless, the reversal of fortunes in Palestine, Aden and Iraq, for instance, cannot be solely attributable to the 'wobbliness' of politicians and civilian representatives. In some respects this would be to expunge the inertia displayed at times by Britain's military commanders, who failed to grasp Clausewitz's basic dictum that war is an instrument of policy:

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. That is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.<sup>96</sup>

Looking at the often inharmonious civil–military relations across all of the case studies considered in this book, one can see how Britain has related ways and means to achieve its ends in a strategic conundrum which it faces every time force is countenanced. This was encapsulated most aptly by Field-Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, who recommended that the 'defence potential of the country can be continually kept under review and examined so as to ensure that the resources available are employed to the best advantage'. In perhaps the most revealing reflections on Britain's strategic outlook, he made clear that 'our foreign policy bears a direct relation to the strength available to support it'.<sup>97</sup> The significance of Brooke's words have lost none of their conceptual insight since they were first uttered.

## Notes

- 1 Gwynn, Charles, *Imperial Policing* (London: Macmillan, 1934), pp. 13–14.
- 2 Morgenthau, Hans. J., 'To Intervene or Not to Intervene', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 45, Nos. 1–4 (October 1966–July 1967), p. 430.
- 3 Ministry of Defence (MoD), *Land Operations: Volume I – The Fundamentals, Part 2 – Command and Control*, Army Code No. 70458, Part 2 (London: MoD, 28 April 1969), p. 5.
- 4 This is certainly a theme explored in David Kilcullen's book *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars amidst a Big One* (London: Hurst, 2009), pp. 31–32, 284, 292.
- 5 Callwell, Colonel Charles Edward, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, third edition (London: HMSO, 1906), p. 21.
- 6 It is also in keeping with M.L.R. Smith's argument that 'call it what you will – new war, ethnic war, guerrilla war, low-intensity war, terrorism, or the war on terrorism – in the end, there is only one meaningful category of war, and that is war itself'. See Smith, M.L.R., 'Strategy in an Age of