



‘A Grand Strategic Error’: the British military elite’s role in the invasion of Iraq

Paul Dixon¹

Accepted: 2 December 2023 / Published online: 30 January 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract

President George W. Bush required only symbolic British participation in the invasion of Iraq, so why did the Labour government deploy their maximum military effort when this was unnecessary and considerably increased the political risk to Prime Minister Tony Blair? *The Chilcot Report* (2016) provides considerable evidence of the military elite’s role, in pursuit of their perceived organisational interests, not only lobbying but also manipulating the Labour government into a maximum military role. Shortly after the invasion, the military elite began to pursue their next war, again pressuring and manipulating the government into Britain’s deployment to Helmand, Afghanistan, in 2006. While fighting wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the military elite were overstretched and in crisis, yet they successfully empowered themselves by deflecting responsibility onto the Labour government. Consequently, it is argued that the lack of democratic control over the military makes Britain particularly disposed to belligerence and fighting further unnecessary wars.

Keywords Iraq war · United Kingdom · Transnationalism · Civil–military relations · Iraq Inquiry · Chilcot Report

Introduction

Prime Minister Tony Blair’s assurance to US President George Bush on 28 July 2002 that ‘I will be with you, whatever’ reinforced both the perception and substantial evidence that US President George W. Bush and the Labour Prime Minister had decided to invade Iraq, then played out a charade of seeking a peaceful resolution through the United Nations to maximise international support and limit domestic opposition to the war.

✉ Paul Dixon
pd220@leicester.ac.uk

¹ School of History, Politics and International Relations, University of Leicester, Leicester LE1 7RH, UK



The Iraq War was neither just 'Blair's War' (Kampfner 2003; Coates and Krieger 2004) nor the 'nation's war' (Porter 2018) because Britain was *divided*. The media focussed on the Prime Minister's deception but this distracted attention from the broader responsibility of the Militarist Coalition which pressured and manipulated the country into what the head of the military later acknowledged was a 'grand strategic error' (Richards 2014, p. 186). This Militarist Coalition included the Conservative Opposition, most of the media, the security services, civil servants, and sections of the intelligentsia. *The Chilcot Report* provided evidence that the military elite had played a major role in maximising Britain's military contribution to the war, not only by pressurising but also manipulating the government, partly by bringing apparent US pressure to bear (Chilcot 2016a, para 811; all references to Chilcot are to paragraphs). Such a high level of military British involvement in the invasion was *not* necessary to preserve the 'Special Relationship' with the United States. But the British contribution became the 'lynchpin' of the invasion force making it much more difficult for Britain to pull out of the war without damaging the UK–US relationship. President Bush appreciated that Blair was under considerable domestic pressure and would have been content with a limited and symbolic British military role.

When invasion turned into occupation and violence escalated, in October 2003, the military elite began to seek a leading role in NATO's deployment into southern Afghanistan (2006). In pursuit of their organisational interests, the military elite reassured politicians that they could simultaneously fight the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and the politicians accepted their expert strategic advice. By 2006, however, the military were overstretched and in crisis, but the military elite successfully empowered themselves by deflecting responsibility for the crisis onto Prime Minister Blair and the Labour government. The findings of *The Chilcot Report* on the role of the military elite have largely been 'forgotten', resulting in a lack of awareness of their role in driving Britain to war and their possible role in manipulating the nation into future wars. Consequently there has been little reform to bring the military under greater democratic control. Both the US and British militaries were empowered by fighting the post-9/11 wars and there have been similar problems in the UK and the US in exerting democratic control over the military. As Risa Brooks, Jim Golbey and Heidi Urben point out in the US, 'Too often, unelected military leaders limit or engineer civilians' options so that generals can run wars as they see fit. ... Even if elected officials still get the final say, they may have little practical control if generals dictate all the options or slow their implementation – as they often do now' (Brooks et al 2021).

This article first provides some context on the power of the military within the British state. Second, evidence is produced suggesting the military elite's enthusiasm for maximum military involvement in the invasion of Iraq from early 2002. Third, it is argued that the military elite's proposal in July 2002 for a more limited and benign role by invading from Turkey was 'never likely'. The Labour government was 'baited' by the military elite with the apparently easier northern option and, just two months before the invasion this was 'switched' to a much more extensive and dangerous role in the south. The fourth part discusses the switch to the South and the further ratcheting up of Britain's role in the war. Fifth, the implications of



Britain's late switch to the south for overstretch and equipment shortages are considered. The final section describes the military elite's attempt to shift blame for the failures of the Iraq war onto the Prime Minister and suggests that the Chilcot Report's findings have been ignored or 'forgotten'. Consequently, there is a lack of understanding of the role of the military elite as part of a pro-war coalition which drives Britain to war and the need for governments in Britain and the US to assert democratic control of the military.

British political–military relations 'Behind the Scenes'

British and US political (or civil) military relations have often been seen as models of the subordination of the military to democratic control for new democracies (Strachan 1997, p. 9; Forster 2006, pp. 19, 23, 39). Samuel Huntington's influential *The Soldier and the State* (1957) argued that in a system of 'objective control' politicians gave substantial autonomy to the military professional on tactics and operations in return for subordination to political control. Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, military historian and member of 'The Chilcot Inquiry', argues, perhaps inconsistently, for both the separation of decision-making between the military and the politicians, and for constant engagement. In a democratic society 'there must be a clear separation between the decision-making role of the government and the more advisory role of the generals and admirals when it comes to setting the objectives for the use of armed force. In practice, this advisory role is one of substantial influence, and is often exercised energetically. ... The purposes set by the government should infuse all operational decisions' (Freedman 2022, pp. 8–9). 'Energetic' seems to be a euphemism for 'aggressive' and Freedman has also pointed out, 'it is very difficult for them [politicians] to ignore military advice' and this advice is likely to be biased in the military's interest (Freedman 2017, pp. 12, 18; Freedman 2022, p. 509; Richards 2014, pp. 181, 186). But he concludes, more equivocally, that politicians and the military cannot stick to their own spheres of influence and 'must constantly engage with each other'. Politicians must 'earn' their authority over the military (Freedman 2022, p. 515, my emphasis).

Professor Sir Hew Strachan has argued that, historically, the military have not only been deeply involved in politics, but they should be involved in politics. There is rather 'too much evidence, not too little' of the Army's role in politics behind the scenes. Strachan argued that Britain is a militarist country where the military had colonised the civilians and there was little parliamentary control. Yet, it was 'the strength of the governmental framework' that had prevented military overthrow of the government. Politicians did not understand strategy because it is a military specialism, and the military elite did not have sufficient influence over Western policy to supply an effective strategy that could have won the Iraq and Afghan wars. A more 'politicised' military is necessary that is more willing to exert its 'professional' power over governments. By 2013, Strachan was arguing that the military could circumvent democratic control by acquiring legitimacy from their association and integration with society at large (Strachan 1997, pp. 8–9, 264–267, 19; Strachan 2013, pp. 12, 25; *The Times* 17 March 2010; Strachan and Harris 2020).



Both Freedman and Strachan are complacent about the power of the military elite and also ignore the considerable evidence of the Army's affinity with the political Right. For example, between 1918 and 2019, out of a total of 352 MPs elected whose main former occupation had been the armed forces, 331 (or 94%) became Conservative MPs. Just 17 were elected for the Labour party and 4 for the Liberals (Audickas 2020). Furthermore, there were post-war tensions between the military and, in particular, Labour governments. In the 1940s, the Chiefs of Staff were threatening to resign over conscription. Labour's long-serving Defence Secretary Denis Healey (1964–1970) 'sometimes felt that I had learned nothing about politics until I met the Chiefs of Staff'. He also complained about 'mutinous mutterings' from army officers who opposed military action against Rhodesia in the sixties (Healey 1990, pp. 263, 332). In Northern Ireland there was severe tension between the politicians' more conciliatory political approach and the Army's hardline attitude to security (Dixon 2024).

During the Falklands/Malvinas War (1982), the military were influential on government policy. Admiral Sir Henry Leach, the First Sea Lord, played an important role in persuading Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to send a Task Force to the Falklands, against much expert military advice (Moore 2013, pp. 666–667). Senior military officers had contempt for politicians and seemed eager to fight the war, knowing that escalating violence could make diplomacy and a negotiated agreement more difficult (Boyce 2005, pp. 94; 42; Freedman 2022, p. 218). Admiral Sandy Woodward, who commanded the Task Force, 'had no doubt in his mind that he must seize the initiative, if necessary from the British War Cabinet itself' (Boyce 2005, pp. 105, 111). Only two weeks after the Task Force had been dispatched, the War Cabinet was stunned by 'a very full account, by the top brass, of the likely course of the war' and its risks. Yet, Thatcher was astute enough to make sure that she had 'nailed down' the positions of all the Chiefs of Staff and ministers so they could not argue they were bullied by the politicians into the war (Moore 2013, pp. 699, 728–729).

Prime Minister Blair experienced the resistance of the Army to democratic control. During the Northern Ireland peace process, the government wanted both the Army and the IRA to engage in 'demilitarisation' to consolidate the peace process and allow negotiations to advance. In February 2000, *The Times* quoted one Army source in Northern Ireland as saying that a proposed 'national day of reconciliation' would lead the Army to resign en-masse. *The Telegraph* reported that the head of the military, General Sir Charles Guthrie, threatened to resign if the government pursued demilitarisation (*Daily Telegraph* 26 February 2000). The government then ruled out any step that suggested an equivalence between the weapons of the security forces and terrorists. The Chief of the General Staff, General Wheeler, told Blair, '... we could not remove the towers in South Armagh while the dissident threat remained'. This caused Jonathan Powell, Blair's Chief of Staff, to 'see the Army in a new light. I did not like their attitude. They were playing a political game, fulfilling the caricature of the securocrats favoured by McGuinness [a Sinn Fein/IRA leader]. In the end, in a democracy, the Army have to do what the politicians decide' (Powell 2010, pp. 175, 177). About a week after this meeting the General Officer Commanding in Northern Ireland threatened to resign if the government insisted on



taking down the watchtowers (*The Times* 22 February 2000; *The Times* 23 February 2000; *The Guardian* 12 December 2000; *The Observer* 3 December 2000). Such threats potentially gave the Army a veto over the peace process.

David Blunkett, Labour's then Home Secretary, recorded the military's resistance to the Prime Minister's instructions on Afghanistan in October 2001. 'Blair gave the Chief of General Staff, Michael Walker, an instruction, but this was "falling on deaf ears"' (Blunkett 2006, pp. 310–311). There were rumours that the Chief of Defence Staff, Admiral Boyce, opposed the ISAF mission and had threatened to resign. He complained about military overstretch, and its domestic firefighting commitments as well as preparations for war. *The Times* claimed that this was 'as close to a mutiny as you will get in the British military establishment' (*The Times* 21 November 2002; *The Times* 30 October 2001; Rawnsley 2000, p. 376; Seldon 2004, p. 600; Bower 2016, pp. 188, 408).

The British military's 'War of Choice'

Numerous techniques were deployed by the British military elite to manipulate the Labour government into maximum military involvement in both the invasion of Iraq and later the escalation of Britain's involvement in Afghanistan. Labour politicians appeared to both defer to and fear the military elite, partly because of the power of the Militarist Coalition, including media support (Chilcot 2016b, para. 793). At least seven techniques can be identified by which the military manipulated the government: first they talked up Britain's role in the invasion to the Americans, making it difficult for the Prime Minister to back out without damaging UK/US relations. Second, the military and MOD's presentation of options to the government failed to offer a spectrum of choices. Third, the military elite used their relationship with the US military to reach President Bush and put pressure directly on the Prime Minister. Fourth, the US military's view was 'ventriloquised' by the British military elite. That is, the British military elite were wrongly claiming that its own views were being expressed by the US military and government because this gave those views greater weight with the Labour government. Fifth, the military elite and MOD created artificial 'deadlines' and a false sense of 'urgency' to put pressure on the government to make decisions to ratchet up Britain's commitment to the war. Such deadlines were highly questionable but had to be taken in a context, where No. 10 may well have been overwhelmed and focussed on legitimising the invasion. Sixth, the ratcheting up of Britain's commitment could be sold to the politicians as 'force on mind' in which the appearance of military build-up, rather than war, would lead Iraq to capitulate (e.g. Chilcot 2016b, paras. 727). Seventh, there is a possibility that the Labour government was 'baited', in July 2002, by the British military elite with a potentially more benign British role by invading northern Iraq from Turkey when this was a highly unlikely scenario. Then, at the last minute, in January 2003, the British were 'switched' to a much more substantial and dangerous role in the south. By this point, the British were already the 'lynchpin' of the invasion of southern Iraq with severe consequences for UK/US relations if the Prime Minister pulled out.



In the run up to the invasion of Iraq, the British military elite used their close relationship with the US military to manipulate the Labour government. There is evidence of the importance of these mil–mil relationships in other contexts. Charles Moore recounts that during the Falklands/Malvinas War, ‘The military-to-military relationship between the two countries [US and UK] was so close that, from the beginning of the conflict, US officials would grant many British requests without seeking permission from their superiors. Those closer to the top of the chain of command, on both sides, often failed to realize just how much help the US was providing’ (Moore 2013, p. 694). The US, British, Canadian, and Dutch militaries and defence officials later cooperated to choreograph their governments’ deployment to southern Afghanistan in 2006 in a way that made the deployment difficult for their governments to resist (Dixon 2025). In 2009, the British military elite used its leverage in the US to put pressure on the Labour government to send more troops to Afghanistan. This led to the complete breakdown of relations between Brown and the military chiefs. The British military also used their relationship with the US military to put pressure on the Conservative/Liberal government over Libya in 2011 and to increase British military spending (Moore 2013, pp. 693–694; Farrell 2017, pp. 269–270; Richards 2014, p. 338; Seldon and Snowdon 2015). Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the former British ambassador to Afghanistan, told the Foreign Affairs Committee, on 9 November 2010, that the military were advancing their own agendas without proper political supervision,

‘There have been cases, I’m sorry to say, of different branches of the British armed forces telling the Americans different things without ministerial authority, because they wanted different things for their own agenda. This needs clear ministerial direction and a clarification of what Ministers want. Some of these mil-mil conversations end up with things being pre-cooked between the US and the UK militaries before they are subject to political approval back in London, and/or you get different parts of the military lobbying for their own hobby-horses without clear political approval’ (Cowper-Coles, Evidence FAC, 9 November 2011: Q. 104).

From an early stage, the British military elite talked up Britain’s role in the invasion. As early as March 2002, ‘the senior British military representative at CENTCOM had already quietly let it be known to [General Tommy] Franks’s command that if the United States planned to lead an invasion against Saddam, Britain would consider contributing a division [about 20,000 personnel] for the effort’. The British ambassador to the US, Sir Christopher Meyer, recalled ‘... being told by a member of the administration quite early in 2002 that we were apparently planning to send more or less what we did send’ (Trainor and Gordon 2006, p. 46; Christopher Meyer, *Iraq Inquiry Transcript*, 72). On 19 March 2002, Geoff Hoon was advised that if a British military contribution was sought it ‘... might be “a division minus”, i.e., the largest of the options...’ (‘Minute Watkins to Policy Director, 20 March 2002, ‘Axis of Evil’ Chilcot 2016b, para. 106). The Chilcot Report confirms that from Spring 2002, ‘Military planners concentrated on identifying the maximum practicable contribution the UK would be able to generate within the potential time-scales for US action’ (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 900–904). In April 2002, the Ministry



of Defence (MOD) advised that Britain should contribute a division comprising of three brigades (the use of ‘MOD’ allows the military to distance itself from some MOD decisions and endorse others). Geoff Hoon, Secretary of State for Defence, told Chilcot that he was not aware that by May 2002 the Americans believed that the British were offering a division for the invasion because a political decision had not yet been made (Geoff Hoon, *Transcript, The Iraq Inquiry*, 35–37). *The Chilcot Report* states that by mid-May 2002, ‘the perception that the UK might provide an armoured division for military operations had already gained currency in the US’. It is suggested that this perception was the consequence of informal conversations between US and UK military personnel and between civilian officials. The implication is that the military planners were getting ahead of policy and trying to bounce the government into a maximum military effort, knowing that once US expectations had been raised it would be more difficult for the government to reduce Britain’s role. Hoon tried to clamp down on such unauthorised conversations (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 230–232, 240–248). In July 2002, *The Guardian* reported a ‘Washington source’ suggesting that the British would contribute 30,000 troops (*The Guardian* 27 July 2002). The MOD argued that a larger contribution would give the government more influence on US planning and could reduce the UK’s risk of contributing to post-conflict operations.

Prime Minister Blair should have been aware that a higher level of British military involvement and consequent increased risk to British military personnel considerably increased his political risk. During the post-war period, British politicians had been sensitive to the impact of casualties on domestic public opinion. There had been antisemitic rioting in Britain over the deaths of soldiers in Palestine, accelerating Britain’s withdrawal. In the subsequent retreat from Empire, politicians were constrained by their ‘Palestine Syndrome’ and a concern that a similar reaction to casualties could re-emerge (Dixon 2000). Peter Rickett, Political Director of the Foreign Office, commented on 22 March 2002 in the infamous ‘Downing Street Memo’, ‘To get public and Parliamentary support for military options we have to be convincing that the threat is so serious/imminent that it is worth sending our troops to die for’.

According to Chilcot, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence resisted the military elite’s efforts to increase Britain’s military commitment. Chilcot concluded that the politicians ‘wanted to keep open the option of contributing significant forces for ground operations as long as possible but between May and mid-October [2002] consistently pushed back against US assumptions that the UK would provide a division’ (Chilcot 2016a, para. 811). David Manning’s memo, dated 23rd July 2002, reported that President Bush saw military action as ‘inevitable’ and laid out three options for UK military involvement including for a land-based contribution of 40,000. On 28th July 2002, Tony Blair did assure President Bush that “I will be with you, whatever” but at this point was cautious about deploying a significant land force although he was coming under pressure from the MOD (Chilcot 2016a, para. 811).

The military elite and MOD officials presented just three options on the use of military force, arguably in ways that pushed the government towards the military elite’s and MOD’s preferences. Three options or Packages of force were proposed,



with no options between Package 2, which did not involve the Army at all, and Package 3 which represented the maximum option. The politicians' preferences for Package 2+ suggest the advisability of providing a range of options setting out in detail the implications of these for the numbers of military personnel deployed, numbers going into combat and estimates of the likely casualties.

- Package 1 represented a small contribution 'largely comprising intelligence support, access to UK bases and limited numbers of special forces'.
- Package 2 included Package 1 but in addition 90 aircraft and 20 warships and amounted to 13,000 personnel.
- Package 3 was the only one to include significant ground forces. This incorporated 'elements' of Packages 1 and 2 but a ground invasion force of over 300 tanks and armoured vehicles and 28,000 personnel for a total strength of approximately 41,000 (although in the end 46,000 were deployed) (De Waal 2013, p. 5. There have been different accounts of these packages see Chilcot 2016b, para. 471).

The politicians initially favoured Package 2 and resisted the deployment of large numbers of ground troops, which would have made the UK responsible as an occupying power. Blair seems to have favoured 'package 2 plus' rather than Package 3 and was wary of using ground troops. He did not want 'any suggestion' that the UK might offer 'a major land contribution to a Force in northern Iraq...'. As De Waal points out, 'Downing Street officials seem to have been highly sceptical both of the practical utility of a large ground force contribution and of the motives and tactics of those in the military and Ministry of Defence advocating it' (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 629, 693–710; De Waal 2013, p. 6).

In his memoirs, Tony Blair later denied that he had been cautious about the deployment of force and claimed that he had favoured Package 3. The former Prime Minister's retrospective belligerence could be explained by the PM's defence of his decision to invade Iraq as a 'strong leader' taking a 'bold' and 'principled' decision (Blair 2010, p. 411; Hoon told Chilcot Blair wanted maximum possible involvement, Chilcot 2016b, pp. 907–908; there are also some reports of Admiral Boyce's caution but the Army's enthusiasm, Bower 2016, pp. 247, 280; Chilcot 2016b, pp. 629, 693–710).

If the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force participated in the invasion and the Army did not then it was perceived that the Army's organisational interests would be damaged because if they did not use their assets, they would lose them in spending cuts. The Navy, for example, had seen the Falklands War 1982 as an opportunity to reverse spending cuts. The mantra was 'use it or lose it' but this encouraged the deployment of military assets that were not necessarily suitable for a particular operation but were deployed to protect them from being cut. A substantial deployment by the Army, particularly if it led to casualties, would not only protect its spending but give the Army a much higher public profile over the RAF and Navy who, apart from the Royal Marines, were much less likely to suffer casualties (Elliott 2014, pp. 82–3, 34; Cowper-Coles 2011). General Richards recounts, in *Taking Command*, that when he arrived at the MOD in September 2002 the assumption was that the Iraq



war would exclude the Army. But Richards and Boyce wanted the Army involved (Richards 2014, pp. 181–182). Richards (later head of the Army (2009–2010) and then head of the military (2010–2013)) had lobbied hard for the Army’s involvement but later claimed to be ‘uneasy about the war’ and with the benefit of hindsight regards it as ‘a grand strategic error’ (Richards 2014, p. 186). During the Chilcot Inquiry General Mike Walker (Chief of General Staff 2000–2003) during the deliberations on Iraq confirmed that “the Army’s always keen to be involved” (General Walker, *Iraq Inquiry Transcript*, 6).

The military made several arguments for the deployment of ground troops. First, they would give the British greater influence on the planning and conduct of the invasion. Although Lawrence Freedman pointed out, peak British influence predated a major ground commitment. Second, ground troops would demonstrate British commitment to the ‘special relationship’ with the US, giving access to intelligence and new equipment. Yet, while a ground contribution was welcome it was unnecessary to secure good relations with the US. Third, involvement in the invasion might allow the British to avoid or limit their post-war peacekeeping role. By contrast, Britain’s substantial role in the invasion left them with a substantial role in the aftermath. Fourth, and somewhat contradictorily, a substantial involvement would allow the UK to take over an Iraq region and achieve some autonomy during the post-war peacekeeping role, rather than being integrated with the US forces. Finally, the generals claimed that the Army’s morale would suffer if it was not included in the invasion force because it might not be regarded as a warfighting force with consequences for retention and recruitment. This claim was viewed with scepticism (Lawrence Freedman comment in Kevin Tebbit *Iraq Inquiry Transcript*, 40–41; Blair 2010, p. 411; De Waal 2013, pp. 7, 6–10; Chilcot 2016b, para. 781).

‘Bait and Switch’: the Turkish option and Package 3

There is a possibility that the military elite ‘baited’ the government with an apparently more benign invasion through Turkey, but then, when Britain’s role was further ratcheted up, they ‘switched’ to invading through the more dangerous south of Iraq. Such a possibility is given more credibility by the evidence that the Labour government was later ‘baited’ with a peacekeeping operation in central Helmand and this was then quickly ‘switched’ to warfighting in the Platoon Houses of northern Helmand.

The military elite put pressure on the government by dishonestly claiming that they were expressing, or ‘ventriloquising’ American views. In July 2002, the British military elite claimed that the US wanted the UK to play a more discrete and, for some, potentially more benign role by invading from Turkey into northern Iraq (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 1370–1371; 1393). The MOD reported that there was ‘... growing enthusiasm in the US for action in northern Iraq led by the UK’ (Chilcot 2016b, paras 523–524). Kevin Tebbit, Permanent Secretary at the MOD 1998–2005, argued that the northern option to occupy the “fairly stable” Kurdish area “looked rather easier than fighting one’s way or helping to fight one’s way up Iraq” from the South (Chilcot 2016b, para. 1393, although there is



some ambiguity about whether this would be 'easier', see 1370–1382). Sir David Manning, the Prime Minister's foreign policy advisor, complained that the British military were 'ventriloquising' US views. That is, the proposal for the Turkish option came from the British military elite but they claimed that it came from the US because this was likely to carry more weight with the British government (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 230–248). *The Chilcot Report* agreed with Manning, stating that the need for Britain's 'discrete role' in the invasion through Turkey 'was suggested to the US by the UK military in July 2002' (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 1370–1371). Manning also argued that the MOD had talked up Package 3, 'US expectations of UK ground troops had been "fuelled because MOD almost certainly aroused great expectations early on – without political authority"'. The Americans would like British military involvement on the ground but did not need it (Chilcot 2016b, para. 801). The Chilcot Report states that military advice changed radically between the end of July and the end of August 2002, '...The evidence clearly demonstrates the focus on identifying the "maximum effort" and giving the UK a combat role in ground operations'. By contrast the Secretary of State for Defence was sceptical, preferred Package 2 and gave the Prime Minister 'a more balanced perspective' (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 543, 544, 540, 597–601).

The Turkish option, it appears, was 'never likely', partly because of Britain's historic, imperial role in the region, and the US was also later refused permission (Freedman 2022, p. 441; Chilcot 2016b, paras. 879–881). Such was the scepticism about the viability of the northern route that US planners sought a Plan B for British forces as soon as the British military made the Turkish proposal. Sir Richard Dearlove, head of MI6, had judged from the Summer 2002 that the Turkish route would not be possible, and Sir David Manning thought this was not possible from October 2002. For others this was apparent in November 2002 but the northern option was the primary focus of UK planning until January 2003 (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 1406–1412, 1419). Consequently, on 31 October 2002, when Geoff Hoon told US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld about Britain's commitment to Package 3 and the invasion from the north, Rumsfeld asked whether British forces would be available in the south, since the prospects of Turkey agreeing to support a British military presence were so poor. US pressure for the British to switch their role to the South and to include Baghdad began to increase (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 998, 1003, 1026, 1036, 1054).

The British military elite apparently used their relationship with the US military to reach President George W. Bush. On 7 September 2002, the British Prime Minister met Bush at Camp David. Tony Blair,

"... had been alarmed that [President] Bush had understood that the UK would be 'leading the invasion' from the North of Iraq. This required very careful handling. Having received the military advice, the Prime Minister's view was that we could not offer Package 3 in the timescale required and given the constraints of Operation Fresco [the military's role in the Fire Brigade Strike]. But we might be able to offer Package 2, plus some further elements. There should be no visible preparations for a month or so" (Chilcot 2016b, para. 629).



The Prime Minister and his Defence Secretary favoured a ‘medium scale’ contribution of a brigade size (approximately 5–6,000) or Package 2 plus, rather than a ‘large scale’, Package 3 which comprises at least 3 brigades or a division (which, it seems, can be defined as anything from 20,000 up to 40,000 troops). By 23 September 2002, the Prime Minister favoured Package 2 and did not want British representatives to suggest to the Americans that the British would make a major land contribution to the invasion of northern Iraq (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 706–707). The politicians also sought to reassert control over communications with the US to avoid the military and MOD officials over-committing Britain to an invasion.

The Prime Minister’s close advisers Sir David Manning and Jonathan Powell suspected the British military, and the MOD were using their influence with the US military to bounce the government into committing to Package 3. On 25 September, the MOD were reportedly telling the US military that the British were considering a land option, albeit ‘heavily caveated’. Sir David Manning thought this “Just about OK” and thought they were being “bounced” by the MOD (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 709–712). Until recently, a land contribution to invasion from Turkey had been ‘impossible’ because the military were playing a role in the Fire Brigade’s Strike in Britain, ‘Now, suddenly it isn’t. The (militarily mouth-watering) prospect of being given tactical leadership of the campaign in the North ... may have something to do with this volte face’ (Chilcot 2016b, para. 801). Blair wanted Manning to ‘Be careful of this Land idea’ and was cautious about the viability of Package 3 (‘Minute Manning to Prime Minister, 22 September 2002, “Iraq: Possible UK Military Contribution”’, Chilcot 2016b, paras. 693, 702). Jonathan Powell did not think there was a correlation between the size of the UK military contribution and increased influence on the US. But the British military felt participating in the invasion was important to their relationship with the US military “on which they crucially depended” (Chilcot 2016b, para. 938).

The military elite and the MOD created a false sense of urgency to ratchet up Britain’s commitment to the invasion. In October 2002, the Chiefs of Staff made another push to increase Britain’s contribution to the invasion. The Chiefs and the MOD claimed that the exclusion of the Army would irreparably damage UK/US relations. Participation in the combat phase, it was claimed, could also reduce Britain’s vulnerability to US requests to contribution to a substantial and costly contribution to post-invasion peacekeeping (Chilcot 2016b, paras 732–734, 755–756). By mid-October Geoff Hoon and Admiral Boyce, Chief of Defence Staff, perceived that the Americans were excluding a British land contribution from their invasion plans and this would reduce Britain’s influence on US planning. There was, therefore, an urgency for the British to commit to Package 3 before the end of the month so that they could be reinserted in US plans.

Officials in No. 10 and the Foreign Office were dubious about the MOD’s proposals and high pressure tactics (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 800–810). The Chilcot Report cast doubt on the MOD’s and the Chiefs’ claim that there was such urgency for a decision on the Army’s participation in the invasion. Americans had not excluded the British from their invasion plans and continued to plan on the basis that the British might offer a land contribution. It concluded drily, ‘It is not clear what specific information caused Adm Boyce and Mr Hoon to advise in late October 2002 that



the US was planning on the basis there would be no UK land contribution' (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 953–959).

On 31 October 2002, the British Prime Minister agreed to Package 3 further ratcheting up Britain's commitment to the war. Ratchet is the appropriate metaphor because there was a perception that, once committed, pulling back from that commitment would be too damaging to UK/US relations. The Prime Minister thought the decision on Package 3 "a v. tough call" (Chilcot 2016b, para. 807). Package 3 was 'seen as the maximum practicable contribution the UK could generate within the predicted timescales for US action'. From 31 October and mid-December 2002, ministerial decisions and military planning was based on advice that Britain would deploy through Turkey a divisional headquarters, a single combat brigade, along with the possible deployment of a Commando Group to the south. This deployment was the maximum feasible given the requirements of the military to cover the Fire Brigade strike and the US timescale of military operations (Chilcot 2016c, para. 478).

The 'Switch' to Southern Iraq

In early January 2003, No. 10 concluded that the Turkish would not allow the British to invade Iraq from Turkey. The 'switch' to the south led also to a major ratcheting up of Britain's arguably riskier role in the invasion which had now become 'critical to the success of the military campaign' (Chilcot 6b 2016c para. 236). Since the UK would be invading the predominantly Shia south which was also generally hostile to the regime this may have been more difficult than the northern option, but easier than occupying predominantly Sunni areas. The US did not anticipate problems in the south, it would be 'a soft rear area', and so this was 'a good fit' for the British contingent given domestic scepticism. Europeans, it was implied, were good peacekeepers but not 'warriors' and up to fighting wars. Other US allies were also given relatively easier tasks because of political and domestic opposition to the war. The British military had been involved in peacekeeping operations but wanted like some other NATO counterparts—particularly the Canadians and the Dutch—to engage in warfighting. General Sir Charles Guthrie, Chief of the Defence Staff, had argued that 'too many humanitarian missions could turn the professional British Army into a "touchy-feely" organisation, more concerned with widows and orphans than fighting' (*The Times* 11 August 2000). By proving to the Americans that they were a 'warrior military', they hoped to be involved in future US military adventures.

When the northern option was closed off, the military elite were not disappointed but enthusiastic about the apparently sudden switch to the south. Admiral Boyce decided that the south would be the easier task than the north after all (Chilcot 2016b, pp. 1404–1405). Chilcot records the military's enthusiastic reaction to the switch:

'21. The military response was immediate and positive and led to a recommendation to deploy large scale ground forces to the South.



22. Deploying UK ground forces to southern Iraq constituted a step change for the UK, providing it with a far more prominent role in the operational plan.
23. By the time decisions on the UK role were taken in March 2003, the UK contribution had become central to the military campaign'. (Chilcot 2016c: paras. 21-23)

The Prime Minister, preoccupied with winning UN support for the invasion, 'paid little attention to the military strategy' (Freedman 2022, p. 441). During the period after 31 October, when the Prime Minister had approved Package 3, the military had continued to ratchet up Britain's land contribution to the invasion from 28,000 in October to 32–33,000 in December. Chilcot Reports, 'Between mid-December 2002 and mid-January 2003, the force to be deployed recommended by the MOD increased from an armoured brigade and a Commando Group to an armoured brigade and two light brigades' (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 947, 1294, 1301; Chilcot 2016a, para 813; Chilcot 2016d para. 289). Admiral Boyce later told the Chilcot Inquiry that he could not explain why Britain's force levels had grown and were larger than those deployed in the First Gulf War, 1991: "The package was being shaped to deal with the task that we thought we might encounter" (Chilcot 2016c, para. 172). Once committed to the south, the Americans then put pressure on the British to take on further tasks (Chilcot 2016c, paras. 38, 99–108). By 9 January 2003, the Prime Minister was telling the cabinet and the public that no decision had been taken on military action. Yet, the British had taken decisions on military action that were perceived to be almost irreversible. On 15 January 2003, Admiral Boyce described Britain's role in the invasion as 'a lynchpin crucial to [the] success of the overall plan' (Chilcot 2016c, para. 129). Two days later the decision was taken to deploy large-scale ground forces (Chilcot 2016a, para 409).

The 'switch' from Turkey to the south had made the UK's military role 'critical' to the success of the invasion which made it very difficult for No. 10 to attempt to limit Britain's exposure or pull out of the invasion. Sir Kevin Tebbit, Permanent Secretary at the MOD, argued that if the British did not go ahead with the invasion the Americans would feel 'betrayed' and there would be 'very severe' penalties. Significantly, the minute which set out the risks to UK influence and interests has not been declassified (Chilcot 2016c, paras. 88–98, 258). Although Tebbit did not sense that "the military machine was forcing the political hand" he suspected that the military had been preparing for a switch to the south during December (Chilcot 2016c: 174-75; Chilcot 2016d , para. 635).

Lord Boyce appeared to be unsure of when British consideration of the southern option began. He stated that this was in December 2002, 'late autumn' 2002 (usually considered to be November to mid-December), and October 2002. If it was October, then this would have been before the Prime Minister endorsed Package 3 for the northern route through Turkey. By the time the decision was taken in to 'switch', Britain's plan for a southern invasion '... was almost entirely developed...' (Chilcot 2016d , paras. 639, 642, 644). Kevin Tebbit later agreed that when the decision was taken to switch, Ministers did not have "a full appreciation of the implications, politically, militarily and security-wise" (Chilcot 2016c: 174–175). Chilcot also concluded that Ministers had not been fully aware of the risks of the switch to



the South for which they would have been accountable. If the Prime Minister did not have a full appreciation of the risks, the Cabinet were even more in the dark and not briefed on the military options, strategic implications, or circumstances for the use of force. There was no cabinet sub-committee or full cabinet discussion of this major increase in Britain's commitment to the war (Chilcot 2016c: paras. 179–181; Chilcot 2016d, paras. 292, 666).

During the Iraq and Afghan wars there was intense controversy, between politicians and the military elite, over the inadequate provision of military equipment. Bringing forward the date on which UK forces might take part in combat 'compressed the timescales available for preparation' leading to 'serious equipment shortfalls'. Just before the invasion, on 13 March, Admiral Boyce assured the Prime Minister that there were 'no serious equipment problems'. However, Chilcot records, 'After the invasion began, it became clear that some personnel had not been equipped with desert clothing and body armour, there were difficulties with NBC [Nuclear, Biological, Chemical] equipment, and there were shortages of ammunition' (Chilcot 2016d, paras. 422, 434, 522; on shortages of ammunition see 555–565 on lack of combat ID 566–574).

Both politicians and the military elite claimed that they did not know about front line equipment shortages. Following negative media coverage about equipment shortfalls, Lord Bach, Parliamentary Under Secretary and Minister of State for Defence Procurement, complained that 'he did not have visibility of equipment issues on the front line' (Chilcot 2016d, para. 435). Insufficient body armour was procured but tens of thousands of sets appeared to have been 'lost' since 1999 and others wrongly delivered so that troops went without. Problems with equipment, NBC protection, and ammunition did not, in the end, have an impact on the overall success of the invasion. But individuals, such as Sergeant Steven Roberts died as a consequence of not having body armour. Equipment shortages impacted on troop morale and how the campaign was seen by the public and Parliament (Chilcot 2016d, paras. 675–882). Lord Boyce's and the Chiefs of Staff's understanding was that everyone had body armour (Chilcot 2016d, pp. 500–521). On NBC protection, it was suggested that two brigades went into battle with less than 50% of the required capability and that this was the military's responsibility due to maintenance and supply of in-service equipment, such as lack of batteries and the failure to distribute equipment. Lord Bach's private office considered the NBC shortages 'very serious. It will be impossible to defend this adequately' (*emphasis in original*). Such shortfalls were not communicated through the change of command, and this ran 'counter to the public lines Ministers were given'. In effect these shortages had, fittingly, been described as 'playing Russian roulette with people's lives' (Chilcot 2016d, para. 530). Lord Bach claimed that he had been informed that there was 'complete confidence' in the provision of NBC and shortages have only come to light subsequently through the media (Chilcot 2016d, paras. 530–532).

The military lobbied for their maximum involvement in the Iraq war understanding the limitations of the equipment that they had available at the time and the extra strain that this would place on military personnel. 'Harmony guidelines' were supposed to protect the mental and physical health of the armed forces by preventing over-deployment, yet these had been broken even before the invasion. The 1998



Strategic Defence Review and *A New Chapter* (2002) had confirmed that military personnel were working at or beyond the planned deployment boundaries. Although the British were improving their ability to operate overseas, the UK's Armed Forces would not be able to simultaneously undertake two, enduring medium-scale operations. Nonetheless, in the second half of 2002, Britain was already engaged in two medium-scale operations in the Balkans and covering the Fire Brigade's Strike as well as smaller scale operations such as Afghanistan (Chilcot 2016d, para. 661). According to Lieutenant General Chris Brown, 'We consistently exceeded our own guidelines on harmony between operations and training throughout Operation TELIC [the invasion of Iraq]'. From 2002, the military were operating at or above the planned level. The decision to contribute a large-scale military force to the invasion of Iraq increased the risk of breaching the harmony guidelines but was not a consideration in that decision (Chilcot 2016a, paras. 823, 718-31 ; Brown 2011, para. 207). Table 1 provides a rough idea of how the UK's military contribution to the invasion of Iraq varied over time. Ambiguity over what constituted a Brigade or Division could be used to conceal the extent of Britain's involvement from the uninitiated. There was also the question of the distinction between those 'enablers' and invasion troops deployed to the Gulf (46,000) and those in the invading force (about 20,000 out of those 46,000). The extent to which the politicians understood the significance of the military elite/MOD's proposals is debateable (see Table 1).

The Iraq war and overstretch

Contrary to the Chiefs of Staff's advice, during February 2003 it became apparent that Britain's participation in the invasion would not lead to a smaller post-conflict role. There was now pressure from the Americans for the British to administer a larger region of Iraq (Chilcot 2016c, paras. 394, 397). Just two weeks before the invasion, Lt Gen Reith expressed concern that only one out of three brigades might see combat. Consequently, he recommended to the Chiefs of Staff a significantly expanded British combat role (Chilcot 2016c, para. 490). Admiral Boyce seemed keen to exploit any opportunities for combat and on 6 March the MOD told the Prime Minister that Britain might play further "cutting edge" roles in combat operations. The Americans could even request the use of British forces around Baghdad (and they later did so), and such requests would be judged on their merits (Chilcot 2016c, paras. 505, 508). By early March, the British were such an important part of US plans that if parliament had voted against the invasion, then this would have significantly delayed the attack, probably with severe consequences for UK/US relations (Chilcot 2016c, para. 613).

On 20 March 2003, US and 'coalition' forces invaded Iraq. The decision to deploy military personnel was taken by the Prime Minister and his entourage and 'not formally considered by a Cabinet Committee or reported to Cabinet'. Geoff Hoon stated to the Chilcot Inquiry that he could 'not recall a single Cabinet-level discussion about specific troop deployments and the nature of their operations'. Chilcot found that out of 26 cabinet meetings from 28 February 2002 to 17 March



Table 1 The rise and fall of Britain's military contribution to the invasion of Iraq over time, March 2002–March 2003

Date	Agent	Strength of British military force proposed
March 2002	British military elite	Division (20–40,000)
April 2002	British military elite	3 Brigades (c5–6,000 each) minus (or less)
May 2002	US perception of British proposal	Division
July 2002	British military elite and MOD propose 3 packages	Package 2, 13,000 Package 3, 41,000
July–August 2002	UK maximise military effort and combat role (ie Package 3)	
7 September 2002	Tony Blair and Geof Hoon favour	Package 2+ or 5–6000 troops
23 September	Tony Blair favours	Package 2
31 October	Tony Blair agrees	Package 3: 28,000 Combat Brigade (5–6000), Divisional Headquarters, Commando Group (to South) (perhaps 1400 Commandos (?))
Mid-December 2002		32–33,000
18 December	Admiral Boyce	Division with 2 Brigades, option for Amphibious Task Group and 2nd Light Brigade in south
7 January 2003	Geoff Hoon	Announces amphibious capability to parliament
7–8 January 2003		Northern option rule out
Mid-January		Armoured Brigade and 2 Light Brigades proposed for South
20 March 2003		46,000 British personnel deployed to gulf, 20,000 invaded including about 30% of invasion tank capability



2003 there were only 5 opportunities for some substantive discussion of policy (Chilcot 2016a, paras 811–813, 58–59, 61).

The British ended up making the only significant non-US military contribution to the invasion force. This comprised 46,000 out of 467,000 military personnel involved, with 20,000 of those part of the invasion force of 140–145,000. The UK provided half the coalition's air assault capability and a large proportion of tanks, perhaps 30%, of the invasion force. The generals and Blair hoped that the war could be won quickly, enabling the withdrawal of British military forces and leaving post-conflict state-building to other NATO armies or the UN. The Army's refrain was 'go first, go fast, go home', preferring to see themselves, like the Americans, as war fighters rather than peacekeepers. After the invasion, the military was slow to acknowledge the growing danger of the insurgency or to commit to higher force levels in an attempt to exert control in Southern Iraq (Elliott 2014, p. 114; Chilcot 2016a, para. 590–601). By December 2003, the UK force level in Iraq was 10,500 and the total contribution from all other nations was just 5,650. Immediately before the invasion, Geoff Hoon had warned the prime minister that troop levels needed to be lowered by two-thirds, to approximately 6500, before autumn to avoid 'long term damage to the armed forces'. However, this level was not achieved until May 2007 when British forces had retreated to Basra airport.

Just over six months after the invasion of Iraq, the military elite were exploring the possibility of a new deployment of a Brigade to Afghanistan 2006 (Fairweather 2012, p. 175). Anthony King states, 'Reports suggested that senior commanders in the army were desperate to get involved in a 'popular' war before the next Strategic Defence Review in order to promote themselves over the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. In 2005, Helmand was seen as that potentially popular war (King 2011, p. 389). Fighting simultaneously in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military became further overstretched and in crisis (Fairweather 2012, p. 367 fn 7).

Blame shifting and 'Forgetting Chilcot'

After the government was committed to maximum military involvement in the invasion, the military elite prepared to claim responsibility for the Iraq invasion if it succeeded but also to shift blame onto the government if it failed. Admiral Boyce complained that the military were already stretched to the limit and sought assurances about the legality of the war. Anonymous 'Senior military officers' were reported to have seen the war with Iraq as irresponsible and the lack of intelligence on the country a national disgrace. As early as March 2002, 'senior officers' were warning the Prime Minister that war against Iraq was 'doomed to fail and would lead to the loss of life for political gain'. A year later there were reports of 'deep disquiet in Britain's military establishment about the confused objectives of a war and a pre-emptive strike against a country that poses no threat to the attackers'. Journalist Andrew Gilligan reported that in the run up to the war senior military leaders privately expressed scepticism that Saddam Hussein 'was a serious threat'. But, 'None was ever prepared to go on the record. Only in their memoirs, or at the Chilcot inquiry, when a stampede of brass wore out the carpets to dump on Blair, did the



public learn of these brave warriors' doubts'. Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair's spin doctor, recorded that even in discussions with the Prime Minister the military was 'hard to read, sometimes giving the impression none of them wanted anything to do with this, then at others giving the impression that they all wanted to be off to the front line' (*The Sunday Times* 27 November 2007; *Daily Telegraph* 24 November 2002; *The Observer* 17 March 2002; *The Guardian* 24 February 2003; *The Guardian* 5 February 2003; *The Guardian* 18 March 2003; *Sunday Telegraph* 10 March 2013; Campbell 2012, p. 348).

After the invasion, the British military elite attempted to shift responsibility for the emerging disaster onto the politicians. Admiral Boyce, Chief of Defence Staff (2001–2003), claimed that he favoured a more modest military contribution to the invasion, but the Army insisted on maximum involvement. But he also told Chilcot in 2009 that if Britain were involved in the invasion he favoured going in with a large force because this would give the UK greater influence. Boyce claimed that soldiers died because the Treasury did not fund the war properly (Bower 2016; Kevin Tebbit *Iraq Inquiry Transcript*, 49, 43–44). By contrast, Kevin Tebbit argued that the military did not drive the agenda and although the Treasury properly funded the war it did not properly fund the Ministry of Defence. Lord Guthrie, the former Chief of Defence Staff (1997–2001) and Blair's 'favourite general', supported the invasion of Iraq but argued that it had been mishandled by the politicians. In 2010, at the Chilcot Inquiry, General Sir Richard Dannatt (CGS 2006–2009) characterised the thinking of the 'Chiefs of Staffs Committee' as, 'Well, if we are going to get involved and we probably will get involved as money is tight, let's keep our involvement as small as we possibly can'. He stated, 'I would also say that we would not have rushed to volunteer a large force, because at the time the Army and Land Command was very heavily committed elsewhere'. Furthermore 'there was no desire to do it', the Army was very busy so involvement in the invasion would be 'difficult' (General Dannatt *Iraq Inquiry Transcript*, 4–5, 6–7; *BBC News* 28 July 2010). Chief of General Staff, General Sir Mike Jackson (2003–2006), later stated that the Prime Minister left the military too little time to prepare for the invasion. General David Richards, who deputised for the head of the Army, lobbied hard for the Army's involvement in the invasion. He did this even though he was 'uneasy about the war' and regards it, with the benefit of hindsight, 'as a grand strategic error'. In 2012, as Chief of Defence Staff, Richards claimed that the military move into southern Afghanistan (2006) was "amateurish", "verging on the complacent", and accused ministers of failing to learn lessons from Iraq (*The Guardian* 18 March 2013; General Dannatt *Iraq Inquiry Transcript*, 4–5, 6; *Daily Mail* 12 October 2006; author reference; *The Sunday Telegraph* 10 March 2013; Richards 2014, pp. 181, 186; *Daily Telegraph* 27 January 2012).

The Chilcot Inquiry and Report (2009–2016) contradicted the claims of the military elite and revealed powerful evidence of their role, in alliance with the US military, in *maximising* Britain's military involvement in both the Iraq and Afghan wars. Rather than interfering with the military's professional strategic, operational, or tactical judgement Tony Blair was excessively deferential to the military's judgement and did not show great interest in the detail of military operations (Chilcot 2016a, para. 811; Freedman 2019, p. 19; De Waal 2013). The Chilcot Report concluded:



‘The size and composition of a UK military contribution to the US-led invasion of Iraq was largely discretionary. The US wanted some UK capabilities (including Special Forces), to use UK bases, and the involvement of the UK military to avoid the perception of unilateral US military action. *The primary impetus to maximise the size of the UK contribution and the recommendations on its composition came from the Armed Forces, with the agreement of Mr Hoon [Secretary of State for Defence]*. (Chilcot 2016a: para 811. *My emphasis*)

In a pivotal moment, Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Michael Walker, told the Chilcot Inquiry: “So we were giving them the advice, which they were following. I don’t think we had any difficulty with that” (General Walker *Iraq Inquiry Transcript*, 54, 58).

Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon had been initially sceptical about the scope of Britain’s military commitment to Iraq. Initially, he resisted the military’s demands for a maximum contribution and seems to have preferred Package 2, which would have greatly reduced the threat to military lives and was a greater contribution than any other US ally was likely to make (Chilcot 2016b, paras. 539-44, 596-603, 790-91). But he was also concerned that if the Army were not included in the invasion force, this ‘could find its way into the media which would be quick to draw unfavourable comparisons between our contribution to this campaign and the Gulf Conflict in 1990/91’ (Chilcot 2016b, para. 793). Later the Secretary of State for Defence was also sceptical about taking on a new operation in southern Afghanistan. But after being confronted by the Chief of Defence Staff, and perhaps anticipating the Prime Minister’s deference to the military, he backed down (Fairweather 2014, p. 150).

In July 2004, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown was reported to have told Tony Blair that the Prime Minister was too soft with the top brass who were pressing for increased military spending: “You’re giving away too much and are being outrun by those military bastards”. The military were in ‘open revolt’ and the Chief of Defence Staff considered resignation if they did not get the money they demanded. Anthony Seldon reports, ‘This pressure resulted directly in the most generous settlement the MOD received for twenty years, achieving some £800 million extra from the Treasury in the final week of the spending review’ (Freedman 2019, pp. 14, 18–19, 24; Seldon 2007, p. 291; Akam 2021, p. 374).

The Chilcot Inquiry, through the questioning of leading actors involved in the invasion, gradually brought into the public realm evidence of the military elite’s enthusiasm, and share of responsibility for the invasion of Iraq. But on the publication of the report the media focus was principally on whether the Prime Minister had deceived in taking Britain to war (*The Sunday Times* 10 July 2016, see also *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Times* 7 July 2016). *The Times* contrasted the bravery of the military with the failure of the politicians and mandarins, ignoring the role of the military elite (*The Times* editorial 7 July 2016). *The Sun* newspaper’s front page stated, ‘WEAPONS OF MASS DECEPTION’ referring to the former Prime Minister’s ‘mass deception of the public over the war in Iraq’ (*The Sun* 7 July 2016). *The Daily Express*’s front page also focussed on the Prime Minister’s



responsibility, 'SHAMED BLAIR: I'M SORRY BUT I'D DO IT AGAIN' (*Daily Express* 7 July 2016). *The Daily Mail* primarily blamed Tony Blair but also pointed the finger at 'the Establishment' (the civil service, law, cabinet, parliament, the security services, the media). The generals were criticised because they did 'not protest more forcefully against being sent to war with inadequate preparation and equipment' (*Daily Mail* 7 July 2016). *The Daily Mirror*, one of the few papers to oppose the war, argued that The Chilcot Report was a 'damning indictment' of Blair's leadership. Former military personnel also lined up to point the finger at the Prime Minister ('Army chiefs want ex-PM to say sorry' *Daily Mirror* 7 July 2016; General Sir Michael Rose wanted military families to take Blair to court, *Daily Mail* 7 July 2016). The left-leaning *Guardian* was perplexed that the generals had not told the government that they were inadequately equipped for war (*The Guardian* 7 July 2016). There was some criticism of the generals for their 'humiliating' handling of the subsequent Iraq war (*Daily Telegraph* 7 July 2016; *Daily Mail* 7 July 2016; *The Times* 7 July 2016).

Only a few commentators who specialised on military issues reported Chilcot's strong, if understated—since written in the language of the British civil service—criticisms of the military elite. These included, Major General (retd.) Christopher Elliott (Elliott 2016), Deborah Haynes ('Military leaders condemned over 'humiliation' of deal with enemy' *The Times* 7 July 2016), Mark Urban (and Haynes BBC 'PM Programme' 12 July 2016), and Sir Max Hastings (*Daily Mail* 7 July 2016). *The Chilcot Report's* criticisms of the military, with its implications for future wars, seemed to have made little substantial impact on the debate about Britain's involvement in the Iraq and Afghan wars. Five substantial analyses of Britain's role in the Iraq and Afghan wars published since the Chilcot Report fail to draw extensively on its evidence and conclusions of military culpability (Farrell 2017; Porter 2018; Barry 2020; Akam 2021; Freedman 2022).

Conclusion

This article has argued that *The Chilcot Report*, and other sources, have provided compelling evidence revealing the military elite's powerful role in pressurising and manipulating the Labour government into 'beyond maximum' military involvement in the invasion of Iraq. In retrospect, senior military officers consider the invasion to have been 'A Grand Strategic Error' (General Richards, Chief of General Staff 2009-10, Chief of Defence Staff 2010-13), and a 'disaster' and 'error of near biblical proportions' (General Dannatt, Chief of General Staff 2006-09). At the time the military elite enthusiastically pursued maximum involvement in the war to advance their perceived organisational interests. They did so despite strong opposition to the war and scepticism about Weapons of Mass Destruction. Furthermore, the Americans only required Britain's symbolic participation in the invasion, and a more symbolic role would probably have substantially reduced military casualties and the political risk to the Prime Minister and the Labour government.

Shortly after the invasion, in Autumn 2003, the military elite began to pursue their next war in Afghanistan. There is little evidence of doubt among the military elite about the advisability of pursuing both wars perhaps because they were



perceived to be in the military's organisational 'interests'. Simultaneously fighting the Iraq and Afghan wars led, in 2006, to a military crisis which was exploited to further empower the military. The wars delivered a major increase in public expenditure; sustained a close relationship with the US military (and a claim for participation in future wars); and apparent victimisation gave the military a much higher domestic profile and popularity leading to the further militarisation of British society—through such initiatives as the popularity of the 'Military Covenant' (2006), the rise of military charities such as 'Help for Heroes' (2007) and the establishment of 'Armed Forces Day' (2009). Responsibility for any apparent failure was successfully deflected onto the Labour government further empowering the military within the state (Dixon 2020). Consequently, both President Obama and Prime Minister Brown ended up fighting a war in Afghanistan in which they apparently did not believe (Brooks et al 2021). A powerful, pro-war coalition has consistently overestimated the effectiveness of military force, driving the UK towards highly belligerent roles in subsequent conflicts in Afghanistan (2006), Libya (2011), Syria (2011–), Ukraine (2022), and Israel/Palestine (2023–).

In the US, there has been growing concern on both the political Left and Right about the further empowerment of the military elite as a consequence of fighting the post-9/11 wars (Gates 2014; Glennon 2015; Brooks et al 2021). By contrast, the poverty of British strategic culture is such that Chilcot's impressive evidence attesting to the power that the military elite exert behind the scenes and their share of responsibility for the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan has been largely ignored and 'forgotten'. Consequently, there is an overestimation of the ability of democratically elected politicians to control the military elite and their allies, and to withstand pressure for war and further military spending. This is problematic because it makes the UK prone to blundering into future unwinnable wars (Chilcot 2016a, paras. 827–28; Dixon 2025).

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Akam, S. 2021. *The Changing of the Guard*. London: Scribe.
- Audickas, L. 2020. UK Election Statistics: 1918–2019: A Century of Elections. *House of Commons Briefing Paper 7529*.
- Barry, B. 2020. *Blood, Metal and Dust*. London: Osprey.
- Blair, T. 2010. *A Journey*. London: Hutchinson.
- Blunkett, D. 2006. *The Blunkett Tapes*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bower, T. 2016. *Broken Vows: Tony Blair The Tragedy of Power*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Boyce, D.G. 2005. *The Falklands War*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.



- Brooks, R., et al. 2021. Crisis of Command: America's Broken Civil-Military Relationship Imperils National Security. *Foreign Affairs* 100: 3.
- Brown, C. Lieutenant General. 2011. *Iraq Study Team Observations*. London.
- Campbell, A. 2012. *The Burden of Power*. London: Hutchinson.
- Chilcot, J. 2016a. *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: The Executive Summary*. London: HMSO.
- Chilcot, J. 2016b. *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Section 6.1. London: HMSO.
- Chilcot, J. 2016c. *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry*, Section 6.2. London: HMSO.
- Coates, D. and J. Krieger. 2004. *Blair's War*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cowper-Coles, S. 2011. *Cables From Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign*. London: Harper Press.
- De Waal, J. 2013. *Depending on the Right People*. London: Chatham House.
- Dixon, P., 2000. Britain's 'Vietnam Syndrome'? Public Opinion and Military Intervention from Palestine to Yugoslavia. *Review of International Studies* 26: 99–121.
- Dixon, P., 2020. Frock Coats against Brass Hats? Politicians, the Military and the War in Afghanistan. *Parliamentary Affairs* 73: 3.
- Dixon, P. 2024. "Striving to facilitate the achievement of the PIRA's aims"? The Labour Government, the Army, and the Crisis of the British State over Northern Ireland 1972-76. History (forthcoming).
- Dixon, P. 2025. *The Militarisation of British Democracy: The Iraq and Afghan Wars and the Rise of Authoritarianism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Elliott, C. Major General (retd.). 2014. *High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Elliott, C. 2016. The Chilcot Report. *The RUSI Journal* 161: 4.
- Fairweather, J. 2012. *A War of Choice: The British in Iraq 2003–09*. London: Vintage.
- Fairweather, J. 2014. *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War or the Peace in Afghanistan*. London: Vintage.
- Farrell, T. 2017. *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan*. London: Bodley Head.
- Foreign Affairs Committee. 2010. 'The UK's Foreign Policy Approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan—Minutes of Evidence'.
- Forster, A. 2006. *Armed Forces and Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Freedman, L. 2017. On Military Advice. *The RUSI Journal* 162: 3.
- Freedman, L. 2019. Political Impatience and Military Caution. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44: 91–116.
- Freedman, L. 2022. *Command*. London: Allen Lane.
- Gates, R. 2014. *Duty*. London: Allen.
- Glennon, M.J. 2015. *National Security and Double Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Healey, D. 1990. *The Time of My Life*. London: Penguin.
- Huntington, S. 1957. *The Soldier and the State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kampfner, J., 2003. Blair's Wars. London: Simon & Schuster.
- King, A. 2011. Military Command in the Last Decade. *International Affairs* 87: 377–396.
- Mantav, M.G. 2021. *Inescapable Entrapments? The Civil-Military Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*. Leiden University Press: Leiden.
- Moore, C. 2013. *Margaret Thatcher*., vol. One. London: Penguin.
- Powell, J. 2010. *The New Machiavelli: How to wield power in the modern world*. London: Bodley Head.
- Porter, P. 2018. *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rawnsley, A. 2000. *Servants of the People: The Inside Story of New Labour*. London: Penguin.
- Richards, D. 2014. *Taking Command*. London: Headline.
- Seldon, A. 2004. *Blair*. London: Simon and Schuster.
- Seldon, A. 2007. *Blair Unbound*. London: Simon and Schuster.
- Seldon, Anthony, and Peter Snowdon. 2015. *Cameron at 10: The Inside Story 2010–2015*. London.
- Strachan, H. 1997. *The Politics of the British Army*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strachan, H. 2013. *The Direction of War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strachan, H., and R. Harris. 2020. The Utility of Military Force and Public Understanding in Today's Britain. *RAND Corporation*.
- Trainor, B., and M. Gordon. 2006. *Cobra II*. New York: Pantheon.

