



The British Debate

Playing The War Game

Sarah Benton explains why Britain is so keen on going to war

Britain has played no significant role in international affairs for 30 years. We assume that this is because it has not known what role to play. We have been mesmerised by Dean Acheson saying that having lost an empire, Britain has not yet found a role. But the problem is not that Britain has lost its empire. It is that it has lost its nationhood. Without that, it cannot have an international role. To be a nation, said Ernest Renan, one of its great modern theorists, the individuals who make it up must have forgotten many things. In particular, they must have forgotten the acts of violence through which it came into being; and to be a nation, its inhabitants have to have a will to be a nation.

The coming into being over the last 30 years of the political communities of Scotland, Wales, women, Afro-Caribbeans, Asians, Muslims, - each of these is premised on a freshly 'discovered' history of violence. To stay in existence, each of these communities must constantly remind us and themselves, of the violence through which they were subjugated in the first place. This is why 'the Irish never forget', why black history starts with slavery, why feminism constantly returns to male vio-

lence. Each of these rememberings subverts the nation. As for the will to be a nation: paradoxically, the Thatcherite decade of celebrating the international market over notions of the national good, of decentralising the national interest into five million privately-owned share packages, did more damage than any amount of scheming from Brussels.

We lack more than a will, and a needed oblivion; we lack even the starting point of identity: a name. Where do you live? In Wales, England, Scotland? Northern Ireland, the six counties? Britain. The United Kingdom. Great Britain. The British Isles. What other nation cannot even settle on its own name? What other nation has thrown itself so wishfully into war? Britain's war aim is not to 'liberate Kuwait'. Britain's war aim is to bring itself into being as an international player and from there back into being as Britain. The political psychology of this war is not triumphant, not even gung-ho. It is of a *willed professionalism*. The professional army is substituting for the national will. By acting professionally (dispassionate, responsible, with technical competence) Britain can, through its army, embrace war as a means of creating an identity for itself in today's shifty international order.

For the few months before the Gulf crisis, the political world dissolved and what existed had no clear shape; its familiar forms - the nations and empires - had no clear trajectory. It gave us, as observers, a curious, weightless sense of detachment. Where did we, British citizens, ex-communists, old new leftists, soldiers for socialism, feminist crusaders, belong in this? It was exhilarating too, as though possibility had suddenly been released from the grip of necessity and we could imagine the world we wanted.

Public life in Britain and America was curiously still. American experts on foreign affairs tiptoed round Europe. If they huffed and they puffed would they blow it all down? It was clear the United States was being left out. Was this a good thing, or a bad thing? Thatcher was making a lot of noise about British sovereignty. Americans increasingly heard her cries as the bellowing of the dying bull. In the rush to change, writes Jeane Kirkpatrick in the United States' most prestigious foreign affairs journal, President Bush was a passive spectator. If the world was changing, this was entirely due to the Soviet Union renouncing its 'will to conquest'.

The axis of the great shift in the world ran between Bonn and Moscow, and if Britain was nominally closer to it all than the United States, its political leaders had even less to say. Conservatives shared the Kirkpatrick view of foreign affairs; it was the Soviet Union's will to conquest which had shaped the entire world, plucking into being the entire defensive structure behind which we lived. This is an astonishing view of the world; a perversely

reversed megalomania; an assertion that all forms of political and military life were brought into existence by the grand design of the Soviet Union so that if those designs suddenly cease to be hostile, then all that is solid in the West will melt.

Now, six months after the Gulf crisis began, it is as though the world has solidified again. We know where we are. There is a war on, Britain is fighting on the right side. It is standing firm with the United States, in its clipped and undemonstrative sort of way. It has a sensible, pragmatic Conservative leader. The French are behaving in a reliably shifty way. The Germans, thank God, are out of it. We know our place in this world. It's a fantasy. It's a delusion. It's a ludicrous game of make-believe and let's pretend, and the biggest let's pretend is that Britain is fighting a war of principle, on its own terms, for purposes which the people understand and support, and for *aims which can be realised by war*. How come the vast majority of the population appears to want to play make-believe? Because we are accustomed to watching public life as a drama.

Our drift out of nationhood - a collective, willed political identity - into a reality we could not shape nor even talk about began a long time ago. Perhaps when we stopped asking what it meant to be fighting a war in Northern Ireland. Britain has been fighting a civil war for 20 years, and we all pretend it hasn't. Perhaps when we continued ordering, often secretly, the most expensive armaments in the world. Perhaps when we fondly remembered the second world war - and engaged in a massive collective oblivion about the causes and costs of that war. Unlike other European nations, Britain has produced no probing retrospectives on its attitudes towards fascism, Jews and war. Or perhaps it was when Margaret Thatcher locked the prime minister away behind heavy iron gates.

One IRA bomb attack later and what was derided as her paranoia is already assimilated as normal public life. We have lost our sense of how extraordinarily abnormal public life has become. Every political leader is locked inside an impenetrable bubble and wafted around by a gigantic retinue of security advisers to keep us out. Only the methods and technologies of security advisers can tell who is and who is not a terrorist, a traitor, what is a civilian shelter, what is a central communications bunker.

When the conduct of public life is *structured* by professional security advisers, its form determined by anti-terrorism measures, then 'normal' democratic rules are not in command. The Gulf war has intensified the domination of public life by 'security' rules. It has also revealed the terrible nostalgia for an era when the rules of democracy were suspended, and instead

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military rules were in command. And the requirements of democracy for full information could be quashed as a threat to national security.

We see this every day at the one point at which British civilians connect to the Gulf: through the media. Those who persistently complain that the media coverage is at worst treacherous, and at best 'an unwitting tool of Saddam Hussein's propaganda machine' would be happy for civilian life to be run according to military rules.

It seems self-evident that war, and the authority of the military and security men, have rendered most of us mere passive spectators because we are powerless to change the course of the story; but also because in the end the war, like national public life, has been put on *for our benefit*. It is we, the spectators, who are expected to again experience what it is to be one nation, all pulling together. And by 'supporting' the war we can feel we are exercising responsibility for the state of the world. Now there's a delusion.

The rhetoric of responsibility has provided Bush and Baker with their new role. Going to war, said Bush, was America taking responsibility for the new world order. And that is the significance of James Baker's speech announcing that the United States would *take responsibility* for rebuilding Iraq and Kuwait. America had lost a role (defending the free world against the Soviet Union) and instantly re-invented another; taking responsibility for the free world. The US, even more than Britain, has had to propel itself into international roles in order to create the illusion of being a united nation-state. This is more of an illusion than it is for Britain because there is even less semblance in the US of centralised, national government. As in Britain, only more so, the United States' search for an intentional role (being responsible) is a search for its own nationhood.

And thus, war is safe, is secure. It pulls into being solid structures. Perhaps we have entered an era of permanent war. Like the cold war, it is, as Mary Kaldor has defined it, an imaginary war, only it has more substance. Orwell imagined it in 1984; permanent war between the three great regions of the new world order; the necessary structure for a wholly illusory public life. On the whole, this is to the great benefit of government, especially conservative governments which thrive on secrecy, paranoia, a paternalistic control of information and protecting us from outside harm. Hence they accede happily to the alarm about terrorist threats.

For hasn't this war been of immense gain to Bush and Major? Bush, the man who could not handle domestic politics, could not cope with his Republican Party in the budget, had displayed not the slightest interest in the worsening problems of poverty in the United States, could be freed to play war. How convenient. He should have a war that went on forever. O