

Book Review: The Development of British Defence Policy: Blair, Brown and Beyond

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Matthew Partridge reviews an edited collection of works set to be a fixture on the reading lists of those studying British foreign policy.

The Development of British Defence Policy: Blair, Brown and Beyond. Edited by David Brown. [Ashgate](#). August 2010.

An inexperienced leader comes to power in an election where the only defence-related issue has been a [brief skirmish over replacing the Royal yacht](#). Weeks after his victory *The Times* [reports](#) that he is still “ready to seek advice from all quarters on his foreign policy”, including a predecessor from another party.

Despite this inauspicious start, Tony Blair was to see his ten-year period as Prime Minister dominated by multiple military interventions, ranging from working with the US to eject Serbian troops from Kosovo, to preventing Sierra Leone from turning into another Rwanda, and liberating Iraq and Afghanistan from toxic regimes. Even though Gordon Brown clearly preferred domestic policy to foreign affairs, his three years in office saw [public rows](#) over the provision of material to the effort in Afghanistan and tabloid fury over the [alleged insensitivity](#) to the mother of a fallen soldier.

Faced with such a wealth of potential topics, David Brown, Senior Lecturer at [Royal Military Academy Sandhurst](#), has decided to focus on questions of doctrine, governance and equipment, areas that have received relatively less coverage. Although limiting its wider appeal, this makes it invaluable for the expert audience that *The Development of British Defence Policy* is aimed at. As General Omar Bradley, one time U.S Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, put it: “amateurs study strategy, professionals study logistics”.

All of the twelve chapters are well-researched, strongly argued and informative. However, while most of the book is written from a neutral academic perspective, perhaps reflecting the fact that most of the contributors are (or were) connected to the Armed Forces, three chapters stand out as supporting very definite points of view. Steven Haines argues that the intervention in Iraq effectively killed the “[Blair Doctrine](#)”, Stephen Deakin contends that the two Labour administrations let the private sector play too great a role in British defence, while Anthony Forster is concerned about civil-military relations.

Stephan Haines’ argument that the ‘War on Terror’ represented a shift away from humanitarianism back to an emphasis on the national interest certainly challenges the conventional wisdom, which emphasises the interventionist nature of post-September 11 policy. However, while Tony Blair emphasised WMDs and downplayed regime change, in the run up to the war in Iraq, Britain and America’s decision to remain in the country demonstrated that democracy promotion was a central motivation. Similarly, while Haines correctly points out that the government missed an opportunity to stop genocide in Sudan, it was only the intervention in Iraq which made such a move seem a possibility.

Stephen Deakin makes several effective criticisms of Labour’s attempts to extend public sector reform, and outsourcing, to the military. In particular he identifies the extent to which the controversial private finance initiative became a badly disguised form of borrowing, and the conflict between the ethos of the private sector and military. The only criticism is that, like many non-economists who discuss this subject, Deakin doesn’t mention Ronald Coase’s pioneering [article](#) on the nature of the firm, which sets out the framework for understanding how companies (and institutions) decide what parts of their operations to carry out internally (and therefore which to outsource).

Anthony Forster’s chapter argues that civil-military relations were compromised by the incorporation of the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) into British law in 1998, the costs of running simultaneous operations in Afghanistan and Iraq while trying to keep defence costs under control, and the increasing public visibility of senior military figures. While all of these conclusions can be challenged, he provides a comprehensive survey of the issues, although the chapter’s sixteen pages are far too short for any extended



discussion. Consequently Forster only briefly refers to some of the more egregious examples, such as General Richard Dannatt's unprecedented interviews to the [BBC](#) and [Daily Mail](#) in October 2006.

The Development of British Defence Policy is surely set to be a fixture on the reading lists of those studying British foreign policy, military strategy or British politics. Additionally, the contributions of Forster, Deakin and Haines are likely to be of interest to the more general reader.

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