

# Book Review: British Generals in Blair's Wars

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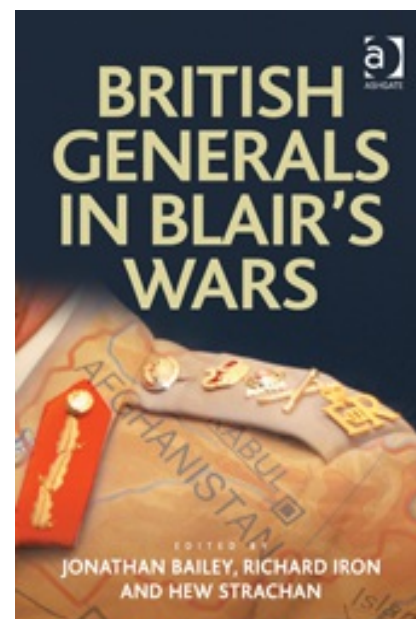
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In *British Generals in Blair's Wars*, senior British officers, predominantly from the army, reflect on their experience of campaigning. The authors explore how the ideas of a generation of senior British officers developed in a period of rapid change, against a background of intense political controversy. **Peter Lee** writes that this book prompts important questions about the very nature and purpose of the British armed forces in the twenty-first century, as well as their relationship with other government departments.



**British Generals in Blair's Wars. Jonathan Bailey, Richard Iron and Hew Strachan (eds.). Ashgate. August 2013.**

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With the end of UK military operations in Afghanistan lurching into view on the political horizon, this book offers a timely, unique, General's-eye perspective on more than a decade of almost continual British Army operations in what have been grouped together under the rubric, 'Blair's Wars'. Through a series of eye-witness accounts – snapshots of individual campaigns at fixed points in time – a picture emerges of how, in the words of the editors, the generals played the hands that politicians and circumstance dealt them. The result is a fascinating cocktail of individual determination and honour, institutional loyalty (occasionally to the point of wilful blindness), creative and nuanced analysis, and, thankfully rarely, hubris, naiveté and a certain detachment from reality.

As the world looks on in horror at the unfolding humanitarian tragedy in Syria, siren voices call out for *someone* to do *something* – and by that they usually mean military intervention by the US, UK and other NATO allies. This book serves as a damning indictment of Tony Blair's *something-must-be-done* approach to so-called humanitarian intervention, which consistently confused political wishful thinking with clear, hard-headed strategic planning – leaving the armed forces to make the best of a number of bad or impossible situations. Tim Cross (Chapter 5) sets out the extent of the problem in the build-up to the 2003 Iraq War: 'I saw no evidence of a clear strategic-level end-state for what we were about – the omens were not good ... No declared end-state; no campaign plan.' He compounds his critique, describing how a briefing to the Chief of the General staff entitled *Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory* 'did not go down well.' These five words would appear to be a metaphor for any and every attempt to bring a degree of political or military honesty to Blair's Wars – especially in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Looking at these campaigns through the eyes of a number of generals it becomes apparent that one of the greatest inhibitors of effective political and military leadership was a lack of honesty and forthrightness. Most commonly this is attributed to Blair and the way he is seen as having deceived the British people in making his case for the Iraq intervention. On the evidence of this book, however, a number of generals who commanded in Iraq and Afghanistan – though not all – were also guilty of deception: of deceiving themselves about the situation they were in. Chapter after chapter reveals a cadre of officers who were straining every sinew in the pursuit of victories that could not –

cannot – be delivered: for their country and the politicians whose short-termism is the enemy of coherent strategy; for the Army whose existence is indivisible from their own; and perhaps for themselves – the successful culmination of a life's work.



Stop the War Demonstration, QEII Conference Centre, London. Credit: [lewishamdreamer](#). CC BY-NC 2.0

The more perceptive generals appear to have accepted their poisoned chalices with a high degree of awareness and did their best in the most trying of circumstances; Justin Maciejewski's summary of the strategic context of the Iraq War and its implications provides a subtle, yet brutal, critique of UK government policy (p. 157-62). In contrast, one or two others come across as almost bemused that their enemies, especially Iraqi and Taliban insurgents and their Al-Qaeda-inspired co-belligerents, chose to fight in ways that were not anticipated and difficult to engage, let alone defeat. Self-deception led some to fail to recognise the type of wars they were fighting. Few seem to grasp the distinction between fighting with manoeuvrable forces (which they did) and fighting a manoeuvrist campaign (which they largely did not). When insurgents set the time, duration and tempo of engagements – which they commonly did in Iraq and still do in Afghanistan – it is they who fight the manoeuvrist war, leaving UK and allied commanders to rely on overwhelming firepower *in response*: in other words, fighting an attritional campaign. Meanwhile, there appears to be little acknowledgement that over Afghanistan, for example, opposition forces have been more successful in undermining the UK's most vulnerable centre of gravity – the support of the British population for continued UK involvement – than vice versa.

All of the above – especially the notable differences between the generals in analytical ability, self-awareness and political sensitivity – raises questions about the selection process and preparation for high command. Kiszely argues that preparing for an operational level appointment 'is more about education than training' (p. 129), given the complexity and unpredictability of modern operations. My question is this: how successful is high-level education going to be if in order for officers to reach the exalted ranks they have to navigate a promotion process predicated on demonstrating characteristics at the tactical level that can mitigate against individual creativity and critical thinking: namely, 'obedience, loyalty, conformity and discipline' (p. 130)?

This book provides a highly thought-provoking insight not only into the contribution of key generals to Blair's wars, but into the execution of command and leadership, and the complexities of the military-political nexus. Further, it prompts important questions about the very nature and purpose of the British armed forces in the twenty-first century, as well as their relationship with other government departments. I highly recommend *British Generals in Blair's Wars* to anyone interested in the military, political or foreign policy dimensions of the UK's recent military interventions. More importantly, it should be compulsory reading for every prime minister, cabinet minister, Member of Parliament

and senior military officer for the next two decades. For the American reader, this book holds up a mirror – perhaps an unwelcome mirror at times – to the actions of US political and military leaders in the recent wars that the UK has supported. The Scottish poet Robert Burns once wrote: ‘Oh would some Power the gift to give us, to see ourselves as others see us.’ This book provides such a gift, though whether that gift will be welcomed is another matter.

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**Dr Peter Lee** is a Portsmouth University Principal Lecturer in Military and Leadership Ethics based at Royal Air Force College Cranwell, where he specialises in the politics and ethics of war and military intervention, the ethics and ethos of remotely piloted aircraft operations, and the politics and ethics of identity. In November 2012 Dr Lee transferred from King’s College London after four years in the Air Power Studies Division and continues to lecture across a range of diverse subjects, from international relations to terrorism and insurgency. In 2012 he published his first book entitled *Blair’s Just War: Iraq and the Illusion of Morality*. From 2001 to 2008 Dr Lee served as a Royal Air Force chaplain. [Read more reviews by Peter.](#)