

# THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWNING

## *Policy, rhetoric and public bewilderment*

### 3. Not in my name

You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy.

You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word; victory; victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terrors, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival.<sup>i</sup>

Well, I can't do the voice—as you can hear—but that of course is Winston Churchill. It's May 13<sup>th</sup> 1940 and he has been Prime Minister for three days. This is his first address as Premier to the House of Commons. It is also the fourth day of *Fall Gelb*, the German invasion of France. As Churchill speaks, the French defence is breaking at Sedan. Dunkirk is less than a fortnight away.

The passage I've just quoted has the structural clarity of a sonnet, or a prayer. There are two parts—stanzas, I want to call them—the first asking and answering the question *what is our policy?*, the second the question *what is our aim?* The first is controlled by the repeated word *war*, the second by the repeated word *victory*, though perhaps the single most important word in the entire passage is the very last one: *survival*. It's rich in rhetorical effect: *anacoenosis* (rhetorical question); *alliteration* (*wage war*, that *God can give us*); *enumeratio* (the listing first of the ways in which the war must be fought, then of the challenges that must be faced—cost, fear, difficulty and exhaustion—before victory can be secured; *tricolon crescens* (those three *victory* clauses which progressively grow both in length and emphasis); and so on. Yet it never feels studied or contrived, but immediate, unforced, fluid; the repetition, alliteration and the short, spare clauses driving both the speaker and listener forward.

There's one phrase—the 'monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime'—which reminds us of the Churchillian orotundity that even contemporaries found old-fashioned, pompous even, though at this moment it is both comforting and rather magnificent, deftly anchoring what Churchill has to say about the present crisis into a context, not just of history, but of a version of that history in which this country has always recognised a chivalrous duty to oppose tyranny and evil.

And that's what strikes me most about this passage and about the 'blood, sweat, toil and tears' speech as a whole. This is not a speech about a moral crusade as such. The United Kingdom is at war because it has entered into a defence pact with other countries and some of its allies have been invaded. Churchill is rallying the Commons and the nation for immediate and entirely practical reasons: the enemy is racing across France and the threats of military catastrophe, invasion and national destruction are real and imminent.

And yet the moral dimension—and the strength that comes from knowing that this is *also* a righteous fight for civilisation against unparalleled evil—is completely continuous with the practical.

Of course we know much more than Churchill's listeners did about the war that Britain would fight for another five years. We know that, while the justification for waging the war—*ius ad bellum*—would never be seriously questioned, things would be done by British forces, the bombing of Dresden and other German cities for instance, which would certainly raise questions of justice in the conduct of that war—*ius in bello*. In other words, we know that the Second World War fits into an intricate and vexed argument about just and unjust wars that goes back, through Aquinas and Augustine, to Rome.

We also know that the fiction of World War II—the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, say or, from the other side of the Atlantic, *Catch-22*—would often express the same themes of absurdity, waste, horror and despair we associate with the literature of World War I, and that these things would indeed be part of the experience of those who fought in this war.

We know, if we've read Corelli Barnett's *The Audit of War* for instance, that the war effort would sometimes reveal, not just British political and industrial incompetence, but disunity and division.

We know finally that some of Churchill's own, newly-formed Cabinet would soon be making the case for suing for peace with Hitler.

But none of this—nor the honourable objections of a minority of pacifists and conscientious objectors—diminish the sense we have, when we listen to Churchill's words, of a moment both of supreme emergency but also of supreme clarity: a moment when leader and people come together, and the pragmatic and the moral fuse together and a resolution is made to go on fighting, uncertain of success but certain at least of the reasons and the moral case for fighting it.

What a long shadow that certainty casts. How difficult for any subsequent prime minister to stand at the Despatch Box and achieve that level of clarity.

Let's listen to one trying. The location is again the House of Commons, the date is now 18<sup>th</sup> March 2003 and Tony Blair is opening the debate into whether this country should join the United States and other allies in invading Iraq. The speech best remembered from this day is the resignation speech made by the late Robin Cook, the author of the Blair government's 'ethical

foreign policy', who had just left the cabinet because of his objections—both practical and moral—to the war. But Tony Blair's speech is itself a striking piece of oratory. This is how it begins:

At the outset I say: it is right that this house debate this issue and pass judgement. That is the democracy that is our right but that others struggle for in vain. And again I say: I do not disrespect the views of those in opposition to mine. This is a tough choice. But it is also a stark one: to stand British troops down and turn back; or to hold to the course we have set. I believe we must hold firm.<sup>ii</sup>

There is a gracious tone to this and indeed to the whole of the speech: an acknowledgement that, as he says a few sentences later, 'people who agree on everything else, disagree on this', while 'those who never agree on anything' find 'common cause'. We hear the first hint of a moral argument—whereas the United Kingdom is a country where people have the right to question and debate everything the government proposes, the citizens of Iraq are not so lucky. Next, a recognition that this is a 'tough choice', not in the Churchillian sense of a choice with painful consequences, but meaning that the choice itself is difficult to make. But this 'tough' choice is also 'stark'—perhaps the choice is finely balanced in the listener's mind but what is involved are alternatives which stand at 180 degrees to each other.

There's a little artistry in the way the choice is put. It is either to 'stand British troops down and turn back' or to 'hold to the course we have set'. So who are we? Well, this first *we*, the *we* that has set the course so far, is clearly Tony Blair himself and his government. But then he goes on to say: 'I believe we must hold firm.' And this second *we* must include not just his government but his listeners, everyone who will be voting in the Commons and, by extension, the nation. It's easy to miss the distinction and to hear the following meaning: *we-everyone must hold firm to the course that we-everyone have already set*. Under this meaning, to stand the troops down is to go back on a decision that we had all already more or less made.

The simplicity and power of the short sentence 'I believe we must hold firm' stand out though. There's no hint of vaingloriousness about it, or aggression: indeed the words 'hold firm' smack in the end of defence—of our own and the world's security—rather than attack. The 'I believe' is important too. This is a statement by the leader of a government, but it is also explicitly a personal statement. Knowing how divided the country is, and his own party, Tony Blair is laying his own political judgement and reputation on the line. Like Churchill, Blair has practical policies and aims to lay out, but *I believe we must hold firm* hints that this is also about a question of courage or the lack of it, a question of right and wrong.

But the case he then has to set out is far more complex and nuanced than Winston Churchill's. It's a story not of a direct attack on British allies and forces and—who knows?—soon the British homeland but a convoluted tale of

UN resolutions and weapons-inspectors and diplomatic manoeuvrings. The questions it seeks to answer are not as simple as *what is our policy?* or *what is our aim?* but *have we exhausted all diplomatic ways of ensuring that Saddam Hussein comply with Resolution 1441?* and *are the consequences of his non-compliance so serious that they justify the use of force against him?* Tony Blair will answer yes to both these questions.

Behind these questions and answers is an unspoken but coherent strategic doctrine—the doctrine of *liberal interventionism* which the Prime Minister had previously articulated in a speech in Chicago in 1999<sup>iii</sup> and to which, not just Kosovo, but the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq clearly conformed. In many ways, this doctrine would turn out to be what Tony Blair and New Labour *meant* by an ‘ethical foreign policy’ and he would stick to it consistently throughout his premiership. We note though how much more *sophisticated* it is—and how much *harder to explain*—than the case for national self-defence in 1940.

Nonetheless, in the midst of this painstaking exposition, the ghost of Churchill makes an appearance. Is Saddam Hussein another Adolf Hitler? Are those who oppose the war in 2003 like the appeasers of the 1930s? Tony Blair’s answer is a subtle one. He protects himself by dismissing what he calls ‘glib and foolish comparisons with the 1930s’ and explicitly says that ‘No one here is an appeaser’, but he nonetheless immediately goes on to talk about 1930s appeasement at some length, his argument being that we shouldn’t blame the appeasers then because—unlike we who have the benefit of hindsight—they didn’t know how dangerous Hitler was. This leads him straight to a discussion of Saddam Hussein and all the evidence we *already* have of just how dangerous he is. Elsewhere he offers this Churchillian insight:

[...] the world has to learn all over again that weakness in the face of a threat from a tyrant, is the surest way not to peace but—unfortunately—to conflict.<sup>iv</sup>

Eighty years on, hindsight, revisionism and modern scepticism have done little to blunt or tarnish the impact of Winston Churchill’s rhetoric.

Just nine years later, it is impossible to read Tony Blair’s speech in the way it was intended to be heard at the time. His argument rests centrally, indeed almost exclusively, on Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and the manifold dangers they pose: direct danger to his neighbours and the region and to us, if the terrorists with whom he colludes get their hands on them; and indirect danger, because if we don’t take on Saddam and neutralise *his* weapons, other bad regimes will believe they can keep or acquire ones of their own. The term WMD appears fourteen times in the speech, and individual WMD—VX, anthrax, mustard gas, sarin, botulinum toxin, radiological bombs and so on—many more times.

None of them were ever found. That is what we know now. And that knowledge eviscerates the speech. To us now, it is a speech without a foundation, a speech almost literally about nothing—which nonetheless led to a war. This is *not* to reach a verdict about whether or not the speech was delivered in good faith—in other words, whether Tony Blair *believed* at the time that Saddam had WMD—that’s a quite separate issue. It is simply to say that what we might call the *objective* moral justification set out for going to war has vanished.

In his passage about the 30s, Tony Blair suggested that we shouldn’t blame the appeasers because it was only later that the scale of the menace of Hitler was revealed. But now we’re dealing with the opposite situation. In this case, it was only later that it became apparent how much *smaller* the threat from Saddam was than had been claimed at the time. Other reasons for toppling Saddam Hussein could and would be adduced—he was a tyrant and a mass-murderer, he destabilised the region, a democratic Iraq could be a force for good in the Middle East—but they do not form a significant part of this, the Prime Minister’s case for going to war *at the point when the decision had to be made*.

Over the past two days, I’ve looked at two ways in which I’ve claimed that our public language has become less effective in helping the public to understand and engage with the big issues of the day: first because of some interesting developments in the *language* itself and second because of the way *authority* is treated, disputed, extended and distorted.

This evening I want to suggest how we might respond to these developments. But before that, I’m going to touch briefly on what I take to be a third source of potential bewilderment, which is what happens when *should* enters the sentence—in other words, when politicians and others feel its necessary or appropriate to add a moral dimension to their arguments for a given piece of public policy.

There are of course debates where moral argument is characteristically to the fore—so called ‘values’ issues like abortion and the debate about gay or same-sex marriage. Here the moral case for or against is often spelled out by advocates explicitly, though the debates are often marked by what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has called ‘conceptual incommensurability’<sup>v</sup>, by which he means, I think, that the two sides in the debate proceed from premises and, behind them, world-views which are so radically different that what follows is not a conventional argument at all, but the disconnected interplay of cases, each of which may be consistent in its own terms, but which never touch each other and can therefore never be resolved.

The internal logic of *a woman’s right to choose* and *the sanctity of human life* may be perfect. Bringing these two logics together in the hope of reaching a definitive conclusion is impossible and thus the argument is, to use MacIntyre’s word, literally ‘interminable’.

Interestingly—and this parallels a contrast I noted in my first lecture—this incommensurability and interminability is much more visible and established in American public debate than in this country. In the UK, there's often a strong practical or technocratic element to the debate—a discourse around the number of weeks of pregnancy before abortion should be banned, for instance—which increases the possibility of compromise and resolution at least *pro tem*. Even in the British context though, I think it's possible to detect signs of a growing *absolutism*, and consequently a growing *polarity*, in the ways such issues are discussed.

But in much of public policy, the moral sits alongside the practical, alongside political, economic, technical, geo-strategic and potentially many other considerations and its presence can either be overt or covert and can move from one to other. If there are differences or divisions on what is right and wrong, then—unlike in pure cases like abortion—they can lie dormant until something happens to awaken them.

The example I'm going to examine this evening is one where all of these dimensions form part of the debate, though for reasons which I come to, the moral dimension seldom disappears entirely from view and often, to many members of the public, feels like the most dimension of all. The example is war: the decision to go to war; and, if war comes, the debate about the conduct of that war.

What's striking about so much of the modern rhetoric of war in the UK is the extent to which it relies on a set of archetypal paradigms. Churchill in the 1930s and 40s is part of a broader paradigm of World War II as the definitive 'good war'. George Bush Senior was reading Churchill when Saddam invaded Kuwait: it was natural for him to paint Saddam in Hitlerian colours just as Tony Blair would, at least implicitly, a decade or so later. Anthony Eden would do the same to Gamal Nasser in the build-up to Suez in the 50s.

But the Second World War can be played the other way as well. Perhaps we—or at least those leaders who argue for military intervention—are the bloody-thirsty aggressors, war criminals even. If you doubt this, take a look at [tonyblairwarcriminal.com](http://tonyblairwarcriminal.com) or [arrestblair.org](http://arrestblair.org). Then there are the wars of the imperial era, wars which—at least in this simplified version of history—were just about geographical and economic gain. Perhaps the oil-fields of Iraq are the *real* reason why in 2003, George W Bush and Tony Blair were determined to press ahead with the invasion. So: blood lust, or imperialist greed.

But the other major lens through which modern wars are often viewed in this country is a more interesting one: it's the Great War—a war whose popular narrative encompasses heroism, sacrifice, nobility on the battlefield *and* reckless, incompetent generals and a political class who, for no very good reason, slaughtered a generation. It was famously in Germany that a stab-in-

the-back myth took root in the years after the war, but that same sense of betrayal by the elites also characterises the collective memory of the war in Britain too. Arrogance, over-confidence, death through bureaucratic or political miscalculation or a cavalier disregard for reality: these things make the Great War paradigm somehow more modern than the one we associate with World War II.

And you bump into it everywhere. In April 2006, Dr John Reid said a few words at a press conference in Kabul about the British Army's deployment into Helmand province. He was contrasting the aim of this employment—which was intended to be focused on reconstruction, security and the building of strong local institutions—with earlier, more combat-focused or 'kinetic' phases of the Afghan campaign. In that context, he said:

We're in the south to help and protect the Afghan people to reconstruct their economy and democracy. We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years time without firing one shot.<sup>vi</sup>

But that phrase 'without firing one shot' is a resonant and oddly reminiscent one. It has a 1914, *Home by Christmas* quality to it and, although it is not actually an expression of optimism—it is not a prediction and Dr Reid cannot have remotely imagined that that the deployment would proceed without any military action—it can easily be made to sound like one. Here's Simon Jenkins writing some eighteen months later in *The Guardian*:

John Reid, the then defence secretary, even talked of completing the Helmand deployment "without a shot being fired". [...] The whole Helmand expedition has from the start been a suicide mission.<sup>vii</sup>

We might notice the inversion. Now it is 'without a shot being fired', which at least to my ear, gives it even more of the sense of an over-confident First World War general. For years now Dr Reid has energetically tried to convince the world that, in his words, 'I never at any stage expressed the hope, expectation, promise or pledge that we would leave Afghanistan without firing a shot'<sup>viii</sup>—he once phoned me at home when he heard someone on the BBC suggesting that he had, and I acted on the phone-call—but this is the kind of narrative pull which is almost impossible to counter entirely.

On Monday, I talked about the compressed phrases—Sarah Palin's *death panel*, for instance—that can take over a debate. Dr Reid's problem was rather one of *meanings*: instead of his own original meaning, a new meaning had been imposed on his words, a meaning whose connection to national memory was so powerful that it took on a life of its own.

In March this year, the *Lancashire Telegraph* reported the death in action in Afghanistan of Sergeant Nigel Coupe from the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment. Here are some of the comments that were posted on the paper's website under that story:

This now brings the total killed to 400. When he was Defence Secretary John Reid boasted that we would be in and out of Afghanistan without a shot being fired. I wonder how he can sleep at night.

The military have done a fantastic job over there at great sacrifice. More than can be said for the politicians. The sad thing is there have never been any casualties amongst the Westminster regiment.

I wear my poppy with pride every year and pray for those that don't come back. [...] RIP good lads: I for one will not forget.<sup>ix</sup>

We're very close to the First World War here. Dr Reid's comment has become a 'boast' and now it's not just about the Helmand deployment but the whole Afghan war. The phrase is now 'fixed' in its inverted form. And there's that jibe, which could have come from any decade in the past century, about 'the Westminster regiment.'

I'm not the only one to have become intrigued by the after-life of the distorted version of John Reid's quote. This April, Julian Borger wrote a piece, again *The Guardian*, which pointed up the misquotation but then went on:

... but the myth does nonetheless encapsulate a deeper truth about the blithe optimism with which the Blair government sent the first deployment of 3,000 soldiers into Helmand in early 2006 [...].<sup>x</sup>

That phrase about a *myth* which nonetheless *encapsulates a deeper truth* is a clear sign—at least to me—that we're heading full-steam into what I've called the *cloud of unknowing*, but the thing that most interests me about this sentence are the two words *blithe optimism*. While Borger certainly goes on to catalogue over-confidence among the military, the reasons he lists for why the politicians agreed to the deployment do not include optimism. There was, he says, group-think around the inevitability of the deployment; a sense that Tony Blair might be embarrassed at an international conference on Afghanistan if the decision had not been made; finally there was 'extremely limited' knowledge about conditions on the ground in Helmand.

All of these things may be true and may indeed explain a decision which led to an immensely difficult and bloody experience for the thousands of British troops who have ended up serving there. But none of them support the phrase *blithe optimism* among the politicians, and it's difficult to avoid the suspicion that the words are there—and especially that Edwardian-sounding



adjective *blithe*—because they firmly bolt the decision, and the politicians who made, to the Ur-myth of the First World War: *lions led by donkeys*<sup>xi</sup>; ‘Never such innocence again’<sup>xii</sup>; and Wilfred Owen’s Abram who ‘slew his son,/ And half the seed of Europe, one by one.’<sup>xiii</sup>

So a sentiment which began as an attempt by British minister to assure Afghans that his government’s intentions in Helmand Province were to do as little fighting and as much reconstructing as possible ends up morphing into an apparent proof-text of ignorance and callousness. And the fact he didn’t actually say it is seemingly irrelevant—even to those who *know* he didn’t say it.

Avarice, recklessness, murderousness, stupidity, a series of historical paradigms that can carry you away like a rip-tide—and an expectation grounded in the Second World War experience that we fight wars in a Manichean moral universe in which we are either on the side of good or of evil. With all these pressures playing on them, no wonder modern politicians often end up in contortions as they try satisfactorily to integrate a moral imperative into fiendishly complicated practical policy considerations.

So what *are* our military objectives in Afghanistan? Given how many politicians I could have quoted from either side of the Atlantic, it seems rather churlish to pick on one, but here is the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, Harriet Harman, laying them out in the House of Commons on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 2009:

It is important to ensure that in the mountainous regions surrounding Afghanistan and Pakistan, we do not have a crucible for the development of terrorism which threatens people not only in those countries but in the wider region and, indeed, the whole world. This mission is also important for the education of people in Afghanistan. Our troops [...] are paving the way for economic development and a more secure democracy as well as security in the region and the world.<sup>xiv</sup>

Well, it’s a belt-and-braces list. Despite that topographically puzzling but heroic-sounding reference to ‘the mountainous regions surrounding Afghanistan and Pakistan’, we grasp the first war aim at once: it is to interdict the terrorists—though now, eight years on from 9/11, the mission has broadened and, in a way, diffused into a global policeman role targetted at the two countries, the region and the whole world. In contrast to Tony Blair’s Iraq speech and indeed Winston Churchill’s ‘blood, sweat, toil and tears’, *national* self-defence no longer represents the core of this war aim.

But our military objectives—and *military* objectives were what Ms Harman was being asked to explain—also apparently include education, economic

development, democracy. Now all of those things no doubt depend on a stable security situation in Afghanistan, one that perhaps could only be achieved by significant numbers of ISAF troops, yet it's not just a long list but one which stretches the use of military force a long way from simple war-fighting. As one American commander said to me in Afghanistan, an M16 is not a lot of use when it comes to making the cultural case for women's education.

By the 2012 presidential race, American war aims in Afghanistan would come full circle, back to the days following 9/11. As far as both President Obama and Candidate Romney were concerned, the US wished Afghanistan well and would continue to support it no doubt with aid, training, technology and diplomacy. But the core war aim—interdiction of terrorists who could attack America and allies—had been achieved and, because of that, the western powers could now plan their withdrawal. Everything else—security, education, economic development, democracy—in the end would be left in the hands of the Afghans.

So why, just three years earlier, was Harriet Harman and her government's list of military so long? Eight years into a war to which both the UK and, at least at this moment in 2009, the US were still fully committed, a kind of moral deficit had opened up in the case. Immediate self-defence was not as compelling as it was at the start and other, previously ancillary good causes were needed to top up the moral justification for the war.

It's easy to dismiss this *topping up* exercise as cynical: politicians determined to carry on with their war come what may, and prepared to use any excuse to justify it. This is exactly the charge that was made about the allies in their conduct of their war in Iraq: that, when it became clear that WMD, the original *casus belli*, were unlikely to be found, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair seemed moved on to other justifications for continuing the military intervention.

But the same broadening of war aims has also characterised the Afghan war, a war whose original justification—that Afghanistan had hosted the terrorists who attacked America—has never been undermined in the way that Iraqi WMD were. If, in simplistic terms, Iraq was for many a 'bad' war right from the start, Afghanistan at least began as a 'good' war, or at least a war whose origins in self-defence were so clear-cut and well-evidenced that there was little protest when it began.

What happened in Afghanistan was not the discovery that the war had been launched on a false prospectus, but something older and more familiar: domestic fatigue at a war that never seems to end; a sense among the political leadership that, despite the difficulties, there are cogent reasons of state to press on; and the need, therefore, to flesh out new or additional reasons for why it is right—not just practically, but *morally*—to be there. And because some factors—the consideration for instance in the case of the UK of the relationship with the US—are difficult to justify from this moral perspective,

it's probably inevitable that humanitarian and developmental goals should be the first to make the cut.

Some will argue that this is a cynical gesture, but it needn't be. A political leader may *always* have believed that there were multiple justifications and potential benefits for fighting a given war—just as with any other policy choice—even if there was a single overriding one to begin with. If that is the case, it's not obvious that it must be cynical to mention one justification at one point and a second at another.

But you can see the problem. Even if always delivered with good faith and the best interests of the country at heart, a list of war aims and justifications which changes and evolves runs the risk of confusing not just the public but the military leaders who are tasked with actually achieving them.

It's not that morally simple wars are impossible to imagine. For many, though of course not everyone, the UK's campaign to eject Argentina and recover the Falkland Islands was exactly that. And if this country ever again faced the existential threat that confronted it in 1940, we can certainly envisage a rhetoric as direct and compelling as that of Winston Churchill.

But of course those are not typically the kind of military intervention which western nations have to contemplate. The ones which they *do*—Iraq, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and the wars that nearly never were, like Kosovo, and never were, like Rwanda—are as complex as any other pieces of modern policy formulation. Explaining the case for and against presents potentially all the problems I have explored over the past two evenings, but with this additional challenge: that at any time the debate may move abruptly into a purely moral sphere and your decision—to intervene or, as in the case of Rwanda, *not* to intervene—may be subjected to a moral test. Is it surprising that modern politicians should strive hard to make sure that, at every stage of a given conflict, the aggregate moral justification should be sufficiently high.

As a result though, both the generals in the field and the public at home may struggle to keep up. It's possible that the strategy and tactics required to build a new Afghanistan are identical with those one would employ if the primary aim was solely to interdict international terrorism in the country, but they may not be. And, more straightforwardly, a public which is giving one subtly different set of war aims after enough may simply become confused about why we are there at all.

And the controlling narratives which colour so much of public expectations about modern wars probably introduce distortions of their own. I suggested that, for many in both the US and the UK, Iraq was a 'bad' war in the way that, for many, Vietnam and Suez were bad wars; while Afghanistan began as a 'good' or at least justified war, like the Falklands say, or even the archetypal good war that took place between 1939 and 1945. Given the run of modern history, there's a danger of a particular fallacy or bias: which is that good wars end well and bad wars badly.

In reality domestic support based on a convincing moral case is only one of the factors that determine whether a war achieves its aims or not. The strength of the enemy, the achievability of the war aims, the attitude and culture of the society in which the conflict is taking place: all of these things may influence the outcome. A war can be both justified and yet unwise because of its practical difficulties; while a war can be unjustified, or only marginally justified and yet be carried to a militarily successful conclusion.

Those who defined Iraq as a bad war and Afghanistan as a good one may yet witness a better outcome in the first than in the second. But the apparent dissonance implied by such a result is very difficult for many people to accept. This is why, in the UK, the 2006 deployment of troops into Helmand plays such an important part in the framing of the story.

Not at the time, but relatively soon after, Helmand came to be seen as a turning-point: a moment when a good war grounded in self-defence become a bad one grounded in military adventurism—or, to put it another way, when a Second World War paradigm gave way to one from the First. The strange life of Dr Reid's 'without firing a single shot' is part of the rhetorical *expression* of this conceptual turn.

To a significant extent, modern popular protest movements against what are taken to be immoral wars—like the *Not in Our Name* movement which campaigned against Iraq in some Western countries—work within the framework of this and other controlling paradigms. Theirs is the language of imperialism, lies and betrayal by elites and, above all of course, the slaughter of innocents, both on and beyond the battlefield.

Of course there are third-party wars which don't fit neatly into those paradigms and which don't offer characters who can play the familiar roles in the drama. And even if the horrors of these wars—the deaths and maimings of civilians and combatants, rape and murder and war crimes of every kind—are far greater than our own wars, the moral outrage which greets them in the west has a far less bitter and vituperative quality.

It's a disputed topic, but perhaps 120,000 civilians died in the Iraq conflict in the period when western forces were in the country<sup>xv</sup>, with military deaths additional to that. It's estimated that the running conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo has claimed between 5.5 and 6 million lives so far<sup>xvi</sup>, including millions of children, and that it has involved crimes of murder, rape, torture, pillage on an unimaginable scale. There are war crimes investigations and suspects, but of course you'll be hard put to find anything on the internet which mirrors [tonyblairwarcriminal.com](http://tonyblairwarcriminal.com). It's too distant and our sense of moral engagement—of moral responsibility—too remote for that kind of animus. Our moral response to war and its human cost is more variegated and more contingent on proximity and relevance than we sometimes acknowledge.

*Not in my name* then does not represent an universal abhorrence of any aggressive war or any war crime. Instead it is focused on something rather

closer to home. After all, you would only use the phrase if you feared that something was being done in your name, or at least that the rest of the world might think it was, unless you vocally refute it.

No: for a citizen in a democracy, *Not in my name* is not just the rejection of a specific democratic decision but a rejection of that democracy's right to make such a decision on your behalf. It's a moment when moral disgust at what is being proposed overwhelms the sense of the need to obey the conventional rules of the game and, after a period of appropriate debate, accept the verdict of the majority.

It shares some of the certainty and purism of the 'values' debates I discussed earlier, debates in which practical considerations are put inside in favour of a simple, clear—and effectively unchangeable—position. What follows may well be a powerful individual or collective declaration of morality, but it is a declaration which is made by people who have already left the debating chamber.

It's not for me to say who was right or wrong in the matter of Iraq. But—in ways which, like Suez fifty years earlier, still colour British public life nearly a decade on—the decision to go to war in Iraq marks a break-point where, for many citizens, an entire diplomatic and technocratic rhetoric collapsed and the public trust and moral solidarity associated it was undermined. So they simply staged a walk-out.

Some of this of course relates to the Iraq decision itself. But it's hard not to conclude that something broader is at work as well. Again, as we saw with the changing texture of public language on Monday and the *argument from authority* on Tuesday, we see how difficult it is to construct arguments which do justice to complex, finely-balanced policy choices and yet satisfy a public need for utter simplicity and clarity when it comes to morality. That task is made more difficult still when so much of the debate is influenced by prevailing historical paradigms of limited explanatory power but overwhelming emotional force.

Winston Churchill had a harder war to *fight*, but an easier war to *explain*, in moral as well as practical terms.

Over these past three evenings, I've tried to sketch out some of the challenges which I believe confront our public language. So what, if anything, can we do about it?

Many of the forces I've talked about—technology, empirical advances in our understanding of language, Enlightenment scepticism especially about authority, the underlying complexity of the issues which public language has to explain and debate—are not reversible. There are others whose future

path we can't predict: for example, the fragmented and garbled state of many of the West's ideologies since 1989 which has had its own impact on contemporary rhetoric.

We can't wish any of this away. But I don't want you to leave you with a prevailing sense of pessimism either about our public language or our political institutions.

I *do* believe that, despite the extraordinary openness of modern media, public bewilderment and alienation are real threats. I *do* believe that the gap between those who formulate and execute public policy and the public at large is sometimes dangerously wide. I suggested on Monday that our public language might be entering a decadent phase—a phase which the ancients believed could precipitate a crisis in political institutions.

But it is also possible that what we need is a period of adjustment to our new circumstances—to more complex politics and policy choices and to an information and media environment which needs new critical tools to understand. After such an adjustment, our public language might regain its explanatory power. So what might it entail?

Let's start with the public themselves. What's called for, I believe, is a new and different kind of education in civics. We need, not just *media* literacy but *civic* literacy. In our schools, colleges and universities, we need a focus on some of the knowledge and skills—about quantity and proportion and probability—which are critical if citizens are to understand public policy choices but which so many people cannot comprehend.

We need to teach citizens how to parse public language in all its many forms, from marketing-speak to the loftiest political utterances to the use of video and other media on TV and radio, the web and social media. Exploring how public language works and developing the critical faculties with which to analyse it is the surest way of understanding it and becoming able to discriminate between real information and debate and the distortion and exaggeration I've discussed in these lectures. In other words, we need our citizens to study rhetoric again.

It's a mission which should extend beyond formal education. The BBC and the other broadcasters, our newspapers and the rest of media, cultural institutions like the British Library and the BFI all have a part to play.

And that brings me to the media and their role. We can't—and I would not want to—reverse the technological advances that have given us ubiquitous, on-all-the-time, interactive media. It brings enormous benefits as well as contributing to some of the trends I've been exploring this week. But both public and media professionals need to learn and adapt to the dynamics of this new environment.

The concentration and intensification of political rhetoric are driving some public figures beyond any reasonable reading of the facts and sometimes we

in the media lend such distortions a kind of qualified privilege as if they are just one more part of the political process and should really only be challenged by other politicians. But for me, untruths are untruths and should always be exposed at once as such. Fact-checking should be a bigger and more prominent of the way in which all public affairs are covered.

I don't subscribe to the view that the media as a whole are too hard or too vituperative in our handling of politicians. On the contrary, in our failure often to interrogate claims, to de-construct statistics, to submit opposition spokespeople to the rigours we regularly apply to those in government, I believe that we sometimes err on the side of softness. My friend the former *Panorama* reporter John Ware once proposed a new current affairs programme with the title *Lie of the Week*. It wouldn't be short of material.

Next we should get the facts right ourselves. It is not just lazy but wrong, for instance, to misquote people so that they can be fitted more easily into a narrative of your own choosing.

Great journalism questions pat narratives and thinks twice before declaring a *turning-point* or *defining moment*: it knows that reality and history don't generally conform to simple geometric shapes. It needs thinking time and the space to adduce its evidence and develop its case. This is why the preservation of *long-form* journalism—for investigations, policy analysis, debate and for classic reportage—is so critical. By this I don't mean long-form *instead of* short-form, but long-form *alongside* short-form, long-form which someone who has read or heard the short-form and who wants to know and understand more can move on to. And I believe there's evidence both at the BBC and the *New York Times* and at other broadcasters, newspapers and websites that there is still a significant appetite for journalism of this kind.

Finally the politicians and other public figures. In many ways, they have the hardest job: the complexity of communication overlaid on top of the complexity of the underlying issues. Forced by the exigencies of political campaigning to make extravagant promises before they enter office, they are then confronted by reality with all its constraints and yet still have to strive to satisfy the public expectations they have raised. Because our public language seldom does justice to the complex landscape of trade-offs in which they are making *actual* policy decisions, they have to communicate in a way which somehow bridges the gap between that technocratic domain and the much less nuanced and more partisan arena in which political debate takes place.

I haven't got much to offer other than a belief that in the end clarity, consistency and reasonableness increase public trust while showboating, artful phrase-making and tactical manoeuvring do not—even if they appear to offer immediate political advantage. Simplicity is a wonderful thing, but many public policy areas are necessarily complicated and bogus simplicity—or *simplesse*—reduces the chances of true public understanding. If experts want to be believed, it's better if they don't stray too far from their area of

expertise. If politicians want public support for something as momentous as a decision to go to war, it would be better if they explained clearly why—including all of the considerations, not just most obviously appealing ones—and then stuck to those war aims through thick and thin.

But the demonisation of politicians by other politicians and by the media is itself part of the problem—and not least because it can be so readily presented as an easy but false *explanation* of the problem. Democracy depends significantly on the ability of political leaders of different views to collaborate as well as compete with each other. Serious public policy initiatives—for example reforming a healthcare system—depends on strategies which will inevitably take longer than any presidential term or stint in government. Strategic consistency of policy depends on a language which can support compromise and concession and the possibility of good faith on the part of those who disagree with you.

In the US more than in the UK, but in the UK as well, this is exactly what we are in danger of losing. The only chance of recovering it—naïve though it may sound—is the return of a generosity of spirit and the emergence of political leaders and commentators with the courage to put the case for it into words.

Difficult, almost impossible, it may be. But perhaps it's that which offers us our best chance of escaping the *cloud of unknowing*.

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<sup>i</sup> Winston Churchill, House of Commons, May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1940.

<sup>ii</sup> Tony Blair, House of Commons, March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>iii</sup> Tony Blair, Speech to Chicago Economic Club, April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1999.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, second edition, 1984.

<sup>vi</sup> Simon Jenkins, *The Guardian*, December 12<sup>th</sup> 2007

<sup>vii</sup> John Reid, Press Conference in Kabul April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2006, quoted by Reuters: see <http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/uk/factcheck%2Ba%2Bshot%2Bin%2Bafghanistan/3266362.html>

<sup>viii</sup> Dr John Reid, House of Commons, July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/9574114.UPDATED>  
\_Soldier\_from\_Duke\_of\_Lancashire\_s\_Regiment\_killed\_in\_Afghanistan\_named/

<sup>x</sup> Julian Borger, *The Guardian*, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012

<sup>xi</sup> In fact probably a quotation developed during or after the Crimean war.

<sup>xii</sup> Philip Larkin [needs reference]

<sup>xiii</sup> Wilfred Owen [needs reference]

<sup>xiv</sup> Harriet Harman in answer to a question from John Maples, House of Commons, July 8 2009

<sup>xv</sup> [Needs reference.]

<sup>xvi</sup> [Needs reference.]