

Book Reviews

Going To War : British Debates From Wilberforce to Blair

By Philip Towle

Reviewed by Air Commodore Neville Parton

It is a great pleasure to be able to review this book by Philip Towle, who in addition to being a founder member of the RAF Centre for Air Power Studies (RAFCAPS) Academic Advisory Panel, has also been a long-term supporter of the RAF's involvement in the international relations programme at Cambridge University, where for many years he was Director of the Centre of International Studies. In addition to a myriad of other publications, he wrote one of the earliest books to examine the broader issues surrounding the use of air power in irregular warfare, *Pilots and Rebels*, which can still be heartily recommended for anyone seeking to gain a balanced, historical perspective of this area.¹

However, *Going to War* is a very different sort of book, and one which taps directly into matters of the moment, as it provides a perfect lead-in to the ongoing Inquiry by Sir John Chilcot into the Iraq War of 2003. The aim is quite straightforward: to examine the way in which Great Britain has reached the point of committing its forces to military action over the course of the last two hundred years. This is introduced in a wonderful manner via a German newspaper headline from 1939 which read (translated) 'Forty-Two Wars in Eighty Years: A Balance Sheet of British "Peacefulness"', and leading

from this into the contrast between Britain's oft-stated peaceful intent and the frequency with which it has been willing to use its military forces to intervene in other countries' affairs.

The subject is clearly an enormous one, and a logical and well-structured approach is used. After considering the part that national culture and circumstance plays, the going to war process is examined from a number of different perspectives; moral elements as represented both by the Anglican Church and civil society, the impact of the media and literature, the role of the non-military commentators as well as their professional military counterparts, and finally the part that Parliament and public debate have to play. Specific attention is then paid to the decisions relating to Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, before considering the thorny issue of whether these various debates on war have had any relevance to the policy decisions that lead to the commitment of British forces.

So what conclusions does the writer reach? One interesting element is the apparent predisposition in the British character which considers that intervening in other people's problems is their responsibility, which has been demonstrated not only in the military sphere but also in the considerable number of non-

governmental organisations (NGOs) with international presence that have originated in the UK. Another keen observation is the way in which the ruling classes and then politicians have considered that the 'public' cannot be trusted to make sensible judgements in the area of foreign policy because they are too jingoistic/simplistic/uneducated/ill-informed - choose your favourite platitude. In fact, using evidence from opinion polls and other sampling mechanisms Dr Towle shows that the public have been shown by and large to have had a generally balanced and reasonable understanding of the facts, and in these days of constant and immediate media reporting are also very aware of the impact of military action on both civilians and soldiers. And yet, as the Iraq conflict in 2003 shows, it is still possible for a small group of politicians to commit the country to war despite widespread public opposition – based on the fact that the public will generally rally to the flag once British forces have been committed. To sum up such a wide-ranging book as this is difficult, and it perhaps best in this area to let the author have the last word:

The public debate [on going to war] has widened over the last 200 years as the public have gained in confidence, but the governmental decision-making process has not improved to the same extent. The Committee of Imperial Defence was established by the government at the beginning of the 20th century to coordinate expertise on Britain's far-flung responsibilities, what is needed [now] is an effort to utilise even more wide-ranging and varied expertise when crisis threaten in the future.²

In this reviewer's eyes there are only

two areas that mar the books attraction. The first is that the chapter which examines 'The Professional Military' could have perhaps spent a little more time considering some of the post-Falklands conflicts that the UK has been involved in, where the interaction between military, media, society and politicians has been at time highly fraught – with the Bosnia and Kosovo crises being perfect examples. The second is aimed more at the publishers, and is a general complaint regarding the price of academic publications in the UK. A recommended retail price of £50 is going to put off most casual readers – and probably a few more professional types – with an interest in this subject. Given the advent of on-demand publication, and the general lack of significant investment in the production and advertising elements of the process, it is difficult to see how prices at this level can be justified. These are, however, minor quibbles with a book which covers a vitally important subject in considerable detail, poses some extremely interesting questions, and yet manages to remain highly readable. Although it may be out of the price range of a number of APR readers, I would still heartily recommend it – beg, borrow, or even just persuade your unit library to get a copy – you will not be disappointed!

Bibliography

Towle, Philip Anthony. *Pilots and Rebels : The use of aircraft in unconventional warfare 1918 - 1988*. London: Brassey's, 1989.

Towle, Philip. *Going to War : British Debates from Wilberforce to Blair*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Notes

¹ Philip Anthony Towle, *Pilots and Rebels : The use of aircraft in unconventional warfare 1918 - 1988* (London: Brassey's, 1989).

² Philip Towle, *Going to War : British Debates from Wilberforce to Blair* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 165.

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