

**By Adam Holloway MP**

*"Don't put lipstick on pigs - acknowledge setbacks and failures and then state what we've learned and how we'll respond... Avoid spin and let facts speak for themselves."*

**General Petraeus – A Commander's Counter-Insurgency Guidance, 2008**

Britain's Armed Forces are in trouble. After twelve years of Labour mismanagement, cracks in the structure of our national defence are clearly visible and no amount of spin and misdirection will patch them up. But, it is wrong to think that this is simply a question of spending, it is not just a balance sheet problem that can be solved with cuts in big-ticket procurement programs or by restructuring our services to better meet the expected challenges of the Twenty-First Century. Those things are important, probably inevitable: but they will not address the root cause of the problem – the failure of our system of military-political decision-making. This is not a "lions led by donkeys" critique; it is not about the successes or failures of individual generals commanding troops on operations. The fact is that the Labour Government has suborned the Armed Forces from the very top to half the way down, creating a system that often enforces what is politically convenient, not what is militarily right. This systemic failure began with the invasion of Iraq and continues to this day. Importantly, this failure continues to prevent us from learning from our mistakes, and so condemning us to repeat them, as we are doing in Afghanistan.

### **1. There were no Generals at the Prairie Chapel Ranch**

To understand what happened to the British military campaign in Iraq, you have to understand how we got there in the first place. From the moment British Forces crossed into Iraq, a process of back-peddalling began and they were put under increasing pressure to get out, by a political leader who had committed his country to war based on his political ambitions, not the considered military advice of his generals. It is not usually possible to put your finger on a calendar and point to the exact day that things began to go wrong. The Iraq conflict is a rare exception.

On 7 April 2002, Tony Blair made a commitment to George Bush at a private meeting at the Bush ranch Crawford, Texas, that Britain would support an American-led invasion of Iraq. In exchange Bush agreed to three concessions, what became known in Whitehall as "the Crawford Conditions." Firstly, Bush agreed that the UN weapons inspectors (UNMOVIC) would be given a chance to complete their investigation into "Weapons of Mass Destruction". Secondly, he would prioritise visible progress on a Middle East peace plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Finally, Bush made a concession to Blair's domestic political considerations and agreed to his request for enough time "to prepare the population". These were political conditions attached to Britain's participation, there were no military factors involved in the decision. Although a small group of officials had secretly been considering options for war since February, the first time that the full resources of the military planning process were able to begin was when Blair returned from Texas and told senior officers in the MoD to prepare contingency plans for supporting an American-led invasion.

In the end it was the indecision of the Turkish Parliament that determined that Britain would invade Southern Iraq. Our Generals had planned to invade from the north in order to have a more discreet role than the Americans and to open up a second front to stretch the Iraqi forces. But permission from Turkey to send troops through their territory was vital and the Turkish Parliament procrastinated and avoided making a decision. Eventually, on 24 December 2002, military planners could wait no longer and switched the British plan to an invasion of the very much more volatile and complicated south. So Britain ended up in Southern Iraq as a result of a last-minute change to a plan, which was the result of a political decision to go to war, made in the absence of military advice. Compare the photographs at Yalta in 1945, with those from the Texas ranch in 2002. At Yalta the political leaders - Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin - are flanked by their senior military officers, a joint political-military consultation. In the other, Bush and Blair stand alone.

## 2. Drowning in spin, our leaders forgot to set clear goals

What were our strategic objectives for the war in Iraq? What exactly did we set out to achieve, and how would we know when we had achieved it? Blair, as part of his process of "preparing the population", sold the war as strategically necessary to neutralise a perceived threat of WMD, and morally necessary to remove an unsavoury and barbaric regime. His team manipulated the information he was given by the intelligence services to push his commitment to war, through a dishonest marketing campaign that paid tribute to the worst kind of sales team.

Our political leaders became so caught up in fabricating reasons to invade and occupy Iraq that they never stopped to actually set a clear and achievable goal for Britain's involvement. The real strategic reason Britain joined the Iraq War was to sustain the "special relationship", to maintain our alliance with the US, in order to continue to reap the political and military benefits of remaining best friends with the Hyper-Power. The irony is that, as I will try and show, we ended up doing more harm than good to our reputation with the Americans, through the debacle of Basra. This confusion and dishonesty amongst our political leaders created the central problem of Britain's involvement in Iraq – the tension between our strategic goal of supporting the US, and the Blair Government's political need to withdraw from the commitment. It started with grand ambitions of "rebuilding a nation" and bringing peace and democracy, and deteriorated to "holding the line" so there could be "an Iraqi solution to an Iraqi problem". When even that could not be achieved, our political and military leaders decided to withdraw the troops and let the Americans fill the gap, while claiming credit for this "success".

Part of the problem was that having committed to support the US, and extracted his three concessions, Blair left the UK with very little ability to influence how the campaign in Iraq was to happen. For example, our military knew that Phase 4 of the operation (the rebuilding of Iraq) was under-resourced and under-planned, but we had no leverage left over the US to change things. We had not even agreed on what the end state would be. Britain went into Iraq with a very different vision of what the final result would be from the Americans.

But it was not just politicians that were incapable of setting clear objectives in Iraq. Our leaders at the top of the MoD, the Chiefs of Staff and senior civil servants, men who were selected for

their clarity of thought, became caught up in the opaque, politicised confusion that was driving our involvement. This inevitably had a knock-on effect on what officers on the ground were being told to focus on. They had a very poor understanding of the political and social dynamics of Basra. Even as late as 2008 the British Headquarters in Iraq was still only able to define their centre of gravity – where our army should be focussing its efforts – as "the consent of the population". It was as if, after five years of being in Basra, the top echelons of the MoD had learnt nothing. In reality, they had spent more time understanding the intentions of Downing Street, than the Shiite politicians who were controlling the outcome of the battles that were raging around Basra. For example, our last significant attempt to bring Basra under control in late 2006 was doomed from the start by the failure to understand that we would not be allowed to deal a crippling blow to the militias loyal to Moqtada Al Sadr while the Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki at that time relied upon his support to maintain power.

Perhaps most alarmingly, there is every sign that this sequence of events is being repeated in Afghanistan. The Government seems to give a different strategic goal every few months depending on the political mood in Britain. Last year it was "providing security so that development can take place", then it became "fighting the terrorists there, so that we don't have to fight them here", and as of now we are focussed on "protecting the people" - I think. One Member of Parliament recalls how an army officer ended a power point presentation in Helmand with the words "and this is why we are here": the last slide showed a picture of Afghan girls in school uniforms. If the British public are confused, imagine what the soldiers who are fighting and dying must feel.

### **3. A failure of moral courage**

In front of the MoD building on Whitehall is a statue of Field Marshall Alanbrooke, Churchill's senior general, whose brilliant military leadership and personal courage did much to win the Second World War. Alan Brooke was famous for standing up to his political master and risking his own career to ensure that decisions were made for the right military, not political, reasons. Alanbrooke said of the Prime Minister: "the first time I tell him that I agree with him when I don't will be the time to get rid of me, for then I can be no more use to him". The contrast with those inside the MoD building today, is damning and it pervades downwards even into operational theatres.

I remember the Defence Select Committee's briefing in Kandahar from the army in 2006. As we left, I was grabbed by a serving officer who had been at Sandhurst with me. Round the back of the hanger he expressed his disbelief at what we had been told in the briefing. "It is amazing, today all 5 Platoon Houses are in heavy contact, we are having problems picking up a dead soldier, and the Americans have dropped a bomb in the wrong place - and they did not even hint at any of that, spent most of the time talking to you about reconstruction, and that was bullshit anyway because I ain't seen any".

In the middle of the fiercest battles in Iraq, our soldiers stood their ground and fought bravely. Some gave everything to do their duty; they may have lacked resources, but they never lacked courage. The same cannot be said for many of those at the top of the MoD whose responsibility was to make the right, not the convenient, decisions in Iraq. They failed to provide the

Government with hard facts and choices and confront them with the strategic implications of under-resourcing the Army. Our soldiers were expected to give their lives if necessary, but those at the very top shrank from committing "career suicide" by standing up to politicians and telling them the uncomfortable truth.

The distinguished journalist Stephen Gray remembers being in the HQ in Basra. The Prime Minister was visiting the next day, and ordinary soldiers and junior officers were to "meet" him and tell the PM how things were going. The army must have forgotten who Stephen was, as to his amazement the staff officers proceeded to discuss what the soldiers were to get across to the PM about how things were going in Basra: in short, they were writing their lines. Fortunately soldiers tend to tell it as it is.

Nowhere is this military spinning more apparent than in the way the counterinsurgency campaign was directed in Southern Iraq. The Chiefs of Staff realised that, for political reasons, the Government was never going to commit the resources to be serious in a counterinsurgency campaign against the Shiite militias that by 2005 were in full uprising in the British controlled parts of the country, where they had filled the vacuum. They reasoned that if they couldn't fight and beat an insurgency, then to ensure their own success they had to redefine the problem. The politically driven Shiite insurgency was simply redefined as mass criminality and therefore a problem for the local police, not soldiers. Military spokesmen were keen to explain that Basra was similar to "Palermo, not Beirut". Whilst this may have been temporarily convenient for the political-military leadership, the long-term consequence was that no coherent campaign was ever developed for Basra until 2008 and the political causes and objectives of the insurgency were never addressed. As an officer from the Basra Consulate put it in 2006 "what's the point in providing intelligence on the insurgency when the Government won't accept that there is an insurgency".

There was also an aspect of pride. British officers had talked at such length about their expertise in counterinsurgency, after decades of experience in Northern Ireland and Malaya, that they could not be seen to have got it wrong. The combination of self-delusion, hubris and ignorance was behind the disastrous decisions that were taken in Basra. Military commanders could not take a long-term view as they only spent six months in the job and no significant intelligence database was built. The result was that key knowledge was lost in the biannual handover and short-termism took over.

Over the period of Britain's involvement in Iraq, the graph - as it were - moves steadily downwards. But every six months there was a little spike of hope upwards. This reflected the departures of senior officers out of Basra at the end of their six month tours, as it had been left on a high note - as they presented the place in better condition at the end of their tour than at the beginning. Perhaps unfairly you could describe it thus: they'd spend the first 2 months learning, the second 2 months dealing with the situation, and the third 2 months working out their story of how things had got better on their watch. One General in his final message to MoD's Permanent Joint Headquarters reported that no less than three of the four Iraqi provinces under him were now ready to be handed over to the Iraqis for "Provincial Iraqi Control". The very first signal sent by his successor the following week reported that only two of the provinces were ready for Iraqi control.

Short-termism coloured most decisions. For example, senior officers pushed the job of defence sector reform and ended up bodging it. They brought the militiamen into the police and didn't take the time or trouble to ensure loyalty to the state rather than to their militia leaders. So we ended up giving the very groups that were conducting the insurgency police powers. This was the context in which the Basra "Serious Crimes Unit" controlled by the Shiite cleric Moqtada al Sadr kidnapped the journalist Richard Butler in February 2008. It was also the mentality that drove the most disastrous decision of the Iraq conflict –abandoning Al-Amarah. The decisions to hand over provinces in Iraq were progressively driven by commanders who were being judged not by how well the job was done, but by how quickly. Corners were cut in other areas too. The decision was taken not to embed British military advisors into the Iraqi Army despite a clear history of this being advisable. The justification given was that too many troops would be needed to protect these British advisors, but the reality was that we were scrambling to get out. When we withdrew from Basra to the airport, the Iraqi Army was left alone and, crucially, they had no access to the airpower and surveillance that their colleagues in the American sector had. This was to prove a serious mistake and contributed more than anything to the later debacle of "Charge of the Knights", when the Baghdad Government had to send their military down into Basra, supported by the Americans, to clean up our mess.

So why didn't those at the top stand up for what they knew was right? Why didn't they risk their careers to speak truth to power? Well, some of them did. Major General Richard Shirreff made a concerted attempt in 2006 to seriously tackle the growing insurgency in Basra with "Operation Sinbad", but he was starved of resources and could not make it work. Ultimately, what Sinbad achieved was to demonstrate to the insurgency that the British would not be allowed to deal them a killer blow. So, when the truth that the militias were now running Basra became unavoidable, the Government started its "criminality not insurgency" spin campaign. So keen were they to avoid shattering this fabrication.

The story of this incident, combined with others of equally damning 'honesty', was told to General Shirreff before he took command. Those talking to him say they gave him the 'true' rather than the 'MoD-spun' situation in southern Iraq. They asserted that the Military "had failed to dominate the ground of the insurgents at all, and that every Iraqi Security Institutions in southern Iraq by 2006 was ineffective (due to poorly resourced training, mentoring and equipping), and riddled with corruption and insurgent leadership". When Shirreff tried to turn the situation round via the very aggressive and ambitious Operation Sinbad it was under-resourced, and at least 2 years too late.

#### **4. The rise of civil servants in uniform, giving "politically aware advice".**

These courageous officers have become the exception rather than the rule in the super-politicised environment that the MOD has become. A "good news only" culture has begun to emerge within the military – the culture of politically aware military advice. We need to seriously address the problem that pliant and conformist civil servants in uniform are systematically being promoted at the expense of capable independent-minded officers.

What does it say about the ability of the military to provide independent realistic guidance to government when PJHQ, provides "politically aware military advice"? Why do so many senior

military men only find the courage to make a stand shortly after they have reached their final promotion, retired or received their knighthood? As a senior officer put it to me: "no one gets promoted for saying things are going badly." We have reached the stage where few are prepared to tell the Emperor that he is naked.

Under pressure from Downing Street to find anything to back up the WMD case, British Intelligence was squeezing their agents in Iraq for information. One agent did come up with something - the "45 minutes" or something about missiles allegedly discussed in a high level Iraqi political meeting. But the provenance of this information was never questioned in detail until after the Iraq invasion, when it became apparent that something was wrong. In the end it turned out that the information was not credible, it had originated from an émigré taxi driver on the Iraqi-Jordanian border, who had remembered an overheard a conversation in the back of his cab a full two years earlier. Indeed, in the intelligence analyst's footnote to the report, it was flagged up that part of the report probably describing some missiles that the Iraqi Government allegedly possessed was demonstrably untrue. They verifiably did not exist. The footnote said it in black and white ink. Despite this glaring factual inaccuracy, which under normal circumstances would have caused the reliability of the intelligence to be seriously questioned, the report was treated as reliable and went on to become one of the central planks of the dodgy dossier.

The truth of the matter was that the intelligence services simply did not know whether Saddam Hussein had WMD, it was equally probable that he was bluffing to maintain a credible threat against Iran, but as one senior intelligence officer put it: "there was no appetite in Government to hear that." We will never know who chose to ignore the footnote - it certainly was not the intelligence service, whose footnote it was. It seems that someone, perhaps in Downing Street, found it rather inconvenient and ignored it lest it interfere with our reasons for going to war.

Why did the people at the very top of the wider intelligence community not make the case more forcefully to the Blair Government that they were misusing an intelligence report on WMD in Iraq, and ignoring the analyst's comments that indicated parts of it were demonstrably wrong? As one who understands put it, "You get in the Prime Minister's office. His highest priority is your own chance to get ahead. He looks you in face. You think: "I want to stay here, I want to please him, and I want to be on his plane ". It's the grim story of how bureaucracy's yield to the will of the boss. Once you get going, there is no time for dissent. Those telling you you're not on the right track gets kicked off the team. You don't stay there if you tell the PM he is out to lunch. Top leaders will always get the intelligence they want".

It gets worse though, matching military advice to the prevailing political wind is one thing, but when the heads of the Armed Forces start actively parroting political propaganda and burying inconvenient truths on behalf of the Government, a serious line has been crossed. There is no better example of this than the lies and spin that make up the official account of what happened in Basra in 2008.

## **5. Labour spokesman - in uniform**

At the same time that the US was putting its lives and money where its mouth was in the Surge,

quite the opposite was happening in the south of Iraq. Acting on firm political direction from Downing Street, we were arranging to hand over the streets of Basra and the hopes and safety of its people to a group of murderous zealots. This is the story of how the British Army fled Basra on political orders, were rescued by our allies and how the Labour Government, backed up publicly by the most senior officers, proceeded to lie about it and pretend it was all their idea in the first place.

In 2007 the Commanding General in Basra was given clear direction from Downing Street to "get us out". The stage had already been set for a politically justifiable early withdrawal from Iraq and the official line was in place that there was no insurgency left in Basra. Any violence was officially the work of mafia type gangs - all that remained was to hand over to the Iraqi Army and exit stage left. The only problem was that anyone who visited Basra could see that was rubbish. A powerful Shiite militia – the Jaish al Mahdi, controlled by a clerical political figure Moqtada al Sadr, was increasingly challenging the British Army for control.

So the challenge presented to the general was how to retreat from Iraq without making it look like the British were cutting and running. He had to justify it to the US generals as the militarily sensible thing to do, rather than a politically driven bailout. It was in this context that military officers began to talk about British forces in Basra being "part of the problem rather than the solution", drawing attacks from the locals out of frustration at occupation. The reality was that the British were the only force left challenging the militias for uncontrolled dominance of the city. So the general came up with the plan to withdraw to Basra Air Station outside the city and hunker down - the negotiation taking place with a prisoner in the UK's own detention facility, Ahmed al-Fartusi. This in effect officially handed them control of Basra in exchange for releasing from prison captured insurgent leaders. This was designed to prevent the impression of a rout as British troops abandoned Basra, so that Gordon Brown could spin this shameful retreat into a "success".

Unsurprisingly, over the course of the next year, it became apparent to the Iraqi Government in Baghdad that one of the country's main cities had fallen under the control of an uncompromising rival political and military force with troubling connections to the Iranian regime, leaving the people of Basra at their mercy. This was a direct challenge of visceral importance to who ruled Iraq, and could not be ignored by the Maliki Government. What was to also later become apparent was that the militia's criminal enterprises within Basra were financially powering much of the Shiite insurgency across Iraq, "buying the bullets" that were killing American soldiers in places like Sadr City.

The British, who were still sitting in the airbase telling anyone who would listen that nothing was wrong, could clearly no longer be trusted. The Iraqi Government decided, independently, to take massive military action in Basra against the advice of the Americans who were worried about stirring up the region. The US were becoming increasingly uncertain of Britain's commitment, but reasoned that an unreliable ally was better than no ally at all. On Friday 21 March 2008, General Petraeus was informed that the Iraqis were to begin what was to become known as the "Battle for Basra" on Monday morning. Though he tried unsuccessfully to persuade them not to, he eventually made supporting the Iraqi operation his Corps Main Effort, reasoning that he could not afford for the Iraqi Government to visibly fail. The first the British knew about it was

similarly on Friday night, but, hunkered down at the Air Station, they were not able to respond so quickly. This was the context in which a joint Iraqi and US force swept into town to crush the militias as part of Operation Charge of the Knights. An operation that the British were unaware of until shortly before it was launched and whose purpose was to visibly and rather embarrassingly do the job that the British had walked away from. Maliki never forgave this, and exacted his revenge in 2008 when he kicked the UK out of Iraq, against Brown's expressed wish to maintain a presence to "protect our investment".

It was at this point that Labour's Basra narrative began, a piece of fiction designed to save the blushes of ministers. The narrative was that Operation Charge of the Knights was all part of the UK's plan, indeed they had been working with the Iraqis on it all along and there most definitely had not been a deal handing Basra to the Shiite militias. Leaving Iraq in 2008 was what Gordon Brown had planned and he had definitely not been shown the door. This was nothing but Government spin. When those at the very very top of the armed forces began to publicly regurgitate this, they became Government mouthpieces. By throwing their lot in with the political pay masters they got away with the very defeat they had played a part in. When some were extended in post, they were not being rewarded for military success, but for toeing the line and keeping mouths shut. As one senior and very well informed person puts it: "when the most senior in the military stand up and says this is what happened, which of us can say otherwise?"

## 6. The consequences of failure

It is never too late to learn the lessons of Iraq, though the insight of many who were there is being buried under the rubble of spin and cover-up. We have done harm to our relationship with the US, through failing to seriously commit ourselves to the task and making pacts with Islamists possibly behind their back. This was surely not how Blair envisioned it when he felt the hand of history on his shoulder all those years ago at The Prairie Chapel Ranch. What now worries the Americans most is not that the British Army was "defeated in the field" (though in truth they were defeated by lack of leadership), but that its commanders and political leaders seem determined not to learn from those mistakes.

US forces have achieved a remarkable turnaround in their fortunes since the Surge. They did this by being horribly self-critical, by accepting that what they were doing was failing and opening the floor to new ideas and frank admissions of failure. They have in short, reinvented themselves, learned from mistakes, and improved. We should not be surprised: they have done it before, when a demoralised army after Vietnam renewed itself. In contrast Britain's military commanders seem threatened by the idea of admitting failure and learning from mistakes. They want to "muddle through". For example, in December 2009 I found very senior US military officers in Kabul keen to be introduced to alternative voices in regard to the evolving strategy. By comparison, I met the retired Afghan Communist General who had managed to hold Helmand province for a full year after the Soviets left and who had been the great expert on running tribal militias to provide local security across the area: no one from the UK armed forces ever thought to give him a ring. We are committed to Afghanistan but our military commanders still insist that their future successors spend large amounts of their training time preparing for eventualities like tank battles against the old Soviet Union. American officers now find continuing British claims to be expert at counterinsurgency risible.

There is no better illustration of the willingness of the Americans to change compared to British obdurate refusal to let facts get in the way of long-term plans than the way the two countries responded to the rising death toll from IEDs in Iraq. In 2007 the new Defence Secretary Robert Gates made the introduction of mine resistant vehicles the Department of Defence's top priority. By contrast, the British continued to stick to Snatch, an outdated and demonstrably unsuitable death trap – largely because the MOD was still investing its funds and effort into the FRES project, a plan to reequip the Army as a futuristic mechanised force. Military planners simply would not adapt to the realities of the war they were fighting, because deep down they did not believe the Government were committed to winning in Iraq. Why ruin long-term plans for a short-term misadventure they reasoned.

The British response to the urgent need to learn and reform is in stark contrast to the culture of reflective self-analysis that the Americans have adopted. The British military hierarchy have taken active steps to suppress and neuter constructive criticism by experienced and well-intentioned officers. Those who do not toe the party line are ruthlessly censured and passed-over. This is perfectly illustrated by the official response this summer to the publication by a serving TA officer of an extremely well researched and persuasive paper in The British Army Review (the Army's professional journal) called "A Comprehensive Failure: British Civil-Military Strategy in Helmand Province", which was damning of official attempts to spin failures into PR successes. In response, the Assistant Chief of the General Staff, issued written instructions effectively removing full editorial control of the British Army Review from its editor and stipulating that political clearance must be sought before the publication of any such articles in the future, due to the embarrassment caused to politicians. What is more worrying was his further direction that in the run up to the Iraq Inquiry there must be no publication of "lessons-learned" from Iraq by serving officers, including those who were actually there. In effect, British officers are no longer free to propose critical and reflective ideas; fresh-thinking that is essential for success, if those proposals might embarrass the Labour Government.

Preventing criticism of the Government seem more important than the professional debate amongst military officers that will generate changes and save soldiers' lives on active service. Remember the words of Lt Colonel Rupert Thorneloe, two weeks before his death from a roadside bomb: "we all know we don't have enough helicopters.....we can not not move people...this increases the IED threat and our exposure to it". And remember what Gordon Brown said two weeks after the Colonel's death: "it is completely wrong to say that the loss of lives has been caused by the absence of helicopters." The day after this was made public, senior officers were confirming that there were indeed enough helicopters, though they "could always use more", and that what Thorneloe was actually griping about was the system for allocating helicopter hours.

What needs to happen is quite clear to those military leaders who have maintained their focus on professional military realities and not political expediencies. To begin to win they need to adapt - and so change, and to change they need the freedom to debate and encourage new thinking without being censored and undermined by the more senior forces of narrow political or career self-interest. The prevalent culture in Downing Street / the Ministries / MOD / PJHQ can't be relied upon to say what needs to be said, and an Iraq inquiry that lacks a single board member with military experience is unlikely to get to the heart of the matters either.

Reassured by often time-serving officials, often ignorant Ministers hold tightly to old platitudes, confident that their tour is now rather short. This ghastly culture continues, endangering our national security. By continuing to bury the truth, we greatly reduce or even kill the chances of hard fought-for success. Our troops need to be adequately funded and equipped. We must look again at how we structure our national defence. But most importantly, we need to relearn the lessons of Churchill and Alanbrooke. We need a culture that encourages a system with integrity, independence and a robust relationship with whichever Minister happens to be in the MoD this season - and the rather more able ones next.

Behind all the stage managed political theatre of the Chilcott Enquiry lie two uncomfortable central truths. The first is that we defeated ourselves in Iraq. Measured against any of the constantly changing objectives our Government gave us for our presence in Southern Iraq we came up short. At Sandhurst they teach you that fighting power is not measured just by raw physical force, equally important is the moral component, what the preeminent military thinker of the last generation, Sir Basil Liddell-Hart described as "the motivation to achieve the task in hand and effective leadership from those placed in authority". Our failure in Iraq was first and foremost caused by a failure effective political and military leadership. The second uncomfortable truth is that nothing has changed. Until we honestly examine and reform the systems of leadership and decision making that caused this, we will continue to repeat this dismal cycle of losing and spinning it away. The Americans have realised this about us, but we have not yet accepted it about ourselves. Many of our political and military leaders live in a world without mirrors where sycophantic careerists pliantly repeat the mantra that everything is OK and we can just muddle through. They are wrong.

Adam Holloway MP sits on the Defence Select Committee. He is a former soldier and ITN reporter, and covered the conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Iraq.

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