

# WebMemo



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## The Falklands War, 25 Years Later: Lessons for British Global Power

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This month marks the 25th anniversary of the British victory over Argentina in the Falklands War.<sup>1</sup> British forces liberated Port Stanley on June 14, 1982, just 74 days after the invasion of the islands and capture of 1,000 British citizens by the Argentine military junta. The retaking of the Falklands and the defeat of the Argentineans ushered in a new self-confident era for Great Britain after decades of post-colonial decline. Under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Britain was transformed from the “sick man of Europe” into a resurgent global power. The British lion had roared again and the world took note. There are lessons in this victory for today’s British leaders.

Margaret Thatcher’s decision to dispatch a task force to retake the Falkland Islands within a day of the invasion was an extraordinary display of leadership that would be almost unthinkable today. The armada of over 110 ships and 28,000 men began to set sail for the South Atlantic—8,000 miles away—just three days after the Argentineans had landed on British soil. London went to war against the regime in Buenos Aires without a U.N. resolution specifically mandating the use of force<sup>2</sup> and unconstrained by the European Union (then known as the European Economic Community).

The Falklands War was a classic example of a nation-state asserting its national sovereignty and right to self-defense, unencumbered by the deadweight of supranational institutions. The British army, navy, and air force, with the strategic support of the United States and Chile, ultimately defeated a larger Argentine force. Britain’s victory came at a

heavy cost, with the loss of 255 British servicemen. It was a sacrifice though that the British nation was willing to bear, in the defense of British territory and the cause of freedom.

Whether confronting Iranian intimidation or squaring up to al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the global war on terrorism, Britain faces many of the same dilemmas today: the projection of military power versus diplomatic pressure; the building of coalitions of the willing as opposed to waiting for U.N. mandates; and the willingness to sacrifice significant numbers of British troops in the face of public unease. The same courage and determination to defend British interests displayed by Margaret Thatcher a quarter century ago are necessary today to maintain Britain’s place on the world stage.

**The Iranian Hostage Debacle.** In the face of extreme intimidation by Argentina, Britain projected strength and resolve, the hallmarks of global leadership. Faced with a similar challenge 25 years later, Downing Street backed down and allowed the ritual humiliation of British servicemen at the hands of another dictatorship.

Earlier this year, Britain was left humiliated by the ruthless regime in Tehran, which kidnapped

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and paraded 15 British sailors on world television with no ramifications for those responsible. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad successfully taunted Britain for two weeks without paying any penalty, and his Revolutionary Guards continued to arm and train insurgents in Iraq responsible for the killing of British troops. London's response to Iranian aggression was weak-kneed and lackluster, projecting a feeble image on the world stage. The response of the British public was little better, with an astonishing 26 percent of respondents in a *Sunday Telegraph* poll on the crisis declaring that Britain should apologize to Iran, with just 7 percent backing preparations for military action.<sup>3</sup>

The Iranian hostage affair underscored several harsh realities: a precipitous decline in British defense spending which has left the UK's armed forces severely overstretched; a clear lack of political leadership at a time of crisis; an unwillingness to threaten the use of force when faced with extreme provocation; the steep rise of pacifist sentiment among the British public; a marked willingness on the part of London to defer to both the United Nations and the European Union; and London's fear of appearing too closely aligned with the United States.

There is a very real danger that the UK will end up in the next decade as a mid-ranking military power with an aversion to the use of force and an increasing willingness to negotiate with, rather than confront, terrorist groups and state sponsors of terror, with its foreign and defense policy constrained by Brussels.

**Rebuilding British Power.** The world needs a confident, powerful Britain that stands as a warrior nation in the defense of freedom and Western civilization. To all intents and purposes, Britain and America today are at war globally against a vicious enemy and ideology that seeks their destruction.

There are a number of steps that Britain must take to strengthen its position as a global power and ensure that she is able to confront and defeat the threats it faces. It will take the same kind of sacrifice and visionary leadership that shaped the British nation in the weeks following Argentina's invasion of the Falklands in 1982.

First, future British governments must undertake a commitment to rebuilding military capacity. Britain spends just 2.2 percent of GDP on defense, the lowest level since the 1930s. Less money should be spent on the vast welfare state and more resources allocated to national security. The UK should spend at least 3 percent of GDP on defense and strive for a goal of 4 percent of GDP if it wishes to project military power worldwide. Britain should have the capacity to take on dangerous rogue regimes such as Iran and be able to defeat them militarily. Never again should British personnel be subject to the kind of ritual public humiliation they received at the hands of the tyrannical regime in Tehran.

Second, Britain must assert its national sovereignty and withdraw from the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), and the European Convention on Human Rights, all of which weaken Britain's capacity to shape its own future and defend itself. As Lady Thatcher recommended in her seminal *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World*<sup>4</sup>, the UK must renegotiate key treaties with the EU and reclaim powers that have been handed over to Brussels, including control of its own seas. As Tony Blair discovered, it is impossible for Britain to be both America's closest ally and part of a politically and economically integrated Europe. Ultimately, a choice will have to be made.

Third, Britain must defend and prioritize the Anglo-American Special Relationship. The U.S.-UK alliance is the most successful partnership of mod-

1. For useful background on the Falklands conflict, see Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993). See also "The Official Website for the Falklands 25 Commemorative Events," at [www.falklands25.com](http://www.falklands25.com).
2. While demanding the withdrawal of Argentine forces from the Falklands, U.N. Security Council Resolution 502 called on Argentina and the United Kingdom "to refrain from the use or threat of force in the region of the Falkland Islands."
3. Sean Rayment, Tim Shipman, and Patrick Hennessy, "Ministers Seek Deal with Iran for Captives," *The Sunday Telegraph*, April 1, 2007, at [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/04/01/wiran01.xml](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/04/01/wiran01.xml).
4. Margaret Thatcher, *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World* (London: HarperCollins, 2002).

ern times, and it is in the interests of both London and Washington that its long-term vitality be assured. British military weakness and rising anti-Americanism threaten the future of the relationship, so addressing both is crucial if the alliance is to survive. The Special Relationship operates as a two-way street that enhances both America's and Britain's ability to project power internationally and defend against global threats. Its collapse would significantly weaken both the United States and Britain, and a world devoid of Anglo-American leadership would be a far more dangerous place.

**A Stark Choice.** The spectacle of the British nation being humiliated at the hands of the Mullahs of Tehran and intimidated by the threats of barbaric terrorist groups in Iraq (as was the case with the cancelled deployment of Prince Harry) must never be repeated. Britain's position as a great power and its willingness to act like one is being eroded by

punishing defense cuts, the rise of European integration, a declining state education system, the growth of home-grown Islamic extremism, and spiraling public animosity toward the United States.

Britain was victorious in the Falklands War because it was free to shape its own destiny and willing to use military power to aggressively defend its interests. Today, Great Britain faces a stark choice between sinking into mediocrity in an increasingly centralized European Union with a largely pacifist approach to international affairs, or acting as a powerful global leader alongside the United States and other English-speaking nations such as Australia and Canada. For the future security of the free world, the choice must be to lead.

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