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Courtesy of the British Information Service

MARGARET THATCHER: "THE IRON LADY"

1925	Born
1947	Graduated Oxford
1954	Called to the bar
1959	Elected to Parliament
1970	Secretary of State for Education and Science, Privy Councillor
1975	Conservative Party leader
1979	Prime minister
1982	The Falklands War
1982–	Continued service as prime minister

Margaret Thatcher, the first woman to serve as Great Britain's prime minister, is also the longest continuously serving prime minister in modern British history. She is one of the architects of the resurgence of British conservatism and, as prime minister, is the manager of that resurgence. Thatcher, the relentless enemy of Labourite socialism, the welfare state, and easy money, is a tough-minded and realistic politician, a skillful parliamentary tactician, and an unforgiving opponent. Shortly after coming into office, she was nicknamed the "Iron Lady," a label she wears with some rueful pride.

Thatcher was born Margaret Hilda Roberts in Grantham, Lincolnshire, in 1925, the daughter of a grocer who was also the town mayor. After attending Grantham Girls' School, she entered Oxford University, where she studied chemistry and served as president of the Oxford Conservative Association. After graduating with an M.A., she worked as a research chemist from 1947 to 1951, when she married Denis Thatcher; they have twin children, a son, Mark, and a daughter, Carol.

By 1951, Margaret Thatcher already had made two unsuccessful bids for a seat in Parliament. She had also begun to study law, and she was admitted to the bar in 1954. She tried again for a parliamentary seat and was elected in 1959 as Conservative member for Finchley, a constituency in North London. She began immediately to rise through

the ranks of the Conservative party. From 1961 to 1964 she was a parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance. From 1964 to 1970 she was the opposition spokesperson for economic affairs and education. In 1970, under the Conservative government of Edward Heath, she was appointed Secretary of State for Education and Science. In this cabinet post she served with some distinction and considerable criticism—for example, when she eliminated free milk for over three million schoolchildren, an outraged Labourite member called her "Mrs. Scrooge with a painted face."

Under the Labour government of 1974 she became opposition spokesperson for the environment, treasury, and economic affairs, and in that capacity she advocated a balanced budget and tight monetary policies. By this time she was able to contend with Edward Heath for the post of Conservative party leader and in 1975 was elected by her Tory colleagues in a stunning upset. For the next four years she tirelessly championed a long list of conservative causes—reduced taxes, law and order and crime prevention, the power of the trade unions, and less government interference. In March 1979 the Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan narrowly lost a vote of confidence in the House of Commons. In the ensuing election of May 3 Margaret Thatcher became prime minister.

In Thatcher's view the preceding Labour government had failed utterly to deal either with the unreasonable demands of the trade unions or with inflation. She resolved to deal with both problems and put in place a right-wing ideological program. She continued to belabor the remnants of the British welfare state; she privatized several government industries; she took drastic measures to control inflation. Indeed, Thatcher made headway against inflation but at the cost of sharply rising unemployment—over three million were left jobless. As a result, she was the most unpopular prime minister in more than twenty years.

Thatcher very likely would have been forced out of office had it not been for the disarray of the Labour party. The more radical Labourites formed a new party, the Social Democrats, dedicated to unilateral nuclear disarmament and pulling Britain out of the European Common Market. The Social Democrats allied with the Liberals, and the alliance came close to commanding a majority in the Commons against the Conservatives. Margaret Thatcher's government was not faring well through 1981 and into 1982: it was criticized on every hand and on nearly every issue. Then, on April 2, 1982, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands. This event was to transform the fortunes of Thatcher's government.

The Falklands Crisis

MARGARET THATCHER

The Falklands, a British crown colony, are a cluster of flyspeck islands located in the South Atlantic, off the southern end of Argentina, 8,000 miles from Britain. Almost no one knew where they were or cared much about them until the Argentine invasion. Two centuries before, Samuel Johnson had called the Falklands "a bleak and gloomy solitude . . . thrown aside from human use."[1] *This had continued almost literally to be the case. The islands had a population of fewer than 2,000 people, most of them tending more than half a million sheep.*

The invasion itself was a surprise, although Britain had had a long-simmering dispute with Argentina over the ownership of the islands, which the Argentines called the Malvinas. The dictatorial Argentine regime of General Leopoldo Galitieri apparently decided to launch the invasion as an effort to distract his people from domestic problems. The British themselves had unwittingly contributed to the decision. The previous year the aging ice-patrol ship HMS Endurance *was scrapped in the annual Defence Review. It had been stationed in the Falklands, the sole token of British naval presence in the South Atlantic. The Argentine government regarded this action as a symbolic withdrawal of Britain from the Falklands.*

The invasion produced a universal reaction of shock and anger in Britain, both in the nation and in Parliament. It was demanded that immediate military action be taken to regain the Falklands. While "the fate of the country was not at stake in the Falklands," "the fate of the government was."[2] *Mrs. Thatcher needed no prompting. Here was a popular cause that she and the Conservatives could seize on to revive their flagging popularity; moreover, it was a cause that was totally consistent with Thatcherite conservatism. All efforts at conciliation or diplomatic solution were swept away—including the shuttle-diplomacy of the American Secretary of State Alexander Haig. This was a matter to be resolved by arms.*

Within days elements of a massive naval task force had been assembled and dispatched. The force would eventually include the aircraft carriers Hermes *and* Invincible *and more than fifty other warships, as well as some fifty civilian ships mobilized as troop transports, including the luxury*

[1]"Thoughts on the Late Transactions respecting Falkland Island" [1771], *Works of Samuel Johnson* (London: J. Buckland, 1787), X, 56.

[2]Lawrence Freedman, *Britain and the Falklands War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. ix.

liners Canberra *and* Queen Elizabeth 2. *The military force consisted mainly of special troops—Royal Marine Commandos, Parachute battalions, and the Special Air Service, as well as some troops from the Guards Division and even Nepalese Gurkhas—a total of some 28,000 including naval personnel, and a substantial number of aircraft.*

Britain imposed a 200-mile blockade around the islands, and by May 1 air raids and naval bombardment against Argentine positions had begun. On that same day the task force attacked and sank the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano, *with the loss of over three hundred lives. Three days later the British destroyer HMS* Sheffield *was disabled by an air-launched French Exocet missile: twenty sailors were killed and the vessel was sunk. The war was becoming serious and, with the approach of winter in the South Atlantic, a British landing was imperative. On May 21 it began, directed at the capital of Port Stanley. Within three weeks the war was over. On June 14 the Argentine commander of the garrison at Port Stanley surrendered on behalf of all his forces in the Falkland Islands. From beginning to end the war effort had been directed by Prime Minister Thatcher and her "war cabinet." The prime minister had held at bay demands for a diplomatic solution from factions in Parliament, from allies such as the United States, and from the United Nations.*

Even before the Argentine surrender, Thatcher gave an assessment of her *war. The occasion was a speech to the 52nd Annual Conservative Women's Conference in London.*

Your conference takes place at a time when great and grave issues face our country. Our hearts and minds are focused on the South Atlantic. You have been debating defence policy at a time when our fighting men are engaged in one of the most remarkable military operations in modern times.

We have sent an immensely powerful task-force, more than a hundred ships and 27,000 sailors, marines and soldiers, 8000 miles away in the South Atlantic. In a series of measured and progressive steps, over the past weeks, our forces have tightened their grip on the Falkland Islands. They have retaken South Georgia. Gradually they have denied fresh supplies to the Argentine garrison. Finally, by the successful amphibious landing at San Carlos Bay in the early hours of Friday morning, they have placed themselves in a position to retake the islands and reverse the illegal Argentine invasion.

By the skill of our pilots, our sailors and those manning the Rapier missile batteries on shore they have inflicted heavy losses on the Argentine Air Force—over fifty fixed-wing aircraft have been destroyed.

There have, of course, been tragic losses. You will have heard of the further attacks on our task-force. HMS *Coventry* came under repeated

air attack yesterday evening and later sank. One of our Merchant Marine ships, the *Atlantic Conveyor,* supporting the task-force, was also damaged and had to be abandoned. We do not yet know the number of casualties but our hearts go out to all those who had men in these ships.

Despite these grievous losses, our resolve is not weakened. We know the reality of war. We know its hazards and its dangers. We know the formidable task that faces our fighting men. They are now established on the Falkland Islands with all the necessary supplies. Although they still face formidable problems in difficult terrain with a hostile climate, their spirits are high.

We must expect fresh attacks upon them, and there can be no question of pressing the Force Commander to move forward prematurely—the judgement about the next tactical moves must be his and his alone.

It was eight weeks ago today that information reached us that the Argentine Fleet was sailing towards the Falklands. Eight thousand miles away . . . At that stage there were only two ways of trying to stop it—through President Reagan, whose appeal to Argentina was rebuffed, and the United Nations, whose plea was also rejected.

There were those who said we should have accepted the Argentine invasion as a *fait accompli.* But whenever the rule of force as distinct from the rule of law is seen to succeed, the world moves a step closer to anarchy.

The older generation in this country, and generations before them, have made sacrifices so that we could be a free society and belong to a community of nations which seeks to resolve disputes by civilized means. Today it falls to us to bear the same responsibility.

What has happened since that day, eights weeks ago, is a matter of history—the history of a nation which rose instinctively to the needs of the occasion.

For decades, the peoples of those islands had enjoyed peace—with freedom, with justice, with democracy. That peace was shattered by a wanton act of armed aggression by Argentina in blatant violation of international law. And everything that has happened since has stemmed from that invasion by the military dictatorship of Argentina.

We want that peace restored. But we want it with the same freedom, justice and democracy that the islanders previously enjoyed.

For seven weeks we sought a peaceful solution by diplomatic means: through the good offices of our close friend and ally, the United States; through the unremitting efforts of the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

We studied seven sets of proposals and finally drew up our own.

Without compromising fundamental principles, we made a variety of reasonable and practical suggestions in a supreme effort to avoid conflict and loss of life. We worked tirelessly for a peaceful solution. But when there is no response of substance from the other side, there comes a point when it is no longer possible to trust the good faith of those with whom one is negotiating.

Playing for time is not working for a peaceful solution. Wasting time is not willing a peaceful solution. It is simply leaving the aggressor with the fruits of his aggression.

It would be a betrayal of our fighting men and of the islanders if we continued merely to talk, when talk alone was getting nowhere.

And so, seven weeks to the day after the invasion, we moved to recover by force what was taken from us by force. It cannot be said too often: we are the victims; they are the aggressors. As always, we came to military action reluctantly. But when territory which has been British for almost a hundred and fifty years is seized and occupied; when not only British land, but British citizens are in the power of an aggressor, then we have to restore our rights and the rights of the Falkland Islanders.

There have been a handful of questioning voices raised here at home. I would like to answer them. It has been suggested that the size of the Falkland Islands and the comparatively small number of its inhabitants—some 1800 men, women and children—should somehow affect our reaction to what has happened to them.

To those—not many—who speak lightly of a few islanders beyond the seas and who ask the question, 'Are they worth fighting for?' let me say this: right and wrong are not measured by a head-count of those to whom that wrong has been done. That would not be principle but expediency. And the Falklanders, remember, are not strangers. They are our own people. As the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Bob Muldoon, put it in his usual straightforward way, 'With the Falkland Islanders, it is family.'

When their land was invaded and their homes were overrun, they naturally turned to us for help, and we, their fellow citizens, 8000 miles away in our much larger island, could not and did not beg to be excused. We sent our men and our ships with all speed, hoping against hope that we would not have to use them in battle but prepared to do so if all attempts at a peaceful solution failed. When those attempts failed, we could not sail by on the other side.

And let me add this. If we, the British, were to shrug our shoulders at what has happened in the South Atlantic and acquiesce in the illegal seizure of those far-away islands, it would be a clear signal to those with similar designs on the territory of others to follow in the footsteps of aggression.

Surely we, of all people, have learnt the lesson of history: that to appease an aggression is to invite aggression elsewhere, and on an ever-increasing scale.

Other voices—only a few—have accused us of clinging to colonialism or even imperialism. Let me remind those who advance that argument that the British have a record second to none of leading colony after colony to freedom and independence. We cling not to colonialism but self-determination.

Still others—again only a few—say we must not put at risk our investments and interests in Latin America; that trade and commerce are too important to us to put in jeopardy some of the valuable markets of the world.

But what would the Falklanders, under the heel of the invader, say to that? What kind of people would we be if, enjoying the birthright of freedom ourselves, we abandoned British citizens for the sake of commercial gain?

Now we are present in strength on the Falkland Islands. Our purpose is to repossess them. We shall carry on until that purpose is accomplished.

When the invader has left, there will be much to do—rebuilding, restoring homes and farms, and above all renewing the confidence of the people in their future. Their wishes will need time to crystallize, and of course will depend in some measure on what we and others are prepared to do to develop the untapped resources and safeguard the Islands' future.

Madam Chairman, our cause is just. It is the cause of freedom and the rule of law. It is the cause of support for the weak against aggression by the strong.

Let us then draw together in the name, not of jingoism but of justice. And let our nation, as it has so often in the past, remind itself, and the world:

> Nought shall make us rue,
> If England to herself do rest but true.

The Falklands Factor

ROBERT GRAY

Amid the victorious trumpeting of the British popular press and the congratulations of politicians at home and abroad, Prime Minister Thatcher resolved to exploit the Falklands victory and transform it into a victory on a broader front. This became clear in an impassioned speech she made to some 5,000 Conservative partisans at Cheltenham Racecourse on July 3, 1982. In that speech, for the first time, she talked about the "Falklands Factor" and how it had irrevocably changed British attitude to produce a "new mood of the nation." The immediate subject of her speech was an impending rail strike, which she contrasted with the patriotic achievements of the Falklands Task Force. She went on from the recalcitrant rail workers to those "waverers and fainthearts" who had doubted Britain's ability at the outset of the Falklands campaign to "do the great things which we once did." "Well," she said, "they were wrong. The Falklands Factor is a new major force in British politics. Things are not going to be the same again." She continued: "All over Britain, men and women are asking—why can't we achieve in peace what we can do so well in war? And they have good reason to ask. Now is the time for management to demonstrate professionalism and effectiveness. Now is the time for the trade unions 'to match the spirit of the times.' The government will no longer print money: the nation won't have it. That too is part of the Falklands Factor."[3]

Thatcher plainly intended to identify the Falklands Factor with her own conservative program in every area of public policy. Neither the prime minister's tactic nor its likelihood of success were lost on her Labourite opponents in Parliament or on their advocates in the left-wing journalistic and intellectual community. A spate of publications poured out analyzing Thatcher's intentions and challenging them. The following excerpt is typical. From "The Falklands Factor," an essay by Robert Gray, a left-leaning labor historian, it deals generally with the new Thatcherite political initiative and specifically with its implications for foreign policy.

The Argentine occupation of the Falklands/Malvinas represents one of those historic moments when the capacity to respond to unexpected events can decisively strengthen or weaken political forces. In

[3]The speech was reported in the *London Sunday Times*, July 4, 1982, and the foregoing quotations are from that account.—ED.

this case the effect was to strengthen the right, and specifically the Thatcherite right. Not only did this greatly improve Thatcher's chances of electoral success and a renewed mandate, it also threatened, and still threatens, to roll back the advances made by widespread popular demands for peace and disarmament, by exposing historic weaknesses and dilemmas in the left, and in the peace movement. Thatcher may thus have won some ground from what has perhaps been the most deeply and broadly based area of dissent from her government's policies.

This essay attempts to explore the wider implications of the Falklands adventure for British politics. I shall argue that these events represent a new application of Thatcher's distinct kind of politics, now in the arena of foreign affairs; the appeals of this initiative expose certain weaknesses of other forces—from Tory "Wets" to the left and the peace movement—which might have resisted it. An effective fight-back requires the left to confront historically awkward issues, so as to redefine the national identities and loyalties which Thatcher has so powerfully mobilized. This is a challenging and daunting task, and one which the left has been reluctant to undertake, but until it is tackled the right will draw a strategic political advantage from its hegemonic definitions of "national interest" and "national unity."

The aggressive military response to the Argentine occupation bears the marks of Thatcherism, extended to foreign affairs. . . .

Two features of this policy stand out. First, not only did the Government opt for a military response, but it also chose one of the more extreme possibilities. The task force was dispatched, not with diplomatic pretexts about safeguarding lives and properties (the classic formula of gunboat diplomacy), but with declarations of intent to dislodge the Argentinians (even if only temporarily) by any means necessary: "Failure is a word we do not use." Most wars since 1945 have begun in a shamefaced way, with growing military entanglements kept secret from both world and domestic opinion; this war began with flags flying, drums beating and cameras rolling, and with the revival of a rhetoric which many people, especially on the left, too easily assumed to be dead. The course pursued may not be that different in content from what other political leaders might have done; but, as so often with Margaret Thatcher, the style and rhetoric were crucial to the political effect.

Second, the sheer audacity of this response, the speed with which events moved, and their relaying to the British public through carefully orchestrated media have muted opposition. Those elements of center opinion, in all the parliamentary parties, which might have

preferred a "softly softly," if still basically military approach were consistently outmaneuvered. . . .

Once the force was on its way, with support from the majority of the media and a bi-partisan parliamentary consensus, the whole grotesque enterprise took on a life of its own. The formation of a "war cabinet" reinforced Thatcher's authority. Popular opinion was frightened, but also excited by the creation of a war atmosphere, and the tendency for the control of events to pass a purely military logic (for example, the way that the safety of the troops became a strong reason for getting them ashore as soon as possible, regardless of the progress or otherwise of diplomatic efforts). With the commitment of forces to combat, identification with the men became a compelling motive, even for people who had reservations about the initial dispatch of the task force. The *Guardian* and the *Mirror* which, to their credit, had maintained a relatively balanced and critical attitude nevertheless carried reports from the battle-zone written in a stereotyped rhetoric familiar from every war this century (the assault troops waiting patiently, sipping cups of tea, etc.). Perhaps most compelling of all were the photos of "British" children welcoming liberating British soldiers. This atmosphere of national emergency and danger inevitably strengthened the authority of Government; opposition leaders have indicated that their criticisms of Government responsibility for the origins of the situation were merely postponed till after the crisis—by when criticism could well be too late and politically marginalized.

"Victory" and the long drawn out return of ships and men provided the occasion for a seemingly endless prolongation of media exposure. This was in many ways the ideal war—short, sharp, "successful," directly involving small professional armed forces and their families, but consumed vicariously through press and TV—for cementing a reactionary chauvinist consensus. The bellicose atmosphere was quite quickly and directly projected against such domestic enemies as ASLEF.[4] The euphoria will of course one day die down and the nagging question of "what next?" will surface, given the apparent difficulty of a continued British presence in the face of an embittered Argentina, or of the cession by negotiation of what has been won with lives.

However it would be a mistake to underestimate the extent to which Thatcher (helped by the passivity of the official oppositions) gained the initiative on this issue, or to assume that the emergence of these problems will automatically discredit her. Even if Thatcher suffers subsequent defeats over the future of the Falklands, the whole issue may by then be quietly marginalized. Its political effect anyhow rests on the gratifying Palmerstonian spectacle of the British lion

[4]The rail union.—ED.

punishing a Latin despot, rather than on Thatcher's wilder visions of maritime imperial rebirth centered on the South Atlantic.

To say that Thatcher has won an important initiative is not therefore to say that the eventual outcome will be what she would favor. Nor does it imply that she has gained the near-unanimous support portrayed in the more sycophantic elements of the media—there has certainly been more dissent, some of it in unexpected quarters, than the media and parliamentary balance would suggest. But that dissent has been largely isolated and leaderless, in terms of mainstream electoral politics. Tail-ending behind Thatcher's war, the official opposition parties added to her glory, rather than gained any for themselves. Winning the political initiative is reflected in the demoralization and division of opposing forces—something less tangible than numerical support, but nonetheless real.

Thatcher's seizure of command in any case has consequences that extend beyond the conjunctural strengthening or weakening of her position, or that of her party. We may be faced with a relatively permanent and organic shift in the political landscape. As is argued elsewhere in this volume, "Thatcherism" constitutes a shift of this kind, to which the personal fate of Thatcher herself is relatively marginal; whatever happens to her, or the government she leads, she has already done her political work. That work may be characterized as the mobilization of hitherto subterranean and politically incoherent currents of right-wing populism, in a way that is something of a new departure within the conservative political tradition, to build support for reactionary "solutions" to Britain's chronic economic and social crisis. This has succeeded by drawing on popular experience and a pervasive sense of crisis and decline, and articulating them in reactionary decisions. The expression of this in foreign affairs had previously been confined to enthusiastic support for the new cold war and the new arms race, Britain's role as Reagan's best friend, and thumping the table at EEC negotiations. Now, the articulation of a distinctly British nationalism has been added to this.

Like the domestic formula of the "free market and the strong state," this assertion has drawn on a sense of crisis related to Britain's long decline and articulated it in a reactionary, and very dangerous direction. One striking, and alarming feature of this has been the backward-looking, atavistic rhetoric, the motif of imperial nostalgia. At the crudest level, this appeals as a sign that Britain is still Great, that, despite change and decay we can still, when pushed, get it together. "Thank God the most professional armed forces in the world are BRITISH," one poster seen in Portsmouth proclaimed (together with "Britain does not appease dictators" and "Congratulations to the

Royal Navy"). Debate at the parliamentary level at times presented the grotesque spectacle of different protagonists all reenacting some moment in the national past from which they draw comfort and hope, in a magic ritual to exorcise the facts of twentieth-century life, an attempt to "conjure up the spirits of the past to help them" (Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*). Thatcher dons the mask of Churchill or Lord Palmerston, while Foot[5] appears to believe that the Falklands are part of the Sudetenland and that he is about to "speak for England."

It is easy enough to laugh at all this, to see it as a wave of hysteria aided by media manipulation. But it has powerful appeals, expressed in varied languages, not all of them as crude as the version propagated by the *Sun*; the resonances are not simply of Victorian "gunboat diplomacy," but also of the popular experience and memory of the Second World War. Thatcherism benefited from the organization of all these currents into more or less enthusiastic support for a war that Thatcher made her own.

Atavistic rhetoric makes sense of an experience of crisis, uneasy decline and lack of forward-looking political leadership. The national past, or a selectively mythologized version of it, is a source of identity and hope. Like all such rhetorics this is in reality the creation of something new, since the old cannot in its entirety be restored. The new factor is the clear assertion of distinctly "British" interests and power in a post-imperial world dominated by the stalemate of the cold war and the "nuclear balance." A language of chauvinism that had seemed out of place in this world is thus given renewed credence.

One aspect of this is the re-definition of Britain's relations with the U.S. Conservative policies since the 1950s have sought to come to terms with the diminished position of British imperialism by asserting Britain's special role as the senior European ally in the Atlantic alliance, but at the same time as a world power with interests transcending the purely regional ones of the NATO pact. These pretensions have at times seemed hollow: at Suez, for instance, the refusal of American support made the British posture untenable. There has always been a residual anti-Americanism on the Tory right, relating to this and other grievances. Now the Suez debacle has been neatly reversed; it is the Americans who have been forced, after a singularly unconvincing attempt at "mediation," to support British claims, at least for the crucial period of armed confrontation. This had demonstrated the value of the Atlantic alliance (and thus of British hospitality to existing and proposed U.S. nuclear weapons), while at the same time asserting British independence and appealing to residual anti-Americanism of the right. In the same way, EEC sanctions have

[5]Michael Foot, the Labour party leader.—ED.

shown the value of an association that had been questioned, not just by the left but by a nationalist right. Britain, in short, is not just one more European country, but can call the tune for its allies on an issue of extra-regional interest. Apart from its short-term effect in helping Thatcher to seize the initiative, this may have a longer-term effect on national consciousness and the production of a new nationalism.

This poses dangers and challenges for the left. It can be a potent force in winning renewed support for the cold war and the arms race, as well as the reassertion of a British imperial role. The Falklands war is likely to reinforce the ideology of war preparation and "negotiation from strength." While the failure of a nuclear strategy to protect the Falklands may demonstrate the incoherence of British military doctrines, this can be masked by less discriminating perceptions of the need for military strength. The spectacle of an actual war, and the atmosphere surrounding it, threatens to erode the widespread popular support for peace and disarmament, which has limited enthusiasm for the new cold war and the new arms race.

A New View of the Falklands War

PETER JENKINS

No one can deny the remarkable political success of Margaret Thatcher and her equally remarkable impact upon modern Britain. One of her former ministers, Francis Pym, has observed that "she has shifted the political ground away from the leftward drift of Socialism. There is little doubt that she would view this as her main achievement: it is the thing she was most determined to do."[6] *Sarah Benton, in* New Statesman and Society, *in the spring of 1989, wrote of Mrs. Thatcher:*

> *She has, with considerable difficulty, transformed her ideology from one of gaining power to one of holding it. Her supporters are no longer victims and martyrs, longing only for a safer Britain. They are innovators and leaders. It is "we Conservatives who set the pace, generate the ideas and have the vision," she tells the 1988 conference. "Inventiveness" has replaced thrift as their number one virtue. The old enemies are vanquished. "Whatever happened to Socialism?" she jeers. "Communism is in retreat," she reassures them.*[7]

[6]Francis Pym, *The Politics of Consent* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p. 11.

[7]*New Statesman and Society*, 28 April 1989, vol. 117, No. 3030, p. 11.

This piece of doggerel appeared in the same journal:

When weary Britain languished
For lack of faith and drive,
And commentators anguished
That we could not survive,
You broke our chains and freed us,
O Mighty Margareen!
Ten years and you still lead us,
Our rare and rightful Queen![8]

But to what extent was the Falklands War the turning point in the political triumph of Margaret Thatcher? In the immediate aftermath of the war, as we have seen, she clearly thought it was the turning point, as did her critics. A somewhat more measured answer is provided by the British journalist Peter Jenkins in Mrs. Thatcher's Revolution: The Ending of the Socialist Era, *one of the best and most perceptive of a glut of recent books on Thatcher and Thatcherism. In his analysis of the "Falklands Factor" Jenkins argues that, while the war itself was a trivial affair, it provided an opportunity for the prime minister to demonstrate the strong leadership Britain yearned for and thus contributed to the eventual success of Thatcher's revolution.*

His analysis follows.

What of the Falklands Factor? One may doubt its salience in any literal sense by the time voters came to enter the polling booths, one year after Port Stanley was retaken from the Argentinians. At least that is what they would have had the pollsters believe. The Falkland Islands were of no concern to the electorate before the war and it would not be surprising if they became of little concern once more soon after it was over. Indeed, an important cause of the war was that a small but single-minded pro-Falklands lobby had been able to take advantage of governmental timidity and huge public indifference to prevent some negotiated arrangement with Argentina which would guarantee the status of the islanders while ending a territorial dispute which had been going on for longer than anyone could remember. It had been the policy goal of successive governments to liquidate a post-imperial commitment which Britain, at a distance of 8,000 miles, no longer had the means of honouring except by expensive distortion of her other defence requirements.

For some months before the Falkland Islands were thrust upon the

[8]*New Statesman and Society*, p. 31.

national consciousness the government had been regaining popularity, chiefly at the expense of the SDP [Social Democratic Party]—Liberal Alliance, whose bubble had reached bursting point at the time of the Crosby by-election in December 1981. In that month the standing of the parties (according to Gallup) was: Conservatives 23; Labour 23; Alliance 50. By March the parties were running virtually neck and neck. The figures were 31: 33: 33. Nevertheless, the war did transform the political scene. In July, with the war won, the government had a 19 point lead: Cons. 46: Lab. 27: All. 24. On the eve of the 1983 General Election the figures were 49: 31: 16. The actual result was 43·5: 28·3: 26. The mould was thus set by the Falklands War but that does not mean that it might not have been set in the same way for other reasons. That we can never know.

The Argentinian invasion of those remote and unimportant islands threw the nation into a patriotic fit. Parliament set the lead. When news of the invasion was first rumored this commentator failed totally to grasp the significance of the matter. The Falkland Islands were a post-imperial leftover of no strategic or economic value and far removed from the real problems facing the country, at home and abroad. I left London that Friday for the country and the next day, annoyed at the disturbance of my Saturday, listened to the emergency debate in the Commons on the radio. Had I been in my place in the Press Gallery perhaps I, too, might have been carried away by the excitement of the moment but as it was, listening at my kitchen table, I could scarcely believe my ears. That the Commons was sitting for the first time on a Saturday since the Suez crisis of 1956 was an invitation to exaggerate the importance of the occasion. One speaker went further and solemnly compared the invasion of the Falklands with the fiasco of the Norwegian campaign in 1940, one of the darkest moments of the war which led to the fall of the Chamberlain government. The most jingoistic speech of the morning came from Michael Foot, who having proclaimed Britain's role as 'defender of people's freedom throughout the world' and asserted the 'absolute right' of the Falklanders to British protection, called upon the government to 'prove by deeds—they will never be able to do it by words—that they are not responsible for the betrayal and cannot be faced with that charge.'

It seemed to me then, and it seems to me now, extraordinary that it should be supposed that Britain could be responsible for 1,800 people and their 600,000 sheep in the remoteness of the South Atlantic. That we should hold ourselves responsible was honourable, noble in the extreme, but foolhardy. It had been irresponsible to continue with such a commitment without the capability of discharging it. The defence of the Falklands had for some time rested on bluff. Now that the

bluff had been called the proper course was to seek to discharge our responsibility to the islanders as best we could through negotiations to guarantee their status as British citizens or to repatriate and compensate them as need be. It was preposterous, it seemed to me, to assert their absolute right to self-determination. Rights could not exist without the means of upholding them and it was quite unrealistic to expect Britannia to rule the South Atlantic in the year 1982.

Karl Marx had said that history repeated itself as farce but then had gone on to say that when it repeated itself for a second time it did so as tragedy. In 1956 the folk-guilt of the ruling class had led an out-of-touch generation to mistake the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by Gamal Abdul Nasser for another Munich. Suez had been a post-imperial farce, a tilting at windmills; but now, it seemed, young lives were to be sacrificed tragically in the Quixotic cause of making a world safe for South Atlantic sheep-shearers. For it was questionable to claim—as Mrs Thatcher did throughout the affair—that liberty was indivisible to the extent that if aggression were allowed to succeed in this case licence would be given to aggressors everywhere, in Afghanistan and Cambodia or wherever. We were deluding ourselves if we supposed that the rest of the world, even our American allies and Common Market partners, would regard a dispute over an insignificant outpost of a lost Empire as an event on the same footing as the Nazi invasion of Poland. Thus:

> At the State Department, in the early hours of the crisis, most of the staff shared the amusement of the press and public over what was perceived as a Gilbert and Sullivan battle over a sheep pasture between a choleric old John Bull and a comic dictator in a gaudy uniform.

In his memoirs General Haig, then the Secretary of State, disassociated himself from this mockingly contemptuous view of the matter but when shown maps he was alleged to have said at the time: 'Gee, it's only a pimple on their arse.'

Indeed, there seemed to me, and here I consulted theologians, something disproportionate about the British response to the Argentinian invasion, reprehensible though it was. St Thomas Aquinas had laid down three conditions for a 'just war'—it must be authorised by the sovereign, the cause must be just, and the belligerents of valid moral intention. Recent Catholic moralists have stressed a fourth condition, most relevant to modern times: a war, to be just, must be waged by proper means (*debito modo*). Could this be said of the despatch of a large naval Task Force (which on its way would sink a cruiser and drown 308 young men) to avenge an act which, if the truth were admitted, was more costly of national pride than of true national interest? The Falklands, as we know, were recaptured in

glorious fashion and the Union Flag flies once more over Government House, Port Stanley. The death toll all round was about a thousand, plus some 1,700 wounded—for 1,800 islanders and 600,000 sheep. *Debito modo?*

There were two flaws to this analysis, more apparent in hindsight than at the time perhaps. The first was that it pointed to no clear alternative course of action. It would have been disproportionate equally to have done nothing. The Junta in Buenos Aires were a nasty lot ('a gang of thugs' Haig told the Cabinet) and their aggression could in no way be condoned; even the Security Council of the United Nations had condemned it. Resolution 502 required Argentina to withdraw but, if she did not, Britain had the right under Article 51 of the Charter to repossess her territory by the use of reasonable force. Diplomacy backed up by the threat of force, it seemed to me, was the appropriate and proportionate strategy.

The Prime Minister's intention from the beginning was to get the islands back and undo the humiliation which had been done. The Foreign Office was in such disrepute as a result of the invasion that it was, literally, *hors de combat;* a peace strategy never really received a hearing. Nevertheless, the Cabinet was from the outset united on the total war objective. The services had many options but no clear plan. The Americans stepped into the diplomatic action. The 'war cabinet' in London in fact went a long way in co-operating with the Haig mission but it was his reports on the character of the Junta in Buenos Aires, anecdotes of drunkenness and imbecility, which convinced the doubting members of the inner group that the 'Argies' would be neither willing to make peace nor capable of it. And, as it turned out, it was the Junta which rejected, first, terms to which Mrs Thatcher had reluctantly agreed, and subsequently—to her huge relief—terms which she would herself have declined to put to Parliament had Galtieri had the wit to accept them. Meanwhile, as the Task Force approached its destination, the options narrowed until the only choice was between all or nothing. Her military strategy achieved its goal; looking back, it is hard to see how a diplomatic approach could have succeeded.

Be that as it may, we are concerned here with the politics of the matter, with the contribution of the 'Falklands Factor' to the realignment in British politics brought about by, or under, Mrs Thatcher. The second flaw in the position of those of us who at the time were critics of the war is that we underestimated, perhaps, the psychological needs of the nation. I do not mean by that a need for crude chauvinistic distraction, for one thing which was striking about those ten weeks was how rare it was to hear of the spirit of high patriotism degenerating into hatred or crude 'Argie' bashing. It might have been

otherwise if the horrendous sinking of HMS *Sheffield* had preceded the tragic sinking of the *Belgrano*. Nor do I mean simply that the country was willing to have its attention diverted by an external adventure, the oldest trick in the book, from three million unemployed at home, although diverted it was for a while as the places of public entertainment emptied and all eyes became riveted to the nightly television news bulletins. No, the psychological need was for a success, a success of some kind, an end to failure and humiliation, to do something well, to win. Nostalgic knee-jerk reaction it may have been, vainglorious posturing in a post-imperial world of Super Powers, but it made people feel better not worse.

Moreover, it aroused genuine admiration around the world and, where not that, reluctant respect. There is a slight note of astonishment in Haig's account of how:

> In a reawakening of the spirit of the Blitz that exhilarated Britain, warships were withdrawn from NATO, civilian ships, including the liner *Queen Elizabeth II*, were requisitioned and refitted, troops were embarked, and in an astonishingly short time a task force of over 100 ships and 28,000 men was steaming under the British ensign toward the Falklands.

Perhaps no people were more surprised that the British, accustomed to being told they did not know how to run a motor car factory. By jingo they knew how to launch a Task Force. The point was not lost upon the Prime Minister in her heady hour of victory. On 3 July a great throng assembled on the race course at Cheltenham—where better?—and she said:

> It took the battle in the South Atlantic for the shipyards to adapt ships way ahead of time; for dockyards to refit merchantmen and cruise liners, to fix helicopter platforms, to convert hospital ships—all faster than was thought possible; it took the demands of war for every stop to be pulled out and every man and woman to do their best.

On she went, dishing out the medals to British industry, the British people—the British worker! Of course, Churchill had to be quoted at such a moment—he had said something somewhere about the need to work together in peacetime as in war, a banal enough sentiment, and now—thirty-six years on—the truth of it at last was dawning on the British people, or so she said.

> We saw the signs when, this week, the NUR came to understand that its strike on the railways and on the Underground just didn't fit [we can hear the voice]—didn't match the spirit of these times.

And on she went. Printing money was no more.

> Rightly this Government has abjured it. Increasingly this nation won't have it. . . . That too is part of the Falklands Factor.

Not only was the Falklands Factor making the trains run on time, it was—it seems—rallying the nation behind the Medium Term Financial Strategy. And as the climax is approached, the sentences grow shorter:

> What has indeed happened is that now once again Britain is not prepared to be pushed around.
>
> We have ceased to be a nation in retreat.
>
> We have instead a new-found confidence—born in the economic battles at home and tested and found true 8,000 miles away.
>
> That confidence comes from the rediscovery of ourselves, and grows with the recovery of our self-respect.
>
> Britain found herself again in the South Atlantic and will not look back from the victory she has won.

Such oratory is not to be taken too literally; it is indicative of a state of mind, not of the state of the nation. War is a celebrated midwife but it is improbable that the loss and recapture of the Falkland Islands in 1982 will prove to have been the rebirth of Britain, or the apotheosis of Thatcherism. What it may have done, however, is to help link in people's minds their images of her with this powerful image of success. She was a winner. Luck was on her side. What she said she would do she would do. She was a sticker whose determination paid off. What had worked so brilliantly abroad, would work at home. And she was quick to reinforce these thoughts in people's minds: 'I think people like decisiveness, I think they like strong leadership,' she told an interviewer. In this way the Falklands Factor became the Thatcher Factor.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The only collection of Margaret Thatcher's own writings, to date, is Margaret Thatcher, *In Defence of Freedom: Speeches on Britain's Relations with the World, 1976–1986,* intro. Ronald Butt, foreword by President Ronald Reagan (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1987), excerpted for this chapter. Her speeches, parliamentary positions, and news releases, however, are fully covered in both the British and American

press and exhaustively analyzed in such British opinion journals as *New Statesman and Society* and *The Economist.*

There are many books on Mrs. Thatcher, including one comprehensive biography, Russell Lewis, *Margaret Thatcher: A Personal and Political Biography,* rev. ed. (London et al.: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983). A briefer and more strictly political biography is Patrick Cosgrave, *Margaret Thatcher: A Tory and Her Party* (London: Hutchinson, 1978). Another book by Patrick Cosgrave, *Thatcher: The First Term* (London: The Bodley Head, 1979), concentrates even more on questions of national policy and politics in her first term as does Jock Bruce-Gardyne, *Mrs. Thatcher's First Administration: The Prophets Confounded* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

There are a large number of books that attempt to analyze the Thatcher government, Thatcher conservatism, or simply Thatcherism. The best of these is Peter Jenkins, *Mrs. Thatcher's Revolution: The Ending of the Socialist Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), excerpted for this chapter. Another excellent, and politically neutral book, is Dennis Kavanagh, *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 1987). Two books that reflect the Tory viewpoint are Francis Pym, *The Politics of Consent* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), by a Tory politician and former member of Thatcher's government; and Peter Riddell, *The Thatcher Government* (Oxford: Robertson, 1983), also one of the most intelligent assessments of its subject.

Because of the success of Thatcher's brand of conservatism she has attracted the criticism of the left like a lightning rod. The essay by Robert Gray, excerpted for this chapter, is an example, as are most of the other essays in the volume in which it appeared, *The Politics of Thatcherism,* ed. Stuart Hall and Martin Jaques (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983). Joel Krieger, *Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) is highly critical of the New Right conservatism exemplified by Reagan and Thatcher. The Falklands War in particular exercised the critics of the left. One of the most comprehensive and strident attacks was by Anthony Barnett, "Iron Britannia: War Over the Falklands," *New Left Review,* No. 134 (July–August 1982). Another is Norman Gelb, "Thatcher's Victory: The Falklands Factor," *The New Leader,* vol. 65, No. 14 (July 12–26, 1982), 5–6. Yet another is an editorial in *New Statesman,* "A victory beyond our means," vol. 103, No. 2673 (18 June 1982). There is an interesting survey and analysis of this left-wing criticism in an article by Clive Christie, "The British Left and the Falklands War," *The Political Quarterly,* vol. 55, No. 3 (July–September 1984), 288–307.

There are a large number of books on the Falklands War itself. The most lively and complete are Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands* (New York and London: Norton, 1983) and a book by Martin Middlebrook that takes its title from the British codename for the war, *Operation Corporate: The Falklands War, 1982* (London: Viking, 1985). A briefer general work in the "Making Contemporary Britain" series is Lawrence Freedman, *Britain and the Falklands War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). Devoted more to analysis than narrative are Peter Calvert, *The Falklands Crisis: The Rights and the Wrongs* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), *The Falklands War: Lessons for Strategy, Diplomacy, and International Law,* ed. Alberto R. Coll and Anthony C. Arend (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985), and Virginia Gamba, *The Falklands/Malvinas War: A Model for North-South Crisis Prevention* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987). A good section on the contribution of the *Queen Elizabeth 2* to the Falklands War is included in Captain Ronald Warwick and William H. Flayhart III, *QE2* (New York: Norton, 1985). Warwick was chief officer of the *QE2* during the experience, and Flayhart is an American maritime historian.