

# Britain: Jack Straw and "The Invention of Peace"

Ann Talbot

17 November 2001

Speaking to the International Institute of Strategic Studies on October 22, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw proposed a plan to, as he put it, bring "order out of chaos."

The speech was clearly intended as a major policy statement on the broader significance of the bombing of Afghanistan and the so-called "war against terrorism" for Britain's foreign policy, which had been drafted by better-schooled minds than his.

In it, Straw identified the main problem in the period of the Cold War as states that had too much power, whereas the main problem since the collapse of the Soviet Union was states with too little power. The attack on the World Trade Centre had demonstrated that the main threat to security now comes from "groups acting formally outside states, or from places where no state functions."

While "distant and misgoverned parts of the world" could once be ignored, he concluded, this is no longer possible. According to Straw, terrorism is the result of weak states, where poor governance has brought about the collapse of civil society. Quoting from a catalogue of weighty authorities ranging from Nicolo Machiavelli to Max Weber and the distinguished military historian Sir Michael Howard, he declared that the great problem facing the world was "failed states".

Straw's view of the state is remarkable for its conceptual paucity. Quoting Machiavelli, he declares that all a state needs to thrive are "good laws and good armies." Weber is called to witness that a state is "a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."

One of these authorities dates from a time before the nation state had come into existence and the other is a product of its degeneration. By Weber's day the working class and the internationalist and socialist movement was a serious political force, especially in Germany. As a result, the German middle class proved incapable of forming a nation state on progressive principles and left the task of unifying Germany to the Prussian aristocrats, rather than risk the working class coming to power.

What is singularly lacking from Straw's speech is any reference to the nation state in its classical period, when it represented the capitalist class at their most progressive, defending democratic principles against feudal privilege. What would have become apparent had he done so, is that all the most outstanding theorists of that period recognise the citizen's right of resistance to the state.

Locke, Jefferson, and Paine were entirely opposed to the concept of the state as a mere monopoly of force. They saw the role of the state as defending the rights of the citizen. Once it ceased to do so, it had no legitimacy.

At one time a British foreign secretary, even at the height of the British empire, would have felt obliged to make at least a rhetorical gesture towards the liberal, democratic conception of the state. He would have had to claim to be defending the best principles of liberty and fair play in attacking a foreign country.

Not so today. Democratic rights do not figure in Jack Straw's thinking,

as he consistently showed when he was home secretary.

Straw's speech is an indication of how far removed is the outlook of the present Labour government from that of its predecessors of whatever party. While it is true that ultimately every state in class society defends the interests of the ruling class by force, no state has ever survived if this is the only way it can maintain its hold over the population as a whole. But Straw either does not know, or does not care, that an open acknowledgement that the state is based on physical force undermines the work of generations to convince the British, against all the evidence, that their island is the home of liberty.

His ill-advised foray into political theory ran into trouble almost at once. Machiavelli and Weber are safely in their graves and could not speak for themselves. Unfortunately for Straw, however, Sir Michael Howard is still in the land of the living and before the month was out had denounced the bombing of Afghanistan. It was, he said, like "trying to eradicate cancer cells with a blow torch".

Speaking at a conference organised jointly by the Royal United Services Institute and the *Guardian* newspaper, Howard warned that the longer the present war went on, the greater the danger that it would shatter western societies.

Its extension to other so-called "rogue states" such as Iraq would be even more disastrous, he argued. The Bush administration had, he said, made a "terrible and irreversible" mistake in calling its anti-terrorism campaign a war.

What makes this speech all the more remarkable is that Sir Michael Howard is not an instinctive oppositionist; he is no radical, or anti-war protestor. He is a veteran of the Coldstream Guards. A firm advocate of NATO, he is the former Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, who has reached the threshold of his 80s respected on both sides of the Atlantic and laden with honours, both academic and royal. Along with Professor Peter Paret, he translated from German Carl Von Clausewitz's *On War*, now considered the standard English version, helped establish the International Institute for Strategic Studies and was twice appointed vice-president of the British Academy between 1978 and 1980. He received the NATO Atlantic Award and the Paul Nitze Award from the US Centre for Naval Analyses.

Howard does not even dispute the claim that Osama bin Laden is guilty of planning the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. His objection is that he thinks the attack was the work of a criminal conspiracy and that the act of declaring war has given terrorists the legal protection of combatants in a conflict between states. He wants them brought before an international criminal court.

His sympathies do not naturally reach out to the victims of the war in Afghanistan, but to the governments that are perpetrating it. Attempting to explain the political damage that the bombing of Afghanistan could do, he reminded his audience about the experience of Northern Ireland.

The British government, he said, had never recovered from the effects of the Bloody Sunday Massacre in 1973 when paratroopers gunned down

unarmed civil rights protestors. “If so much damage can be done with bullets, what can be said of bombing?” he asked.

What he means is that Bloody Sunday damaged Britain’s reputation abroad and exacerbated the conflict. It enabled the Provisional IRA, then only a tiny organisation, to recruit members and to raise money. He anticipates that the bombing of Afghanistan will have a similar effect on Al Qaeda.

Howard represents an older and more politically astute generation of the British ruling class. He went through the experience of the Second World War when he fought in some of the bloodiest battles of the Italian campaign. Specialising in military history, he also believes that the US and Britain should still heed the military lessons of Vietnam, which demonstrated to him that a small cohesive force can withstand a larger power armed with sophisticated weaponry.

Even before the present conflict he was sceptical of the high technology warfare advocated by the US military. He pointed out to an interviewer that, “Its weakness is that it assumes a confrontation against a comparable, if not equal, power with the same kind of technology and weapons. But most of the conflicts now and in the foreseeable future will not be between, as it were, Goliath and Goliath but between Goliath and lots of little Davids whose little sharp stones from the brook may be more effective than the huge technological armor of great superpowers.”

Above all else, however, Howard fears that the political system that has sustained capitalism for centuries may be destabilised by the war against Afghanistan. What is at risk in this present war, he insists, is the very system of nation states.

In his recent essay *The Invention of Peace*, [Profile Books, 2001] to which Straw refers, Howard traces the history of the system that was created by the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War in 1648, through a succession of subsequent crises associated with wars and revolutions, after each of which a new world order was established.

Straw seems to imagine that strong states automatically produce peaceful international relations. But Howard is well aware that 300 years of history after 1648 prove that this is not the case. Nation states also go to war with one another.

The central theme of his essay is that it has always been necessary to establish a world order that regulates the relations between nation states if peace was to be maintained. He also recognises the intimate connection between those wars and periods of revolution.

In the course of his 100-page essay, he briefly charts the history of these wars. He describes how the great European powers met at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 when they had defeated Napoleon. They restored the monarchs and ecclesiastical authority that the French revolution and the revolutionary wars had overthrown. Their aim was to re-impose a conservative world order that would suppress any future revolutionary movements.

In 1848 the European order created at Vienna was threatened by a series of revolutionary upheavals. They were a continuation of the French revolution in that they expressed the opposition of the bourgeoisie to the aristocracy’s domination of political power. In Italy and Germany they expressed a desire for national unity and an opposition to the feudal particularism that was embodied in the many small states that then divided these nations.

But the difference between 1848 and the French revolution of 1789 was that the working class had appeared on the scene. In England they were organised in the Chartist movement. In Germany workers played a leading part in the 1848 insurrections.

Howard has read enough Marx to know that disaster was averted because “the bourgeoisie took fright and aligned themselves with the forces of order.” By exploiting national movements and creating representative political institutions, the leading European statesmen such as Bismark and Napoleon III succeeded in turning the tide of revolution.

They created a new world order based on the modern industrialised nation state.

This ensured peace, in Europe at least, Howard argues, for the next 40 years, until the First World War. But in the aftermath of that war it was no longer possible to create a stable world order based on the nation state system because of the Russian revolution, the first socialist revolution. In 1918, Howard recognises, Lenin and Trotsky, the leaders of that revolution, had every intention of assisting revolutionary movements in the rest of Europe.

The world of 1918 was, says Howard, divided between “two universalist concepts of world order,” communism and liberal democracy, “both claiming the heritage of the Enlightenment.”

A new world order based on the nation state system could only be arrived at after the Second World War because of the role played by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which had usurped power in the Soviet Union. As far as Howard is concerned, Stalin’s betrayal of the international socialist revolution was a sign that he was a shrewd politician with whom the West could do business.

At no point between 1648 and the present did the nation state system ever lead in itself to peace and stability. On the contrary, throughout modern history, whether at Vienna or at the conferences that followed the Second World War, Howard recognises that the great task facing the major powers was to establish an international system of relations between themselves that could avoid avert war and suppress revolutionary movements.

Even in so short an essay, his views reveal a degree of profundity that escapes the British foreign secretary. It is based on a lifetime’s work and level of political understanding that is unknown among the current crop of Labour politicians. He correctly conceives of history as a series of inter-related wars and revolutions. He recognises the important role that the Stalinist leaders of the Soviet Union played in maintaining the stability of the capitalist system after World War II. He is aware that liberal democracy must be able to lay claim to certain Enlightenment values if it is to have any credibility.

But that is not to say that there is anything progressive about the views he expresses. He speaks as a defender of British imperialism’s interests and is as impeccably right wing in his perspective as any guards’ officer could be expected to be. The unprecedented slaughter of the First World War, in which half of an entire generation of men was wiped out, evokes no criticism or regret from him. “Contrary to general belief,” he writes, “the conduct of that war had not been completely sterile, nor were memories entirely negative.”

The great development of the First World War, for Howard, was that it produced “keen young specialists in violence.” He admires “the flexible use of artillery in support of storm troops capable of providing their own fire-power with light machines guns, flame-throwers, grenades and mortars”. When added to air-power and the radio, “far-sighted strategic thinkers” could now “visualize a new kind of war that would give scope both for professional skill and individual heroism.”

Hitler, of course, was one of these “specialists,” who as Howard acknowledges, used violence against both external and internal opponents. Although he disapproves of fascism, he cannot resist admiring the “brilliant campaigns of 1940”—which saw the bombardment of European cities from the air, Rotterdam destroyed; Belgium, Holland and France conquered. The murder of communists, the deportation of Jews and Gypsies that followed receive no attention. His view of war remains essentially soldierly. Military power is in and of itself admirable for Howard. He views military dictatorships in former colonial countries as necessary because “stability in these countries could be provided only by authoritarian rule; usually by a Western-trained military.” Reagan’s “star wars” project was “visionary,” if impractical.

Why then does such a man oppose the war in Afghanistan? What

Howard fears most is that the war will have political repercussions internationally, including within the major capitalist countries.

In an interview earlier this year he explained how, after the Congress of Vienna, a supranational class of aristocrats maintained the 19th century “Concert of Europe” through which they avoided a major war because they knew that such a war would lead to revolution.

By declaring war on Afghanistan, Bush has disrupted international relations, which were already under strain because of the end of the Cold War, the globalisation of the economy and the growth of nationalism. Howard’s knowledge of history tells him that this may not only lead to a wider war, but to a revolutionary upsurge that will, he warns, threaten to shatter what he describes as our own multicultural societies.

His concern is shared by former senior Labour minister Lord Denis Healey, the defence secretary and chancellor in successive Labour governments during the 1960s and 1970s. He called for the bombing of Afghanistan to stop because it is “creating more terrorists, turning more people throughout the Muslim world against the West.” He warns that, “it is undermining governments which are presently friendly to the West and which it is very important to keep on-side, particularly the governments of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.”

Right-wing regimes, such as those in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, were put in place by the West to prevent revolutionary upheavals among the oppressed colonial and semi-colonial masses. Healy recognises the danger that these regimes could be toppled and that the West would have no reliable local forces to call upon in the event of mass movements re-emerging.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**