

UK Ministry of Defence seeks to counter growing opposition to war

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A document obtained by the *Guardian* under the Freedom of Information Act exposes the preoccupation of Britain's ruling elite with how to prosecute future wars in the face of growing anti-war sentiment.

The study was written in November 2012 by a Ministry of Defence (MoD) think tank, the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) and entitled *Risk: The Implications of Current Attitudes to Risk for the Joint Operational Concept*.

The eight-page document, which has no named authors, begins with two quotes.

Bill Rammell, minister for the armed forces under the last Labour government, declares, "My great fear is that we as a nation will become so risk-averse, so cynical and so introverted that we will find ourselves in inglorious and impotent isolation by default."

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel states, "A risk is a chance you take; if it fails you can recover. A gamble is also a chance you take, but if it fails recovery is impossible."

The paper then takes an abstract ramble through the nature of risk before presenting its main argument: "It is often argued that the MOD has become steadily more risk averse as the years have passed and this canard is steadily gaining acceptance. However it is very difficult to find historical evidence that the military have become more risk averse in recent years."

In opposition, the authors argue, "the military may have come to believe that the public, and through their influence, the political leadership of the government, has become more risk averse on the basis of recent campaigns."

This is a mistake, they continue because, "this assertion is based on recent, post-2000 experience and we are in danger of learning false lessons concerning the public's attitude to military operations. Historically,

once the public are convinced that they have a stake in the conflict they are prepared to endorse military risks and will accept casualties as the necessary consequence of the use of military force."

To substantiate this point, the DCDC document cites public support for the Falklands/Malvinas war and operations in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 2007. Neither example is, of course, to be accepted as presented. Opposition to Britain's role in Northern Ireland was always present, even though the terror campaign waged by the Irish Republican Army did much to alienate large sections of the British working class.

In 1982, the Thatcher government was deeply reviled. Official unemployment figures stood at 3.6 million, with some unofficial estimates suggesting that it had in fact hit 5 million. Inner-city riots had exploded across several major UK cities a year earlier. Government policies were meeting opposition in a number of industrial disputes and strikes. It was the Labour Party's support for the Falklands/Malvinas war that played a key role in rescuing it. Together with the media, Labour's warmongering allowed for a united effort to legitimise a supposedly "just war" against a fascist junta that disoriented and confused broad sections of workers.

Nevertheless, the DCDC document continues, "In those cases where the public is unconvinced of the relevance of the campaign to their wellbeing they are not prepared to condone military risk and are acutely sensitive to the level of casualties incurred.

"Neither the action in Iraq nor the operations in Afghanistan have enjoyed public support and we are in danger of learning a false lesson from the experience of the last 10 years."

The authors recognise as a problem the fact that "the

public have become better informed,” and that “the need to run military risks has become more difficult.”

The document suggests addressing this problem in a number of ways.

Significant parts of the remaining document concern the moulding of public opinion to accept further and bloodier military conflicts.

The document recommends that the already jingoist and corporate-servile media be supplemented with a state war propaganda agency. The armed forces should have “a clear and constant information campaign in order to influence the major areas of press and public opinion.”

Further, the paper proposes measures to “reduce public sensitivity to the penalties inherent in military operations” and calls for measures to “inculcate an attitude that service may involve sacrifice and that such risks are knowingly and willingly undertaken as a matter of professional judgment.”

The need to tackle the impact of military casualties on public consciousness is a recurring theme in the document. At one point, it suggests reducing “the profile of the repatriation ceremonies”—an apparent reference to the processions of hearses carrying coffins draped in the union flag driven through towns near Royal Air Force (RAF) bases where the bodies of dead soldiers were repatriated.

From 2006 to 2011, 345 UK military personnel killed in action were brought back to RAF Lyneham and driven through the town of Royal Wootton Bassett, in Wiltshire, in front of crowds of mourners and to regular media coverage. Since then, bodies have been repatriated via RAF Brize Norton, in Oxfordshire, with hearses driven through the nearby town of Carterton.

This is a disputed position within ruling circles, due to such ceremonies having been consciously utilised to bolster support for the military. This led to a partial retraction by an MoD source, who stated, “It is entirely right that we publicly honour those who have made the ultimate sacrifice and there are no plans to change the way in which repatriation ceremonies are conducted. A key purpose of the development, concepts and doctrine centre is to produce research which tests and challenges established doctrine and its papers are designed to stimulate internal debate, not outline government policy or positions. To represent this paper as policy or a potential shift of policy is misleading.”

The DCDC paper also recommends a major investment in “autonomous systems for unmanned vehicles”, which is an oblique reference to the increasing use by the British military of “drones” or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

A November 2011 report by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported that the UK will “spend over half a billion pounds on acquiring and sustaining armed Reaper drones on operations in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2015.”

The RAF is continually upgrading its drone warfare capability. It is intended that, by 2030, these will constitute 30 percent of the RAF’s capacity. Recent estimates suggest that in Pakistan alone US drones killed up to 3,533 people between 2004 and 2013.

The document also calls for an increased use of mercenaries, referred to as “contractors.” Noting the huge growth of private security companies during the past decade, it adds: “Neither the media nor the public in the west appear to identify with contractors in the way that they do with their military personnel.”

A greater reliance on Special Forces is also recommended, with the paper commenting, “The public appear to have a more robust attitude to SF losses.”

Long before the August 29 defeat of the war resolution on Syria introduced by British prime minister Cameron in the House of Commons, sections of the British ruling class had been aware of and were consciously seeking to counter the growth of anti-war sentiment in the population.

Cameron and Obama ultimately dashed their heads against the huge and growing opposition to the politics of the ruling elites they serve, along with their bloodthirsty pro-war media. But the march towards war can only be ultimately halted by an international movement based on the working class and directed towards the overthrow of capitalism—the source of war, social inequality and political repression.



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