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## British soldiers are dying in Afghanistan to win the war of Whitehall

**Only one battle matters to the Ministry of Defence – the battle for resources. In this the Taliban is not an enemy, but an ally**

Simon Jenkins

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Next week Nato defence ministers meet in Brussels, reportedly to start planning an [Afghan army "retraining mission"](#) next year. Start planning? What have they been doing for over a decade? When will spades be called spades and retreats retreats?

Afghanistan has become another [war of the Spanish succession](#), its cause long forgotten by the opponents but an unending parade of pride, money, heroism and national prestige. It is no longer a war of retribution for 9/11, no longer a war of democratic nation building. It is merely a place where soldiers are sent by politicians to pretend to win, even as they die.

The one straw at which ministers and generals will grasp is that as long as the war lasts, it helps them lobby for money. Ever since Nato lost its reason for existing, its task has been to find a purpose. It has dragged out the insane Afghan conflict for 11 years. Why stop now? In the one battle that matters to a modern army – the battle for resources – the Taliban is not an enemy but an ally.

What do officials say nowadays to the relatives of the [433 British and 2,000 American who have died fighting in Afghanistan](#). Do they say they have avenged the dead of 9/11, taught the Taliban a lesson, "sent a message" to militant Islam, helped rebuild a poor country? They cannot surely be repeating Gordon Brown's line, that their deaths are making Britain's streets safer. London now has to be patrolled by armed policemen, and a billion pounds spent protecting the Olympics.

The truth is that British troops are dying in Afghanistan because no British government has the guts to admit they are there to no purpose. Military lobbyists shelter behind the "bravery of our boys" to sustain defence spending. No party dares question the war or its objective, for fear of demeaning heroism. The war is not mentioned at party conferences. Money is poured into drone bombing, despite its manifest counter-productivity. The coalition claims to be "training" a 350,000-strong local army and police force, but knows them to be unreliable, a new Taliban in the making.

There is evidence that Philip Hammond, the least gullible of defence secretaries, is starting to cleanse the Augean stables of defence spending. [Trident is being mothballed](#). Regiments are being disbanded. Hammond is demanding the army get below 100,000 soldiers, given that after Afghanistan it will have little to do beyond changing the guard. The navy and air force crave another Libya, where they "bravely" spent half a billion pounds replacing a nutcase with a bunch of bandits. Their reckless procurements are at last being addressed.

Whether Hammond survives long enough to do more than scrape the surface of his [£37bn budget](#) has yet to be seen. He is still buying jet fighters, destroyers and "hunter-killer" submarines, designed by military lunatics to fight Hitler. In 2010 Cameron was bamboozled by the defence lobby into the nonsense that it would cost more to cancel aircraft carriers than to build them. He then found [adapting F-35 fighters to use them \(one day\) had tripled in cost](#).

These are not sums attributable to the vagaries of war. They are normal day-to-day spending, as on schools and hospitals. If any other government department, let alone a council or private company, behaved like the MoD it would be bankrupted and replaced, its officials probably up before the Old Bailey.

Senior politicians are putty in the hands of military posturing and hard-graft lobbying. That is how Britain has come to spend more on defence than Germany, Japan, India and even Russia. The MoD has seen 250 senior staff leave to work for defence contractors in a single year, without batting an eyelid. Defence spending is one vast job-creation scheme. It has not made Britons safer, merely some Britons richer.

Each attempt to cancel or cut a programme is greeted with howls from the lobbyists. A marine general, Julian Thompson, popped up recently to say that ["the Falklands war would be lost today"](#), so deep are the cuts. Admirals deplore the "hollowed out navy, holed below the waterline". Dan Jarvis, an ex-paratrooper and Labour MP, wails to the Guardian that [army cuts damage "our ability to leverage influence in the world"](#). Spending on defence is like the Olympics, a matter not of security but of global leverage and influence.

Afghanistan policy no longer uses the word victory. It needs only to engineer a future that preserves Nato dignity and saves its generals from humiliation, however long it takes. Today's wars of intervention are like medieval conflicts, causes so lofty that mere mortals cannot see the point. They are an outlet for heroism, a reason for lucrative taxation and, with luck, a source of glory.

I have never read a coherent explanation, in simple English, of why Britain still spends money on defence, long after the cold war is over. If anyone were to emerge to pose a conventional and existential threat to the British state, which is wildly unlikely, we would have time to rearm. As for our current obsession with fighting wars in small countries, the future is said to lie with hi-tech cyber-weapons, not lumbering armies and manned weapon platforms.

Nothing illustrates the thinness of the case for military spending so much as the airy language nowadays used to justify it. We no longer need to stop invasion. We merely need to "punch above our weight" and "stand tall in the world". This is fatuous. An attaché swaggering at an embassy drinks party is not influence. China and Germany are proving that influence in the modern world comes from working hard, from a tight budget and a sound economy. Britain has neither.

When public money is spent to no purpose it is usually wasted. Defence money merely encourages government to indulge in one stupid war after another, killing Britons and foreigners in conflicts we are never going to win. [Rory Stewart's recent television history of Afghan disasters](#) was irrefutable.

This week another British soldier is likely to die in Afghanistan. His death will be greeted with heroic rhetoric, intended to imply that his sacrifice is keeping this country safe. That will be a lie. Britain is less safe for fighting this war. Soldiers are dying to defend a Whitehall budget, enrich a commercial lobby and protect a politician's back. They are wretched reasons.