

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3639 | JUNE 14, 2012

Falklands War: Lessons of Liberation Ring True for U.S. Today

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Thirty years ago today, the Falkland Islands War between Great Britain and Argentina ended with a cease-fire after a hard-fought British campaign to liberate the islands from their Argentine occupiers. That victory would not have been possible if Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had not launched the daring campaign and if the United States, under President Ronald Reagan, had not covertly supplied Britain's forces.

Today, the islands are in the news again as the Obama Administration—much to the anger of London and with no support from the Falkland Islanders themselves—urges Britain to enter into negotiations with Argentina over the sovereignty of the islands. This unwanted initiative is yet another in a series of American snubs to Britain.

The Falklands War illustrates the fundamental point that, in

international affairs, one should always treat one's friends better than anyone else. But it also offers a number of lessons for America as it struggles to avoid the devastating effects of defense sequestration and to maintain a military that provides for the common defense.

Lesson 1: Be Prepared for Surprise. The Falkland Islands had long been a minor source of concern for Britain, but in 1982, no one expected an Argentine invasion. Indeed, Britain had just completed a defense review that argued—sensibly, in the Cold War context of the times—that Britain's most important role in NATO was to protect the North Sea from the Soviets.

Every government tries, as it must, to forecast the future, but most governments fail most of the time. Strategic surprise is a fact of life; governments need to remember that and—especially in the realm of defense—keep enough reserve capacity and flexibility to act successfully when their predictions are wrong.

For example, U.S. troops are based in Europe not primarily to defend Europe but to allow the U.S. to project power rapidly in response to strategic surprises.¹ That is why the House amendment sponsored by Representatives Mike Coffman

(R-CO) and Jared Polis (D-CO) would hurt U.S. national security interests.

Lesson 2: Focus on Mortal Threats. Once Argentina invaded, Britain had to respond. What was remarkable was that it responded with force. No one—certainly not the Argentines—believed that Thatcher's Britain would fight back or that it could do so effectively. They were proven wrong on both counts. But once the war was won, Britain did not turn the focus of its defense effort to the Falklands. It remained committed to the defense of Western Europe from the Soviet threat. Events demand a response, but not every event is a mortal threat; Argentina was an enemy, but it was not the Soviet Union.

By the same token, the U.S. today has core national security interests in the safety of the homeland, the prevention of major power threats to key U.S. interests around the world, and maintaining the freedom of the global commons, including on the sea, in space, and in cyberspace. The U.S. cannot afford to allow other concerns to distract from these core interests.

Lesson 3: Who Dares Wins. This motto of Britain's famous Special Air Service, which served

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3639>

Produced by the
Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

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heroically in the Falklands, is also applicable to international relations. As Winston Churchill once noted, the chains of consequence of a great victory are very long. Once victory is won, the consequences seem inevitable. But before victory, it requires statesmanship and courage to believe that they might even exist.

The results of the war were not limited to the liberation of the islands. The war discredited the Argentine military dictatorship that launched it and led to the restoration of democracy in Argentina in the 1983 election. It also helped to discredit dictatorships across South America and so played a role in the return to democracy across the entire region in the 1980s. Finally, it showed the Soviet Union—whose experts were sure that Argentina would win—that Britain was back and proved that the resolve of the West to stand up for its values was strengthening.

No one in June 1982 could have believed that a war in the remote South Atlantic could have such large consequences or do so much for democracy. The war was fought over the islands, but it ended up being about a great deal more. The lesson that standing up for principles can have big consequences is a lesson

that Americans should always bear in mind.

Lesson 4: There Are No Permanent Victories. The reward of victory is being in a better position to face the next problem. It would be pleasant if the world were the kind of place where problems remained settled and victories stayed won, but the history of the Falkland Islands, and of Argentina, proves it is not.

Thirty years later, the Falkland Islands are again the subject of a campaign by an Argentine government that is in dire economic straits and is using the Falklands to distract the Argentine people from the mess the government has made of their country. South America has again swung back in the direction of authoritarianism. And British authorities again profess confidence that, even if Argentina wanted to act, it lacks the capability to do so.

The fact that the U.S. is now egg-ing Argentina on and that Britain—thanks to successive defense cuts since the end of the Cold War—now lacks the capacity to retake the islands only makes this return of history even more dangerous.

The Obama Administration is moving the U.S. in the same direction. Heritage analyst Baker Spring points out that the Administration's

proposed defense budget is not only inadequate to preserve the U.S. lead in weapons technology; it is overwhelmingly about reducing U.S. military capabilities.² The U.S. is at risk of going down the same road that Britain had gone down so dangerously far in 1982.

Maintain Defenses and Back a Key Ally. For the U.S., backing Britain is not simply a matter of taking the side of an ally, though that is essential. It is a matter of defending the rights of people everywhere to democratically choose their own form of government and the U.S. recognition that sovereignty derives ultimately from the will of the people.

As Heritage scholar Matthew Spalding has noted, the Founders believed both that the government must provide effectively for the common defense and that national sovereignty in the world was based on popular sovereignty at home.³ Those are wise American traditions to apply to the U.S. defense budget and to the Falkland Islands today.

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1. See Luke Coffey, "Removing Brigade Combat Teams from Europe Undermines U.S. Interests," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3632, June 7, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/06/army-brigade-combat-teams-removal-from-europe-undermines-us-interests>.
2. Baker Spring, "Obama's Defense Budget Makes Protecting America Its Lowest Priority," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2658, March 1, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/03/obamas-defense-budget-makes-protecting-america-its-lowest-priority>.
3. Matthew Spalding, "America's Founders and the Principles of Foreign Policy: Sovereign Independence, National Interests, and the Cause of Liberty in the World," Heritage Foundation *First Principles Series Report* No. 33, October 15, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/10/americas-founders-and-the-principles-of-foreign-policy-sovereign-independence>.