

## The Military Covenant and Britain's Increasingly Visible Armed Forces

In 2006, prominent interventions from academics and senior members of the Armed Forces highlighted what they saw as an increasing cultural gap between civilians and the Armed Forces in the United Kingdom. These interventions led to public, political and scholarly debate on the so-called military covenant “the basic contract between the soldier and the state” (Dorman 2007, 323). While to some extent these debates focused on how the state could better meet the needs of the Armed Forces they also led to calls for a more visible and publically supported Armed Forces. In this paper, I trace the key aspects of this military covenant debate over the past 15 years and show how it provided the backdrop for a proliferation of events which saw, what David Cameron (2010) referred to as, “the military front and centre of our national life once again”.

This paper is a contribution to a larger project which seeks to understand the phenomenon of an increasingly visible military in a so-called ‘liberal’ society such as The United Kingdom. In this paper, I outline empirical information on the covenant debate while taking my first tentative steps towards providing it with an intellectual context. My broader project will look at these practises as part of what Michel Foucault referred to as modern governmental power. In his *Security, Territory and Population lectures* Foucault spoke of the:

The ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target (Foucault 2007, 108)

Although not referencing Foucault directly in the paper, it is with these words in mind that I have outlined the following empirical detail on the military covenant debate. In particular, I have sought to identify the rationales and logics which have informed much of this debate and then to show how in turn these logics have informed the tactics and practices of increased military visibility across civil society. Mitchell Dean (1999, 38) explains how a governmental analysis can expose how “problematizations are made on the basis of particular regimes of

practises of government, with particular techniques, language grids of analysis and evaluation, forms of knowledge and expertise". In other words, I do not want to understand the phenomenon of an increasingly visible military as a *militarism* of a liberal society but to understand it as part of liberal governmentality. This paper is my *initial* attempt at providing such an analysis.

Although 2006, was the year the term 'military covenant' became prominent in the UK civil-military debate, its first use was actually in a small piece of army doctrine *Soldiering: The Military Covenant* which was produced by the Army in 2000. In the first part of this paper, therefore, I provide an analysis of this document and identify the key rationales and logics which lay behind it. In particular, I note how the document's central argument is that if sufficient military effectiveness is to be maintained then an optimal civil-military balance is necessary. In the next section, I examine how two key civil-military interventions, which took place in 2006, propelled the notion of the military covenant into the heart of the defence debate in the United Kingdom. I show how while the interventions of the *Channel 4* documentary *Battle Fatigue* and, the then head of the British Army, Richard Dannatt appeared to reinterpret the covenant, the logics of military effectiveness which lay behind its initial conception remained. I then briefly inspect how a wide range of organisations from across society took on the concerns raised by this covenant debate by initiating a whole host of initiatives, such as an Army Forces Day, which sought to raise the profile and public understanding of the military in the UK. Finally, I identify a period of reflection in the UK civil-military debate where these initial attempts at re-balancing the UK civil-military relationship were evaluated through the same logics and rationales which dominated the debate from the start. The paper begins, therefore, with an overview of the military covenant's first inception in February 2000.

## [Protecting Professional Space: The Covenant's First Inception](#)

### [Civil-Military Background to the 2000 Covenant Document](#)

The political environment in Britain at the end of the twentieth century gave senior members of the British Army cause for both optimism and concern. There was optimism because after The Cold War had ended, a decade earlier, with "widespread uncertainty in defence

establishments” (McInnes 1998, 824), the new Prime Minister, Tony Blair (1999), had now shown, through his actions and words, that military force would play an integral part in the conduct of British foreign policy. Markus Maeder explains (2004, 207) how a sequence of military operations, in places such as Kosovo and East Timor, at the end of the 1990s meant that “the self-consciousness of Britain’s Services was strengthened”. Nevertheless, alongside this new found confidence there were concerns, within the army, about the progressive political agenda of Blair’s new Labour Government. In particular, Army chiefs feared that Labour’s commitment to a new Human Rights Act would result in the introduction of restrictive employment legislation that could damage the Army’s ability to conduct military operations successfully. Anthony Forster (2006, 1051) notes, for example, how since this time “employment practices in the armed forces have ... come under pressure from EU health and safety legislation, especially as regards the duty of care and other employer obligations”. Furthermore, from the perspective of the British Army, this ‘liberal’ shift in British politics was representative of changing attitudes across the whole of civil society. This perspective led to a fear that new recruits would increasingly come from a world where individualism was valued above everything else and, as a consequence, they would struggle to adapt to core military values, such as collectivism and sacrifice. General Roger Wheeler, noted, for example, how “the concept of self-discipline has changed a lot in society, but it remains a crucial part of the ethos of the Army” (Evans 2000). The British Army emerged at the start of the new millennium, therefore, with a rediscovered *raison d’etre* but with a leadership increasingly fearful of liberal encroachment into its professional space.

### The ‘First’ Military Covenant

Against this political backdrop, in February 2000, the Army published a new piece of official doctrine entitled *Soldiering: The Military Covenant*. This new doctrine’s primary objective was to ensure that British military effectiveness would be maintained despite these increasingly liberal pressures from civil society. The 2000 military covenant document was conceived, therefore, as what Forster (2011, 2) describes as “an antidote to the threat of civilianization of the Army”. The doctrine’s central argument was that in order to ensure British military effectiveness a gap between civilian and military worlds in the United Kingdom was essential. In order to maintain this gap, however, it was crucial that the values of these civilian and military worlds did not drift too far apart. Using the parlance of civil-military relations

scholars, therefore, this was a document primarily concerned with the optimal size of the civil-military gap in the UK. In this respect, the 2000 covenant document evokes the thinking of the military strategist Carl von Clausewitz who spoke of a trinity between the army, the government and the people. According to Clausewitz (1989, 89) operational effectiveness in war is premised on “a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended from three magnets”. It is an attempt at this balancing act which can be seen in the 2000 military covenant document. First, by insisting that a civil-military gap is essential but then by voicing a concern that this gap can grow too large. I will examine the two stages of this argument in turn.

### *The essential gap between military and civilian?*

In the very first line of the document, we are reminded that “the purpose and measure of the British Army is military effectiveness: success in war and on other operations” (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2000, 1-1). The document argues, moreover, that this military effectiveness cannot be achieved unless soldiers routinely carry out tasks which their civilian counterparts would never be asked to do. In other words, protecting “the unique nature of soldiering” (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2000, 1-1) is essential if military effectiveness is to be maintained. As the British military historian Hew Strachan (2003, 48) explains “operational effectiveness became the mantra which rationalised the Army’s divergence from civilian society”. Strachan (2003, 44) further notes how “liberal democracies and constitutional governments by definition live with a division between their armed forces and their societies”. This thinking is borne out more explicitly by Samuel Huntington (1957, 63) who argues that “the man of the military ethic is essentially the man of Hobbes” while civilians in a liberal democracy “hold that human nature is pliable and may be improved through education and proper social institutions”. In other words, from this perspective, it is essential that a liberal democracy’s military retains unique characteristics because what militaries are asked to do sits in direct contrast to the central tenets of liberal democratic thinking. The covenant document lists some of these unique characteristics. For example, it notes how “every soldier is a weapon bearer” which means that “all must be prepared personally to make the decision to engage an enemy or to place themselves in harm’s way” (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2000, 1-1). Furthermore:

All British soldiers share the legal right and duty to fight and if necessary, kill, according to their orders, and an unlimited liability to give their lives in doing so (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2000, 1-1).

'Unlimited liability' is a euphemism which was first used by John Hackett to describe the risk of death in the military. For Hackett (1983, 202) it is 'unlimited liability' which separates the military from the rest of society:

It is the unlimited liability which sets the man who embraces this life somewhat apart. He will be (or should be) always a citizen. So long as he serves he will never be a civilian.

Patrick Mileham (2010, 24) argues that, when writing the 2000 military covenant document, "Army doctrine and policy-makers ... wanted terms that proved the defining difference of their institution from any other, with its difficult and deadly serious role". By placing the notion of unlimited liability at the centre of the covenant, therefore, the 2000 covenant document powerfully produces a representation of a unique military profession set apart from its civilian counterparts.

#### *Demographic and Legal threats to Military Effectiveness: The Civil-Military Gap*

While, according to the covenant document, it is essential that military and civilian worlds remain discreet, this can only be achieved, the document argues conversely, if this gap does not become too wide. If the values of British society become too liberal, the document argues, then this could have a detrimental effect on the military uniqueness crucial for an effective British army. Strachan (2003, 43) describes how the armed forces often perceive civilians:

They see civilians as venerating individualism over cohesion, as mentally soft and physically feeble, and as expecting the armed forces to incorporate personnel policies wholly inappropriate to fighting formations.

Put simply, there is a concern that civilians are too liberal to be incorporated into a military ethic and that civilian legislation could inhibit the ability to fight effectively. Forster (2011, 2) argues that these issues present “far-reaching challenges to the Army’s jurisdiction and its ability to determine for itself its culture and values”. It is both of these fears which are articulated in the 2000 military covenant document. The covenant document portrays a British society increasingly out of touch with military values by identifying demographic and legal challenges to the uniqueness of the British military profession.

### Demographic Challenges

New recruits to the British army overwhelmingly come from British society. It is through their training that the army hopes that these new recruits will move from the civilian to the military world. For example, another piece of doctrine, *Operations*, notes how the Army “needs to recruit an untrained civilian and turn him into a soldier” (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2010, 2-33). In *Soldiering: The Military Covenant*, however, a fear is expressed that this training process will become increasingly problematic because British society is becoming too liberal. In particular, it claims there is an incompatibility between a liberal society premised on individualism and the collectivism at the heart of the military ethic:

The rise of the importance of the individual in society, and the associated stress on the rights rather than responsibilities of the individual has profound implications for the Army (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2000, 2-7).

This is because it explains:

Soldiers differ from civilian employees because success in military operations, when the price of failure may be death, requires the subordination of the rights of the individual to the needs of the task and the team (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2000, 2-6).

Whereas in civil society the life of one individual would be of paramount importance, in a combat environment giving one’s life is often a necessary part of the job. Crudely speaking,

military effectiveness can only be achieved if soldiers die or are willing to. These fears echo those of the influential civil-military relations scholar Charles Moskos (1977, 2), who described the military 'calling' as "a purpose transcending individual self-interest in favour of a presumed higher good". Like the authors of the 2000 covenant document, Moskos also feared that this 'calling' was becoming increasingly anachronistic in Western societies. The covenant document, therefore, produces a representation of a British public too far out of touch with military values. The document identifies two changes in particular which, it argues, have brought about this change in society's values: A lack of understanding within society of military values and a move away from Christian ethics. It is the first of these which I will briefly examine now.

### A Gap in Civil-Military Understanding?

The document expresses a concern that "the proportion of the population with personal experience of the armed forces is falling fast" (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2000, 2-5). Although it does not outline explicitly how this change has led to a change in societal values, this concern is typical of a number of civil-military relations scholars, such as Hew Strachan (2003, 45-46), who argue that "the reopening of the civil-military 'gap' is the product of the ending of conscription". Strachan (2003, 45), notes, for example, how "by 2000 the legacy of conscription was waning. Even the last of those drafted was now aged over sixty, and was likely to be a grandfather". Likewise, the military historian Richard Holmes (2006, 2) identified, in a 2006 lecture, "a gap between the army's ethos and the mores of society in general". Later in the lecture Holmes (2006, 5) talked nostalgically of growing up:

in a society that knew the difference between a brigadier and a bombardier, a battalion and a brigade, and could put lieutenant colonel, lieutenant commander and flight lieutenant in the right order.

In contrast, scholars such as Helen McCartney (2010, 422) see this portrayal of British society as "invoking an idealized past where relations between the military and wider society were close". What is important here, however, is that this perception of a British Public out of touch with military values, expressed in the 2000 covenant document, was a prevalent one and

crucially it was a perception that would become increasingly influential as the decade proceeded.

### Legal Challenges to Military Effectiveness

The 2000 covenant document also cites legal challenges to the fighting power of the British army. Like the demographic changes it notes how legislation is increasingly privileging individual concerns over collective ones:

In recent years the range and scale of employment and social legislation that may be applied to the Army has changed radically. Individual rights are ensured in legislation which seeks to eliminate discrimination. By placing more emphasis on individual rights than collective responsibility, much domestic and European legislation may impact adversely on the operational effectiveness of the Army (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2000, 2-6)

In other words, the concern here was that the violent world of the battlefield was becoming more pervasively scrutinised by civilian law. In his 2006 lecture, Holmes (2006, 9) gave an example of how this legal challenge to military effectiveness has manifested itself, claiming that “in Iraq you cannot legitimately shoot someone who shoots at you but then tosses his weapon to someone else”. Another example, of this perceived incompatibility between civilian law and the battlefield was provide by former Army Officer Patrick Hennessy who in a Radio 4 documentary spoke of:

the families of soldiers who’ve died perhaps in a roadside IED, roadside bomb, questioning the vehicle that their [relative] was sent out in - that sort of ability to legally challenge a tactical decision, that’s very new territory (Bowen 2010).

What the 2000 covenant document is concerned about, therefore, is that civilian law is pervading the Army’s professional space. Furthermore, like the society it comes from this is a legal framework increasingly out of touch with military values.

### The Significance of *Soldiering: The Military Covenant*

The notion of the military covenant would eventually come to be associated with all three armed forces but at this early stage it was solely a piece of Army doctrine. Indeed, more specifically, Forster (2011, 4) notes how the covenant document was the manifestation of “how a small leadership group of commanders wanted to see themselves and how everyone else should see the Army” In other words, the 2000 covenant document presented an idealised *representation* of the British Military Profession, not necessarily an accurate description of the ‘state of the profession’ at the turn of the century. Moreover, this was a representation that was produced with strategic logics of military effectiveness at its core. A representation which venerated the army as a unique even exceptional organisation while portraying a British civil-society increasingly out of touch with its military. Crucially, this representation of the British Military Profession, which was outlined in *Soldiering: The Military Covenant*, would go on to play a large role in informing the image of the British Armed Forces as it became an increasingly visible organisation in the decade that followed.

### The Military Covenant after 2006

In 2006, the number of British service personnel killed in Iraq and Afghanistan jumped to 66, from 21 the previous year (BBC News 2011). This was principally because in 2006 the British army moved into Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan. Although the British Army had been in Afghanistan since 2001, their move into Helmand precipitated a significant increase in combat operations. With the increased fighting came the inevitable rise in British combat deaths and injuries. Consequently, media attention began to focus on what British society was doing to support injured personnel and the families of the dead. In this environment, the military covenant became a useful device for articulating these concerns.

Before 2006, *Soldiering: The Military Covenant* was a little read piece of Army doctrine. During 2006, however, the notion of ‘The Military Covenant’ was thrust into the centre of the defence debate in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, over the following years, the debate surrounding the military covenant formed the backdrop for a proliferation of events, practices and organisations which sought to revere the Armed Forces while also attempting to

engender a greater understanding of the armed forces amongst the population. Put simply, to a large extent the concerns of the authors of *Soldiering: The Military Covenant*, that the correct civil/military balance be achieved, were now writ large and being addressed by a whole host of military, charity, government and business organisations. This phenomenon was described by one civil-military relations scholar as the military covenant developing “a life of its own” (Mileham 2010, 33) while another wrote that “a bit like letting a genie out of a bottle, once out the concept Military Covenant was very difficult to control” (2011, 5). To be sure, I do not want to suggest that *Soldiering* in some way ‘caused’, or was even the catalysts behind, Britain’s armed forces becoming an increasingly visible organisation. What is worthy of note, however, is that the logics and rationales which motivated the authors of the 2000 covenant document began to dominate the civil-military agenda from 2006 onwards. They not only informed the justification for many of the events which saw the armed forces becoming increasingly visible but played a large role in the debates that surrounded them. What was less explicit, however, was that these were rationales and logics that had initially been articulated in an attempt to maintain military effectiveness. In this section of the paper, I will examine two key civil-military interventions from 2006. A Channel 4 documentary, *Battle Fatigue*, and a Daily Mail interview with General Sir Richard Dannatt, the then head of the Army. What is significant about these interventions is that they both drew on the notion of the military covenant in order to make their concerns more comprehensible.

### Battle Fatigue

The key motivating factor behind the writing of *Soldiering: The Military Covenant* was the maintenance of military professional space. When the notion of the covenant was taken up by media, military and charitable organisations in 2006, however, the focus changed. The focus of media attention now became this section of the document which argued that in return for a soldier’s ‘unique’ work they deserved fair treatment from British civil-society:

The unique nature of military land operations means that the Army differs from all other institutions, and must be sustained and provided for accordingly by the nation (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2000, 1-3).

Put simply, because of the unique status of military life, and the individual rights this meant forgoing, soldiers should be appropriately rewarded by 'the nation'. It was the extent to which this unique status placed an obligation on 'the nation', to support the armed forces, which now became the firm focus of media and political debate. The ambiguity of the term 'nation' would mean, however, that the question of who *was* responsible for 'sustaining and providing' for the armed forces would become open for interpretation. In my first example, the Channel 4 documentary *Battle Fatigue*, that obligation was placed firmly at the feet of government.

Forster (2011, 5) describes how in the spring of 2006 "the Military Covenant first began to be used against both the government and the MoD in a partisan and highly politicized way". One of the first times this shift in emphasis was seen was in the *Channel 4 Dispatches* documentary *Battle Fatigue* first broadcast on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2006. Andrew Gilligan's documentary drew attention to the government's failure to support injured troops coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan (Bluemel 2006). Crucially, the programme drew heavily on the covenant to frame its argument. Indeed, the documentary began by almost paraphrasing the covenant document: "British soldiers accept the risks of their job but if the worst happens they expect to be looked after". Gilligan then went on to refer to the covenant explicitly "the British Army has something called the Military Covenant it's a formal part of military doctrine ... but that Covenant appears to be breaking down". As Forster (2011, 5) notes, *Battle Fatigue* "was the first explicitly to draw on the Military Covenant as a commitment that the government were failing to honor (sic)". In the documentary, this concern is expressed by Private Neil Spencer who laments that "fighting for the country is an easy thing ... fighting my government for what you're entitled to is a blooming hard thing". This lack of commitment by government is further highlighted by Gilligan who states that it has been nearly two years since any minister visited the wounded service personnel at Selly Oak hospital. The documentary ends as it began with an implicit reference to the covenant "while the country can still rely on soldier's loyalty they feel increasingly that they can no longer rely on ours". The documentary is notable because it represents one of the first times that the covenant was drawn upon to highlight ethical concerns in the relationship between the armed forces and, what the original covenant document referred to as, the 'nation'. In terms of this documentary the fulfilment of the 'nations' obligations were firmly place at the feet of government. Later in 2006, however,

another media intervention would take place which would shift this obligation away from government and towards the population as a whole.

### Richard Dannatt

Between August 2006 and August 2009, General Sir Richard Dannatt was the head of the British Army or The Chief of the General Staff. One of the defining features of his tenure were his persistent campaigns to ensure that the rank and file of the British Army were adequately supported and compensated for the work that they did. The wording of the military covenant, therefore, was the perfect device for articulating these concerns. The first time Dannatt brought the notion of the covenant into the public defence debate was in an interview with the *Daily Mail* published on October 12<sup>th</sup> 2006. Unlike, the *Battle Fatigue* documentary which placed 'the nations' obligation at the feet of the government, Dannatt suggested, in the interview, that these obligations were not just limited to the government but to the population as a whole. In a similar vein to the *Battle Fatigue* documentary, however, Dannatt used the notion of the covenant to frame his argument, at one point evoking its wording by proclaiming that "I don't want the nation to let the army down" (Sands 2006). The interview starts with Dannatt highlighting government failures by complaining that army pay and, more generally, defence spending is not sufficient: "is £1,150 take-home pay for a month's fighting in Helmand province sufficient?" he asks. He then goes on to draw attention to the problem of military personnel sharing hospital facilities with civilians. At this point, his line of thought concurs with the authors of the original covenant that military and civilian worlds need to be kept separate. For example, he argues that an injured soldier waking up in hospital "wants to wake up to familiar sights and sounds, he wants to see people in uniform. He doesn't want to be in a civilian environment". Furthermore, as in the original covenant document, Dannatt argues that there is also a lack of public understanding about what the military does. For example, this medical arrangement has led to "a wounded soldier in Selly Oak Hospital ... being abused by an anti-war civilian". By using this example he moves the focus of his concern away from the government and towards placing the responsibility with the British public for failing to properly comprehend and respect what soldiers do. He reiterates this point later in the interview, stating that "it is important that Paras back on leave can go down to the pub and people will know what they have been doing". In many respects, therefore, Dannatt's argument retained the logics and rationales of the original 2000 covenant document. Namely,

that the correct civil-military balance be achieved: the armed forces must remain unique while simultaneously making sure that the civil-military gap does not grow too wide.

### Fulfilling the Societal Obligation

During and after 2006, the focus of the covenant debate moved away from how the government was failing British troops towards the less tangible problem of how the population at large were failing the armed forces. These failures, more specifically, were seen as failures to fulfil *obligations*. For critics of the government, identifying and articulating these obligations was a relatively easy task. For example, commonly cited problems included army pay, insufficient equipment and inadequate compensation for bereaved families and wounded personnel (for an example see The Independent 2007). Specifying 'society's' obligations was a much harder task. Furthermore, how were these obligations to be fulfilled?

Traditionally, military charities have provided a conduit for the public to demonstrate their support for the armed forces in the United Kingdom. One charity which has been at the centre of the covenant debate is the Royal British Legion (RBL). In 2007, it was the RBL's 'Honour the Covenant' campaign which played a significant role in raising the prominence of issues related to the covenant. As Vron Ware (2010, 5) explains, the RBL "was well placed to intervene on a number of fronts, particularly those that involved commemoration". The RBL is perhaps best known for its annual 'poppy' appeal which culminates with commemorations of Britain's war dead on Armistice Day each year. In the original covenant document, published in 2000, it was this event which was used by the army to illustrate how members of the public customarily upheld their part in the covenant:

It has perhaps its greatest manifestation in the annual commemoration of Armistice Day, when the nation keeps covenant with those who have made the ultimate sacrifice, giving their lives in action (Ministry of Defence UK (Army) 2000, 1-3).

Seen from this perspective, therefore, the RBL has been a key facilitator in enabling the population to fulfil its so-called covenant obligations. Nevertheless, after 2006, the public's participation in annual remembrance events no longer appeared, on their own, to satisfy

many commentators that society's covenant obligations were being met. For example, scholars such as Christianne Tipping (2008, 12) claimed that "a hitherto apathetic public are also culpable" for a breakdown of the covenant. Furthermore, in a speech, in the year following his *Daily Mail* interview, Richard Dannatt (2007) argued that "the real covenant is with the population at large, the nation" while exhorting that "soldiers want to be understood and they want to be respected for their commitment". In the following years a number of media, charity, military, business and government organisations appeared to respond to these criticisms by initiated various initiatives designed to aid the general public in fulfilling their covenant obligations. For example, there was the creation of several new military charities. Primary among them was *Help for Heroes* which, set up in 2007 with the support of Richard Dannatt, to date has raised over £100 million to support wounded British soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. This public engagement with organisations such as *Help for Heroes* certainly convinced military historian Hew Strachen (2011, 277) that the population was now meeting its covenant obligations:

The public's desire to engage with the armed forces and to fulfil its obligations under the military covenant remains extraordinarily strong, as the success of Help for Heroes shows.

There were government initiatives too. In 2008, the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown commissioned a report entitled *National Recognition of our Armed Forces* which argued that:

It is desirable that there should be a re-appraisal by the Armed Forces themselves of the priority given to public outreach, and to relations with politicians and the media in particular (Davis et al. 2008, 4).

This was a report, therefore, which was concerned with improving the Armed Forces public relations. Crucially, the key motivations behind this public relations effort would be to address the same concerns which had hitherto dominated the covenant debate. For example, the report opens by reminding us that "the Armed Forces have a unique place in society" (Davis et al. 2008, 3). It then reiterates the now familiar concern that public understanding of what the military does needs to improve and suggests that in order to improve this, that

“countervailing measures are taken” (Davis et al. 2008, 4). One measure the report recommended was the holding of annual ‘Armed Forces Day’ celebrations. On 27<sup>th</sup> June 2009, this recommendation was put into practise when Armed Forces Day celebrations took place all over the United Kingdom. Mileham (2010, 35) notes how with its focus on living service personnel, Armed Forces Day “balances ... annual commemoration of the dead on Remembrance Sunday”. On the one hand, these celebrations involve practises, such as marches and fly pasts, which venerate and reinforce the unique status on the military. While on the other, as a later report looking at the impact of Armed Forces Day noted, “by increasing awareness of the Armed Forces, we generate ... understanding at a national, regional and local level” (Ministry of Defence UK 2011a, 85). In the years that preceded 2006, therefore, there were countless initiatives which sought to facilitate the fulfilment of society’s obligations under the covenant. Crucially, motivating most of these were the same logics of civil-military balance which were set out in the 2000 covenant document.

Alongside these more deliberate attempts at encouraging public support there were other practices which appeared to exemplify the ideal civil-military relationship. For example, the people of Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire lining the streets to pay their respects as the funeral corteges of dead service personnel passed through the town. The town of Wootton Bassett subsequently was held up by politicians and the media alike as the exemplar of how the population at large could honour the covenant. For example, in 2011, Britain’s new coalition government published *The Military Covenant: Today and Tomorrow*, in conjunction with a rewritten “tri-Service” covenant, it noted that:

The British public regularly demonstrate and voice their strong support for the men and women of the Armed Forces and their families. There has been no clearer demonstration of this than the regular efforts shown by the people of Royal Wootton Bassett to pay their respects to Armed Forces personnel killed in Service (Ministry of Defence UK 2011b, 58).

Likewise the British civil-military relations scholar Helen McCartney (2010, 422) has noted that:

When inescapably confronted by those sacrifices, the British public does respond. The most striking example is provided by the inhabitants of the town of Wootton Bassett in Wiltshire.

The events which took place in Wootton Bassett appeared at first to be exactly the public behaviour that critics of the UK's civil-military relationship craved. Nevertheless, according to the logics which dominated the covenant debate it is public *understanding* which is crucial if the military is to operate effectively. As public adoration of the military grew and grew, an increasing number of commentators began to ask more specifically if this show public support and sympathy could be equated to an increased public *understanding* of the armed forces.

#### [Undermining Military Effectiveness: A Post-Diana Sentimentality?](#)

2009 is a year which, in many respects, represented a high point in the public admiration of the military. For example, it was a year which saw the inaugural Armed Forces Day, and the first Sun Military Awards. Furthermore, Wootton Bassett experienced its busiest day when the coffins of eight soldiers killed in Afghanistan came through the town. By 2010, however, a number of, mainly military, commentators started to question the extent to which this outpouring of public adoration was, in fact, detrimental to military effectiveness. Dixon (2012, 133) notes, for example, how "the spontaneous behaviour of the people of the village of ... Wootton Bassett ... symbolised the military's uneasy relationship with public opinion". Commentators began to speak of a post-Diana sentimentality, as members of the public openly grieved for people they never knew. Notably amongst them was Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Fry who speaking to a newspaper said:

There is some of this that is good and laudable and there is some that is pretty mawkish ... it is a question of trying to celebrate what is good and trying to avoid the Diana, Graceland stuff (Coghlan 2010).

In the same article Michael Clarke, from The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), echoed Fry's comments while exposing the strategic concerns beneath them. He argued, for example, that "it creates a sense that the Service personnel who die on operations are seen as yet more

victims of government policy, as opposed to instruments of that policy" (Coghlan 2010). Speaking to *The Independent*, Lieutenant Colonel Matt Bazeley elaborated on these comments:

We don't want sympathy; sympathy is for losers and we are not losing.  
We are soldiers, we know the risks, we know what we are doing and why  
we are here (Sengupta 2010).

Ten years after its first inception, therefore, the concerns which motivated the drawing up of the first military covenant document came to the fore again. Namely that military effectiveness will be damaged if the 'unique' military realm is too heavily influenced by its civilian counterpart. In this case with the 'sympathy' shown at Wootton Bassett, the fear was that civilians would simply not understand that in the military world death was an inevitable by-product of successful military engagement. The logic of creating the optimal civil-military balance was still central to the UK defence debate. While 2006-2009 saw an upsurge in initiatives and practices motivated by these logics, in 2010 a process of revaluation took place. Commentators were now assessing these initial attempts at re-balancing the civil-military relationship through the same logics which had persisted throughout the preceding decade.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have identified the key logics and rationales which have dominated the civil-military debate in the United Kingdom over the past 15 years. First, there has been an overwhelming concern that the UK Armed Forces remain a unique organisation. Nevertheless, there has been the related fear that if the civil-military gap grows too big then this military uniqueness could be undermined. If civilians become too liberal, the argument goes, then the United Kingdom will no longer be a society from which an effective military can prosper. It is these logics and rationales which have informed not only the debate surrounding the military covenant but motivated the numerous innovations which have sought to increase the visibility and support of the Armed Forces in the United Kingdom.

I began by showing how logics of military effectiveness lay behind the first articulation of the first covenant document published in February 2000. I then examined how in 2006 the covenant

moved from being a piece of relatively insignificant British Army doctrine to a concept which precipitated a significant increase in military visibility in the United Kingdom. I argue that through the articulation of a societal obligation various events and practises were conceived which sought to facilitate the meeting of this obligation. Finally, I identified a period of reflection in the civil-military debate where these new initiatives and practises were evaluated through the same logics and rationales which had dominated the civil-military debate from the start. Outlining the key features of the UK civil-military landscape in this way is my first step towards developing an understanding of how this phenomenon, of an increasingly visible military in the United Kingdom, can be seen as part of the practises, techniques and knowledges of liberal governmentality.

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