

## Thin Red Line, Getting Thinner

By Eliot Cohen

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A chill ran down the spines of admirers of the British army when they heard that the green-eyeshade lads at the Treasury may be about to do with word processors what generations of Frenchmen, Americans, Indians, Burmese, Egyptians, Afrikaners, Germans, Japanese, Chinese and the IRA couldn't do with bullet, bayonet, shell, sword and bomb: wipe out the Black Watch. That Scottish regiment, once the 42nd of Foot, has served Britain with extraordinary valor for 21/2 centuries. Some of its story belongs to Americans as well: At Fort Ticonderoga in northern New York stands a small cairn with a shiny plaque commemorating the day in 1758 when the regiment lost more than half its strength in a pitched battle of the great war for empire, which in turn set the conditions for American independence 20 years later.

Something more substantial than sentiment, though, should cause Americans to note with alarm the swinging of a Treasury ax at the roots of the British military establishment. Some 20,000 military and civilian jobs will go, and with them four infantry battalions (out of 40), three Royal Air Force squadrons and a dozen surface warships. Of these losses, the one most troubling to Americans should be the cuts to an army that, at 102,000 men and women, will number half what it did in 1980.

To be sure, as always when politicians cut end strength, the talk will be of far greater capability with fewer personnel, of network-enabled this and information-dominant that. Some of the jargon (borrowed from us) may even be true. But the hard fact remains that the British government, squeezed by the costs of its social welfare state and dominated by a Treasury that has little use for the armed forces, is cutting its military in wartime, and when its armed forces are stretched as never before. It will leave a military more suited for sprints than for distance running; so busy operating that it has neither the time nor the resources to innovate; fielding an army too small to sustain substantial long-term deployments; an air force still inadequate in transport, reconnaissance and ground attack; and a navy that will have two handsome new aircraft carriers but would, in fact, be hard-pressed to hurl the army ashore and then remain off the coast to fight alongside it. Misguided industrial policy and poor choices about force structure have played their part in this sad tale. These are, however, fundamentally the fruits of nearly two decades of steady decline in real British defense spending.

As it is, of course, the entire British armed forces, slightly over 200,000 strong, number little more than the smallest of the American armed services, the Marine Corps. But that fact disguises the real significance of this erosion of British strength, and the stake the

United States has in stopping it.

First, Britain is the only considerable state that can send substantial forces in the field to operate alongside ours. Others -- the Australians or the Norwegians, to take two very different examples -- have superb niche capabilities, but only the British have the size and sophistication to take on large military tasks. If Iraq has taught anything, it has been the extreme desirability of bringing along a coalition, with all of its awkwardness, to a large geopolitical problem. But to have a coalition one needs at least one large partner. The issue is not just capability in some narrow, mathematical sense but the legitimacy and reassurance that comes from knowing a substantial partner is in the fight with us. And the American military has gotten to be so good, so technologically advanced and so tactically adept that only a handful of militaries can operate alongside ours and hope to keep up. Foremost among those who can are the Brits.

Second, Britain brings to bear real military expertise. Particularly in the field of counterinsurgency, its soldiers have the hard-won knowledge of decades of frustrating small-war experience, in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. Their soldiers and generals have learned a great deal about pacifying distant trouble spots, knowledge from which the Yanks could and have benefited. But as we have learned in the Persian Gulf, numbers of boots on the ground count in this kind of fight -- even when it comes to training indigenous forces.

Finally, Britain is a European power. In NATO it is unique among the militarily serious states. France is hostile to us; Germany is increasingly so, and has debilitated its armed forces by putting them on starvation rations for the past decade. Spain has tilted to France, and Italy, despite pockets of excellence, is an uneven power. The other states are either too small or as yet too poor and inexperienced to provide both muscle and leadership in complex fights.

Naturally, American officials will shy away from chivvying Tony Blair, their best friend in Europe, about his government's reversion to an age-old pattern of cutting the armed forces budgets as the storm clouds gather. No matter: They should point out the price paid for such fecklessness in the past. And they might suggest that as the flames of insurgency burn in Iraq, while Taliban guerrillas and warlords fight a new Afghan government, as al Qaeda terrorists plot mayhem in our cities and theirs, when mass murder erupts in Africa and governments teeter in the Middle East, this is not the time to thin the red line to the breaking point.

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