



HeadsUp Forum # 24

www.HeadsUp.org.uk

Defence D-Day...Should our forces be in Iraq?

(February 25th – March 14th 2008)

An online platform providing young people with a secure and structured space to discuss their perspectives on defence.

Across the country people are concerned about our national security in an increasingly volatile global climate where conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan continue. Young people discussed the impact of conflicts on families, violent versus non-violent solutions and the standard of living in post-war zones.

Participants were appreciative of the dialogue with legislators who visited the debate. For most of the young people, this was the first time they had been in such discussions and the defence debate gained expertise from the range of legislators taking part, including:

- **Bob Ainsworth MP** - Minister of State for the Armed Forces
- **Linda Gilroy MP** - Member of the Defence Select Committee
- **Gerald Howarth MP** - Shadow Minister for Defence
- **Willie Rennie MP** - Shadow Minister for Defence
- **Nick Harvey MP** - Shadow Defence Minister

Senior Ministers, MPs, Peers, AMs and MSPs from all political parties continue to value HeadsUp as a useful forum to interact with young people on key issues. The HeadsUp team provide short, one-to-one online training sessions to all participating decision-makers.

Young people remain very keen and committed to HeadsUp as a unique opportunity to get their opinions heard by decision-makers. During this forum they posted comments both in and out of school hours - underlining how keen they are to use this resource, even giving up some of their spare time to keep on top of the debate as it developed.

In keeping with the youth participation agenda, a summary report outlining key findings and quotes is disseminated to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, enabling young people's voices to be heard by key decision-makers. The main objective of the site is not only to enable peer-to-peer deliberation on hot political issues, policies or events, but also to provide students with a means of informing themselves about the topic.

All HeadsUp Debates are supported by structured, student-centred background notes that include an overview of the key issues being debated, a comprehensive

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glossary and statistics package, plus summaries of arguments for and against specific issues.

11 to 18 year olds from across the UK took part in this Defence Debate. HeadsUp continues to attract new schools, teachers, and young people to register to take part in the debates.

The HeadsUp team would like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the legislators who gave up their time to participate in this debate. We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, and interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings.

Responses and requests for further information should be directed to:

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Forum Summary

Should we intervene in overseas conflicts and what are the implications of these decisions?

The UK's defence policy is underpinned by key decisions as to whether we should intervene in conflicts overseas. HeadsUp participants were asked to examine this policy and decide if we should be entering into such conflicts at all. Perhaps unsurprisingly this discussion thread was the most popular in the entire forum.

After considering the issues surrounding the topic, all participants acknowledged how tricky such decisions are. Some called on the authorities to make balanced decisions about going to war and agreed that going into Iraq was the right thing to do:

Deciding whether to go to war should be about balancing things up. If we go to war, is it likely that less people will die in the long term? These decisions should be thought out and discussed at depth before we go to war. Iraq, for instance, was the right thing to do if it would be likely that Saddam Hussain would have killed or otherwise ruined the lives of more people in the long term than the amount that have died in the war. The decisions for war should be consistent.

War is a complicated issue but especially so when its not our fight. Even though most people believe in a simple answer, this can simply never be the case.

One school of thought in this discussion thread was largely supportive of the decision to enter into overseas conflicts. However, these youngsters did hold some reservations about such a massive decision and the impact on the local community:

Overseas defence is vital to the security of the United Kingdom. As a democratic country it is vital that we sustain world wide peace and freedom whether it means going to war. However I do think that the crisis in Afganistan and Iraq should be backed by France, the UN, Pakistan, India, China, Canada and Russia as well as Britian and the US (France is already in Afganistan with us). Our forces are overstretched so the fact that we are in two wars is just ridiculous.

As one of the world's leading political powers, it could be considered our responsibility to interfere with overseas conflict if it will definitely aid the course of justice and help to preserve peace. However, as Iraq is a currently dangerous and unpredictable area, it may have been unwise to put our own soldiers at risk for a cause that does not directly affect our country, and this action could either be considered as 'honourable' or 'poking our noses into other country's business', and there will always be controversy on this matter. We will simply have to accept that the political powers of this country hold the final decision, and by voting we entrust them with our fate.

Nick Harvey MP joined the debate, agreeing that this policy should only be used as a last resort:

Firstly I have to say what a fantastic debate! great range of contributions so far. My own view on 'humanitarian' intervention is that it can all too easily be used as an

excuse for ill-thought out and illegal wars - such as was the case in Iraq, for example. That is why I believe that interventions should only take place as a last resort and within the framework of international laws and agreements. We must always remember that by waging conflict, we risk creating a humanitarian crisis equal to or worse than those we are trying to prevent.

Willie Rennie MP voiced his support for the notion that war should only be last resort:

In my opinion, intervention is sometimes entirely necessary...war should always be the last resort. However, sometimes governments will not listen, and we should intervene in order to protect others from undue suffering, what we sometimes here talked about as a humanitarian war. A few posts here have questioned the nature of morality, and whether we have the right to judge who is right and wrong and so intervene at all. I would argue, however, that very few systems of morality worldwide would condone mass murder and genocide, and that my personal morality means that I am touched when I see peoples forced into poverty or imprisoned for their political views, and I am moved to act. There will be deaths, but if we plan for the long run before hand (as was so noticeably absent with Iraq) then these deaths can be minimised for the long term benefit of the country we are trying to help.

Linda Gilroy MP explained how important decisions were taken concerning the reconstruction of nations which had been invaded. Taking Afghanistan as an example, she pointed out the benefits of the situation there now compared to the previous repressive regime:

...Many people think it is in our own interest to stop Afghanistan falling back into the sort of country it was when ruled by the Taliban and played host to al-Qaeda training camps. The really difficult bit is how to do the reconstruction. If we are going to do other operations like this in the future, then we need learn from Afghanistan so that we can do a better job. Although Afghanistan is still difficult, we should remember what it was like before we became involved and how it has now changed for the better:

** Girls can now go to school – they were not allowed before*

** People can listen to music and fly kites – the Taliban did not allow this.*

** Even the national sport, Buzkashi, which is played on horses and is similar to polo – was banned.*

** The country has been able to hold two elections.*

One HeadsUp participant was concerned that if we chose not to intervene in global conflicts that would make us look weak amongst our allies and enemies:

we need to follow through with our commitments, if we do not, our global look will be tht we are not strong enough to contend with a small group of rebel fighters. A weak look would severly dim the impression the uk has on the global political scale. Also if we left the terrorists think tht they have won. and the uk would be very vulnerable to terrorist attack.

The decision to invade Iraq was discussed at length by a range of young people and legislators. One young person argued strongly in favour:

Personally i think moving into Iraq was not a rash , badly made decision but a successful attempt to remove a political dictator who had imposed torture on many innocent people. The British and American armies are still fighting hard to eliminate

the taliban and stabilise the country and i think personally their doing a very brave , nesscessary job in helping another country and saving it from the evil people that are currently destroying the country.

Picking up on this comment, Linda Gilroy MP explained to the students in the forum why we still have a presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. In particular, she detailed the thinking and timings behind British troops handing back control of Iraq to the new regime:

If Senator John McCain said what jmj reports him to have said then he is wrong. What our troops have been doing in the South has been different from what the US led coalition have been doing in the North where things have been more complicated. It included the home of Saddam Hussein and the "Sunni triangle". We were able to establish relative security and get down to training 10th and 14th divisions of the new Iraqi army sooner. They are now pretty much in charge – we have handed back Provincial Control of the Basra Province to the Iraqis – the last of the four in which we took the lead five years ago now.

The US led coalition in the north surged to establish the same levels of security we had already achieved in the South at that point. I imagine Baghdad will be the last Province to be handed back – it has so obviously been the most difficult.

In southern Iraq those UK forces that are left are based at the Basra airport and now have largely a mentoring and "overwatch" role.

The defence committee have asked for more details about the extra money being spent in Iraq and Afghanistan. My guess is that in Iraq some of it is to make sure that the base at the airport has been made more secure. And in Afghansitan we have more troops this year – and are providing better equipment – including the WMIK vehicle which is being built here in Plymouth Devonport.

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Forum Summary

What is the impact on the families of those serving in the armed forces?

The focus for young people in this discussion thread was to consider the impact on the families of men and women serving in the armed forces. Participants also shared stories about their family members or a friend's family member who has fought for the country.

The majority of participants clearly felt sympathy with those families directly affected by British defence policy decisions and most used the forum to voice their frustration. One young person posted information about their uncle serving in Iraq and the profound impact that had upon the family:

my uncle Tony is in the royal marines and spends most of his time abroad. he served for nearly a year in Iraq and his latest adventure was to singapore. he didnt say why or what he was doing but it seemed pretty important. he is always in Bath or Poole or around london somewhere and i think he is pretty high up. knowing all this i feel really sorry for my cousins, they hardly ever see their dad...

The impact of the Second World War is still felt by some HeadsUp participants as demonstrated by one story of separation:

I do not have any family but I know my Grandfather can remember part of WW2. He was separated from his mother, causing upset and sadness amongst them! I think that it is cruel to ask this of young children because we are selfish and find a love of destruction. We make people suffer because we are so ready to rush into war. This is not fair!!!

Interestingly, one young advocate wanted to underline the vital role British women played in the war effort:

Women did a lot of work during WW2 because many men had left to fight. this was a factor that indefinitely led to women becoming the mens near equal. I must say, they were an extreme help during both world wars on the home front and with supply to the allies.

Another youngster could not talk from first hand experience on the subject but still knew friends whose families had been badly affected by our forces entering into conflict around the world:

I think that the war in Iraq has had a massive impact on every1 and especially those who have had fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers or other family members sent over their. I am not speaking from personal experience but many of my friends have older

relatives going to iraq or basra with the RAF. The affect of this upon them is quite severe as the worry for that relative is immense.

One perceptive student summarised the lasting effect of what it's like to have a family member sent to war:

I think that if a family member is sent to war, it leaves a long lasting effect on the family as if the family member is killed, the family will be left sorrow and remembrance every where they go as the death will be in the news everywhere. I don't think that war should be the option that the government refers to if anything happens and that more support should be given to the families of the the soldiers who die.

In response to this argument, other participants were quick to stress that the possibility of soldiers dying in action should not deter governments from making the decision to go to war. In addition, they linked troop casualties to the lack of appropriate equipment:

Of course it is sad when people lose members of their family to war, but it should not sevre as a reason not to go to war, but a reason for the government to minimise troop casalties by giving them the right equipment!

no-one is forcing the members of family to go to war so its there choice. their family members should support them in their decision. obviously its a tragedy if someone dies but they're well aware of that danger when entering war...

Legislators taking part in this debate were happy to share their wealth of knowledge and opinions with the young people online. Nick Harvey MP responded to a batch of comments from young people on the subject of the military covenant and overstretch:

When we think about armed conflict, most of us immediately (and quite rightly) think of the big questions of 'right and wrong'. What is often forgotten is the crippling effect that prolonged operations can have on service men and women, trying in some way to live a normal and happy life whilst serving their country. In the UK, there are systems in place to offer a level of protection and welfare for soldiers and their families, which acknowledges the massive sacrifices that they have made for their country. This is what we mean when we talk about a 'military covenant' - an agreement between the soldier and his country.

For the last ten years, Armed Forces have been involved in almost a decade of continuous military operations - meaning that these service men and women have been busier, and under more pressure, than ever. Under Tony Blair we fought five wars in just six years; the bombing of Iraq in 1998, then interventions in Kosovo in 1999, Sierra Leone in 2000, Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq again in 2003. And here we are in 2007 and still embroiled in Afghanistan and Iraq. All this has been done on a relative shoe string defence budget. To make matters worse, the equipment and terms and conditions for our sailors, soldiers and airmen have been exposed as very poor. This makes a mockery of the 'military covenant'.

Linda Gilroy MP explained the difference between stretch and overstretch and gave some parliamentary context to her work on the Defence Select Committee which will be looking at recruitment and retention in the armed forces:

Stretch and overstretch have technical definitions. Overstretch is when deployments to theatres of war like Iraq and Afghanistan mean that there is not enough time for periods for rest and recuperation and training and preparation - which are set out in what are called 'harmony guidelines'. This can be particularly important where families are concerned. Some of our troops are overstretched - especially those who serve in what are called "pinch point trades" where there are shortages of specialists. Our forces are definitely stretched - and overstretched in some specific trades and specialisms - helicopter pilots are a particular concern. This matters if our service personnel are to get enough training - as well as to families. The defence select committee will be looking at recruitment and retention - this is a new enquiry just announced - and this will let us see a lot more of the detail about what the people it affects are thinking about the very high tempo of operations. As some of you have said - some like it, some do not. - but in what proportions we will learn more about in this enquiry.

Finally, the forum was running at the same time as the controversial story broke about Prince Harry serving in Afghanistan. Moderators asked participants what they thought of the news, which received a mixed reaction:

If Prince Harry is doing more harm than good, ie. putting the troops around him in danger, or requiring troops to protect him, then he shouldn't be allowed to fight. If the only person who's really at risk is himself, that it's up to him.

I don't feel sorry for him. Being a normal soldier is one of the only things he can't do, he gets enough other benefits to make up for it.

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Forum Summary

Do we stop and think about life in post-war zones such as Iraq, Afghanistan or the Balkans? Was it worthwhile?

In this section of the debate, students were asked to consider whether we think sufficiently about what life will be like in post-war zones and whether conflicts were worthwhile.

Two passionate HeadsUp youngsters had very different viewpoints. The first felt that we don't think enough about long term impact:

I think that some people do think about what life is like in the war zone but not enough. We are too preoccupied with ourselves to think about the effect of our wars. It does not only create physical problems but think of all the emotional scars it has caused. We need to think about these things and how they do decrease the quality of life for many people.

The second young person analysed the same situation and came to a very different conclusion:

I think that we care too much about the lives of those we are fighting. We get in a war to win a war, and I think that often being ruthless and deliberately causing as much damage as possible is a faster way to finish a war, and thereby minimise casualties.

Elsewhere in this discussion thread, there was little sympathy for smaller, sometimes aggressive nations or factions, who start conflicts in their region. These young people felt that these aggressors should not receive our assistance:

it's not our fault if other countries cause wars and cant take the aftermath

let's just leave them to themselves they can do what they want. if they have another war then we cant help them

Finally, attention in this discussion thread turned towards summarising the deliberations. Nick Harvey MP attempted to do this in this post to the students, which reminded them that it's easier to start wars than end them:

There have been lots of great comments and thoughts posted here. The lasting effect of war is often forgotten when conflicts officially 'end' (remember Bush's "mission accomplished" speech!), or drop out of the headlines. But we must never forget that "it's easier to start wars than to end them". Thanks to everyone for your insights; I'll take them into the Commons with me!

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Forum Summary

Has violent or non-violent conflict resolution been more successful when looking at recent conflicts?

In the final discussion space, young people were charged with the responsibility of deciding between peaceful protest or violence. This intriguing question clearly stirred up a lot of passion in participants – with the majority of young people speaking out in favour of finding peaceful solutions at all costs:

I think that every thing can be resolved non-violently but it takes more time and effort then just bombing and blowing things up.

Any conflicts that have been resolved non-violently have been resolved successfully. Recent wars and conflicts have certainly led me to think about war usually for the purpose of reforming a country with bad human rights records. Under a dictator, it's probably impossible to stop any violence through a peaceful protest, especially from abroad. However, we can consider things like economic sanctions.

One teacher used the debate to ask participants some additional searching questions about the effectiveness of non-violent protests. Furthermore, students had to consider if powerful sanctions worked better in certain scenarios:

Many religions teach non-violence (some may find this ironic, considering the wars fought in the name of religion). How effective can non-violent protests be? Would this work in all situations or do some people only respond to more forceful sanctions?

Another participant could not understand why a clear distinction did not exist between solving a conflict in a non-violent way and peaceful protest:

There must be a clear distinction between solving an international issue non-violently, and peaceful protest. On the international stage, often violence is necessary - is it really possible to negotiate with Islamic Fundamentalists? At the same time, I think within a national context, particularly a democracy, that violence only weakens a cause - look at Malcolm X and Martin Luther King

The focus in this discussion evolved as more students had their say on violent conflict resolution. Several HeadsUp regulars used the forum to argue that non-violent conflict is a nice idea but isn't actually a realistic option in a volatile international climate:

We have not evolved enough socially, to be able to solve grand scale problems without violence. Surely it would be much better to be able to stop conflicts with peace, but unfortunately many nations have become withdrawn to listen to middle parties. It is unfortunate but for now military action is the only way to 100% effectively deal with threats.

we may all want a non- violent conflict but is that actually possible?? if you look into the history of wars in the past.. the league of nations for example also wanted to solve these problems without violence but it didn't work. When there are people who are willing to harm the people within their own country surely they will not be willing to discuss what they are doing.. action needs to be taken because the people in these countries where our troops are, who are causing all the problems, are not likely to sit down and have a nice chat about what they are doing.

If we caused the problem, i.e. the break up of a nations hierachy, no matter how bad it was, we should help fix it as well. Violence should not be the answer, but just because it shouldn't, doesn't mean it isn't.

Still on the controversial issue of violent conflict resolution, some HeadsUp students highlighted real examples of conflicts throughout history to argue their opinions. One pointed to the Second World War as an excellent example of a conflict where violent resolution was necessary after diplomatic talks and solutions failed:

WWII is in many ways the perfect example of where violent resolution is necessary, and right. If we had allowed Nazi ideology to control the world, then I, and all of my family, would not be around today. I think it is critical that everyone realises that attempts at genocide are very difficult to stop peacefully, and so violence becomes the only answer.

One astute youngster used the defence forum to offer a perspective on the big defence issues and media coverage:

if we are still uncivilized enough to go to war we should expect blood, guts and headless bodies. it should not be seen from over here though. war should stay in the country its being fought in. there is no way a five year old should see a severed body on the five o clock news. let alone in the daily paper. i think that people dont really understand the concept of war any more. its a battle of wills to out smart and out rank your oponent until you ultimately get what you want.

Finally in this discussion thread, Linda Gilroy MP responded to a question posed by one of the HeadsUp moderators which asked - Do we honour those killed and wounded in combat enough? Her response was critical of authorities but offered some insights into how this situation could be radically improved:

No we do not. There should be something tangible for those they leave behind. That is a big debate in and out of parliament just now. The Daily Mirror have a campaign "Honour the Brave" which you can find on google. I support it – what do you think? Ross Kemp who backs the campaign says : "It's very important to show our troops they're appreciated. You can't fight a war on terror and not thank, or respect, the people doing the work for you." And if Kemp can pin it - or stick it - on them, so much the more rewarding...

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Conclusions

Overseas conflicts should be a last resort
Considerable impact on families
Mixed reaction to consideration for life in post-war zones
Violence is a necessary evil in conflict resolution

Young people involved in this debate came to the following conclusions:

Participants felt that overseas conflict must be a last resort. They argued that diplomatic negotiations should be exhausted before embarking upon any conflict decision.

The impact on the families of armed forces personnel is considerable. Some students were sympathetic about this scenario whilst others felt that to some extent it comes with the territory.

Mixed reaction to consideration for life in post-war zones. There was a fairly even split when young people were deliberating if we give sufficient thought to what life will be like in post-war zones.

Students believed that violence was sometimes a necessary evil in conflict resolution. Most argued in favour of peaceful protests but the majority acknowledged that, on the whole, non-violent acts did not achieve their aim.

The range of enthusiastic and relevant legislators taking part online during all three weeks gave the debate added momentum and a stamp of parliamentary approval from the young people's collective viewpoint.

Defence D-Day...Should our forces be in Iraq? was a particularly topical issue for a HeadsUp Forum and therefore one that was welcomed by young people who participated alongside NGOs and MPs from across the political spectrum. It provided a secure, structured but non-sanitised platform for young people to voice their perspectives on many aspects of defence and the consequences of war.