

# Deciding on War and Peace:

## The Battle for British War Powers in the Post-Iraq Era

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### Abstract

Tony Blair's extraordinary decision to ask for Parliament's approval for British military deployment in the Iraq War prompted lingering questions about who decides on matters of war and peace in modern Britain. His successors' use, and thereby confirmation, of the new parliamentary prerogative suggested a fundamental reorganization of war powers in British politics, giving Parliament a significantly stronger position in the realm of foreign affairs. This paper argues that a number of factors, like a Prime Minister's leadership style, the role Cabinet and the civil service, and Parliament's governing disadvantages that makes it difficult for Members of Parliament to assert themselves proactively rather than reactively, make the prospect of a "War Powers Act" enshrining Parliament's constitutional role in authorizing war highly unlikely.

### Background

The evolution of British war powers is characterized by a gradual transfer of power, from the monarch, to the Prime Minister and now to Parliament. For one of the most storied military powers in the world, Britain has yet to codify these important powers in any formal way. This is in stark contrast to how war powers have been formally enshrined in other countries, like the United States. The emergence of a parliamentary prerogative in the last two decades complicates the question of who decides on matters of war and peace in Britain today.

### Prime Ministers at War

<b>Margaret Thatcher (Falklands War)</b>	Thatcher was at a low-point in her tenure when the Falkland Islands were invaded. Her decisive leadership during the war is largely considered to be a turning point in what would become a landmark Government in British history.	Thatcher was uncharacteristically loyal to her Cabinet during the war, following the strategic decisions of her military advisors without interfering. She was often out-of-step with ministers at other points in her premiership, prompting several high-profile resignations.
<b>Tony Blair (Iraq War)</b>	Blair was immensely popular having led the Labour Party to resounding victories in 1997 and 2001. At the time, it allowed him to be decisive, putting his reputation on the line in order to get what he wanted.	Blair's popularity also enabled him to dominate Cabinet in a way that few prime ministers had since Thatcher. Subsequent reports on the Iraq War would condemn his disregard for Cabinet norms and unusual decision-making style.
<b>David Cameron (Libya, Syria, ISIS)</b>	Cameron was much more cautious than Blair, perhaps partly informed by the latter's tainted legacy after Iraq. Though described as a passionate interventionist, he didn't seek to defy Parliament, both in rhetoric and actions.	Cameron was unlike Blair in that he preferred collective decision-making and set up the National Security Council on his first day in office. The NSC would help guide him in military conflicts throughout his premiership.

### Parliament Asserts Itself



Tony Blair's decision to give Parliament an a priori vote before the Iraq War set a precedent on how Britain went to war. Blair was not constitutionally mandated to do so, and his successors could well have chosen to break with the precedent. Ultimately, David Cameron would help cement it, not only repeatedly asking for the approval of MPs but also accepting their veto, as he did in 2013. His successor, Theresa May, however chose to bypass Parliament in 2018 when she joined allies in coalition airstrikes in Syria.

### Implications

May's decision, taken in the context of her predecessors' actions, casts significant doubt on the prospects of a "War Powers Act" that would formalize Parliament's role in authorizing military actions. Indeed it suggests that the parliamentary prerogative that has emerged since Iraq, and many have come to equate to law, remains at the mercy of the executive, and his or her willingness to cede power.

### An overview of the emergence of the parliamentary prerogative

**March 18, 2003**

Tony Blair gives Parliament a vote on the Iraq War, giving MPs a say on a British military action for the first time ever.

**July 2007**

Gordon Brown's Government issues a Green Paper suggesting the deployment of troops should not be decided solely by the Government.

**March 22, 2011**

MPs approve an intervention in Libya after troops had been deployed; David Cameron promises to consult Parliament on further actions

**August 29, 2013**

MPs vote to block British military involvement in Syria, the first time Parliament effectively vetoed a proposed military action.

**December 2, 2015**

Cameron wins a parliamentary vote on British participation in an coalition airstrikes campaign in Syria against ISIS.

**April 14, 2018**

Theresa May does not ask for Parliament's approval before joining U.S. and French allies in launching air strikes against the Syrian government.

