

Corned Beef Raid on Embassy British Patriotism and the Falkland Conflict

By Adam Haney

In 1982, Great Britain went to war over possession of the Falkland Islands. The islands themselves do not appear to be much to fight over. The Falklands, specifically speaking, are the two larger islands immediately off of the eastern coast of Argentina, near the Straits of Magellan. The Falklands War encompassed not only these two islands but the islands as far south and east as the South Sandwich Islands. It is from the two main islands of the group that the name of the conflict originates.

Physically, the islands are not much to look at. Ronald Reagan described them as "That little ice-cold bunch of land down there."<1> They have also been called "An island thrown aside from human use."<2> Clearly, these islands are not exactly the stuff that legends are made over. However, the Falkland Islands have had a place in the joint history of Britain and Argentina since 1690, when a British ship sighted the islands and gave them the name of the Treasurer of the Royal Navy, Viscount Falkland.<3>

At the time of their discovery, the islands were unsettled. There are no people who can claim them as their homeland.<4> The islands lay to the west of the Papal line of Demarcation, a line that was drawn to divide the so-called New World between the then powers of the sea, Spain and Portugal. The Pope gave everything to the west of the line to Spain, this included all of South America except for Brazil; everything to the east belonged to Portugal. By virtue of their relationship to this line, decided on by Pope Alexander VI in 1493, the islands belonged to Spain.<5> Around the early eighteenth century, the islands had become an important stopover point in the long trip around the Cape of Good Hope to the Pacific.<6> By that time, the Pope's authority had waned to such a point that the Line of Demarcation was no longer enforced, and the Falklands were not the exclusive property of Spain. However, the islands were not settled by any European power until the French established a settlement on East Falkland in 1764. The French later transferred this claim to the Spanish in 1767. Meanwhile, the English established a settlement of their own on the island of West Falkland in 1765.<7> In 1774 the British decided to leave the islands, while the Spanish maintained a settlement there until the collapse of the Spanish empire in the Americas. The Spanish were totally evacuated in 1811, leaving the islands in its original condition, with no inhabitants.<8>

The newly independent Argentine Government in Buenos Aires attempted to establish a penal colony and a fishing settlement on the islands, but were rebuked, once by an American Naval Captain and once by a prison riot in which the jailer was killed.<9> The British soon realized that it would be advantageous to resettle the islands. They would then be able to control the Cape of Good Hope and the Straits of Magellan, as well as easily resupply British ships on their way to the Pacific. In 1833 Captain J.S. Onslow

landed on East Falkland, and the Argentine garrison that was stationed there surrendered without a fight.<[10](#)>

From 1833 onward the islands were treated and administered as a British colony and then dependency. The government of Argentina did not take kindly to the British action, however. They vigorously protested what they saw as a breach of their borders. The British, however, would have none of that, and it was not until 1960 that Argentina began to raise serious questions about the islands in the international community.<[11](#)> This lack of continuous pressure would later prove to be important, as the British would argue that Argentina gave up their claim and allowed the British to have the islands.

In Britain, the question of a few rocky islands thousands of miles away did not weigh heavy on the minds of the people or the politicians. In Argentina, however, the question of the Falklands, or Malvinas as they are known in Argentina, is an important one. To the Argentines, the islands represent the evils of colonialism. They see this land as having been stolen from them by a foreign power, and the islands sat off of the coast, mocking Argentina. The British government perpetually underestimated the seriousness of the problem. It was not until the specter of British naval cutbacks in 1981 forced the government to look at the security of the islands that people began to realize that something was brewing.<[12](#)> However, by that time it was too late.

It is important to note that 1983 would mark the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the seizure of the islands by the British. This date was fast approaching in the years leading up to the war. That date certainly loomed over the heads of General/President Leopoldo Galtieri's government.<[13](#)> Patience within the Argentina was running thin, and the Falklands were a powder keg waiting for a spark. An incident on the island of South Georgia provided that spark.

On 20 December 1981 an Argentine businessman, Constantino Sergio Davidoff, visited an abandoned whaling station on the island of South Georgia under contract to remove any scrap metal he could find. However, he landed without the proper permits. He was notified that he would need the permits if wished to return to the islands. He replied that he would get the permits, but in the meantime he was sending a crew of workmen to the island to begin working while the permits were being processed. In response to the British government's complaint, the Argentine government insisted that Davidoff was acting on his own accord. It now appears that he may have acted with the support of the Argentine Navy, if not authorities higher in the Argentine government. The situation began to deteriorate rapidly as Argentine ships landed and deposited supplies on South Georgia. At this point, the best hope for a compromise appeared to be an American mediation, but Argentina appears to have decided on the military option long before. On 2 April 1982 2,500 Argentine troops landed and disembarked at Port Stanley at six A.M. local time.<[14](#)>

From the start of the conflict, the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, had taken a neutral position. Great Britain had been an essential ally of the United States since the end of the Second World War and the founding of NATO, but the right wing

Argentine government played an important role in Reagan's anticommunist strategy in South America. Thus, President Reagan dispatched his Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, to mediate between Great Britain and Argentina. Haig's mission was to try to keep the Falklands crisis from coming to blows.<15> He spent much of the time leading up to the British invasion of the islands shuttling back and forth between Great Britain and Argentina trying to accomplish that mission. However, Haig's mission would ultimately fail, forcing the United States to choose sides. When that time came, Reagan and the U.S. sided with Great Britain.<16>

The war itself was a short and isolated one. It did not spread to either the British or Argentine mainland, or any place outside of the Falklands Archipelago. It was quite the opposite of what had happened and was happening when other major world powers entered into armed conflict (Vietnam and Afghanistan). It was confined to the islands in question and it was primarily a naval war. It is also important to note that this was the first war of the cold war era in which both sides were fairly well equipped with modern military hardware. Britain, being a member of NATO, was equipped with modern equipment. The Argentines, having a right wing, anti-Communist government received aid and bought weapons from the west. In Vietnam and other "small" conflicts, one side was lacking in major hardware, such as tanks, jets, and battleships, but both Argentina and Britain had a modern Airforce and Navy, and they both used them effectively.<17>

The battle for the Falklands began with the invasion of East Falkland by Argentine forces. It was a remarkably bloodless affair. Despite stiff resistance by the resident Marines, only one Argentine soldier was killed and no islanders were injured during the course of the invasion.<18> The British government reacted to this by sending a carrier group to the islands on 5 April 1982. The British also declared a two hundred mile exclusion zone around the islands, meaning that any ship within two hundred miles of the islands would be sunk.

Actual British military operations began with the operation to retake the island of South Georgia, the one that started it all. This was accomplished on 25 April 1982. Things began to seriously heat up with the sinking of the Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano* on 2 May 1982. The *H.M.S. Sheffield* was sunk in retaliation on 4 May 1982. The *Sheffield* was one of the most modern ships in the Royal Navy, and the sinking brought about a new respect for the abilities of the Argentine military; it also brought up doubts as to whether the British were up to the task of reclaiming the Falklands.<19>

Not until 21 May 1982 did the next major land operation take place. On that day, British forces landed at San Carlos on the island of East Falkland. From 21 May until 14 June 1982 British land forces were engaged in combat continuously. During this course of the war came the tragedy at Fitzroy, where the *H.M.S. Sir Galahad* and *H.M.S. Sir Tristan* were bombed on 8 June 1982 and fifty-one men lost their lives. The fighting continued through the end of the battle for Port Stanley, the capitol city of the Falklands. The Argentine garrison at Port Stanley finally surrendered on 14 June 1982, marking the end of hostilities for the actual combatants on the islands.<20>

Why were these men on the Falklands? What were the British fighting for? What makes the Falkland Islands important enough to risk the lives of thousands of young men? The British had a number of reasons for being in the Falklands. There were pressures from the international community, there were pressures from the domestic front, and there were pressures from the residents of the Falklands themselves.

"This does not, of course, diminish the fact apparent to any visitor to the island that the population is British and, as was forcefully impressed upon us whenever the subject was discussed, is firm in its desire to remain British." Thus said Lord Shackleton in a 1976 report to the House of Lords on the economic prospects of the islands.<21> The issue over which this whole conflict was fought was that of self-determination, according to the British. These tiny, rock-strewn islands were "still British and the people still wish to be British and owe their allegiance to the Crown," according to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.<22> The whole might of the British nation would be used to protect them.

Public support for the action that the government was taking in the Falklands was important from the start. The Vietnam War had proven that any military action must be supported by the people. For the United States the Vietnam conflict proved to be a serious debacle, and Margaret Thatcher did not want anything remotely like that to happen.

Margaret Thatcher was a lawyer with a degree in chemistry from Oxford. She was first elected to Parliament in 1959, six years after giving birth to twins. She became leader of the Conservative Party after Edward Heath was ousted in 1975. Thatcher cut her leadership teeth in her four years as leader of the opposition in Parliament. After his bitter break with Thatcher, Francis Pym paid her this compliment, "She was an extremely good leader of the Opposition. I think she was the best I have ever known in Parliament."<23> Mrs. Thatcher and Conservative Party were elected into power in 1979. It took her some time to consolidate her power within her own government, and a year after she and the Conservatives had taken over, inflation and unemployment had risen dramatically to double what they had been at the time of the election. For obvious reasons, during the first years of her term as Prime Minister, Thatcher's and the Conservative Party's popularity plummeted.<24> A strong head of state during a popular war can bring about a change of heart in the public, and can cause a rise in the popularity of the people in power. While Mrs. Thatcher certainly did not manufacture the Falklands War, she masterfully used it to advance her popularity and standing with the British people. Mrs. Thatcher's speeches about the war helped to boost both her popularity and the popularity of the Falklands' cause.

Britons had begun to have anxiety over their nation's place in the New World Order. The cold war left the United States and the Soviet Union as the only two superpowers. Great Britain finally joined the European Community in 1971, amid protests from many Britons.<25> Thusly, many British people were insecure about their place; they had dropped from covering a quarter of the globe to a second rate power who had to join the other countries of Europe to have a say in what happened. It was this climate that

Margaret Thatcher took advantage of. She successfully converted the fears of her people into pride and patriotism.

The British are predisposed to having an aversion to invasion. The British take pride in the fact that they have not been successfully invaded since 1066; they were the only country to resist the efforts of Hitler during the Second World War, just as they had resisted an invasion by Napoleon in the early nineteenth century. Thus, the Argentine action against the Falklands struck a chord with the people of Britain.<26> The Falklands action also struck another chord with the British public. Being islanders themselves, they did not have to stretch much to identify with the plight of the Falklanders. The Falklands might as well have been the nearby, British-owned Channel Islands; it was easy to justify defending them.<27> Members of Parliament recognized this and took advantage of this history, "we have long learnt to make this island a secure home and stronghold, at any rate until very recent times. Out of that security from invasion have arisen our political institutions and our ways of governing ourselves."<28>

Thus, Prime Minister Thatcher found that the British public was already leaning toward the defense of the Falklands; all she had to do was give them a nudge in that direction. Mrs. Thatcher used the long, illustrious history of Britain to incite the passion of her people. She sought to arouse the patriotic spirit of the Britons.<29> The British school system had provided Thatcher with a strong foundation for her patriotic imagery. School children are drilled with lessons about Britain's military past. Everyone is taught and knows about the victories of Waterloo, Trafalgar, the Spanish Armada, and the Battle of Britain.<30> She used her speeches to evoke the memories of the World War II and other British military triumphs to fire up the public. For example, she told the Conservative Women's Conference, "We, of all people, have learnt the lesson of history: to appease an aggression is to invite aggression elsewhere."<31> Thatcher used comments such as these to invoke the memory of British military might, and others, such as Mr. Edward du Cann, took her cue in Parliament, "Let us hear no more about logistics- how difficult it is to travel long distances. I do not remember the Duke of Wellington whining about Torres Vedras.<32> [Hon. Members, "Hear, Hear."] We have nothing to lose now except our honour."<33>

Thatcher continually employed the idea that the Falklands were a small, helpless area that needed Britain to come to the rescue. "The liberty of the Falkland islanders must be restored. For years they have been free to express their own wishes about how they want to be governed. They have had institutions of their own choosing. They have enjoyed self-determination. Why should they lose that freedom and exchange it for a dictatorship?"<34> She told the Scottish Conservative Conference, "The Government wants a peaceful settlement. But we reject a peaceful sell-out."<35> The Prime Minister even accused the Argentines of colonialism, and she portrayed England and the Falklands as victims of Argentina's predatory practices.<36> Thatcher used statements such as these to arouse support for the war and pride amongst the people. For Thatcher and the British public, the war was a way to get back the pride they had lost over the previous thirty years. As Prime Minister Thatcher stated, "Too long submerged, too often denigrated, too early forgotten the springs of pride in Britain flow again."<37>

Thatcher was blessed by a degree of unity in the House of Commons that is rarely seen. A great majority in Parliament was outraged over the humiliation of caused by the Argentine invasion and the reports that islanders were suffering at the hands of the military.<38> They were also buoyed by the passing of UN resolution 502, which condemned the Argentine invasion.<39> This allowed the opposition party (the Labour Party) to join the conservatives in condemning the Argentines and supporting military action. "There is only one reaction which is fit to meet unprovoked aggression upon one's own sovereign territory; that is direct and unqualified immediate willingness - not merely willingness expressed by action - to use force" This sentiment by Ulster Unionist Enoch Powell was echoed by Labour Party member Micheal Foot, "There is the longer term interest to ensure that foul and brutal aggression does not succeed in our world."<40> Some Members, such as Dr. David Owen, invoked memories of past British failures to inspire unity in the Houses, "This is very different from Suez. Let us not make it like Suez. Let us not have what happened in 1956, when service men went into Suez against a background of bitter party political debate."<41> Most members of Parliament were on board with the Conservatives in condemning Argentina and supporting military action. Predictably, the conservatives took it further than most. They had a tendency to portray President Galtieri as a modern-day Hitler. Thinking such as this brought them close to the line of absurdity.<42> It is important to note, however, that they did not cross that line and were able to keep the attention of the Britain and the world with out making them laugh.

The question to ask at this point is what kind of effect all of this rhetoric had on the people of Britain. It has already been noted that Britain's location and history would likely have an effect on the minds of the British people. They are an island people, and they have a history when it comes to invasion. The main question is whether Thatcher's speeches and the united front in the House of Commons would push the people to support the war. However, before this question can be answered, it must be noted that Mrs. Thatcher was blessed with a friendly media. The people of England would support Thatcher and the government because the media reported the news favorably to the government's position.

Some of Thatcher's opposition flat out accused the media of being "the gutter press" and having a "military bias."<43> To be sure, most of the major British media outlets supported the war effort. For example, the *Sunday Times* provided the headline "The Navy Sets Out To Win Back Britain's Pride" when the task force left for the Falklands.<44> *The Sun* provided the headline "They Gave Their Lives For Freedom" above an article about the battle of Goose Green.<45> The public enthusiastically responded to such headlines. One can not help but be filled with pride by when reading headlines such as these.

The media proved to be one of Thatcher's and the government's biggest assets. They provided the government with free positive spin on what was happening. The press helped to maximize the government's position. An example of this was the 23 April edition of *The Sun*. It gave front page coverage to Thatcher and her opinions on what is going on. It placed an article on bombing Argentina in a more visible position than an

accompanying article by Labour pacifist Wedgwood Benn, who demanded that the task force be brought back. Then, for good measure, page six contains an editorial attacking Benn's position.<46> *The Times* is guilty of the same thing. In the 10 April, 10 May, and 20 May, 1982 editions of *The Times* articles on positions adverse to the war were placed below the fold, while other pro-war articles were placed above the fold, in a more visible position.<47>

In general, the people supported this type of media coverage. A letter to the editor in the 8 April 1982 edition of *The Times* reads, "Sir may I warmly applaud you on your leader this morning: 'Patriotism Tempered With Good Sense.' That is the voice I like to hear. The Thunderer speaking for England."<48> People received guidance not only from the press but from on high. Roman Catholic Cardinal Hume agreed with Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Robert Runcie in letting the world know that the Britain's actions in the war had God's approval. He declared the war a just one according to the precepts of St. Augustine.<49> Of course, putting it on the front page did not hurt either.

The people showed their support for the war in ways other than letters to the editor. When the ships of the task force left for the Falklands, huge crowds cheered them as they left port.<50> During the war people also took to the polls. There were important by-elections happening during the crisis, and people took them as an opportunity to show support for the way the Conservatives were handling the war. The Conservatives were able to bring "disillusioned Tories" and the important "I don't know vote" over to their side.<51> Many took their support of the war further than a polling booth. The 8 April edition of *The Times* contained this headline: "Corned Beef Raid on Embassy." "Two patriotic brothers launched a corned beef attack on the Argentine embassy in London." One of the brothers said, "I am British and proud of it."<52> All of these occurrences show that the common people supported the war in the Falklands. It aroused a sense of patriotism and importance. Anytime someone is incited to throw corned beef at a building, some thing special is happening.

To be sure, not everyone was in favor of the military action. The radical left wing of the Labour Party, led by Anthony Wedgewood Benn, did not support the war effort. At the beginning of the conflict many speakers try to counteract the way that Thatcher had framed the war in the context of great military victories by comparing it to the Charge of the Light Brigade during the Crimean War, Gallipoli during World War I, and the American experience in Vietnam.<53> Not all media was completely friendly to Thatcher's and the government's position, either. "*The Guardian* accuses the government of pursuing 'gun-boat diplomacy' in the cause of the politics of national pride."<54> Benn and his supporters organized a public rally and march on 9 May in support of a truce and peaceful settlement to the whole conflict. Represented at the rally were several religious, pacifist, and leftwing political groups.<55> Benn and his supporters attacked the media and their coverage of the war. Dame Judith Hart, Parliamentary representative from Lanark, said that many papers were printing "political pornography" and that war is never predictable. She stated that British victory was not a foregone conclusion. Generally, most of the opposition to the war came from the left. The Labour party was split between center-left-wingers and radical left-wingers,<56> and the radical left was

most opposed to the war. There was also opposition from hard-line Irish groups. The Irish Defense Minister labeled the British Government as the aggressor.<57> Although they were not representative of the general population, they were a vocal minority.

The Falklands was also one of the first conflicts to occur in the age of the pollster. Polls made a high profile entrance into the world of war during the Falklands conflict. The government was now able to gauge the support of the British people fairly accurately throughout the entire conflict. Thatcher and the Conservatives liked what they saw. Most polls reflected a high level of support for the government position. The approval ratings remained between seventy and eighty percent throughout the entire conflict. They dipped slightly during the sinkings of the *Belgrano* and *Sheffield* but were soon back up around eighty. They also showed that, while people felt that the government should not have let the situation escalate, they were in favor of using force.<58> The British people felt that if they would use force they would be victorious. The polls showed that "the public had no doubts of victory."<59>

Far and away, the public supported Thatcher and her handling of the crisis. The Prime Minister used this conflict to increase her own popularity as well as increase the pride of her people. Out of the Falklands came a new sense of national pride and patriotism. The public can thank the Prime Minister for that. She molded information until it was shaped in way that the public would love. People want to be part of a winner, and that is what Britain was after the Falklands War.

Britain came out of the war with a secure sense of her place. The British people once again felt that they belonged in the world order, and assumed a place of leadership in the formerly opposed European Community. Britain knew that it was a winner, and it knew that because the public rallied around the men and women of the armed forces and they forged a new pride in combat. The Britain of old was back. They were once again a nation of chivalry, defender of the weak and freer of the oppressed.

Those gathering in Gosport to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the Argentinian surrender, will each have their own individual memories of those harrowing days, as will the families of those servicemen who never came home. You achieved great things. You renewed the reputation for honour and courage which we all associate with the name of Britain. You ensured the triumph of freedom. --- Margaret Thatcher, 1997<60>

Notes

1 Freedman, Lawrence. *Britain and the Falklands War*. (Basil Blackwell, Inc. Oxford, U.K.: 1988). 14

2 Calvert, Peter. *The Falklands Crisis: The Rights and the Wrongs*. (St. Martin's Press, New York: 1982). 1

3 Freedman, 18.

4 Hoffman, Fritz L. and Olga M. Hoffman. *Sovereignty in Dispute: The Falklands/Malvinas, 1493-1982*. (Westview Press, Inc. Boulder, Colorado: 1984) 17; Calvert, 4.

5 Hoffman, 17.

6 Ibid. 30.

7 Elliot, R. Reginold and Dr. Jeffrey M. Elliot. *Tempest in a Teapot: The Falkland Islands War*. (The Borgo Press, San Bernidino, California.: 1983) 19.; Freedman, 18; Hoffman, 39-43.

8 Calvert, 6.

9 Ibid, 7.

10 Calvert, 7; Hoffman, 78-81.

11 Hoffman, 102.

12 Ibid 102-147.

13 Freedman, 33.

14 Elliot, 65.

15 Ibid, 62-64.

16 Hoffman, 160-174.

17 Hastings, Max and Simon Jenkins. *The Battle for the Falklands*. (W.W. Norton & Company. London :1983.)340-354; Calvert, 109.

18 Hoffman, 163.

19 Calvert, 116-117.

20 Hastings, 342-343.

21 Freedman, 17.

22 *The Times*. 6 April, 1982 pp. 1

23 Young, 101.

24 Young, Hugo. *The Iron Lady: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher*. (Farrar Straus Giroux: New York: 1989.) 14-246; Freedman, 5.

25 Calvert, 64.

26 Femenia, Nora. *National Identity in Times of Crisis. The Scripts of the Falklands-Malvinas War*. (Nova Science Publishers, Inc.: 1996). 134.

27 Calvert, 83.

28 *Illustrated London News*. June, 1982 pp. 21.

29 Monaghan, David. *The Falklands War: Myth and Countermyth*. (St. Martin's Press, New York: 1998) 35.

30 Ibid, 15-17.

31 Ibid, 16.

32 Torres Vedras is a town in west central Portugal, about twenty-seven miles north of Lisbon. The Duke of Wellington used the town as his Lisbon Headquarters during the Peninsular War in 1810 against Napoleon.

33 Seltzer, Leon E. *The Columbia Lippinott Gazetteer of the World*. (Columbia University Press, Moringside Heights, New York: 1952.) 1933.

34 Morgan, K.S. ed. *The Falklands Campaign: A Digest of Debates in the House of Commons* 2 April - 15 June 1982. (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, London: 1982) 10.

35 *The Times* 24 April, 1982 pp. 4

36 Thatcher, Margaret. *The Downing Street Years*. (Harper Collins Publishers, New York: 1993.) 221.

37 Monaghan, 9-10.

38 Femenia, 126.

39 Calvert, 75.

40 Ibid, 80

41 Femenia, 135.

42 Morgan, 157.

43 Calvert, 84.

44 *The Times*. 10 May, 1982 pp. 4.

45 *The Times*. 6 April 1982 pp. 1.

46 Monaghan, 19.

47 Ibid, 35.

48 *The Times*. 10 April, 1982 pp.1; *The Times*. 10 May, 1982 pp.4; *The Times* 20 May, 1982 pp.6

49 *The Times*. 8 April, 1982 pp.11

50 *The Times*. 30 April 1982 pp.1, 6.

51 Calvert, 85.

52 *The Times* 30 April, 1982 pp.1

53 *The Times* 8 April, 1982 pp.3

54 Monaghan, 33.

55 Ibid, 34

56 *The Times* 9 May, 1982 pp.4

57 *The Times* 10 April, 1982 pp.1

58 Thatcher, 216.

59 Freedman, 92-104

60 Norpoth, Helmut. "Guns and Butter and Government Popularity in Britain." in *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 81, No. 3 (Sept 1987) pp. 949-959. 952.

61 Thatcher, Margaret. June 1997 at:
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