Derek Marshall was at the launch of "Britain's Generals in Blair's Wars" (published by Ashgate) at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The hall was packed with a distinguished audience, including CDS General Sir David Richards, former MoD permanent Secretary Sir Kevin Tebbitt and many other MOD/military notables. The speakers were Professor Sir Hew Strachan, one of the editors, soon-to-be Commander, Land Forces General Sir Nick Parker and Desmond Bowen, formerly of MoD and Cabinet Office. The overall sense I had, although the tone was patient and polite, was of the pent up unease of the military about the wars they had been thrust into by Blair without adequate planning and resource.

The first chapter of the book by (retired) Major General Jonathan Bailey and co-editor, states this very baldly, showing great resentment at Blair's approach: rather than "wars of choice" you might characterise Iraq and Afghanistan as "wars of belief" or even "wars of delusion". There was also disgruntlement that MoD had clearly held up publication of the book, insisted on revisions to content and blocked serving officers from contributing, though Sir David Richards said he had decided to take part anyway as he only had a few days left in post and they couldn't stop him!

I had an overwhelming sense of what a massive enterprise I had been working alongside for the last 20 years, the UK military establishment if you like, but wider than that, the political establishment that had launched the UK into these wars: somewhat less controversially into Kosovo, Macedonia and Sierra Leone, but non-consensually into Iraq and Afghanistan. Sir David Richards counselled that lessons had been learned and these had affected the approach to Libya and was affecting that to Syria. Those lessons had clearly been painful for the military. Nick Parker commented that the urge to intervene must be tempered by the humansacrifice involved.

In the short speeches, Hew Strachan said the book arose from the Oxford programme on the changing character of war and he had found the most interesting part "the moment of self-criticism" in 2006/7. Sir Kevin Tebbitt noted that UK gone into these wars with a rather "grandiloquent" view of its own capabilities, with perhaps a bit too much self congratulation: In our own view we were the only nation that could pull all the various war aims together and operate with the trust of the US. Nick Parker spoke of the revelation that the US military were much quicker learners and much more ready to take knocks, big knocks, and come back stronger: of course they had much more resource to support that effort.

Professor Strachan pointed out that this was a period of painful adjustment from largely British led military activity, especially in Northern Ireland, to multinational led activity with all its complexities and frustrations. Nick Parker spoke of the risks of those based in Whitehall in effect taking decisions that should be left to the commanders in the field. An underlying theme that popped up now and again in discussion was that theatre commanders had not been part of the decision making process in London. He also spoke of the complexity of modern warfare: multi agency in Whitehall and multi partner in coalition. There were times when the military were not the not the lead agency: There was a need for clearer decision making on when the military should be in the lead and not. Development aid was usually a rather a blunt instrument in achieving specific goals; he felt international business could play a more important role. He was keen to see more debate on these issues.

Des Bowen stressed that there was never a single military view of what should be done, unless the PM asked CDS to provide a single opinion. There was a risk of thinking things had been clear-cut when at the time it was not the case. But the Blair years could be accused of being preoccupied with values and ignoring big issues, like the adequacy of resources. He echoed David Miliband's call, in the Ditchley lecture, for a clearer balance between military power and other levers. Robert Fox of the Evening Standard stated bluntly that the UK had lost the war in the media. He described the UK war aims as "incoherent", criticised the Government for not providing enough resources e.g. to confront Iran-backed insurgency in Basra, and said the Government attitude to public discussion of war and its aims was "a scandal". No-one really disagreed but it was pointed out that the war aims were multinational and, indeed, somewhat confused between partners.

David Richards commented that it was now accepted that military tactics had to reflect the Government's media message, which was a huge shift in approach. Another journalist accused the military of being cheerleaders for war; and an academic suggested some of their advice to Ministers was too "politically aware". These charges were denied and regret was expressed that some retired generals had attached themselves to a political party.

It was also pointed out that soldiers were naturally unlikely to be negative in speaking about their tasks and sometimes had to deal with undue complexities e.g. when asked how many troops it would take to defend Kabul they had estimated 70k but then the Afghans had said they would do it themselves, so the figure had been reduced to 5k! All-in-all this was a fascinating insight and a debate which will run on and clearly has implications for the future of UK national security.

The third editor is Richard Iron. Derek Marshall is the former policy Managing Director at the trade body ADS and is now an independent commentator.