

Advice to
OFFICERS
of the
British Army

Chapter One
The Commander-in-chief

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Two and a Quarter Centuries Ago — Advice to the Commander-in-chief — *and now?*

A COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF is to the army under his command, what the soul is to the body: it can neither think nor act without him; and, in short, is as perfect a non-entity without its commander as a wife is without her husband. You must, therefore, through pure goodwill and affection for your troops, [take care of your own sacred person](#), and never expose it to any dangers. When any service of danger is to be performed, you should send your second-in-command, or some inferior officer—but whomsoever you send, if he succeeds in the business, be sure to take all the merit of it to yourself.

You must be as absolute in your command, and as [inaccessible](#) to your troops, as the Eastern sultans, who call themselves the Lord's vicereagents upon earth.

As no other person in your army is allowed to be possessed of a single idea, it would be ridiculous, on any occasion, to assemble a [council of war](#), or, at least, to be guided by their opinion: for, in opposition to yours, they must not trust to the most evident perception of their senses.

You have heard that [secrecy](#) is one of the first requisites in a commander. In order, therefore, to get a name for this great military virtue, you must always be silent and sullen, particularly at your own table; and I would advise you to secure your secrets the more effectually by depositing them in the safest place you can think of; as, for instance, in the breast of your wife or mistress.

It is your duty to be attentive to the public good, but not without regard to your own, in your dispensation of favours. You must take care [never to advance an officer](#) above one step at a time, however brilliant his merit, unless he be your relation: for you must consider that your ignorance in the higher branches of your profession can only be covered by the strictest attention to punctilio, and the *minutiæ* of the service.

Pedantic lawyers will insist that Her Majesty the Queen is the true Commander-in-chief of all the British armed services, and that as she has herself served in uniform and, moreover, kept in close touch throughout her long reign with the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force, she is far better qualified than the current Prime Minister to command the defence of her country — but because he has been reported as referring to “my army”, and because he sent it to fight in Iraq (albeit without proper planning), he is considered to be the *de facto* Commander-in-chief even if not *de jure*. All Prime Ministers, as recommended, do take care of their own persons, and are driven everywhere in armoured limousines (while the soldiers targetted by roadside bombs drive in unarmoured Land Rovers).

Yes, Prime Ministers can in practice be inaccessible, and apart from the thirty minutes used to answer questions on Wednesdays they may be rarely seen in the Parliament to which they are answerable.

Councils of war? Absurd! Admirals and Generals and Air Marshals might reveal facts Prime Ministers prefer not to know, such as the details of enemy missile capabilities. So this is another recommendation to observe. Any consultations about wars are to be held on the sofa with two friends who agree with the Prime Minister. If it had not been for the very strict observance of this recommendation, it is possible the Army might never have even reached Iraq.

Secrets? Of course they are safe with the current Prime Minister, and Cherie talks only to Carole ~ so that's alright then.

Protection? Naturally, obviously, and not only for military matters. Frank Field: fired. Kate Hoey: fired. Intelligent ministers can carelessly destroy the Party's reputation. Tony McNulty: a great guy.

Above all, be careful never to promote an intelligent officer; a brave, [chuckle-headed](#) fellow will do full as well to execute your orders. An officer that has an iota of knowledge above the common run you must consider as your personal enemy; for you may be sure he laughs at you and your manœuvres.

A principal part of your duty is to see [justice](#) distributed among your troops. Military law being so summary and concise, you will not find this a difficult matter; but if, simple as it is, you should be entirely unacquainted with it, you may substitute your own goodwill and pleasure—and that, in fact, must be justice: for a Commander-in-chief is as infallible as the Pope.

Remember that ease and conveniency are apt to render soldiers effeminate; witness Hannibal's army at Capua. Never, therefore, let the troops have [comfortable quarters](#); and as money, according to Horace, lowers a man's courage, be sure to cut off every emolument from your army, to prevent the impediment of a full purse. No persons will behave so desperately in action as those who are tired of their lives; *Ibit eò quò vis qui zonam perdidit* — and the more you pinch the army under your command, the more you may appropriate to your own use.

If you serve under a ministry, with whom economy is the word, make a great bustle and parade about retrenchment; it will be [prudent](#) for you, likewise, to put it, in some measure, into practice; but not so as to extend to your own perquisites, or those of your dependents. These [savings are best made out of the pay of the subaltern officers and private soldiers](#); who being little able to bear it, will of course make much complaint of it, which will render your regard to economy the more conspicuous.

Should the duties bear too hard on any particular corps, never attend in the least to their representations. Remonstrances are the forerunners of [mutiny](#); and it is the highest insult to your rank and command to insinuate that you are not infallible.

Well, there are lots of brave, chuckle-headed fellows in government now that Des Browne and Derek Twigg have been promoted into the MoD to join Adam Ingram. There's no threat to anyone from there.

Justice! Good point that! The great advantage of knowing nothing about life in the armed services and the so-called stress of being in action (which is what soldiers are paid for, anyway), is that special pleading about the problems of rotten equipment can be ignored and Commanding Officers can be sent for courts martial automatically.

This one has been followed to the letter. Some of the quarters the troops have would not be allowed to convicts by the Human Rights Act, and television crews have shown to the public clear evidence of how much money careful stewardship of the accommodation has saved. If it were not for this care it would not have been possible to pay the MoD staff the bonuses they earned by saving all this money.

The virtue of prudence is applied only with respect to the soldiers – a Prime Ministers' accommodation may be accepted wherever offered, especially on harsh foreign service in Italy, Egypt or the West Indies.

Pay scales have been arranged well, too. Many of the troops now in Afghanistan are earning less than the minimum wage, which is not applicable out there, the Chancellor says. Additionally, every opportunity is taken to cancel any allowances that the troops expected as compensation for their so-called hardship and separation from their families. Des Browne says there were complaints that soldiers who had bought their own boots and flak jackets expected to have their cost refunded, but this shows clearly that the famous sense of humour our troops are supposed to have is failing. Such flagrant examples of poor leadership from the chinless wonders will be taken into account during the next round of redundancies. Mutineers can expect no less.

Be sure to give out a number of orders. It will at least show the troops you do not forget them. The more trifling they are, the more it shows your attention to the service; and should your orders **contradict** one another, it will give you an opportunity of altering them, and finding subjects for fresh regulations.

You should have a **clever secretary** to write your despatches, in case you should not be so well qualified yourself. This gentleman may often serve to get you out of a scrape. You must take pains so to interlard your letters with technical terms that neither the public nor the minister to whom they are addressed, will understand them; especially if the transactions you are describing be trivial: it will then give them an air of importance.

Nothing is so commendable as **generosity** to an enemy. To **follow** up a victory would be taking advantage of his distress. It will be sufficient therefore for you to show that you can beat him when you think proper.

When an inferior general is to be detached upon an expedition, be sure to send the most **ignorant and inexperienced**; for he stands the most in need of a lesson.

You should always act openly and fairly both with friends and foes. Never, therefore, steal a march, or lay in ambush; neither should you fire upon or attack your enemy in the night. If you have read Pope's translation of Homer you may remember what Hector says, when about to fight with Ajax: *Open be our fight, and bold each blow, I steal no conquest from a noble foe.*

If you are pursuing a **retreating enemy**, let him get a few days march ahead, to show him that you have no doubt of being able to overtake him when you set about it; who knows but this proceeding may encourage him to stop? After he has retired to a place of security, you may then go in quest of him with your whole army.

Contradictory orders have the advantage of confusing enemies before an attack, and this justifies withholding the equipment necessary for invasions – which of course will save money if it doesn't later reach the soldiers for whom it was intended. Then the expressed hope that in the operation to bring peace to Helmand province no bullet would be fired allowed the correct ammunition to be held back in the UK, and thus the cheaper, useless ammunition was issued to the troops in Helmand. Similar confusion was created when the British public was assured the Army would receive whatever was needed to win the war against the Taliban – more helicopters, better vehicles, more men, whatever! The Taliban actually believed it! (Not the Army.)

Clever secretaries to write reports? They are called spin doctors now.

Generosity to the enemy is a virtue the current Prime Minister has more than any other in British history. He has clearly demonstrated this in his deals with the IRA throughout ten years in office – always ready to give our enemies what they wanted in exchange for concessions they never made, and always ready to claim such defeats as victories. In this way the IRA could clearly see he had the strength of character to be willing to lose, the moral strength to accept defeat.

Expeditions? If someone must go to Baghdad, someone who, owing to his inexperience will find the visit educational, then it must be the Defence Secretary. (As George so often says – *a no-brainer!*)

When a British attack drove the enemy back towards Pakistan, and intended to cut off the retreat with the use of the reserve flown in by helicopters (an unfair advantage), the plan failed because there were no helicopters — but that didn't matter, there was no reserve either!

The 1782 book was obviously written as a satirical jest, but is it, as recent events suggest, now used as a serious guide?