

Canal, and not the destruction of Cairo or of the Egyptian state. This self-imposed restraint was not based on high-minded principle but on a calculation of what might be accomplished without dangerously broadening the conflict, reinforced towards the end by the discovery that Egypt was well-equipped with surface-to-air missiles. (We are all lucky that the calculation was not disproved.) Similarly, the involvement of the United States in the long war in Vietnam was limited; it was tacitly understood that nuclear weapons could not be used without triggering off a broader conflict that the United States did not seek. The same is true in the Falkland Islands. The United Kingdom has a modest stock of nuclear weapons, some conveniently carried on submarines, but their use is unthinkable and has not been mentioned. Even the wild talk in Britain that it might be necessary to attack airfields in Argentina has quietened as the sober realities of conflict have dawned, and as the importance of public and political opinion elsewhere in South America has been appreciated.

What this implies is that limited wars are possible only with the tacit agreement, however grudging, of other interested parties. And because other states' opinions can change, the combatants must spend a substantial part of their energy persuading everybody who is prepared to listen that they are acting reasonably, or at least as reasonably as is consistent with their resort to violence. This, no doubt, explains why the Falklands conflict has so far been conducted with extraordinary civility. The substantial British community in Argentina has not been unduly harassed, while in both capitals journalists go normally about their business (although three British journalists have been wrongly locked up in Argentina for six weeks, and three others kidnapped for a day). In Britain, the only untoward incident has been the decision last weekend by the Tottenham Hotspur football club that its talented Argentine player should be dropped from Saturday's cup final. Both sides have an interest in continuing like this, for to behave otherwise would weaken the cases they are putting to their friends.

Against this background, the British government has made two important errors. First, it has unnecessarily sought to keep to itself news of what is actually happening in the Falkland Islands. Second, no member of the British government has yet made the conciliatory speech that circumstances demand, making the simple point that the traditional links between Britain and Argentina need not be jeopardized by what is going on and even that the present Argentine government, while not democratically elected, is less fiercely repressive than its predecessor. Indeed, it would be entirely consistent with the notion that the Falklands war is strictly limited that even now the British government should be prepared to negotiate the kind of settlement it will be prepared ultimately to countenance. For the time being, both sides are stuck on the abstract concept of sovereignty; sooner or later, they will have to settle among themselves some kind of monetary price at which that concept could be made more flexible (see *Nature* 8 April, p. 480). One of the tricks in fighting a limited war is to help opponents to give up the struggle at the earliest opportunity.

Technologically the Falklands war is far from limited. Reports that troops under air attack are unnerved not to see the attacking aircraft but only the missiles sent automatically to bring them down are vivid and credible, but that is what conventional warfare has become — a technicians' war. The past few weeks have shown that vehicles carrying people, whether ships or aircraft, moving in an environment in which radar detection at long range is technically straightforward, have become exceedingly vulnerable to attack. As missile ranges lengthen, they will become more so — which should give pause to the now-vociferous British naval lobby. Long-range attacks on ground targets are for the time being more difficult and still require human intervention, but the development of conventional battlefield weapons in the past decade suggests that even that relative immunity will not persist indefinitely. It does not, of course, follow that people will cease to matter. On the contrary, their roles as gatherers of intelligence and as communications links between pieces of equipment will become more important while their numbers shrink and as their

skills increase. This inexorable trend points to several circumstances. First, limited war becomes more feasible as the chances of large numbers of military personnel being killed diminish. Second, the cost of military preparations is bound to increase. Third, there is a limit to the extent to which the depersonalization of conventional warfare can be carried without the combatants deciding that they must force a decision by using civilians as hostages of a kind. None of these prospects is cheerful.

Rothschild rides again

Lord Rothschild's report on social science research is predictably intelligent and subversive.

Once upon a time, the story goes, there was a wicked fairy called Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State at the Department of Education and Science in the United Kingdom. One day last year, soon after his appointment (some say demotion) to that office, Sir Keith took the daring step — it was at least unprecedented — of cutting half a million pounds from the recommended budget of an innocent but youthful mainstay of British academic life, called the Social Science Research Council or SSRC for short. Anxious to dissemble the extent of his wickedness, Sir Keith said that he would leave it to Lord Rothschild, a scientist and merchant banker who acquired in 1971 a fearsome reputation for angering academics, to recommend whether or not this stripping outfit should continue to exist. Thanks to the journal *New Society*, it soon became known that Sir Keith had been dutifully promising the Chancellor of the Exchequer (by definition wicked) that *something* would be done about SSRC. Thunder and lightning occurred.

Wicked fairies have no luck. How could Sir Keith have known that his chosen companion in malevolence had earned his reputation for wickedness by his flair for telling the truth and doing it deftly? Lord Rothschild's report on the issue last week (*An Enquiry into the Social Science Research Council*, Cmnd 8554, HMSO, £6.50) is in that tradition. For as nice a statement of the case for social science, and a neat dig at Sir Keith in the process, what could better the fifth paragraph of his report?

Einstein is reported to have said that "Common sense is a deposit of prejudice laid down in the mind before the age of eighteen". Yet to the layman — the man in the street — many of the problems on which social scientists work are either too far fetched or do not need further work because common sense answers are already available. Common sense tells us that:

- (1) Capital punishment deters potential murderers;
- (2) The import of foreign cars should be drastically curtailed;
- (3) There should be more small hospitals and fewer large ones;
- (4) Horror comics make children violent (USA).

Are we sure that common sense is right? Might there not be a layer of prejudice or even ignorance?

So, this is how the story goes, Lord Rothschild turns out not to be a wicked fairy's hatchet-man, but a good fairy in disguise. The youthful SSRC has been misjudged, he says. Too many have expected too much of it too soon, and without a proper understanding of what academic life or the social sciences are like. So the SSRC should be reprieved, first from the burden of being "looked at" for at least the next three years. In gratitude, however, it should be prepared to move to Swindon, should be more (not less) courageous and should defend itself against the single open charge of left-wing bias. Wicked fairies everywhere will be discomfited by this sane and unchallengeable opinion. One of these will be the British Academy, which calls itself "the national learned society representing the interests of the social sciences", and which took the lead in bad-mouthing the SSRC a year ago. Lord Rothschild (who is evidently not unalloyed good fairy) quotes a pompous passage from the academy's written evidence saying (truthfully) that it is incompetent to be the SSRC but promising that it will be "vigilant" in overseeing the council's work. Can everybody live happily after that?