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# The Politics of Commemoration: Britain and D-Day, 1984-1994

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## ABSTRACT

*Commemorations are about the present more than the past, as they reveal how different groups of people believed historical events should be understood within their own modern context. Both Margaret Thatcher in 1984 and John Major in 1994 were aware of the complicated political implications of British commemorations of D-Day. While Thatcher managed the potential international diplomatic traps that were thrust upon her in 1984, Major's intentional efforts to use public festivities to boost domestic political support in 1994 were far less successful.*

British Prime Ministers, at *Question Time* and elsewhere, are not unaccustomed to criticism. So it was not out of parliamentary tradition, on 21 April 1994, for John Smith, Leader of the Opposition, to accuse John Major of 'constantly getting things wrong', nor, later in the day, for Terry Lewis, Labour MP from Worsley, to refer to 'the Prime Minister's incompetence'.<sup>1</sup> What was perhaps surprising, however, was the source of this criticism. John Major's Government, in Parliament and even more so in the Press, was being excoriated for its planned observance of the 50 Anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy. The Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher were expert at invoking the Second World War in the service of their political goals. From Churchillian comparisons to the Falkland Islands, the Party and its leaders regularly referred to an image of wartime Britain that resonated well through the 1980s in a nation struggling with both its postcolonial identity and its sense of its place in the world. All the more surprising then, as *The Independent* declared in a front-page article, 'that the Conservatives, of all parties, should turn out to have a tin ear for patriotism.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Hansard*, HC Deb. 21 April 1994 vol. 241 cc. 1034-8; HC Deb. 21 April 1994 vol. 241 cols. 1038-52.

<sup>2</sup>Neal Ascherson, 'D-Day: The best way is humility', *The Independent*, 22 April 1992.

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Commemorations tell us far more about the visions of the people doing the commemorating than they do about the events that are the ostensible subjects of their efforts. This is especially the case when national identity seems contingent on specific ways of understanding the past.<sup>3</sup> After all, as *The Guardian* once facetiously editorialised, 'As far as the British people are concerned the history of planet earth goes like this. 1) The earth cools. 2) Primitive life forms emerge. 3) Britain wins the Second World War.'<sup>4</sup> The nostalgia of war hearkened back to a time when Britain, with its empire securely in place, stood alone and saved the world from fascism.<sup>5</sup> Forty years later, Britain's place in a postcolonial world was far more complicated than those reassuring visions of the past. While Margaret Thatcher was adept at the politics of public memorialising, a decade later, John Major found the politics of reading the popular culture much trickier, leading to costly failures rather than political success.

While there was consensus that the 40th anniversary of D-Day needed to be marked, there was no real sense of urgency. Though the Queen's intention to attend ceremonies in Normandy was announced in November 1983, a variety of questions in Parliament indicate that specific planning did not really get under way until well into the spring of 1984, and plans for Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the House of Lords to attend were not in place until May.<sup>6</sup> For the Government, the main purpose of the ceremonies was to emphasise the strength of the Anglo-American relationship, past and present, and by implication, future. The anniversary of the

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, John Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup>The author went on to suggest that only other possible events of note were the Beatles' appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show and England's 1966 World Cup victory. *The Guardian*, 7 June 2000. See also: Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: Gender and National Identity, 1939-1991*, (London: I B Taurus, 1997); Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991); Paul Gilroy, 'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': *The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup>This was always, of course, a construction; see Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*; and especially Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup>'Queen expected to join D-Day veterans on Normandy beaches', *The Times*, 3 November 1983; for Parliament, see HC Deb 09 December 1983 vol. 50 c. 260W, HC Deb 27 March 1984 vol. 57 col. 104W, HC Deb 04 April 1984 vol. 57 col. 588W, HC Deb 06 April 1984 vol. 57 col. 699W, HC Deb 10 April 1984 vol. 58 cols. 185-7, HC Deb 25 April 1984 vol. 58 cols. 506-7W, HC Deb 03 May 1984 vol. 59 cols. 539-44, etc.

landings on 6 June was well placed for these purposes, coming on the heels of the European elections and immediately followed by the G7 Economic Summit in London. By focusing on the Normandy landings, it was easy to justify the exclusion of the Soviet Union. Cold War adversaries did not have to discuss their wartime alliances because the scope was defined by the amphibious assault on the beaches of western France, conveniently ignoring the fact that the opening of a second front implied pretty clearly that there must be fighting on another front elsewhere. Instead, the Soviets could be moderately praised in their absence.<sup>7</sup> The Germans, too, were not invited, a bit awkwardly (this issue returned ten years later). Even the Canadians, despite the presence of large numbers of veterans, were rendered almost invisible, not least because Queen Elizabeth was described as representing them as well as the British, though Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau was also present.<sup>8</sup> The Commonwealth was therefore where it belonged, subsumed under a British identity. The Germans were defeated and absent; the Soviets could be praised but elsewhere; the French, to Francois Mitterand's apparent disgruntlement, were forced to show at least a modicum of gratitude for the costly military operation that was patently, if not exclusively, on their behalf. That left the British and the Americans, acknowledging their past accomplishments by paying tribute to the soldiers who had been there, enacting their historical partnership in a way that could hardly have served the Conservative Government better.

The United States, of course, was more than a cooperative partner; in an election year, the Americans had their own European agenda. President and Mrs. Reagan made an extended European trip, offering a multitude of photo ops in the President's ancestral land of Ireland before the ceremonies in Normandy, and staying on in London for the economic summit. These kinds of events played to Reagan's strengths, and it was especially helpful for him to look like a world leader when Walter Mondale and Gary Hart were slogging it out in Democratic primaries for the opportunity to face him in the November election. The press repeatedly commented on the control that the American presidential team exerted over the structure of the ceremonies. They took place, for example on Utah Beach, one of the American landing sites, though certainly not the most important tactically. The British responded by holding additional ceremonies elsewhere; the Queen went to Arromanches near Gold Beach for a parade of veterans, as well as visiting Commonwealth and Canadian cemeteries. This required the Queen to do something she was known to dislike, and had not done

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<sup>7</sup>'D-Day tribute on the beaches', *The Times*, 7 June 1984, among others; Reagan coupled praise with criticism of the Soviet Union's continued presence in Eastern Europe.

<sup>8</sup>'Busy royal schedule revealed for D-Day celebrations', *The Times*, 15 May 1984.

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since her Silver Jubilee in 1977: travel by helicopter.<sup>9</sup> Newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic noted that President Reagan's address was perfectly timed for the morning news programs in the United States to carry it live, but the tone was generally one of bemused tolerance rather than irritation (with the possible exception of the French).<sup>10</sup>

The Conservatives were not pitch-perfect in their commemoration. Certainly, there was resentment, despite the official message, of what was often perceived as an American attempt to control D-Day to the exclusion of recognition of the British role. Americans were prone to discussing Omaha and Utah, and forgetting the landings at Sword, Juno, and Gold Beaches. Montgomery was often overshadowed by Eisenhower. Even more significantly, though, the Government, in its focus on message, missed the mark with the people who made the message possible. They realised that the presence of veterans was absolutely necessary, and that they must be seen as helping those who could not make their own arrangements. Though they reported to the House of Commons on the number of private schemes for D-Day visits (and indeed more than a few had sprung up in the previous years), this year and this event were special. In a written response, John Stanley for the Ministry of Defence explained that 'exceptionally in this case, arrangements will be made to enable a representative group of D-Day veterans to visit Normandy on 6 June at public expense.' Targeting veterans who would not be financially able to go otherwise, the British Legion identified up to 400 participants for Government support.<sup>11</sup> When, however, the Ministry was asked about providing support for war widows, the response was negative: 'This visit has been organised for those who took part in the D-Day

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<sup>9</sup>ibid. The helicopter use (and the Queen's aversion to it) was mentioned repeatedly in the press; see additionally 'Queen must overcome her dislike of helicopters for D-Day visit to France', *The Times*, 26 May 1984; 'Queen pays homage to the dead', *The Times*, 7 June 1984.

<sup>10</sup>Reginald Dale, 'American News: Reagan sets off to win European acclaim and impress home voters', *Financial Times*, 1 June 1984; Rich Jaroslovksy, 'Politics '84 – Election Year Extravaganza: Reagan Offers Peaceful Diplomacy Scenes to Counter His Bellicose European Image', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 June 1984; 'D-Day tribute on the beaches', *The Times*, 7 June 1984; Reginald Dale, 'Weekend Brief: Never far away from the old votes back home', *Financial Times*, 9 June 1984; for more on Mitterand's frustration, see also Reginald Dale, 'Reagan Rubs Raw Nerves in Europe / Controversy over US President's visit to West Germany', *Financial Times*, 19 April 1995. *The Guardian*, in contrast, referred to the 'contrived tedium' of the coverage of Reagan's visit, the D-Day ceremonies, and the summit, calling for more 'hard news' and less of what it termed the 'gigantic balloon of empty tomfoolery', 9 June 1984; even the highly-supportive *Financial Times* referred to the coverage of Reagan's participation at the ceremonies as 'ballyhoo', Ian Davidson, 'Foreign Affairs: One summit really matters', 4 June 1984.

<sup>11</sup>HC Deb 04 April 1984 vol. 57 col. 588W

operation, and the number of applications by D-day veterans has already greatly exceeded the number of places available.<sup>12</sup> This was a public relations mistake that cost much more than the travel expenses of the widows, and in the end the Government paid those, too. After a hue and cry in the public, the press and in the Commons, the policy was reversed, and 53 widows traveled to Normandy as the guests of the Government.<sup>13</sup>

The Conservatives were not the only ones to underestimate the extent of veteran involvement, despite the almost universal invocation of the veterans themselves as the subject of the commemorations. The Imperial War Museum planned only a new 'small display' to occupy 'two new free-standing cases in front of existing D-Day photographic display.' It consisted of uniform items and models of landing craft, as well as a variety of printed matter: newspapers, cartoons, propaganda, and maps, as well as both personal letters from soldiers and official communications from Montgomery.<sup>14</sup> The Museum planned some simple souvenirs for their shop, including one in their series of documents packs, to contain facsimiles of printed matter similar to those on display.<sup>15</sup> Exhibits were also mounted at the Museum's other sites: HMS Belfast (which itself participated in the D-Day naval bombardment of Juno Beach), Duxford Airfield (which was an American fighter base in June 1944), and the newly-opened Cabinet War Rooms.<sup>16</sup> Interest, however, was greater, and snowballed in unexpected ways. In February 1984, the Museum was contacted by the manager of the Dominion Theatre in Tottenham Court Road, asking them to mount a display at the theatre to coincide with a planned week of screening of 'The Longest Day' in mid-March. Museum staff produced a captioned photo montage for the event, in the name of good publicity.<sup>17</sup> That display, in turn, was seen by a veteran who served as an

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<sup>12</sup>HC Deb 08 May 1984 vol. 59 col. 298W

<sup>13</sup>Philip Webster, 'War Widows to join D-Day trip', *The Times*, 30 May 1984; Alan Hamilton, 'D-Day celebrations. War widows disgusted at last-minute offer of trip', *The Times*, 31 May 1984; HC Deb 06 June 1984 vol. 61 col. 191W.

<sup>14</sup>Handwritten notes, undated [1984], 'D-Day Display'; for reference to 'small display', see Penny Ritchie Calder, Exhibitions Officer, correspondence, 23 January 1984. In "D-Day Display 1984," Imperial War Museum Exhibition files.

<sup>15</sup>Undated (1984), 'Overlord Imperial War Museum Documents Pack', 'D-Day Display 1984', Imperial War Museum Exhibition files.

<sup>16</sup>See Imperial War Museum Press Notice, 'Fortieth Anniversary of D-Day', May 1984. For more on the opening of the Cabinet War Rooms, see 'The Arts: Underground where the war was won – Gillian Darley visits the Cabinet War Rooms, now open to the public, and is much impressed', *Financial Times*, 24 May 1984.

<sup>17</sup>IWM Internal Memorandum, from Exhibitions Officer (Penny Ritchie Calder) to Director (Dr. Alan Borg), 24 February 1984; see also Borg's handwritten response on the memo, as well as Ritchie Calder's internal correspondence with the Photography

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officer in his local British Legion branch, who contacted the Museum to ask if they could borrow the montage for an exhibition he and his fellow members were putting on in their village hall on Saturday, 9 June 1984. According to his correspondence, their plea to their members was quite successful, and they expected to 'have quite a good show' as they were 'doing quite well for exhibits'.<sup>18</sup>

In 1984, veterans spoke usually as individuals. They wrote letters to the editors of various newspapers, agreeing or disagreeing with a variety of leading articles, book reviews, and news coverage, offering no coherent vision of what commemoration should look like. Alan Forrest wrote movingly in *The Financial Times* of a visit with a fellow Normandy veteran, timed (as were those of others he met there) intentionally to 'avoid the enormous "bull" surrounding the Queen's visit.' They questioned why they had come: 'it certainly isn't to tell old soldier's tales, to bask in heroes' sunshine, or even to put wreaths on graves (a fairly unproductive exercise).' He went, he determined, 'to remember my friends who lost their innocence and their lives in those bloody hedge rows.' Forrest and his companion watched children building sandcastles, and his friend, with his own memories, said 'that's what beaches ought to be for.' The account concluded, however, with a sombre reflection on the visit and the children who had clamoured for stories of the battle; they veterans, like Henry V, were glad to have been there, 'but I suppose we were avoiding that little boy's question – "Did you kill a lot of Germans, sir?"'<sup>19</sup>

That individuality, and that level of nuance, were both gone by 1994. Though one reviewer declared on June 9 that 'we may forget D Day for another 10 years now', it did not entirely go away.<sup>20</sup> Veterans continued to travel to Normandy each June, without the international pageantry. The press were practically gleeful in their reporting on the new official Museum for Peace in Caen. Despite 'concern that the Americans, with strong financial backing, were trying to rewrite history and eclipse the British role' and 'that French historians were underplaying the importance of

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and Production staff of the Museum, and her confirmation dated 29 February 1984 with the manager of the Dominion Theatre. 'Dominion Cinema: proposed D-Day display', in 'D-Day Display 1984', Imperial War Museum Exhibition files.

<sup>18</sup>I cannot identify the veteran until I can ascertain whether or not he is still alive; the documentation, dated 28 March 1984 and 7 April 1984, as well as the British Legion branch letter to its members, dated March 1984, and the flier announcing 'A Commemorative Exhibition of the 'D'-Day Landings in Normandy', are included in the above-named file, housed at the Imperial War Museum.

<sup>19</sup>Alan Forrest, 'D-Day: a requiem on the beaches: Alan Forrest on memories of forty years ago', *Financial Times*, 2 June 1984.

<sup>20</sup>B. A. Young, 'The Arts: Radio – crime, punishment and living history', *Financial Times*, 9 June 1984.

Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, the Allied Commander-in-Chief during the first few weeks of the invasion', the museum focused particularly on British contributions. Topping the exhibits of pride were a massive portrait of "Monty" and his Rolls Royce', and a 'full-scale replica of an RAF Typhoon' despite American efforts to include a Mustang. Though Americans were 'reported to be "seething" at being outmanoeuvred by the British campaign', *The Times* concluded that the 'British success can be put down to hard work, perseverance and gentle diplomacy with the French.'<sup>21</sup> This approach does not seem to suggest that Thatcher's theme of Anglo-American cooperation was holding up terribly well. Of course, Thatcher herself was not holding up very well, either; despite winning her third term in 1987, she was forced out in a leadership struggle in 1990 and left the House of Commons in 1992. Her successor, John Major, found a different commemorative world in 1994.

Though he defeated Neil Kinnock and the Labour Party in the general election of 1992, Major's standing was never terribly secure. By 1994, the Conservatives were dealing with considerable intra-party factionalism, and Major survived a leadership challenge only a year later, only to be comprehensively beaten by Tony Blair and the Labour landslide of 1997. With the Cold War over, Britain's 'special relationship' with the United States was more complicated while giving less international status; Britain was no longer needed as the European stalwart opposing the Soviet Union, key to a NATO alliance that was now changing beyond recognition with the admission of former Soviet-bloc countries. The ten years between 1984 and 1994 had also been a decade when the silence surrounding postcolonial society was definitively broken, and the end of empire acknowledged, if not come to terms with. The Falkland War had been the last hurrah of imperialism; the participation of its veterans, a company of 2nd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, in the 1984 D-Day commemorations, was perhaps the last echo of that cheer. Major and the Conservatives, desperate for political capital, failed to recognise that the commemorative language had changed, and suffered for it.

The 50 anniversaries of D-Day, VE-Day, and VJ-Day, were the responsibility of a specially-created World War II Commemorations Team, which fell under the supervision of the Ministry of Defence but also worked extensively, particularly for the D-Day commemorations, with the new Department of National Heritage (created in 1992).<sup>22</sup> For 1994, responsibilities for events were divided: Defence was in charge of coordinating the June 4 to 6 ceremonies in the English debarkation ports, across the channel, and in Normandy, including participation in the international event at Omaha Beach as well as services at several Commonwealth War Graves Commission

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<sup>21</sup>'Diplomacy wins on D-Day memorial', *The Times*, 6 June 1988.

<sup>22</sup>See 'Commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the End of WWII: Post-Exercise Report', Ministry of Defence, Restricted – Management. Obtained via Freedom of Information request; personal copy.

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cemeteries, and a veterans' march-past at Arromanches. National Heritage planned an event focused on civilians, and planned an extensive family fun day in Hyde Park for early July. These plans ultimately faced three challenges of increasing importance. The first two, both related to the June events, seemed to threaten the Government's plans, but were solved and these commemorations were ultimately widely praised. The third, however, brought the Government criticism, mockery, resistance, and eventually forced a complete capitulation to an unexpected and unexpectedly uniform interpretation of how D-Day could be marked.

The first challenge was directly parallel to ten years earlier: what to do about the Germans? The intervening decade had not made this one any easier to resolve. The German government sought an invitation to the ceremonies as a sign that Europe was now united in peace, and an acknowledgement that the Germans who were now friends and trading partners (and fellow members of the European Union) were not the same as the Nazis who were defeated half a century earlier. In November 1993, however, the *Daily Mail* reported that the Queen did not want the Germans given 'equal status' with the Allies, and that there were also concerns raised 'in the French government and along Allied veterans' groups.'<sup>23</sup> At the official launch of the Government D-Day commemoration plans, held in January 1994 at the Imperial War Museum, John Major explained that the Germans would be participating in celebrations of 50 years of peace in 1995, but that D-Day 'is essentially an occasion for the wartime allies', though again the Russians (no longer Soviets) were also excluded, though this time silently.<sup>24</sup> Some rumblings continued on both sides about the appropriate role for the Germans; while the liberal press and younger generations often advocated being inclusive, the veterans' perspective usually sounded much like

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<sup>23</sup>John Deans, 'Surrender by Kohl in the battle of D-Day', *Daily Mail*, 26 November 1993; see also Peter Shard, 'Germans plead to join party for D-Day', *Daily Mail*, 2 July 1993; Steve Doughty, 'Britain may bar Kohl from 1994 D-Day memorial', *Daily Mail*, 9 November 1993.

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Christopher Bellamy, 'Major puts D-Day plan into action', *The Independent*, 7 January 1994. See also Louise Jury, 'Major promises millions for D-Day 50 years on', *The Guardian*, 7 January 1994, and Bill Moulard, 'Time to remember: Major's vow as D-Day Veterans look back with pride', *Daily Mail*, 7 January 1994. The Government was quite satisfied with the launch at the Museum; see letter from the Ministry of Defence to Alan Borg, Director of the Museum, 11 January 1994; Section 44: Notable Anniversaries; (i) 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary D-Day; Imperial War Museum Archives. The Imperial War Museum was regularly considered an appropriate host for these kinds of events; the Southern and Normandy Tourist Boards held a press conference there to announce their own commemorative plans on 3 June 1993; Imperial War Museum Internal Memorandum, 25 May 1993; Section 44: Notable Anniversaries; (i) 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary D-Day; Imperial War Museum Archives.

that of Brian Jackson, who reminded a reporter that ‘after all we fought for six years to stop the Germans from marching down the Mall.’<sup>25</sup> However, the compromise of excluding them from D-Day but including them the following summer to mark the end of the war and the beginning of the peace settled most of the debate.<sup>26</sup>

The second crisis averted was quite different, centring on hotel rooms rather than diplomatic exchanges. More than nine months before the anniversary, the *Daily Mail* was already complaining that French hotel owners were price gouging and cancelling reservations, exploiting the veterans making what was likely to be their last trip.<sup>27</sup> The situation was deemed bad enough to merit parliamentary intervention. In November, the Prime Minister informed the House of Commons that the Ministry of Defence had approached the French government, with the result that there was now an office in Caen ‘to deal with all queries concerning accommodation in Normandy.’<sup>28</sup> This was not enough, apparently, as the housing crisis reappeared in the spring, this time with a much clearer set of villains. The headline in the *Daily Mail* screamed of ‘Anger as British D-Day veterans lose their hotel rooms in Normandy to an invasion of American TV networks.’ According to the article, it was actually the French government that had requisitioned the rooms on behalf of the TV personnel, because French officials wanted the rooms the networks had originally reserved, and so needed to move them somewhere else. So the real villains of the story were the French government, though it’s always safe to blame things on American television. There were heroes as well, however, as ‘French families, shamed by the shabby treatment of the men who fought to free them, deluged the authorities with offers to put them

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<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Marianne Darch, ‘Disgruntled veterans blame Tories for D-Day “muddle”’, Marianne Darch finds opinion is divided on how the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Normandy should be celebrated’, *The Independent*, 19 April 1994.

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, ‘The Kohl shoulder: Snubbed German leader orders all-out boycott of D-Day celebrations’, *Daily Mail*, 5 March 1994; Steve Crawshaw, ‘Dear Helmut Kohl; the Chancellor of Germany seems miffed that his European partners haven’t invited him to their D-Day party in June. Never mind, Mr Kohl, perhaps you can come to next year’s peace jamboree – if you’re still in office’, *The Independent*, 10 March 1994; Neal Ascherson, ‘D-Day was for the liberty of all: the Germans should be there too’, *The Independent*, 13 March 1994; Ian McDonald, ‘Letter: No to Kohl’, *The Independent*, 20 March 1994; ‘Time for Goodwill towards Germany’, *The Independent*, 21 March 1994; ‘Kohl welcomes Major proposal on German participation in D-Day celebrations’, *Financial Times*, 24 March 1994.

<sup>27</sup>Tracey Harrison, Tim Jotischky, ‘No room for heroes: D-Day veterans lose bookings as greedy French hotels sell out to highest bidder’, *Daily Mail*, 23 August 1993.

<sup>28</sup>HC Deb 23 November 1993 vol 233 c32W. See also ‘D-Day victory on rip-offs’, *Daily Mail*, 24 November 1993.

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up.<sup>29</sup> Under extensive pressure from across the press spectrum as well as behind the scenes, the French government almost immediately retracted the eviction notices, and another potential crisis was averted.<sup>30</sup>

The peace for the Conservatives was quite brief, however. On April 12, the Department of National Heritage announced the second phase of D-Day events, focused on civilians. Whispers of concern about this approach had been raised months before; one letter to the editor despaired that 'The memory of a great battle in which thousands died or were maimed is being celebrated as a Hollywood extravaganza, so that the tourist industry can make a killing 1994-style – even if it dishonors and degrades the dead of 1944.'<sup>31</sup> Certainly, the tourist boards had long been in action, preparing for 1994 and the opportunity to draw significant tourist spending to their areas. The Southern Tourist Board had been promoting the anniversary for two years, and launched their press campaign at the Imperial War Museum in June 1993. By January 1994, they were sending the Museum their 'D-Day pack', with separate brochures targeted at British and American veterans, posters, a video, and an eight-page 'Travel Trade & Veterans Newsletter' for November 1993, with a 'D-Day 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year' logo and detailed plans for commemorative events throughout southern England and Normandy.<sup>32</sup> Commercial tie-ins with the anniversaries abounded; while there had been souvenirs for sale for the 40 anniversaries, the number and array increased exponentially in the 1990s. The Imperial War Museum put on a far more complex show, 'From D-Day to Victory', which ran for more than a year and a half from its festive and VIP-studded launch when Viscount Montgomery official opened the exhibition in February 1994, through autumn 1995. Far more than the two new display cases of ten years earlier, this exhibition filled a double-height gallery space and included 'four a/v programmes, five other complicated a/v elements,

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<sup>29</sup>'Unhappy landings: Anger as British D-Day veterans lose their hotel rooms in Normandy to an invasion of American TV networks', *Daily Mail*, 4 April 1994.

<sup>30</sup>See, for example, Julian Nundy, 'France liberates D-Day veterans' occupied hotels', *The Independent*, 5 April 1994; 'No room for such thoughtlessness', *The Independent*, 5 April 1994; Peter Shard, 'French yield to the D-Day heroes; France surrenders to the wounded heroes', *Daily Mail*, 5 April 1994; Paul Johnson, 'The French can't forgive us because they owe us so much; as the row rumbles on over D-Day celebrations', *Daily Mail*, 5 April 1994; Lynda Lee-Potter, 'Making room for the heroes', *Daily Mail*, 6 April 1994.

<sup>31</sup>Sidney Vines, 'Letter: Remembering the war dead with pomp', *The Independent*, 8 November 1993.

<sup>32</sup>Included in Section 15 – Exhibitions; (d) Temporary Exhibitions; (28) D-Day Exhibition; Imperial War Museum Archives.

and 70 large, detailed graphics panels.' It also went 25% over budget.<sup>33</sup> The Museum Shop offered a much wider variety of souvenirs as well; in addition to updated document and photograph packs, they planned cassettes, a 'D-Day commemorative medallion'; a variety of items targeted at children, and one of the many anniversary-themed books to be published that year.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, numerous private companies marketed mugs, t-shirts, recordings, key chains, badges, and a variety of other memorabilia, including those distinctively British collectibles, thimbles and tea towels.<sup>35</sup>

Coming from private entities, none of this seemed to arouse much criticism. Coming from the Government, however, such a festive – and commercial – approach quickly drew criticism. Negative reaction was not immediate; the only press outlet that was troubled from the first was *The Guardian*, which was saddened by 'a messy pot-pourri of militarist nostalgia, austerity of kitsch and theme park merchandising – plenty of sound and hype, all signifying virtually nothing.'<sup>36</sup> The *Daily Mail*, in contrast, wrote happily of the 'huge tribute' announced by the Government, with no hint of concern about the 'military parades, exhibitions of World War II equipment, firework displays, star-studded concerts, fly-pasts, gala dinners, street parties and reunions', all endorsed by Dame Vera Lynn, the now 77-year-old 'Forces Sweetheart', singing 'We'll Meet Again' at the launch.<sup>37</sup> A day later, however, the tabloid had changed its tune, in response to an immediate outcry from organized veterans groups claiming that D-Day was about commemorating the dead and wounded, and that celebrations would be better deferred to the summer of 1995. As Albert Page of the Portsmouth branch of the British Legion explained, 'All we want is to pay our respects. No one in Britain was having a party 50 years ago. Thousands of men were being killed and maimed every day.'<sup>38</sup> The tabloid agreed, invoking the dead and asking 'Do we really want to

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<sup>33</sup>See correspondence; 'Launch of 'From D-Day to Victory'', 17 February 1944 [sic], Acceptances'; Imperial War Museum Internal Memorandum, 'D-Day exhibition: increase in costs', 13 February 1994; in Section 15 – Exhibitions; (d) Temporary Exhibitions; (28) D-Day Exhibition; Imperial War Museum Archives.

<sup>34</sup>Imperial War Museum Internal Memorandum, 'Plans for forthcoming D-Day anniversary', 13 July 1993; Section 44 – Notable Anniversaries; (i) 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary D-Day, Imperial War Museum Archives.

<sup>35</sup>A number of which are in the author's personal collection, thanks to the amazing resource of eBay.

<sup>36</sup>Geoff Mulgan, 'Lost leaders who can't tell a convincing story', *The Guardian*, 13 April 1994.

<sup>37</sup>John Deans, 'An unforgettable day: Major mobilises Britain for a huge tribute to D-Day heroes', *Daily Mail*, 14 April 1994.

<sup>38</sup>'Old soldiers up in arms at street parties plan', *Daily Mail*, 15 April 1994.

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remember their sacrifice with EastEnders and street parties?’<sup>39</sup> The protesters and press particularly fastened on a proposal for ‘spam fritter contests’, which seemed to sum up the ways that the Government was trivialising sacrifice in the name of scoring political points. Within days, Ian Sproat at the Department of National Heritage and John Major himself were facing questions and criticism not just in the tabloids but in *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and the House of Commons. Both the Royal British Legion and the Normandy Veterans’ Association condemned the approach and claimed not to have been consulted during the planning process. Instead, the Government had hired a public relations firm, Lowe Bell, at a cost of £62,500. It did not help the Conservatives’ position that the head of the firm, Sir Tim Bell, was a close associate of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

Criticism intensified in the press and in Parliament.<sup>40</sup> On 19 April, John Major was asked in the House of Commons why he had not consulted with veterans’ organisations. Major responded that that the Secretary of State for National Heritage had met with members of both the British Legion and the Normandy Veterans’ Association that morning, which did not impress his audience.<sup>41</sup> Things only got worse on April 21, when John Smith accused the Government of getting everything wrong and the Prime Minister’s response was so interrupted that Madam Speaker had to intervene for order; later, Terry Lewis referred to Major’s ‘incompetence’.<sup>42</sup> The press did not let up; the *Daily Mail* wrote that ‘It’s rather like inviting jugglers to the Cenotaph’ (21 April); the *Financial Times* punned about ‘History frittered away’ (22 April); the *Independent* claimed that for ‘D-Day; the best way is humility’ (22 April) and “‘Light-hearted” approach draws heavy backlash; Little was done to reconcile opposing camps arranging event’ (22 April). Day after day in Parliament the Prime Minister and

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<sup>39</sup>Ludovic Kennedy, ‘The Day of Reckoning: Fifty years ago, 100,000 men like these died to free the world from unspeakable evil. Do we really want to remember their sacrifice with EastEnders and street parties?’, *Daily Mail*, 15 April 1994.

<sup>40</sup>See, for example, Paul Eastham, ‘It’s right to rejoice over D-Day, Minister insists’, *Daily Mail*, 19 April 1994; Alice Thompson and John Young, ‘Pressure grows on Government to tone down D-Day events’, *The Times*, 19 April 1994; John Deans, ‘Call off the D-Day revels’, *Daily Mail*, 20 April 1994; Philip Stephens, ‘Red faces over white cliffs backlash’, *Financial Times*, 21 April 1994.

<sup>41</sup>HC Deb 19 April 1994 vol. 241 cols. 735-40. Major also pointed out that Field Marshall Lord Bramall, himself a Normandy veteran and career soldier until he retired as the last serving World War II veteran, was on the Committee. Lord Bramall at this time was the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Imperial War Museum. Bramall soon told the press that thought he had been involved in the planning for the June events, he had not had anything to do with the proposed July festival.

<sup>42</sup>HC Deb 21 April 1994 vol. 241 cols. 1034-8; HC Deb 21 April 1994 vol. 241 cols. 1038-52.

Government faced questions about the procedures followed, the parties consulted, and especially about Lowe Bell, its selection, and its fees. It was Vera Lynn, however, who really sunk the plan. Siding with 'her boys', she announced that she would not sing at any Government event that the veterans' groups had not approved. The Government was forced to back down, though in stages; ultimately, the festival was held, without controversy, as part of the VE Day celebrations the following summer. While the plans were dropped, the Conservatives continued to pay for them, as the press continued to mock the spam fritters and what they represented for months. Similarly, few in the Opposition resisted opportunities to remind the Government of its 'embarrassment', as one member called it, on the floor of both Houses. Some members more gently referred to 'the muddle the Government got themselves into', others stated more baldly that 'the Government made fools of themselves about D-Day.'<sup>43</sup> Instead of uniting the nation – or at least a good portion of it – behind him, John Major found himself in an even more precarious political position than before the start of the commemoration season.

In the end, the Government was accused repeatedly of failing to understand the difference between 'celebration' and 'commemoration' – this must have been hard to take, given that the word 'celebration' was used liberally both in 1984 and from 1993 to early 1994, until it suddenly became the sign of the blundering idiocy of the Conservatives. Again, and again, they were accused facetiously of confusing D-Day and VE-Day. It was not, however, that the Government did not understand the past; rather, it was that they did not understand the present. As Geoff Mulgan wrote in *The Guardian*, the debacle was 'confirmation that this generation of leaders is virtually unable to think historically, still less to imagine its own place in the scheme of things. . . our political leaders are mute, beyond the occasional vision of an England of village greens and warm beer. It is as if for them history really has come to an end.'<sup>44</sup> The vision is of village greens and warm beer, yes, but also of an Empire in its place and a secure and central position in a global hierarchy. Freezing a certain vision of the past allowed Conservative British Governments to establish a political base despite a very different present; this worked in 1984, but a decade later, it was the present that had become another country.

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<sup>43</sup>Quotations are from HC Deb 04 May 1994 vol. 242 cols. 722-816 and HL Deb 10 May 1994 vol. 554 cols. 1503-19; there are many other examples.

<sup>44</sup>Geoff Mulgan, 'Lost leaders who can't tell a convincing story', *The Guardian*, 13 April 1994.