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Margaret Thatcher and the Making of the Falklands Myth

The Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands on 2 April 1982 presented Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative Government with a crucial challenge. Should the Argentinians succeed in retaining control of the islands, Thatcher's already shaky image as a strong political leader would be destroyed, making electoral defeat inevitable. Should the invaders be ousted, however, either through diplomacy or, preferably, through a military counter attack, Conservative supremacy would be greatly reinforced. As things turned out, the Argentinian forces were routed by a task force dispatched to the South Atlantic on 5 April and sovereignty over the Falklands was restored to Britain on 14 June. It was therefore the Argentinian Junta that fell from power while Thatcher and her Party scaled unprecedented heights of popularity.

Military assessments of the Falklands campaign suggest that there was a high level of risk inherent in the decision to send a task force 8000 miles into a South Atlantic winter to face an enemy well entrenched on the ground and capable of fighting an effective air war and that, regardless of Thatcher's assertions to the contrary, defeat was a distinct possibility on a number of occasions (Thompson, J., pp. xvii–xix). Nevertheless, while she may have been the child of good fortune, Margaret Thatcher, aided by her political allies and a friendly media, most notably the Sun newspaper, mounted an extremely effective campaign in the war of words that raged on the home front. As a result she ensured that the maximum benefit would accrue to herself and the Conservative Party in the event that her bold gambit in seeking a military solution to the Falklands crisis paid off. In this chapter, I will analyze some of the ways in which Thatcher used the
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situation created by Galtieri’s invasion not simply to increase support for the Government but also to consolidate her previously stuttering campaign to establish a new hegemony based on a wedding together of radical monetarist economic policies and a regressive vision of British society.

THATCHER’S VISION OF BRITAIN

Once she had taken over the leadership of the Conservative Party from Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher wasted no time in announcing that she was a new type of ‘conviction’ politician (Barnett, p. 69) who rejected the consensus politics that had dominated the postwar era. ‘Socialism’, she stated baldly at the 1975 Party Conference, her first as leader, is ‘bad for Britain’, not only because it leads to poor economic management, in the form of ‘high inflation, high unemployment, low productivity and record taxation’, but also because it is spiritually stultifying and has caused a ‘loss of confidence’ and ‘a sense of hopelessness’ (1989, p. 20) in the British public. The Welfare State did not, therefore, feature prominently in Thatcher’s vision of the future. Instead, she pledged herself to a capitalist system capable, in her view, of producing ‘a higher standard’ of both ‘prosperity and happiness’ (1989, p. 21).

Thatcher’s version of capitalism was heavily influenced by new right or neoconservative thinking in general and the economic theories of Milton Friedman in particular. Its main features were a commitment to sound money, less government, privatization, lower taxes and sharply reduced public spending, and deregulation aimed at allowing the logic of the marketplace to assert itself. Odd as it might seem, however, this obviously radical economic-social programme was not presented as something new but as a turning back of the clock in order to make ‘the Britain you have known . . . , the Britain your children will know’ (1989, p. 22). Only by setting such a direction, Thatcher argued, could she hope to rescue her country from the ever-increasing threat posed by socialism’s ‘deliberate attack on our values – on merit, excellence, our heritage and our great past’ (1989, p. 22). Thus, as Raphael Samuel puts it, ‘a Government ruthlessly intent on modernizing (and Americanizing) British society nevertheless call[ed] for a return to traditional ways’ (1: lvii). Iain Chambers