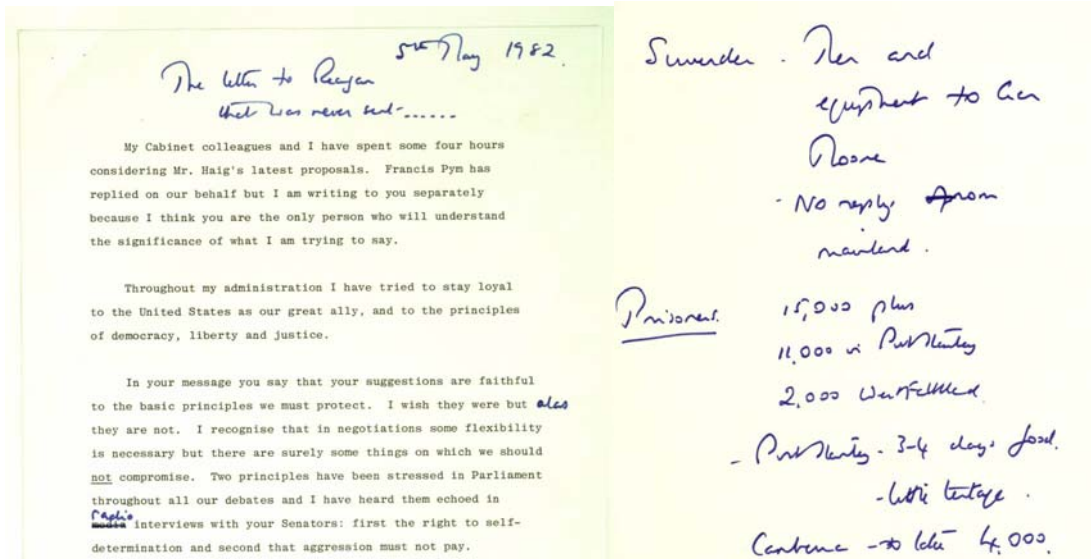


Thatcher Archive reveals deep divisions on the road to Falklands War



Thatcher's emotionally-charged and unsent letter to President Ronald Reagan, left, and her own notes on hearing of the Argentine surrender and the end of the war. Credit: Margaret Thatcher Foundation/Churchill Archives Centre

The Falklands War – the conflict that defined much of Margaret Thatcher's political career and legacy – dominates the release of her personal papers for 1982 at the Churchill Archives Centre from Monday (March 25).

Government tensions and widespread reluctance to wage war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands, even as the conflict unfolded, are laid bare among the thousands of pages of Thatcher's papers being opened to the public and made available online by the Margaret Thatcher Foundation at <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/>

Among the 40,000 pages of documents being released is Thatcher's own copy of the note confirming the Argentine invasion of the Islands, and an emotionally-charged draft letter to President Reagan, eventually toned down, where she resolutely refuses American overtures to concede ground to Argentina's military dictatorship.

A previously unseen 12-page record made by Ian Gow, Thatcher's Parliamentary Private Secretary, following the appearance of Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington and Defence Secretary John Nott at the backbench 1922 committee, describes how the tenor of that tense exchange informed Carrington's much-lamented decision to resign.

Thatcher's attempts to dissuade him came to nought and the archive contains a warm letter of explanation from Carrington to Thatcher, and a touching letter by return from the Prime Minister on May 4, 1982, relating how much she and the Cabinet missed his presence.

But the papers released this year also contain evidence of less cordial relations and weak support at best from large sections of the Conservative Parliamentary Party in the build-up to war.

Critics of Government policy could be found inside Downing Street as well as outside. Some of Thatcher's closest advisors were sceptical that the islands were worth the fight with John Hoskyns, David Wolfson and Alan Waters, all staunch Thatcherites, persistently lobbying her to strike for a diplomatic deal with Argentina.

Outside Number 10, junior ministers Tim Raison and Ken Clarke as well as Stephen Dorrell and Chris Patten were also expressing alarm; Dorrell for one saying he would only support the Task Force as a negotiating measure - and advocating a withdrawal if the military Junta in Argentina refused to negotiate.

All this only accentuated an important effect of the war, driving the Prime Minister ever deeper into the heart of the government machine where only a handful of her most senior ministers and officials could follow.

On Tuesday, April 6, four days after the Argentine invasion, Thatcher met with former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, seeking his advice on handling the looming conflict. While there was no official minute of the meeting, Thatcher's own note survives. It references the now famous advice from Macmillan not to have Chancellor Geoffrey Howe in her War Cabinet so that money would not be an issue in making military decisions, and also details his counsel on handling war correspondents – essentially to restrict, if not censor them, as much as possible.

However, as the situation in the South Atlantic worsened in the face of Argentine intransigence and fighting began, wider Conservative and opposition support eventually began to fall in place behind the Prime Minister.

Critics remained, however, and the archive for 1982 contains sharp exchanges with Archbishop of Westminster Cardinal Hume, who challenged the morality of the Government's action, and even Astronomer Royal Martin Ryle, who described the occupation as a 'relatively minor event' – a view tersely rebutted by Thatcher.

The personal sadness she felt at the loss of life during the Falklands War is reflected in the keeping of notes such as the slip of paper handed to her on June 12, relaying that HMS Glamorgan had been hit by an Exocet missile, with casualties at that point unknown. Elsewhere, the archive records instances of the Prime Minister anxiously awaiting news and reading long into the early hours of the morning as losses mounted and the British and Argentine forces traded heavy blows.

News that the Argentinians had surrendered came in a call from Fleet Command at Northwood at 9pm on Monday, June 14. The Thatcher Archives has her notes on the call, as well as her annotated copy of John Nott's celebrated earlier statement announcing the recapture of South Georgia, nearly two months earlier on April 25.

The 'Falklands Factor' famously led to a huge post-war boost in the Prime Minister's own popularity rating, as well as the Government's. She connected the conflict to domestic issues, asking in a famous speech 'why does it need a war to bring out our qualities and assert our pride?'

Despite looming large over much of 1982, the Falklands were not the only overseas challenge to the Prime Minister. Thatcher's first big visit after the Falklands War was to Japan, China and Hong Kong. The Chinese leg of the trip was particularly significant as it kicked off the long negotiation on the return of Hong Kong to China.

The archives reveal something of the vast preparation she personally undertook for the visit to the Far East, especially China. She felt obliged to examine every detail of the trip, wary of the symbolism of each visit and determined to make a powerful impression at every point.

Among the papers at Churchill are a list of clothes she was planning to wear, meeting by meeting (all the outfits were given names such as Smoky, Fuchsia and Plum Stars), and the archive also contains details of her outright refusal to lay a wreath at the Monument to Revolutionary Martyrs in Tiananmen Square, despite being advised that many Western heads of government had recently done so. She simply scrawls 'NO' in capped letters next to the suggestion.

She also spent an astonishing amount of time planning the British return banquet (held in the Great Hall of the People) where she oversaw cutlery arrangements and the silver table settings supplied by the Royal Navy. Ever keen to cut costs, whether in the British economy or domestically, Thatcher also waded in on a ridiculous argument about the cost of the banquet; the PM favouring the cheaper 50 Yuan option but eventually being persuaded to accept the 75 Yuan menu which contained shark's fin and sea slugs.

She also became embroiled in a heated dispute about the possibility of serving jam sandwiches for dessert (considered a treat for foreign visitors). Meriting official discussion with the Foreign Office, Thatcher opted for a fruit salad dessert instead.

Despite the care and attention put into seemingly every aspect of the Far East trip, the archive confirms her meetings with the Chinese leadership did not run smoothly. Papers released this year relate for the first time that Communist Party Chairman Deng Xiaoping threatened to move into Hong Kong before the expiry of the lease in 1997 if there were 'very large and serious disturbances in the next fifteen years', even going so far as to mention HSBC by name as a potential agent of such disturbances.

Away from the seriousness of war and international political wrangling, Thatcher also spent one evening in 1982 in the company of the man behind the world's most famous drag queen – Dame Edna Everage. While not attending in full and glittering regalia, Barry Humphries did give Mrs Thatcher a Dame Edna cooking apron for 'informal lunches at Chequers'. The archive also contains record of an amazing literary dinner at the home of Hugh Thomas where she sat down with Larkin, Spender, Stoppard, Berlin and the like. However, records note that Iris Murdoch and John Le Carre, a grudging admirer, were unable to attend.

For Christmas 1982, the archive also reveals she was sent tapes of Yes, Minister, by the Director-General of the BBC, Alisdair Milne.

ENDS

For more information, please email Stuart Roberts, University of Cambridge Communications Officer at communications@admin.cam.ac.uk or call 01223 764982.

Images available on request, as are interviews with Chris Collins of the Margaret Thatcher Foundation and Andrew Riley of the Churchill Archives Centre.