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## Invisible enemies, wars without winners: when 'khaki elections' fail

Dr James Morrison

Troops on the streets, covert Cobra briefings, terror threat raised to 'critical'. Semantic salami-slicing by security top brass about whether code red means another terrorist attack 'is' or merely 'may be' imminent. Baleful words of defiance from the Downing Street podium about the need to defend 'our values, our country and our way of life'.

Two weeks before polling day, Theresa May and Amber Rudd's politically calculated reply to the carnage in Manchester arguably bore all the symbolism of what Policing the Crisis memorably dubbed 'law and order panic'. From its 'enemy within' rhetoric to its authoritarian actions, the Government's default battle-lines starkly echoed the apocalyptic responses from politicians, judges and law-enforcers that pepper Stuart Hall et al's atomization of an earlier 'crisis' of values, country and way of life – one played out through a distinctly 1970s cocktail of street crime, strikes, protests and (periodic) IRA bombs.

Of course, there is much that is different about the nature of today's marauding 'folk devils' – not least that, compared to the largely specious threat posed by the central bogeymen of Policing the Crisis (black 'muggers'), our latest enemy within, 'radical Islamist terrorism', is real (if also simplistically racialized and, at times, exaggerated). The more 'militarized' nature of the present threat also allows the state and its agencies to conflate law and order and defence under an overarching umbrella of 'security' – both in framing the problem and prescribing policy solutions. Faced with a back-peddling pacifist as her principal rival – one repeatedly (if disingenuously) accused of opposing 'shoot-to-kill' policing on Britain's streets – by the time terrorists struck again, less than two weeks after the Manchester attack, Downing Street's 'strong and stable' incumbent should have made light weight of mobilizing a wave of public scepticism about Jeremy Corbyn's principled, but presentationally opaque, nuances. Indeed, in her fleet-footed move to take ownership of the earlier terror threat upgrade – appropriating the right to announce it from the independent Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) – May had shown every sign of following the Crosby crib-sheet to the letter. Similarly, her swift deployment of battle-clad troops onto Britain's streets symbolized a readiness to revive the 'war on terror' discourse long since publicly abandoned by UK ministers, with the armoured trappings of a state of emergency.

But, for all the 'strong and stable' imagery, Churchillian grand-standing and warnings of dire peril if 'terrorist sympathizer' Corbyn were elected, this was never going to be a clear-cut khaki election. For one thing, the rhetorical devices used to construct one were barely fit for purpose. With the image of May's 'snap election' statement still fresh in voters' minds, and amid criticism of her reluctance to meet ordinary people or debate her fellow leaders, her Number 10 podium now looked to be more protective

barricade than public-facing platform. Even the mediatized 'spectacle' of her dispatches from Cobra seemed more transparently stage-managed than usual – with wider than usual tabloid exposure of the acronym's meaning, 'Cabinet Office Briefing Room A', betraying a level of bureaucratic banality more redolent of Yes, Prime Minister than Graham Greene or Ian Fleming.

More importantly, what marked out the historical Tory khaki triumphs of 1900 and 1983 and the more pyrrhic 1918 win for Lloyd George's controversial coalition was that each played out against recognizable iterations of conventional warfare: with, in turn, fixed bayonets, trench warriors and seaborne taskforces vividly mobilized against ominous, all-too-visible enemies. By contrast, war against Daesh and its adherents – invariably home-grown guerrillas capable of living (and plotting) undetected among us – is a wholly different proposition. Quite apart from the now widely recognized absurdity of waging war on an abstraction – 'terror' – what can victory ever hope to look like against a phantom enemy? And it is victory, above all else – dressed up as military conquest or the mere restoration of law and order – on which success in elections fought on securitized agendas depends.