

## The Falklands Conflict 1982

**The BBC's attempts to provide unbiased reports after Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands in April 1982 caused a storm among Conservatives, from Mrs Thatcher down.**

By David Wilby

The invasion of the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic was the biggest overseas conflict Britain had been involved in since the Suez Crisis of 1956. Within days of the invasion the Managing Director of BBC Television (and Director General designate) Alasdair Milne was warning news and current affairs producers that they might come under pressure to take the government's side similar to those exerted during Suez. He was right.

At first there was the phoney war as the British Task Force set sail for the South Atlantic. The trouble really started when hostilities began. On *Newsnight*, on Sunday 2 May 1982, Peter Snow struck a sceptical note about a report from the Ministry of Defence. "If we believe the British..." he began. Later came another qualification: "the only damage the British admitted."

Casting such doubt upon official sources caused fury on the Conservative benches in the House of Commons. The next day, John Page MP described Snow's comments as "totally offensive and almost treasonable" and although he later admitted his language had been "a little colourful", he still regarded them as unacceptable.

The official BBC response to his complaint was: "In times of hostility, as at all other times, the BBC has to guard its reputation for telling the truth." And the outgoing Director General Sir Ian Trethowan wrote to Mr Page: "Of course the BBC could not be and is not neutral as between our country and the aggressors. But one of the things which distinguishes a democracy like Britain from a dictatorship like Argentina is that our people wish to be told the truth, and can be told it."

That Thursday, 6 May, Margaret Thatcher became involved. Mr Page raised the subject at Prime Minister's Question Time. He asked her if she believed the coverage gave enough support to Britain's forces and their families.

To the 'hear-hear's of Mrs Thatcher's MPs, she told Mr Page: "There are times when it would seem that we and the Argentines are almost being treated as equal. If this is so it does give offence and causes great emotion among many people."

That night the BBC Chairman, George Howard – who had been appointed on the recommendation of Mrs Thatcher – made a speech defending the BBC and insisting that the Corporation was determined "that in war, truth shall not be the first casualty".

He added: "The public is very rightly anxious about the future, and deserves in this democracy to be given as much information as possible. Our reports are believed around the world precisely because of our reputation for telling the truth."

But by now a full-scale row was raging. *The Sun* weighed in the next day with a leader column beginning "There are traitors in our midst." It went on: "What is it but treason to talk on TV, as Peter Snow talked, questioning whether the Government's version of the sea battles was to be believed?"

The *Sun* did not lambast the BBC alone. The *Guardian* and *Daily Mirror* also came under fire – leading a Labour MP to ask whether the *Sun* could be sued for libel. The *Mirror* had its own response. With pictures of a series of jingoistic *Sun* headlines on its front page (like "Gotcha!" and "Stick it up your Junta"), its splash headline simply called its tabloid rival "The Harlot of Fleet Street".

The following week the BBC was back in the firing line. The *Panorama* of Monday 10 May featured critics of the conflict under the title *Can We Avoid War?* Such dissent prompted a furious reaction. Around 300 viewers rang the BBC to complain, while others telephoned Downing Street.

The former Cabinet minister Geoffrey Rippon described it as "one of the most despicable programmes it has ever been my misfortune to witness". Another former minister, Sally Oppenheim, called it an "odious, subversive travesty". And the Foreign Secretary, Francis Pym, told the Commons Foreign Affairs select committee the following day that he was concerned Argentina was winning the propaganda war. He invited viewers to write to the BBC directly to make their views known.

Even *Panorama's* presenter Robert Kee was unhappy. He wrote to *The Times* to complain that he thought the programme had been one-sided. As a result, he was dropped as presenter for the following week and later that month he resigned.

The BBC's Managing Director of Radio, Richard Francis, added to the discontent. On 11 May, in a speech in Madrid to journalists from around the world, he said: "It is not the BBC's role to boost British troops' morale or to rally British people to the flag...The widow in Portsmouth is no different from the widow of Buenos Aires...The BBC needs no lessons in patriotism from the present British Government or any other."

Francis went on to explain the importance of BBC independence:

"When the Argentines claimed in the first raid on Port Stanley airport that they had shot down two Sea Harriers and damaged two more, the British Minister of Defence said none had been hit and the world wondered who was right. But when the BBC's correspondent aboard HMS *Hermes* reported 'I counted the Harriers go out and I counted them all back,' the world believed."

The minister responsible for broadcasting was the Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, who had a reputation for trying to achieve consensus. He suggested talks to clear the air and invited both the Chairman, George Howard, and Alasdair Milne (Trethowan was in the United States) to talk to members of the Conservative backbench media committee, under its chairman Geoffrey Johnson Smith.

If Whitelaw hoped this would take the heat out of the argument, he got it badly wrong. On a hot Westminster night, 122 MPs turned up at a room on the Commons committee corridor and gave the BBC men a roasting. Howard was mopping his brow even before the meeting started. By the end, his handkerchief and shirt were reported to be wringing wet.

He refused the MPs' calls to apologise and tried to tell them about the Corporation's responsibilities to broadcast all shades of opinion. Winston Churchill, the grandson of the wartime Prime Minister, flatly dismissed that argument, saying: "We did not see fit to give equal time to the Goebbels propaganda machine."

The sound of barracking that evening was heard far down the committee corridor. One eye-witness told a reporter: "There is blood and entrails all over the place." The former Sports Minister Hector Monro said: "It was the roughest meeting I have ever attended in all my years as an MP."

When Trethowan arrived back in Britain, he decided to face MPs again at another meeting the following week. This time fewer attended and the atmosphere was less febrile. Trethowan tried to persuade them the BBC was not neutral, but was doing its job.

And back at the BBC he told news and current affairs executives that they had to be "sensitive to the emotional sensibilities of the public".

By that time the uncertainties surrounding Britain's retaking of the islands were starting to lift. Footage from the conflict began to arrive back in Britain. The success of the operation gripped the country and raised morale, and the BBC's patriotism in the conflict was not questioned again.