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The defence and security review need not be a disaster

By focusing on reshaping Whitehall so it can manage the new 21st-century security economy, the review could still come good

Tim Cross and Nigel Hall
guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 5 October 2010 12.59 BST
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A leaked letter from Liam Fox, right, revealed the defence secretary's displeasure at the prospect of 'draconian' cuts. Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/AFP/Getty Images

It was proving impossible even before [Liam Fox's letter](#) to the prime minister to find a single security commentator who was positive about the [strategic defence and security review \(SDSR\)](#) process. Many say that it has exceeded their most pessimistic expectations, and the unanimous view is that it has been driven by cuts, not policy; that it has been rushed; and that it has been anything but strategic. All in all, it is clear that the coalition government will struggle to take the nation with it next month when it publishes its SDSR and announces very painful cuts. What can be done?

Given our dire financial predicament, with the worst debt in our peacetime history, and the inevitable emotions generated within beloved armed services as our youth sacrifice life and limb in grim historically familiar battlefields, this SDSR was always going to be a challenge. But while it still could be the disaster many expect, if the coalition government gets strategic and puts the right person in charge of the all-important delivery stage, and radically adapts Whitehall in order to better manage the new 21st-century security economy, the review could still come good.

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Most people understand that we face increasing uncertainty and complex security risks. But not everyone has grasped that the top security priority is the need to ensure a prospering 21st-century economy to pay for our security in an ever more interconnected and interdependent world. It is important to reiterate that this review is not just about defence. It is about our overall security, and it requires strategic and coherent direction and management across the whole security economy. It must therefore go deeper and wider than we have experienced for generations.

If an equivalent review had been conducted a few years ago, we might have avoided much of the appalling overspends and incoherence across the defence equipment programme run up by the last government and invested in more of the right military and civilian 21st-century capabilities. The bottom line now is that we have to take even bigger hits in some defence programmes in order to achieve a better balance across the new, broader security environment. It is time for strong UK strategic leadership; leadership to ensure we get ahead of the pack.

Once we get over the inevitable Trident, aircraft carriers, aircraft, and tanks emotional hiatus, the coalition will therefore need to demonstrate that it is the Whitehall central government machine itself which needs changing. This is centre of gravity and a big-hitting senior and respected figure of stature will need to be brought into the cabinet to implement the SDSR and deliver the whole-of-government changes required.

High-level ownership of SDSR implementation and its development by this heavyweight, on behalf of the prime minister and the National Security Council, is critical – critical to set the right priorities and bang heads together; critical to conduct rigorous stress testing; and critical to get the Whitehall barons focused on the wider interest. Whitehall needs much better risk and situation awareness, enhanced scientific and research underpinning, a savvier balancing of soft and hard power instruments and resources, and significantly more agility and adaptability across departments, decision-making bodies, and force structures – particularly in the military and emergency services, most importantly the police.

Three key issues will need tackling:

First, a body of eminent radical thinkers should review recent leadership, principally in the MOD at secretary of state, senior official and senior military levels, and assess the decision-making processes applied since the Falklands war. This will be resisted, but it is essential if we are to learn lessons from the recent gross mismanagement of defence. This would complement the work of the Defence Reform Unit headed by Peter Levine, which is already heavily loaded.

Second, research, innovation, and education directly associated with a prospering 21st-century security economy must become "winners", and be better funded and directed. It cannot, for example, be right for the business secretary to be headlining "Research: More for Less" as he did in a recent keynote speech. The marked decline in UK research spending and filed patents are important strategic indicators of our future security. To counter this, a percentage target of gross domestic product should be set for research, innovation and education, akin to the cold war defence spending target.

Third, and notwithstanding many encouraging cyber-security developments, we need to channel effort and resources into combating cyber-crime. The internet is now the medium in which and through which most of our daily life takes place. A major disruption would quickly undermine the fabric of the nation and lead to serious unrest. E-crime is big and growing, already costing up to £40bn a year in the UK. Our cyberspace must be made more secure if we are to retain economic advantage, and we certainly need a civilian command and control system as robust as the military's to ensure it. Clarity over who has

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overarching responsibility for cyber-security is essential.

Other security priorities include delivering overdue operational and economic efficiencies across the police, and striking the right balance of effort and resources between the regional- and national-level organised crime and counterterrorism activities and local level policing soon to be placed under the aegis of the newly established [Police and Crime Commissioners](#). We must reinforce our ability to take on the 30,000 people already engaged in organised crime, and we must enhance our high-impact event emergency services extremis capabilities with a reserve cadre and mutual aid agreements with key European allies.

If the outputs of the SDSR are to stand any chance of success, the coalition government must get truly strategic. With the right person in charge it must put its own house, Whitehall, in order, and deliver the radical change necessary. The nation will only support painful cuts for the right, forward-looking strategy and associated priorities. It won't support an incoherent bottom-up cuts exercise.

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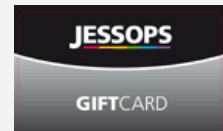
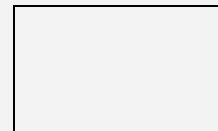
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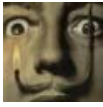
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Horrendous overspends, wildly inaccurate projections and disasterous planning seems to be the norm in the MOD.

Reduce the project time lines, get rid of whole batalions of desk bound Colonel Jobsworths and the country's deficit will drop hugely- instantly.

Even more importantly lives on the frontline may be saved instead of being lost at the hands of the bungling Colonel Blimps

alex13

5 October 2010 1:32PM

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The nations defence forces should be just that, a defence incase some one decides to invade this land. When we go in to this and that land on the premise that we are getting rid of despots we look like hypocrites, why have we not gone into somalia or Zimbabwe for instance. We spend more per capita on defence than most other nations and we have to get it into the public mindset that we are not the big boys that some like to think. The great irony is that being an island we have an easier defence job. We can not afford to keep a massive military and there are a lot of ways we could cut down, a massive reservist force as an example. We do have to send units for UN peace keeping but I do not see why we do not send units at the same level as the Germans. We should keep our defence forces at the same level as our European neighbours not like we are some type of military super power, we are not any more and its not really something to be proud of.

AdvanceBritannia

5 October 2010 1:37PM

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Blimey, a defence article in the Guardian without an agenda! Refreshing.

It is obvious we no longer need a fleet of 400 aircraft or 350 tanks awaiting the Soviets, that much is plain to those of us who are strong minded on defence though unlike Simon Jenkins thinking we do still need them!

I for one hope at least one carrier gets the go ahead, it is only a blue water navy that allows this country independence of action. If we butcher our armed forces for the sake of a war we're trying to get out of all we'll end up with is a counter insurgency army that will fight other countries wars in far off dusty places.

At least the navy provides DEFENCE of our interests without putting boots on the ground in someone elses backyard.

tonyp1

5 October 2010 1:46PM

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The worrying thing about this article is that there is no mention at all of what the actual threats are going to be, and hence no specifics about what kind of resources, materials, training, staff, strategies and hardware the country will need. It then follows that it is also impossible to know how much future defence will cost or what the operational requirements will be.

The lack of transparency suggests to me that those in the know might be thinking of fighting more wars in the future - wars for resources, such as water, fossil fuels etc - but looking to use virtual, cyber, biological, chemical and automated means to do so, wherever possible.

If we had the will and mechanisms to negotiate peaceful international relations, we wouldn't need to spend such vast amounts of money in competitive struggle with rivals and we wouldn't cause so much misery and dissention by invading vulnerable countries.

Why do we not use our financial and human resources to promote co-operation rather than conflict?

[EUoverking](#)

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 5 October 2010 1:50PM

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I would police the borders, and fund deportations.

In the long run it will save money, and it will certainly increase security for years to come.

No point having a large navy, if the enemy can still enter the country.



[ArbutnotPedant](#)

5 October 2010 2:11PM

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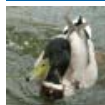
What is the military utility of Trident?

Did I hear Cameron say on the Today programme this morning that "Trident is safe" ?

If this was a proper Strategic Defence Review, it would be able to identify what is the threat against which Trident is a deterrent.

If there is such a threat, will it arise so instantaneously that it needs one of the four submarines at sea all the time.

There is plenty of money to be saved by not committing to a like-for-like replacement of Trident



[Vraaak](#)

5 October 2010 2:29PM

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" The marked decline in UK research spending and filed patents are important strategic indicators of our future security. "

Meanwhile, funnily enough, since the Tories got in, the defence industry has been on a recruitment drive.

So if you're fed up working long hours in a university and having your ideas nicked while some other git takes the credit, you can go and work somewhere where everything you come up with remains a secret. And the impact statements write themselves.

The downside is it involves finding new ways to kill people, bearing in mind there might after all be a God.

[HelenWilsonMK](#)

5 October 2010 2:32PM

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Let cut through the Tory lies when it comes to defence spending.

The most the last Labour government ever spent on defence was 3.04% of GDP and averaged 2.6 %. while the last Tory governments since the end of the cold war spent between 4.18% & 3.18% of GDP.

Fox keeps on saying defence spending was out of control under Labour yet Tories have spent more in less challenging times.

[JeepersCreepers](#)

5 October 2010 2:34PM

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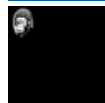
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Britain is on the cusp of a defence dilemma. We can no longer afford the level of armed forces we currently have. Although some, not me, think spending more is essential to preserve national security, in reality if we spend too much we damage national security as we weaken the rest of the economy and public services. The Soviet Union fell apart because it spent too much on the military, the US nearly bankrupted itself in the 1960s for the same reason and had to cause a major global economic shock under Nixon to escape. The UK has the third largest defence budget in the world - seriously, can someone explain why.

All three of the recommendations in this article are essentially technical - we need

better leadership, more research and more cyber-crime capability. These sound clever, but in reality I think the UK needs to invest more in its alliances and network of international co-operation to share the burden of collective international security. As well as reducing costs, it will clearly enhance national security if there is a collaborative like minded nation response to cyber-crime and appropriate research into military technology, rather than the over-expensive isolationist approach recommended in this article.



DerKleinePrinz

5 October 2010 3:11PM

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If we had a united European Defence Force with the French, Dutch, Germans etc.. defence spending would be a fraction of the current costs.

It would also make us less likely to jump into pointless wars and facilitate further co-operative investments into research and development (Eurofighter serves as an example). The best form of defence for Europe is to distance itself from US foreign policy, and a joint European armed forces would allow us to do this whilst ensuring military strength and independent, European decision-making in international affairs.



bobemax

5 October 2010 3:28PM

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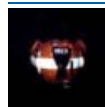
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This coalition government have a lot to prove in the face of the pessimistic forecasting of the "destroy Britain brigade".

This government will not put policies in place that will alienate it from the electorate, or damage its chances of being re-elected in five years time.

Labour, with its retrospective wisdom, desperately want this government to slow down on the changes it's making, because they know that once the governments policy changes take effect, the country will recognise the benefits.



bailliegillies

5 October 2010 3:43PM

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A proper review of our defence needs is long overdue and needs to reflect our economic reality, our place in Europe and the world and whether or not we can afford to be the empire's attack poodle.

I don't want to see the country defenceless, neither do I want to see it spending unnecessary resources and losing unnecessary lives for someone else's wars of choice. I accept there will be situations where we will have to project power to defend the country but I don't see how any of the wars of the 21st century have benefited this country, or made it any safer.

The primary responsibility of the armed forces should be the protection of the United Kingdom and its European allies secondary and where necessary acting as peacekeepers for the UN and not participating in wars against phantasms that only exist in the minds of the fearmongers.

We need forces that are mobile and adaptable, with good, reliable and practical equipment and not managerial, future wish lists aka star wars fantasy weapons. I'm not against having nuclear weapons so long as there are others out there that possess them but think that Trident is a Boy's Toy too expensive for our current needs now that the threat from the Soviet Union is gone.

We need to ask ourselves who and what is the future risk, how will they get here and what weapons will they use and what means of transport will they use. Will they come in small groups or full strength, will they be national or other and will they establish fifth columns amongst our own dissatisfied population.

I think that the future face of warfare is going to change as it becomes too expensive in lives and resources and weapons become more destructive. Al Qaeda and other disaffected groups around the world are likely to be the future shape of war, whether for their own profit or for someone else's.

globalgypsy

5 October 2010 3:58PM

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I think it would be possible to save quite a few quid, if defence spending were just used for, you know... Defence.

Not for starting wars. Especially, not for starting expensive, disastrous and illegal wars on the instructions of our special relation across the pond.



[blusterless](#)

5 October 2010 4:01PM

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The Falklands was probably defence (but argueably unnecessary) whereas Iraq and Afghanistan are offence and possibly Iran will be offence. By all means spend money on defence but cease offensive activities. Pruning standards of living (the welfare state) to finance the military is a slimy action that has been carried out by every tinpot military dictator in history.

"Forward" he cried (from the rear) and the front rank died.



[aaardvark111](#)

5 October 2010 5:16PM

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The public is being played here. Liam Fox's leak, the comments from the generals, support for the aircraft carriers from the Lib Dems and SNP. It's all setting us up for the announcements that cuts to defence will be minimal. Defence cuts are one line the Tories dare not cross, even as they slash and burn everything else.



[Atavism](#)

5 October 2010 5:20PM

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I'm amazed - an op/ed that doesn't say "Scrap Trident, and aircraft carriers and disband the military and then we can dance in Meadows while butterflies plait our hair".

Thanks for allowing someone to dare to say we need an active defence.

We also need an active cyber-defence. China is probing us on a daily basis.



[Saintslad](#)

5 October 2010 5:36PM

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Ah, strategy. Not something that the UK has ever knowingly done since 1945. As the author's tried to point out, this isn't about tanks, aircraft carriers or jet planes, it's about how, where and why we want to engage with the world.

Add in the fact that the Cabinet-based, collegiate government we "want" promotes back-biting, inter-cine warfare (cf Brown vs the rest of the Labour party) and silo thinking. To remove this, and hence have "joined up" strategic thinking across Government, involves a loss of power for lots of people, and thus is as likely as pigs flying.



[Thinklikethewolf](#)

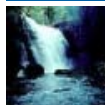
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Many of the comments here have covered the biggest issue - that of where the UK sees its place in the world. I suspect that the SDSR will not set out where the UK sees itself in the world in the next few decades beyond the cliché of 'punching above our weight'. But we don't really know what our weight is any more and therefore we can not be sure what we need to spend to ensure that we punch above it. If we could answer the question of what our interests are, perhaps then we could answer the question of what we need to spend to look after them.



Spoutwell
5 October 2010 7:55PM

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Its more realistic to tell the US to buy its own aircraft carrier and have a part-time militia like the Swiss do.



boonery
5 October 2010 8:05PM

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"to better manage the new 21st-century security economy...the right military and civilian 21st-century capabilities.... the bottom line nowhigh-level ownership of SDSR implementation rigorous stress testing...robust ... the outputs... forward-looking strategy..."

Is this generals pretending to be middle managers, or middle managers pretending to be generals? Either way, it's not surprising the military is in a mess if this is the level of incoherence at the top.



EACLucifer
5 October 2010 8:12PM

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@ Spoutwell

Switzerland doesn't rely on a militia for defence. It relies on the fact that an attack on neutral Switzerland would result in other powers defending Switzerland. It means they can rather limit their own defence spending, but not every country can do that. In effect countries like Switzerland rely on other countries spending money to protect them.



pietroilpittore
5 October 2010 8:48PM

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blusterless

The falklands was probably defence (but argueably unnecessary)

You do realise that this statement puts you firmly into the fruitcake brigade, don't you?

"Probably defence". Sure, we'd all noticed the incessant British attacks on Argentina before poor peace-loving democratic Galtieri was forced, against his will, to respond.



Saintslad
5 October 2010 9:00PM

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To those who quote Switzerland as the way forward, I'd say great. Where are you going to allow me to put my compulsory automatic rifle/carbine. Just wondering....



Celtiberico
5 October 2010 9:25PM

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Speaking as a disinterested citizen of a neutral state, I think Britain needs to own up to the fact that it is simply too small not to integrate its military completely, especially in terms of shared equipment and maximising interoperability for reasons of economy of scale. Whether that is done by forming a bloc together with the US, Canada, Australia etc., or by buying into a Common European Defence I am agnostic about, but as it stands British defence policies come across as straddling both camps without fully committing to either (which strikes me as decidedly unwise). Splendid Isolation would only work if the British decided to devote defence spending to an genuinely independent nuclear deterrent backed up by a Coastguard and purely local army - ie, Switzerland or Sweden plus nukes.



EACLucifer

5 October 2010 9:35PM

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@ Celtiberico

Britain is firstly massively larger than Switzerland or Sweden, and secondly not only is Britain not comparable to Switzerland or Sweden, Switzerland and Sweden are not comparable to eachother.

Sweden has a cutting edge armed forces with a current focus on expeditionary capability. They have troops in Afghanistan, there own design IFVs, Fighter Jets and were - for a while - one of the world leaders in stealth ships.

Switzerland has a national militia and the expectation other people will get them out of trouble.



aurlius

6 October 2010 2:19AM

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Why does Britain feel she needs this stuff?

Where's the conventional military threat? Why do you want to project your power (is that Phil the Power?) around the globe?

You might find that if you don't f*** with other people they won't f*** with you.

Save all that Defence(?) budget on improving life for all on your little island.



ThePrompter

6 October 2010 7:19AM

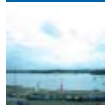
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"The defence and security review need not be a disaster"

No, but given the track record over the past couple of days from this chaotic bunch of idiots in joined-up thinking, it probably will be.



JJ139

6 October 2010 7:44AM

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How much could be saved by merging the army, air force and navy into one force? How much is triplicated by this outdated division into different services? Might be a good starting point for making huge savings.



Fumblebuck

6 October 2010 1:09PM

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Tim Cross and Nigel Hall

...a big-hitting senior and respected figure of stature will need to be brought into the cabinet to implement the SDSR and deliver the whole-of-government changes required.

Hey, they could ennoble Blair and get him in to do it! After all, he's made such a good job of bringing us [peace in the Middle East](#), hasn't he?

Oh, hang on...

...a big-hitting senior and respected figure

Bugger.



Fumblebuck

6 October 2010 1:18PM

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tonyp1
5 October 2010 1:46PM
...Why do we not use our financial and human resources to promote co-operation rather than conflict?

It's easier to fight than to co-operate.

Fumblebuck
6 October 2010 1:29PM

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tonyp1
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..The lack of transparency suggests to me that those in the know might be thinking of fighting more wars in the future - wars for resources, such as water, fossil fuels etc - but looking to use virtual, cyber, biological, chemical and automated means to do so, wherever possible.

I am convinced that deep in the bowels of the MoD, senior mandarins and policy wonks have been discussing for *many* years a possible (likely?) future of resources shortages (energy, water, minerals etc.) and climate-change dislocation, and how best to insulate the UK and/or grab the UK's share. Our politicians have realised this for a few years, as shown by [John Reid's 2006 speech](#), whilst the Pentagon has been pondering such a future for even longer.

The UK is fortunate - we're an island. If the world turns nastier, we can pull up the drawbridge. Having an effective military (and yes, nuclear weapons) may be vital if such a world comes to pass.

I hope it doesn't, but I suspect that deep down, that is what is being planned for.

Celtiberico
6 October 2010 3:34PM

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Sweden has a cutting edge armed forces with a current focus on expeditionary capability. They have troops in Afghanistan, there own design IFVs, Fighter Jets and were - for a while - one of the world leaders in stealth ships.

Yes, but I doubt that they would have bothered with the Viggens, S-tanks etc. if they had had nukes. The point I'm trying to make is that given the limited financial resources available, the UK can only keep Trident if it is prepared to treat all other services as Cinderellas, and that seems to me to make sense only if the British withdraw to 'splendid isolation', as alignment to either a European army or simply the NATO status quo requires the British army being in a position to provide an expeditionary force - and one that really should be properly equipped. I think it is frankly immoral to send off troops who have to beg and borrow essential material from the Americans.

So you can really choose between properly-armed and equipped conventional forces, relying on the US (or conceivably, EU) nuclear umbrella in return for participation in various inter-Allied conflicts, or alternatively, chucking out your Army (and quite possibly much of the Air Force, surface ships etc.) in order to hang on to the nukes.

Markss
6 October 2010 4:28PM

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Countries with the smallest military spending seem to be the safest eg Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Belgium etc etc - not to mention Costa Rica who abolished their military several decades ago and haven't been invaded or targeted by terrorists yet.

The more threatening a country appears the more vulnerable to attack.

obscure
6 October 2010 5:23PM

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Countries with the smallest military spending seem to be the safest eg Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Belgium etc etc - not to mention Costa Rica who abolished their military several decades ago and haven't been invaded or targeted by terrorists yet.

The more threatening a country appears the more vulnerable to attack.

Belgium was pretty unthreatening in 1940, but history suggests it didn't make them very safe.



Celtiberico

6 October 2010 9:54PM

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Belgium was pretty unthreatening in 1940, but history suggests it didn't make them very safe.

Well, geopolitics were rather different then. Mind you, the Belgians - and Dutch, Danes, Norwegians - conspicuously failed to read that geopolitical situation at the time. The Belgian Government's best chance of avoiding conquest would arguably would be to remain formal allies of the British & French rather than trusting in the goodwill of the Nazis (tho they were not alone in thinking they could avoid unpleasantness by staying formally neutral - indeed, the US fell for the same temptation).



BeSeenButNotHeard

6 October 2010 10:34PM

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