CHAPTER SEVEN

WAR SECRETARIES AND THEIR COMMANDERS-IN-CHIEF: SOUTH AFRICA, PROFESSIONAL RIVALRIES, AND THE POLITICS OF REFORM

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When Great Britain went to war with the South African Republics in October 1899, the War Office and the government were certain that they knew what they were getting the country into. The British had a century of experience in dealing with the Boers, and only two decades before they had fought a war against Transvaal commandos. Britain sued for peace in that war, but came out of it with a seemingly healthier respect for their ex-foes. By the end of the century, however, that view had been altered by Britain's imperial successes and the development of a highly professional army. The common opinion was that the Boers had become soft in the last two decades, the victims of population growth, state development, and a realignment of interests toward exploiting the gold riches of the Rand. Matched against such a foe in the next conflict, British military officials could not fathom another loss.

Underscoring this opinion was Britain’s very reasonable method of military administration. Ultimately, the army answered to Parliament via the secretary of state for war, and such an arrangement was the only viable option in a modern democracy. Although the mechanics of administration and the nature of the civil-military relationship had changed over time, the fact that the state was able to analyze its methods and mold them when necessary spoke to the overall success of the system. Hindsight points out that even as the structure was tweaked in the years leading to the South African War by those quite impressed with the soundness of their ideas, it failed to serve the nation and the army in the way imagined.

The two Commanders-in-Chief during this period, Lords Wolseley and Roberts, made a concerted effort to convince the government of the need for an alteration in the administrative structure. Both believed that the answer to Britain’s military shortcomings was to place ultimate military control into the hands of the Commander-in-Chief. Doing so
would enable the forces to be commanded by an expert, rather than a
civilian whose experience with military affairs was limited to his tenure
at the War Office. Britain’s war in South Africa did indeed result in a
re-shaping of the administrative system into a model truly designed to
operate in a major international conflict. What prevailed, however, was
not victory for Horse Guards, but rather ultimate civilian control.

The government also should have understood the Boer mindset.
Britain’s history in South Africa was underscored by an ongoing conflict
with an Afrikaner desire for sovereignty. The Transvaal had come to
embody Afrikaner nationalism, a view the state’s military victory in 1881
served to reinforce. In the second half of the 1890s, as the Jamieson Raid
had defined more clearly Britain’s attitude toward the South African
Republic, Lord Salisbury’s Unionist administration sought to negoti-
ate with the Boers from a position of strength. The Unionists believed
Anglo-Transvaal relations had been bungled in the past because the
Liberals were not willing to stand up to the Boers. Just as they were
afraid of military spending, so too were they afraid of applying effective
political pressure—the kind backed by force.

Salisbury’s government failed to see the entire picture, however. The
potential for conflict in the present crisis was great and more should
have been done to ready the nation for it. Yet these politicians, as
skilled as Salisbury and his ministers may have been in other mat-
ters, approached the possibility of armed conflict with the small-scale
campaign mentality that had worked so well in the Victorian Era and
did not see the necessity of planning for possible large-scale operations.
In other words, both the British government and the army prepared to
fight the last war even if the impending conflict involved new opera-
tional and strategic considerations.¹

Most of Salisbury’s government showed little concern for the develop-
ning South African crisis. The unpopularity of defense costs (except
when they pertained to the navy) kept most ministers’ minds well away
from War Office planning. The post of war secretary was a thankless
job, performed in a horrid jumble of buildings in Pall Mall. William
Fremantle St. John Brodrick, Secretary for War between 1900 and
1903, agreed with Lord Salisbury that to be a government minister in

¹ See Brian Bond, The Victorian Army and the Staff College 1854–1914 (London:
Eyre Methuen, 1972), Chaps. 1–5.