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## **"Rishi's D-Day Disaster": authority, leadership and British military commemoration**

**Natalie Jester, University of Gloucestershire**

On 6 June 1944, allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy, in an attempt to repel the Nazis in the largest ever seaborne invasion. This has come to be known as D-Day and holds great historical significance in western Europe. On 22 May 2024, Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak called a General Election for early July, with D-Day commemoration events taking place on 6 June. The international ceremony was attended by world leaders including Emmanuel Macron (France) and Joe Biden (the United States) but Sunak was missing, offering Foreign Minister David Cameron as a replacement. Labour leader Keir Starmer was present for many events.

The result was outrage and bafflement from the British press: what significance does this hold? [Laura Shepherd](#) has argued that, in contexts of war and the military, leadership becomes a key focus. Specifically, those in charge often come to be portrayed as "figures of authority," with a stoical form of masculinity seen to best embody leadership. This is mirrored by press coverage of D-Day, where four elements stand out for both Sunak and Starmer as "figures of authority," or not: decision-making, patriotism, duty, and global relationships.

Firstly, Sunak's judgement is directly called into question. Military leaders are in "[disbelief](#)" about his choice, while coverage abounds of [Sunak](#) and his [cabinet members](#) calling it a "mistake." Whilst Sunak had been absent, Starmer was himself present at many D-Day events, with press coverage not only discussing his presence but dedicating space to [his words](#): "'For me there was only one choice, which was to be there,' Sir Keir said." He is shown to be a politician who makes good decisions, on this issue at least. Ultimately, this is arguably a representation of the respective politicians' ability to make decisions in leading the country. With the Prime Minister holding key decision-making power over the armed forces, poor choices in the D-Day context would have looked especially negative.

[Joseph Haigh](#) argues that commemoration events for the World Wars are an important element of British national identity specifically. As a Daily Mail [article](#) tells us, "D-Day is engraved on our national DNA," suggesting that Sunak is unpatriotic in non-attendance. Perhaps predictably, [some of the coverage](#) quoted Reform Party leader Nigel Farage, "I think the one thing people have always associated the Conservative Party with is being basically patriotic. It is led by a man who very clearly isn't." Representations of patriotism often imply whiteness in various ways, though this is typically indirect within media reporting. One [Telegraph article](#), that puts this more obviously, quotes a reader: "The historian David Starkey was criticised for saying Sunak wasn't 'grounded in our culture' but this proves he was correct. How could anyone vote Tory after this?" In stating that Sunak is divorced from "our culture" he is represented as not really British.

Duty – or lack thereof – is key within this reporting. As coverage of D-Day events continued, it emerged that the Conservative party had actually chosen the date and time of the ITV interview. Sunak has previously been [accused of vanity](#), an implicit charge often levelled at female politicians through a focus on their clothing. The interview added fuel to the argument that Sunak cared more about a television appearance than honouring WW2 veterans at what might be their last event. In a context of broader themes of military self-sacrifice, this revelation was damaging. Even the right-wing press covered Labour's assertions that this was an abandonment of duty, with [one headline stating](#) "Labour accuses Sunak of 'dereliction of duty' after he left D-Day service early for TV interview." In taking Sunak to task, Labour is represented as understanding what duty means.

With Sunak missing, Starmer was photographed warmly smiling and shaking hands with the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. The result was an image of Starmer as someone who is globally connected and fosters international relationships, including with those who understand the pains of war personally. Whilst the leaders of key global powers took their place, in Sunak's absence Britain was not represented at the very highest level. For a country that still considers itself to be a great power, this was perhaps seen as a misstep.

What kind of impact might this coverage have had at the polls? We cannot be certain, but it likely proved damaging in the eyes of the Conservatives' traditional voters. One Telegraph headline asked: ["How could anyone vote Tory after this?"](#) With a poll of 35,000 people in the same article finding that 81% of people believed Sunak was wrong to leave early. This matters because [ever more people are reading their news online](#), so a large number of people will have read these stories. Indeed, a [YouGov news tracker](#) found that more people had seen news about Sunak's D-Day absence than they had coverage of the European Football Championship. Overall, even in the right-wing press, coverage both presented Sunak poorly and Starmer well, in an area of importance for right-leaning voters. As a result, this is likely to have further damaged the Conservative party at a time when they were already losing support.

The final edited version of this article can be found here (p75): [electionanalysis.uk](http://electionanalysis.uk)