



REUTERS  
INSTITUTE for the  
STUDY of  
JOURNALISM

**Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper**  
**University of Oxford**

**REPORTING AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ: MEDIA,  
MILITARY AND GOVERNMENTS AND HOW THEY  
INFLUENCE EACH OTHER**

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Trinity Term 2011

Sponsor: Australian Broadcasting Corporation

## Acknowledgments

At the foot of an elegant staircase in the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University is an arresting sight: a very large book, spanning about a metre from top to toe. There's another of the same ultra-large size at the top of the stairs, two flights up on the landing, leading to the room where I did some of the research for this paper. I came to know those two large books quite well: they are eloquent memorials to Reuters staff and contractors killed doing their jobs, covering wars and conflicts around the world. Eight were killed in Iraq and Afghanistan between September 2001 and July 2011. Those books are also to found at the headquarters of Thomson Reuters at Canary Wharf in London.

In a long career I've been fortunate to have the opportunity to report on a range of coups, revolutions, insurrections and full-scale wars, though thankfully, mostly from a distance. Without the support of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australia's most respected broadcaster and web producer, this would not have been possible. As executive producer of Australia's leading international television current affairs program, *Foreign Correspondent*, I made many decisions about covering conflicts, what approaches to take, who to send and what to ask of them, always bearing in mind the obvious – that there is nothing useful about a correspondent or camera operator who is dead or maimed.

Too many international colleagues have died in Afghanistan and Iraq and more recently in Libya, and we honour their sacrifice. Bearing witness to war is a dangerous business, not to mention extremely expensive. Yet serious news organisations are obliged to find ways to give their audiences the clearest, most truthful accounts possible of why people fight and die. As an ABC foreign correspondent and as a producer I didn't always come to the right decisions; this fellowship at the RISJ has been part of the process of learning and reflecting. I'm indebted to the ABC for its commitment to serious journalism and for the opportunity to join a long line of distinguished colleagues at Oxford under a scheme which bears the name of a former ABC Chairman, Donald McDonald.

My thanks to all the staff of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, particularly the Head of the Journalism Fellowship program, James Painter, who supervised this research. Also to Dr David Levy, Director of the RISJ and John Lloyd, Director of Journalism who have created the intellectual environment which flourishes in the institution. The hard graft of keeping the RISJ functioning is managed by an impressive quartet: Sara Kalim, Alex Reid, Kate Hanneford-Smith and, until recently, Amanda Armstrong. Sir Rodric Braithwaite, former UK Ambassador to the Soviet Union and author of a compelling book, *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-1989*, gave me much to think about, as did my fellow students from all parts of the world.

Finally, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my family for being supportive of this sabbatical. In truth a short stint at Oxford was, in part, a way of trying to keep up with my young adults who are powering through their tertiary studies and with my academically gifted spouse whose editing skills have erased many sins over decades.

## Contents

Introduction .....	4
Chapter 1: Winning the wars, losing the peace .....	6
Chapter 2: Critical turning points in reporting the wars.....	17
Chapter 3: Generals, politicians, diplomats – using the media .....	33
Chapter 4: Killing Osama Bin Laden and the long goodbye: ending NATO’s combat role in Afghanistan in 2014 .....	41
Chapter 5: Observations and conclusions.....	47
Greg Wilesmith interviews.....	60
Bibliography .....	60

## Introduction

Osama bin Laden's heavy-lidded eyes loomed out of the screen to which I'd awoken. It was day one of serious work on this paper and the United States and its allies were crowing over the news of his killing in Pakistan as an extraordinary breakthrough in the war against terrorism and, optimistically, as a critical step towards US and NATO forces disengaging from Afghanistan.

Having rightly surrendered media time and space in the early months of 2011 to newer, sexier conflicts in Egypt, Libya and Syria, the war in Afghanistan had re-emerged the previous week. There'd been a reprise of *The Great Escape* as 475 Taliban prisoners had fled from a Kabul prison through a tunnel dug from the outside in. Within days, not coincidentally, the Taliban declared the start of their annual spring offensive. And from Washington DC it was confirmed that General David Petraeus, architect of 'the surge' in Iraq and in modified form in Afghanistan, was to become not America's top soldier but America's most important spy, head of the Central Intelligence Agency. Since it is the CIA which is directing many of the lethal drone strikes against al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in Pakistan, while simultaneously negotiating talks with Taliban and other insurgent groups in Afghanistan, perhaps this is good casting.

The varying and contradictory accounts of the circumstances of Osama bin Laden's death, the discovery of a vast array of intelligence about al Qaeda's plans and ambitions, the embarrassment of Pakistan's government, military and intelligence services, and the predictable spate of revenge bombings and massacres all help to frame this paper's assessment of an extraordinarily violent decade beginning in September 2001.

While Afghanistan is the current 'hot' war with 140,000 troops under the NATO banner, Iraq remains far from peace. The United States maintains 33,000 troops there as military trainers and as a back-up strike force for a still relatively feeble Iraqi government. Insurgents are still bombing and maiming civilians. So concerned is the United States that Iraq could again spiral into chaos that it has tried to engineer a request from the government in Baghdad to delay the departure of some of those forces. However the Iraq government has unable to provide a guarantee of immunity against prosecution for US forces so almost all will leave by December, 2011.

Much has been written and spoken about the circumstances in which the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and their allies went to war in Iraq to counter the perceived threat of weapons of mass destruction and the 'sexing up' of intelligence documents relating to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and linking Saddam Hussein's regime with al Qaeda.

This paper will not spend undue time traversing that much-trampled ground, which in any case is the subject of a far-reaching inquiry in the UK headed by Sir John Chilcott. It's

expected to report by the end of 2011. However, it is germane to this paper to show that that the belief in the public mind, particularly in the United States, that Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was linked to al Qaeda and with the 9/11 attacks, was a key factor in influencing support for the Iraq war. Remarkably, three years after that war began in Iraq, many US troops still believed that unfounded conspiracy theory.

I will outline the political and media environment in which the wars began; show how the tenor of reporting changed from being broadly supportive in the initial stages of the Afghanistan war, and then in Iraq, before turning critical, often cynical and, by some, condemnatory about justification (both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* felt compelled in 2004 to apologise to their readers for failures of reporting pre-war in 2002 and 2003); and thereafter sceptical about tactics and strategies. I'll trace the arc of media coverage through the wars.

Another focus of this research is to look at the tactics used by governments and military forces to influence reporting and commentary during the wars and to seek to do so. These included the sub-plots, in which military, current and retired, use the media to try to influence variously the public and – on occasions – government decisions. I will look at the inevitable tensions that occur between politicians and military leaders and the media. While the dynamic is constantly changing, it is possible to draw some broad conclusions about how effective officials were at particular moments. Not least, I will assess some key moments when it could be reasonably said that the conduct of the wars was affected by media coverage.

Although this study ambitiously attempts to study media/military/government relationships over the past decade in the US, UK and Australia, there is a clear bias towards UK media, institutions and the interviews conducted here. This paper is the product of the place – and there could be few better than Oxford – and the single academic term available for research. The tenth anniversary of 9/11, and all its attendant media reflections, took place in the closing days of writing this paper, and lent a certain symmetry to the process.

## Chapter 1: Winning the wars, losing the peace

*Recollections of correspondents: John Simpson, Mark Corcoran and Michael Ware.  
Government responses to 9/11 and influences on media.*

### Afghanistan

Most of us can remember where we were when first watching, hearing or reading the news of the 9/11 attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania which killed 2,974 people. John Simpson, the BBC's World Affairs Editor for more than 20 years, knows precisely:

*10th September 2001 I was actually in Kabul and had decided to leave on the assumption that nothing was happening. The Taliban government tried to get rid of me and would have done it over a period. But I could have stayed there if only I'd known what was going to happen the following day... And so I was grotesquely wrong-footed. I was in Peshawar in Pakistan when the attacks on the Pentagon and twin towers took place and I spent a month, well into October, just simply trying to get back in.<sup>1</sup>*

When Simpson did slip across the Afghanistan border for a few days, he was camouflaged in a voluminous female costume topped by an all-covering headdress, known as a burqa. ("And of course that was enough for the British press never to think of anything else.")

In fact the British press reported on another rather more significant incident when Simpson, the relentless competitor, returned to Kabul in middle November. Having travelled with the Afghan Northern Alliance forces which had forced the Taliban to retreat from the city, he seized the day, skipped ahead of the militia, and strolled into the city, telling his British audience:

*It was only BBC people who liberated this city. We got in ahead of Northern Alliance troops... I can't tell you what a joy it was. I felt very proud indeed to be part of an organisation that could push forward ahead of the rest.<sup>2</sup>*

Simpson quickly acknowledged that he'd got rather carried away in the emotion of the moment, given that there were several other BBC reporters already inside the city who had been lying low. Many other British, American and Australian reporters arrived within hours. Al Jazeera Arabic had no need to boast about arriving; it had been there for months. (Indeed, its broadcasts from Kabul of the first American missile strikes on the capital were immediately put to air on US and British international networks, as was a tape of Osama bin Laden, filmed in a cave, saying that America was finally tasting what Muslims had experienced. He proclaimed there would be no peace until Palestine was free.)

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with John Simpson, 16 June 2011, London.

<sup>2</sup> BBC *Today* program, 13 November 2001.

Paul McGeough, writer-at-large for *The Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) and *The Age* (Melbourne) had a difficult time reporting the early stages of the war. Having interviewed the Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masoud in August 2001 about the failure of the United States to act against al Qaeda and the Taliban, he was back at his base in Manhattan to see the 9/11 attacks, then to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan before crossing into northern Afghanistan. Up in the Kalakata Hills, McGeough clung grimly to the roof of a Northern Alliance armoured personnel carrier when they were ambushed by the Taliban. Two French reporters and a German reporter were killed.<sup>3</sup>

The point of these anecdotes is to highlight that the reporting of wars is a business fraught with peril and uncertainty. One needs luck, but more importantly, knowledge, contacts, money, good planning and persistence by individuals and by news organisations.

One of the reasons Simpson was able to make those forays into Afghanistan post 9/11 was precisely because he knew the country, having first visited in 1980 and reported there regularly since 1996; he'd got to know the Taliban Foreign Minister and was able to get a visa now and then. And he was backed by the enormous resources of the BBC. McGeough had similarly invested time in learning how to operate in Afghanistan and the region and as a former editor of SMH had the clout to go wherever was needed to cover the biggest story of the decade. For Al Jazeera Afghanistan and Iraq made its reputation for enterprising journalism.

### **Washington after 9/11**

The Bush Administration proclaimed its response to 9/11 as a "war on terror," rather than responding to a terrorist act, as massive as it was. The rhetoric of war had the broad effect of enrolling Americans and most of the media in a common purpose: to defeat the enemy.

US historian John Dower, who has made a deep study of the language used in wartimes, notes that President Bush wrote in his diary that the hijacking of the passenger planes was "the Pearl Harbour of the 21st century".<sup>4</sup> The Japanese attack on the US fleet in Hawaii in 1941, which provoked the United States to enter World War Two, was described by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his address to the US Congress as a "day of infamy," a description repeated in many newspaper headlines.<sup>5</sup> Seventy years later, US newspapers used the same words to describe the al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington.

In such an atmosphere of threat, it was hardly surprising that the media gave extraordinary time and space to stories about "striking back" at what for most Americans was a

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<sup>3</sup> Paul McGeough, *Manhattan to Baghdad: Dispatches from the frontline in the War on Terror*, (Allen & Unwin: Sydney, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> John Dower, *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor/Hiroshima/9/11/Iraq*, (W.W. Norton and Co: New York, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> "Yesterday, December 7 1941 – a date which will live in infamy – the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of Empire of Japan." Franklin D. Roosevelt, Congressional address, Washington, 8 December 1941.

mysterious enemy. It shouldn't have been such a mystery: al Qaeda had bombed the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in east Africa in 1998, killing more than 200. At the time, President Clinton ordered a retaliatory missile strike on al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan.

Through this period the international media were scrambling for insights into the Taliban regime which was hosting al Qaeda and in return being partly funded by it. In late 1998 Mark Corcoran of the ABC's *Foreign Correspondent* program gained relatively rare access to the Taliban as they pushed into regions of Afghanistan which they did not control. In an interview he reflected what suspicious people they could be:

*We were constantly harassed and threatened around Kabul, but the closer we got to the fighting and the Taliban combat troops the more relaxed they became. On the frontline of the Shomali plains their fighters were keen to pose for the camera.*<sup>6</sup>

Corcoran said that while the Taliban had an international reputation for banning television as non-Islamic, it was clear even then that they were pragmatic as well. At a *madrassa* (an Islamic school) across the frontier in Pakistan:

*We were shown – and permitted to film with some restrictions – an IT studies room full of late-model desktop computers. Students were being taught how to create propaganda websites and establish messaging groups.*

Having fought with Afghan *mujahedeen* against the Russian occupiers through the 1980s and having benefitted then from covert American support, funnelled through Pakistan, bin Laden was well known to US intelligence. In late 2000 al Qaeda set out to sink the destroyer USS Cole while it was in port in Yemen, an act that killed 17 American sailors.

Indeed through 2001 Bush administration had hundreds of warnings from the FBI, the CIA and the NSA (National Security Agency) about the threat posed by al Qaeda; its growing role in Afghanistan fighting with the Taliban; running training camps along the Afghan-Pakistani border for Islamic terrorists from around the world; and the strong links with Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate).

Some of this information was in the public domain in the US, courtesy of serious newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, the news weeklies *TIME* and *Newsweek* and public radio and television. But on the national network television, the news programs which were the major source of information on international issues had been radically cut back through the 1990s. A veteran CBS correspondent Tom Fenton subsequently played the main US commercial networks:

*As surely as 9/11 pointed up the myriad failures of official agencies in Washington, it also revealed the abject failure of the news media... We had failed to warn the*

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Corcoran, *Inside the Taliban*, Foreign Correspondent, ABC Television, 27 October 1998.

*American public of the storm clouds approaching our shores. And in failing to do so, we betrayed the trust of the public.*<sup>7</sup>

Australia's Prime Minister John Howard was in Washington at the time of the attacks, having met President George W. Bush the previous day. He immediately and without any Cabinet discussion publicly pledged that Australia's military would be available to the US. On his return to Australia, Howard addressed the national security committee of cabinet which agreed to invoke the US-Australia defence treaty ANZUS, even before any formal US request, authorising Australian military support in any conflict to come. Equally committed from the start was the British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Alistair Campbell, Blair's powerful director of communications quotes Bush telling Blair that 9/11 was "a new war, the Pearl Harbour in the 21st century."<sup>8</sup>

### **The Afghan war**

One day short of a month after the 9/11 attacks, US and UK forces began bombing Afghanistan. CIA paramilitaries and US and Australian special forces had already infiltrated the country.

Throughout the rest of 2001, the international news agenda was dominated by reports of the ongoing chase after al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in Afghanistan and the first of many misjudgements: the inadequacy of the initial deployment of troops – 10,000 from the US and another 5,000 internationals under a NATO umbrella.

Michael Ware, who had been sent to Afghanistan for *TIME* Magazine, had decided that the best way to report the country was to become as invisible as possible. "When I spoke Pashtu it was evident to the Afghans that I spoke with a thick Kandahari accent. So I speak the language of the Taliban."<sup>9</sup> Ware set off on the trail of the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar:

*It's lawless country, there's no safety net, no insurance, you're surviving on your wits and your instincts. Afghanistan was a journalistic nirvana. I had the name of one of the most iconic print publications on the planet, I had all the resources I could possibly have needed and that greatest of all resources, time, time to disappear.*<sup>10</sup>

Ware believes that serious news organisations with non-daily deadlines and space had an advantage in trying to make sense of the confusing mosaic in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the US there were a flurry of investigative stories revealing the elaborate plotting behind 9/11; funding from Saudi Arabia; training of terrorists in Germany and the US; and the failure of America's intelligence services to share information about terror groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Fenton, *Bad News: The Decline of Reporting, the Business of News, and the Danger to Us All* (Regan Books: New York, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Alistair Campbell, *The Blair Years: The Alistair Campbell Diaries* (Arrow Books: London, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Michael Ware, Skype, 2 July 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ware.

While US-based reporting was often highly critical of the Bush administration, the reporting of the war itself was seen by some journalist managers to require extra guidance. In October 2001 the Washington Post revealed that the chairman of CNN has ordered his staff to balance images of civilian devastation in Afghan cities with reminders that the Taliban harbours murderous terrorists. In a memo to his international correspondents, Walter Isaacson wrote that it 'seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan.'<sup>11</sup>

The Bush Administration had formally requested that the US networks apply self censorship and not run any al Qaeda material 'live', which effectively would have meant not cutting to Al Jazeera if it aired a new tape (see Hugh Miles' account of this period).<sup>12</sup>

A former senior BBC executive Mark Damazer recalls that Prime Minister Tony Blair's communications director Alistair Campbell was highly critical of much reporting from Afghanistan:

*There was quite a lot of friction with the government over Afghanistan. Campbell was complaining almost from the word go. He felt that our reporting in Afghanistan on the normal sort of issues that arise – civilian casualties, messy deals having to be done with not necessarily the right people, lots of different angles, Campbell didn't like quite a lot of it. And he wrote and said so. This was long, long before it all started to go wrong. He (Campbell) was at it straight away – applying pressure and we were resisting. I don't think we gave him an inch on Afghanistan. And all this is the background to what happened in 2003, so his frustration was furious because we just wouldn't give way.<sup>13</sup>*

Reporting Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 ran and ran, such that 3rd January 2002 was the first day for more than 100 days that an Afghanistan story did not run on the front page of *The New York Times*.

A week later a major Washington think-tank, the Brookings Institution, arranged a meeting at the Pentagon. Journalists complained that Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld "had imposed an odd kind of stranglehold on the normal flow of information from other officials, placing reporters in the awkward position of having to depend solely on him". Victoria Clarke, a senior public affairs official, acknowledged "this was Rumsfeld's intention, his way of cutting back on leaks, and for a time, clearly the strategy worked."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Howard Kurtz, "CNN Chief Orders 'Balance' in War News: Reporters Are Told To Remind Viewers Why U.S. Is Bombing", *The Washington Post online*, 31 October 2001, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&contentId=A14435-2001Oct30>>, viewed 28 August 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Hugh Miles, *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV Challenged The World*, (Abacus: London, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Interview Mark Damazer, Oxford, 5 July 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Hess and Marvin L. Kalb, eds., *The Media and the War on Terrorism* (Brooking Institution Press: Boston, 2003).

In April 2002 Mark Corcoran reported another ABC *Foreign Correspondent* program from Afghanistan which highlighted some of the uncomfortable realities of US forces attempting to occupy the south:

*Whoever controls the opium poppy controls southern Afghanistan – such is the power of this humble plant. It was a lesson quickly learned by the Soviets, the mujahedeen, then the religious zealots of the Taliban. Now it is the turn of the Americans, descending from clear skies on Operation Enduring Freedom with lofty ideals of good versus evil – only to find they’ve landed in a grey world of compromise.*<sup>15</sup>

Deals were struck: the Americans would ignore opium production in exchange for intelligence from local people about al Qaeda and Taliban forces. The story was prescient. Almost ten years later Afghanistan remains the biggest source of the international heroin trade, despite intermittent but often bumbling efforts by NATO and Afghan forces to control it. Corcoran recalls:

*There were some negative responses to my story because in the post-9/11 climate, sections of the military and the public were annoyed at anything that was anything less than wholehearted praise for the Americans.*<sup>16</sup>

Through the course of 2002 the international focus on Afghanistan was already waning. General Sir Richard Dannatt who led the initial UK presence in Kabul in 2001 has written, though with the benefit of hindsight, “This deployment also seemed a further justification of the *go first, go fast, go home approach* of our interventions abroad.”<sup>17</sup>

Michael Ware in July 2002 readily identified the problem for the invading forces:

*In my opinion the greatest problem facing the US led forces at the moment is just finding an exit strategy... coming in was relatively easy on a wave of military success. Staying here and maintaining the peace is increasingly proving to be a losing battle. If the American bombers in the skies leave today the al Qaeda camps, the Kashmiri militant camps, the Pakistani militant camps would all be back tomorrow.*<sup>18</sup>

In 2003 Corcoran profiled Afghanistan’s interim president Hamid Karzai, who had been installed the previous year:

*Karzai was, I think, suffering from some sort of attention deficit feelings because Afghanistan was getting less international attention due to the invasion of Iraq and he was desperate to keep the attention on the Afghanistan conflict. We had the run of the palace where he was being guarded by US military contractors, even inside the palace grounds.*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Corcoran, *Inside The Taliban*, Foreign Correspondent, ABC Television, 27 October 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Mark Corcoran, Skype, 21 June 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Dannatt, *General Sir Richard Dannatt Leading from The Front* (Random House, London, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Michael Ware, Interview *Foreign Correspondent*, ABC Television, 31 July 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Corcoran.

Corcoran travelled with Karzai to neighbouring Pakistan to see the coup leader, General Pervez Musharraf. Karzai wanted Taliban fighters who had crossed the rugged frontier to be detained and returned. But Musharraf was playing a double game. While most of the Taliban were given sanctuary, many al Qaeda fighters detained in Pakistan were handed over to the United States and a great many ended up in Guantanamo Bay, the US prison on Cuba where some remain to this day.

The Taliban set up bases in Pakistan from which they launched raids back into Afghanistan. It was clear from this time that the Afghan government was already embattled. Karzai appealed to the Australian government to send back the SAS (Special Air Service) elite force which had been withdrawn at the end of 2002 (in expectation that they would be needed in Iraq). The Australian government ignored the request. One solitary Australian military liaison officer was left to fly the flag in Afghanistan. The SAS didn't return until late 2005.

### **Iraq war: political background**

In 1991 the United States and its allies, including the UK and Australia, took only six weeks to force Iraq to quit Kuwait which it had invaded the previous August. Defense Secretary Dick Cheney was asked on national television why the war had stopped at the Iraq border?

*I think for us to get American military personnel involved in a civil war inside Iraq would literally be a quagmire. Once we get to Baghdad, what do we do? Who would we put in power, what kind of government would we have?*<sup>20</sup>

As it turned out these were all perceptive questions but by 2001 Cheney, now Vice President, declared that 9/11 had "changed everything". As early as 12th September 2001, President Bush is reported to have asked national security advisor Richard Clarke to "see if Saddam did this, see if he's linked in any way?"<sup>21</sup> Bush had a deeply held personal hatred of Iraq's president Saddam Hussein. He blamed him for the attempted assassination of his father, George H. W. Bush in Kuwait in 1993.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, one of the intellectual neo-conservatives entrenched in the Republican government who had come to power committed to regime change in Iraq, questioned the CIA's initial judgement that al Qaeda was responsible for the attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, saying they were too sophisticated for such a small group and needed a state sponsor – Iraq must have helped them.

The reflexive focus on Iraq demonstrates what an irritant the Saddam Hussein regime had been since the withdrawal from Kuwait 10 years earlier. Iraq had been ordered to pay war reparations to Kuwait for damage to oil industry infrastructure and the sabotaging of oil wells. Moreover Iraq was ordered to declare all WMD so that they could be destroyed. Throughout the decade, UN inspectors had made numerous trips to Iraq searching for

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Karl, "Interview with Dick Cheney", *This Week with David Brinkley*, ABC, 7 April 1991.

<sup>21</sup> John Dower, *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor/Hiroshima/9/11/Iraq*.

stocks of chemical and biological weapons, production facilities and delivery systems and tracking Iraq's efforts to build a nuclear weapon. It was a frustrating business and despite the economic sanctions which had been imposed to ensure compliance, the inspectors were periodically shut out of Iraq. By 2002 the US was demanding urgent international action. General Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the UK General Staff at the time, asserts:

*It seems probable that when George W. Bush asked our Prime Minister in spring 2002: "We are going into Iraq, are you with us?" there was only one answer. History and the Chilcott inquiry will be the judges... In London there was a growing focus on the intelligence that underpinned the case for war... my abiding recollection of the intelligence to which I was privy was just how thin it was.*<sup>22</sup>

UK Prime Minister Blair was keen to support President Bush but also wanted UN Security Council resolutions to provide political cover and international legal sanction. To help influence public opinion, the UK government released dossiers which it said were based on the considered judgements of the joint intelligence committee, warning of WMD and of the threat Iraq posed to the region. Blair wrote in a forward to the September 2002 government dossier:

*Intelligence reports make clear that he (Saddam Hussein) sees the building up of his WMD capability, and the belief overseas that he would use these weapons, as vital to his strategic interests, and in particular his goal of regional domination. And the document discloses that his military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them. I am quite clear that Saddam will go to extreme lengths, indeed has already done so, to hide these weapons and avoid giving them up.*<sup>23</sup>

Taking its cue from the government dossier, Britain's largest selling daily newspaper, Rupert Murdoch's *The Sun*, hyped the threat posed to British servicemen at their sovereign bases on Cyprus which were claimed to be within Iraqi missile range. The headline was: *Brits 45 minutes from Doom*.

(The 45 minutes claim led to a BBC reporter saying in 2003, after the war had begun, that the dossier may have been "sexed up". The government denied the claim. A furious row erupted between the government and the BBC; the chairman was effectively sacked and the director-general and the reporter resigned.)

These dossiers reflected the pattern of media management that the Labour leader had adopted since becoming Opposition Leader in 1994 and Prime Minister in 1997. Blair's official spokesman Alastair Campbell, a former tabloid political journalist, saw it as his role to write, as he described it, "the script" for the news media, whether this was in the form of speeches or interviews or answering questions in parliament. Campbell's diaries, totalling

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Dannatt, *General Sir Richard Dannatt Leading from the Front*.

<sup>23</sup> *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government* (The Stationary Office: London, 24 September 2002).

800 pages, demonstrate a workaholic determination to set the agenda and to steer, cajole and, on occasions, bully political journalists and editors to write and say what he wanted.<sup>24</sup>

By 2002 Campbell's "spin", as it was derided by some journalists, had already become contentious. The public mood in the United Kingdom was divided. Many people were far from convinced that there were compelling reasons for going to war against Iraq for the second time in 12 years. In February 2003 the anti-war movement marshalled the better part of a million people in central London protesting against what seemed an inexorable march to war.

In Australia the conservative coalition of the Liberal and National parties, having intervened militarily with the US in Afghanistan, and previously in the 1991 Gulf War and in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, enthusiastically adopted the Bush Administration's claims about Iraq's WMD capacity and threat to the Middle East. In the United States public opinion was mixed but President Bush's handling of Iraq, according to the Gallup Poll, was always above 50 percent between October 2002 and March 2003; once the war began it soared above 70 percent.

News Corporation, which owns newspapers in Australia, the UK, the US and elsewhere, adopted a strong pro-war stance. British media commentator Roy Greenslade noted that 175 editorials in Murdoch newspapers around the world justified the war, some in remarkably similar terms.<sup>25</sup>

The corporation's chairman Rupert Murdoch had set out the rationale for war in Iraq in an interview with a journal he did not own, *The Bulletin*, Australia's main weekly news magazine (now defunct). "We can't back down now, where you hand over the whole of the Middle East to Saddam," Murdoch was quoted as saying. "I think Bush is acting very morally, very correctly, and I think he is going to go on with it." As for Tony Blair, "I think Tony is being extraordinarily courageous and strong on what his stance is in the Middle East." And Murdoch ventured there was a potential commercial upside as well: "The greatest thing to come out of this for the world economy... would be \$20 a barrel for oil. That's bigger than any tax cut in any country."<sup>26</sup>

Murdoch's Fox television network banged the war drum in both the tone and content of its coverage before and during the war. It was popular: audience figures jumped by 300 percent to an average 3.3 million viewers a day, compared to 2.65 million for CNN, which had been the market leader during the 1991 war when it had exclusive reports from Baghdad.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Alistair Campbell, *The Blair Years: The Alistair Campbell Diaries*.

<sup>25</sup> Roy Greenslade, "Their master's voice", *The Guardian*, 17 February 2003, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2003/feb/17/mondaymediasection.iraq>>, viewed 18 August 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Julia Day, "Murdoch backs courageous Blair over Iraq", *The Guardian*, 11 February 2003, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2003/feb/11/iraqandthemediainews>>, viewed 19 August 2011.

<sup>27</sup> *BBC News*, 18 April 2003.

Ted Turner, the founder of the CNN network, claimed in April 2003 that Murdoch had promoted the war because it was good for his businesses.<sup>28</sup>

In the same month the BBC's chief executive Greg Dyke weighed into the issue. In a public speech in London he said, "Commercial pressures may tempt others to follow the Fox News formula of gung-ho patriotism but for the BBC this would be a terrible mistake."<sup>29</sup>

In mid-2003 two polling organisations in the United States decided to ask similar questions about the role of media in how Americans perceived the Iraq war. Susan Moeller, Director of the International Center for Media and Public Agenda at the University of Maryland, concluded:

*The polls discovered that almost two thirds of those surveyed believed something that wasn't true. Half believed that the US had found evidence that Iraq was working closely with al Qaeda, over one fifth believed that actual weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq and almost a quarter believed that world opinion favoured the US going to war with Iraq.*<sup>30</sup>

Moeller says that the 3,000 people polled were asked about their media consumption habits. 'Only 23 percent of those that who watched or listened to public broadcasting (PBS and NPR) believed one or more of the false statements, but 80 percent of those who watched FOX news did.'

Even six months after the Iraq war and two years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, a Washington Post poll revealed most Americans believed that Iraq had been invaded because Saddam Hussein was involved in the plane hijackings.

*Nearing the second anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, seven in 10 Americans continue to believe that Iraq's Saddam Hussein had a role in the attacks, even though the Bush administration and congressional investigators say they have no evidence of this. 69 percent of Americans said they thought it at least likely that Hussein was involved in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, according to the latest Washington Post poll... President Bush and members of his administration suggested a link between the two in the months before the war in Iraq. Claims of possible links have never been proven, however.*<sup>31</sup>

A poll of US military serving in Iraq in early 2006, almost three years after the war began, produced another disturbing finding. Zogby, a well respected pollster used by Reuters,

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<sup>28</sup> "Turner: Murdoch is a warmonger", *The Guardian*, 25 April 2003.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2003/apr/25/newscorporation.pressandpublishin.>>, viewed 17 August 2011.

<sup>29</sup> "Dyke slates 'gung-ho' war reports", *BBC online*, 24 April 2003,

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2973163.stm>>, viewed 10 June 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Moeller, *Packaging terrorism; co-opting the news for politics and profit* (Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> 'Dana Milbank and Claudia Deane, "Hussein Link to 9/11 Lingers in Many Minds," *The Washington Post online*, 6 September 2003, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A32862-2003Sep5?language=printer.>>, viewed 17 June 2011.

reported on its website that that 85 percent of those polled said the US mission is mainly “to retaliate for Saddam's role in the 9/11 attacks”. 77 percent said they also believed the main or a major reason for the war was "to stop Saddam from protecting al Qaeda in Iraq".<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> IBOPE ZOGBY International, “U.S. Troops in Iraq: 72% Say End War in 2006”, *IBOPE ZOGBY International online*, 28 February 2006, <<http://www.zogby.com/news/2006/02/28/us-troops-in-iraq-72-say-end-war-in-2006/>>, viewed 13 May 2011.

## Chapter 2: Critical turning points in reporting the wars

*Guantanamo, invasion of Iraq, embedding reporters, battle for Baghdad, the first battle of Fallujah, Abu Ghraib scandal, second battle of Fallujah, Sunni/Shia slaughter, retired general's revolt, congressional elections reflect voter anger at the war.*

### Guantanamo

One of the unexpected consequences of the invasion of Afghanistan was that the world suddenly became familiar with a hitherto largely unknown slice of Cuba, run by the United States military on a lease more than a century old. Guantanamo Bay was, the US decided, distant enough from prying eyes and safe enough to hold people detained in Afghanistan and suspected of links to al Qaeda and the Taliban. The first of them arrived in early 2002.

The American and international media clamoured for access and it was finally given. The sight of men manacled hand and foot, chained together, bent over and shuffling along in orange overalls with blackout goggles blinding them, was televised around the world. News reporting conveyed the perception that detainees were being denied natural justice because the Bush Administration had adopted the view that the Geneva Accords did not apply to the prisoners. Moreover they would be tried by military commissions with radically different rules of evidence to those in conventional (mainland) American courts.

The US Supreme Court ruled in 2006 that the Bush Administration's approach was wrong. By that time not a single detainee had appeared in a court. David Hicks, an Australian, was the first to be tried and convicted. Hick's lengthy incarceration, as reported by the ABC's North America correspondent Leigh Sales and other reporters had become a festering sore for the Australian government, which lobbied the US to speed up the process. As part of a plea bargain Hicks pleaded guilty to one charge of supporting a terrorist organisation and was transferred to an Australian prison to serve the last nine months of his sentence. Another Australian detainee at Guantanamo Mamdouh Habib had been released and repatriated home after being held for three years without charge. (Habib claimed that he had been tortured in a Cairo jail and Australian officials were aware of it before he was transported to Guantanamo).<sup>33</sup>

After almost ten years many detainees have still not been accorded any sort of judicial process. Guantanamo and all that went with it – extraordinary rendition, phantom flights, and the torture of suspects in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt and Eastern Europe in secret jails – proved to be a public relations disaster for the United States. Having invaded Afghanistan and Iraq under a banner which, among other things, proclaimed democratic values and

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<sup>33</sup> Leigh Sales, *Detainee 002: The Case of David Hicks* (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne, 2007).

respect for the rule of law, the US found itself being condemned around the world for breaches of human rights.

### **Iraq: the invasion**

In March 2003, television viewers around the world were delivered a spectacle: US and British military units racing north across the deserts of southern Iraq in the direction of Baghdad. The so-called embedded media were there too, some 600-strong; television crews were beaming 'live from the battlefield' pictures to the world, radio reporters were on satellite phones, stills photographers were uploading dramatic pictures from their laptops onto satellite phones.

It was the ultimate in reality television and understandably garnered good audiences. Richard Sambrook was the BBC's Director of News at the start of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and was later head of BBC Global News:

*Sky News was slightly less rigorous on its sourcing of breaking events and so on – that's where the 'never wrong for long' tag was kind of applied—but they did very well. Sky News' audience shot up against the BBC's news channels and our audience research said that's because people found Sky's news reporting was more dramatic and exciting, but then would want to watch the BBC at 10 o'clock to see what really happened.*<sup>34</sup>

Sky News, operated by the Murdoch dominated BSkyB, was positively restrained compared to the jingoistic tone adopted by Murdoch's Fox News in the United States. Fox's ratings rose dramatically compared to CNN. Some media academics and some reporters for that matter take the view that embedding reporters with military units compromises their integrity when they're fed, watered and form bonds with soldiers who also protect them. Sambrook defends the practice:

*We had embedded correspondents which was slightly controversial. I don't actually subscribe to the controversy because I think it is an issue of scale rather than principle. There have been embedded war correspondents for a hundred years, the issue's one of scale. We had embedded reporters providing incredibly graphic and vivid reporting from the frontline but having no overall sense of the progress of the war.*<sup>35</sup>

Accordingly, Sambrook says, there was always a need to provide as broad a range of information as possible, ranging from the Coalition military public relations unit in Doha with an elaborate television set, designed by a Hollywood producer, to reporters providing content and analysis in London, Washington and, importantly, from Baghdad:

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Richard Sambrook, Oxford, 27 May 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Sambrook.

*We did have teams in Baghdad which caused some controversy with the UK government and also therefore with the very patriotic tabloid press. That's always the case. It was the case in Baghdad in 1991; it was the case in Kabul during Afghanistan in 2001. The view from Downing Street is that you shouldn't be reporting from behind enemy lines and there is a wing of the tabloid press which will always support them in that and the BBC gets called the Baghdad Broadcasting Corporation and traitors and the rest of it. But in my view it is essential that you have a view from behind those lines and reflect that as well.*

### **Australian perspectives**

The criticisms directed at the BBC by successive UK governments have often been replicated by Australian governments in their dealings with the ABC and most often for the same reasons – broadcasters who strive to be independent inevitably report subjects that embarrass ministers or officers and challenge government policies. ABC managers withdrew a team from Baghdad before the war began – on grounds of safety – much to the chagrin of the ABC's Middle East Correspondent Mark Willacy:

*Back in Australia there was a lot of scaremongering saying we'd all be strapped on the front of tanks by Saddam's people and used as human shields. That spooked a lot of people in the ABC. We argued our case hard and long and got nowhere... then the programs ended up using Paul McGeough (Sydney Morning Herald/The Age) and Ian McPhedran (News Ltd.) from Baghdad which really rubbed salt in the wounds. Ironic in hindsight in that we went back in during some of the worst times of the insurgency where the risk I believe would have been a hundredfold greater.*

Nonetheless the ABC had more reporters on the ground throughout the region than any other Australian news organisation; it included a team embedded with US forces. Geoff Thompson provided one of the most dramatic illustrations of the value of embedding by showing the killing of Iraqi civilians by US forces – an incident most likely sparked by 'friendly fire'.<sup>36</sup>

In May 2003 the Australian Communications Minister complained to the ABC about what he called the "biased" and "anti-American" content and tone of reporting and interviews. Senator Richard Alston made 68 specific complaints about the influential national radio program *AM*. When only two complaints were initially upheld by the ABC, the minister further complained to the industry regulator, the Australian Broadcasting Authority, citing 43 complaints, of which four were upheld after a year-long inquiry. While the ABC took the view that the reviews demonstrated that *AM*'s coverage was "professional and balanced", in fact the government's complaints, frequently restated, as well as the media coverage

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<sup>36</sup> Geoff Thompson, "Jittery marines kill more civilians", transcript, *ABC online*, <<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2003/s829597.htm>> viewed 10 May, 2011.

they generated, had the effect of cowing some staff and denigrating the ABC's war coverage.

It is worth emphasising here that Senator Alston's critique essentially represented situation normal. Australian governments of all political colours traditionally set out to influence, both publicly and privately, the ABC and the other predominantly government-funded broadcasting network SBS, disregarding their legislated independence. Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke certainly tried to do so during the 1991 Gulf War.

In war, even more so than in peace, all Australian media find they have problems with the narrow bureaucratic mindset in the Defence Department, which is often encouraged by the office of the Defence Minister. Unlike American and British media, Australian reporters weren't offered the opportunity to be embedded with Australian forces during the invasion of Iraq. One reason was that special forces units couldn't be encumbered with even a small number of media. It is easy to imagine why this might not be a good mix in the field but refusing all access after particular deployments shrouds every operation in secrecy.

*Witnesses to War :The History of Australian Conflict Reporting* captured the mood of the time:

*By 2003 the poor relations between the Australian military and the media which had been evident in Afghanistan in 2001 had deteriorated even further. John Tulloh, the veteran head of international coverage at the ABC found the Australian Defence Forces, "unnecessarily secretive, obstructive and unhelpful on occasions including a form of censorship."<sup>37</sup>*

Years later Ian McPhedran, a veteran defence writer for News Limited's Australian newspapers was even more critical:

*Australian troops have been fighting in the so-called war against terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq since late 2001 but what do Australians know about the reality of this brutal campaign? Apart from some concocted and highly controlled media visits, the coverage has been extremely limited. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has gone out of its way to prevent media access and to censor information and in doing so has virtually written the troops out of our history.<sup>38</sup>*

*A former Chief of the Australian Army General Peter Leahy, now Director of the National Security Institute at the University of Canberra is extremely worried about the relationship between the government, military and media. "It's not only broken, but I think dysfunctional and volatile."<sup>39</sup>*

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<sup>37</sup> Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath, *Witnesses to War: The History of Australian Conflict Reporting* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Ian McPhedran, "War! What War?" in Foster, Kevin ed., *What Are We Doing In Afghanistan* (Australian Scholarly Publishing: Melbourne, 2009), p. 65

<sup>39</sup> General Peter Leahy, *Hungry Beast*, ABC Television, 23 March, 2011

## Baghdad

One of the reporters in Baghdad awaited the coming storm was Lindsey Hilsum, International Editor of Britain's *Channel 4 News*. For her, reporting the end of the Saddam Hussein regime was a career highlight:

*I think that was the best week journalistically of my whole life because that week you would walk out of the hotel and everybody had a story that they had not been able to tell for the past 30 years... We went to Abu Ghraib which at the time was famous for being a terrible prison under Saddam Hussein and a man came up to us screaming, saying come with me and he said to Tim, the cameraman - film, you must film! So we went to the centre of Abu Ghraib where there's this huge mural of Saddam Hussein. And he pulls a pistol out of his pocket and he shoots Saddam Hussein three times. And he says I was a colonel in the army and I was accused of having taken part in a coup attempt and I was imprisoned here for five years and I was forced to paint that mural - and this is my revenge. And this is the pistol bullet! [Hilsum produces a squashed bit of metal from her wallet.] I mean stuff like that was just amazing.<sup>40</sup>*

Hilsum says the sense of euphoria initially experienced by some Iraqis did not last long and for that American troops were much to blame. They were scared and ill-disciplined:

*Day 1, all our drivers and fixers and so on were thrilled to see the Americans. They were so happy they were going up and throwing their arms around soldier. Day 2 we witnessed the Americans kill seven Iraqis and injure a little girl and they (our Iraqi colleagues) were absolutely horrified.*

Apart from the BBC teams in Baghdad and those embedded with Coalition forces, the BBC also had teams making their way through Kurdish areas in northern Iraq. Among them was John Simpson. His reporting of Iraq had incensed Saddam Hussein on a number of occasions, not least in a *Panorama* program which revealed that Saddam Hussein, paranoid about security, had frequently used 'body doubles' for public appearances. Just days before Baghdad fell and after months of lobbying for a visa Simpson was told he could have one, but by then it was too late. (He learned later through Iraqi intermediaries that Saddam had intended to have him killed.)

In every war, appalling mistakes are made and Iraq was no different. Simpson and his team were heading south, trailing a Kurdish convoy, when they were mistakenly attacked by US jets. Simpson reported on BBC radio:

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Lindsey Hilsum, Oxford, 1 June 2011.

*It was an American plane that dropped them bomb right besides us... This is just a scene from hell. All the vehicles are on fire... There are bodies lying around, there are bits of bodies on the ground. This is a really bad own-goal by the Americans.*<sup>41</sup>

The BBC's Kurdish translator was killed. Simpson was deafened in one ear and hit by shrapnel as were most other members of the team. As noted in the introduction to this paper, the Iraq War saw many media workers killed. By Simpson's count – and he carried on reporting down to Baghdad - 16 died in the first month, of whom seven were killed by American fire.<sup>42</sup> Among the most egregious was the missile strike on the Al Jazeera bureau in a residential neighbourhood in Baghdad, killing a correspondent and wounding a producer. Al Jazeera had given the Pentagon the address and map co-ordinates of the office when the war began precisely to try and avoid being targeted. The US claimed that 'significant enemy fire' had been coming from the area.<sup>43</sup>

Less than three hours later the Palestine Hotel was struck by American fire. Three camera operators were killed, one from Reuters and two from a Spanish channel. The US military said it had been responding to fire from the Palestine Hotel. Journalists staying there unanimously described this as untrue. No American soldier was held accountable for any of the killings.

One of the most cited "made for television" moments in the early part of the war was the toppling of a Saddam Hussein statue. George Packer, who reported from Iraq for *The New Yorker*, captured the mood:

*The fall of the statue of Saddam in Baghdad's Firdos Square on April 9 was received by many Americans as the sudden and dramatic end of the war. The liberation of Iraq had come faster with fewer casualties and less destruction than anyone, even the optimistic, had imagined possible. None of the disasters that some had forecast had come to pass — refugees, chemical weapons, burning oil fields, massive civilian casualties.*<sup>44</sup>

Even so just two days later the US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was already demonstrating extreme sensitivity to reporting from Iraq telling reporters at a Pentagon media conference:

*I picked up a newspaper today and couldn't believe it... I read eight headlines that talked about chaos, violence, unrest. And it was just Henny Penny – 'the sky is falling.' I've never seen anything like it! And here is a country that is being liberated, here are*

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<sup>41</sup> John Simpson, BBC radio, 6 April 2003.

<sup>42</sup> John Simpson, *The Wars Against Saddam, Taking The Hard Road to Baghdad* (Macmillan: London, 2003).

<sup>43</sup> Hugh Miles, *Al Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*, (Abacus: London, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> George Packer, *The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq*, (Faber and Faber: London, 2006).

*people who are going from being repressed and held under the thumb of a vicious dictator and they're free!*<sup>45</sup>

Then came an extraordinary show of triumphalism. On 1st May President Bush, the one-time National Guard pilot in Texas – service which he used to avoid being drafted during the Vietnam War – donned a flight suit to be ferried out to the massive aircraft carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln. There, in a staggering piece of set-piece theatre, he declared that “major combat operations” in Iraq were over. The US news channels gave it extensive, enthusiastic coverage. Opinion polls of the time recorded that more than three quarters of Americans approved of the way Bush was acting as president.

In fact, major operations requiring tens of thousands more troops than had been deployed in the initial invasion were to stretch many years into the future and it was only after a massive increase in troop numbers that the combat phase turned more positive from 2008 onwards. Bush’s remarkable overstatement in his “mission accomplished” performance came back to haunt him; the speech was increasingly used to characterise the Bush Administration as delusional about the course of the war.

Many international reporters in Baghdad began documenting the fundamental errors of the American occupation – the failure to end the looting, to make the streets safe, to provide the most essential elements of a city: reliable electricity and water supplies. George Packer describes the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA):

*The CPA’S isolation behind security perimeters and the difficulty of communication made it a fairly opaque institution to Iraqis and journalists alike... Stratcomm functioned as an offshore extension of the White House press office, relentlessly on message. Its chief concern was to control the perceptions of the American audience in the 24 hours news cycle.*<sup>46</sup>

Packer says that Iraqis quickly turned off the propaganda being churned out on official television, turning instead to Al Jazeera or Iranian stations:

*Everyone in Baghdad knew that the media project was a disaster; in London Tony Blair knew and he was tearing his hair out trying to get it fixed but as with so many other aspects of the occupation, the origins of the problem lay in Washington... I went back and forth between the green and red zones between the CPA and Iraq feeling almost dizzy at the transition, two separate realities existing on opposite sides of concrete and wire.*<sup>47</sup>

## Fallujah

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<sup>45</sup> Brian Whitaker, “Free to do bad things”, *The Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2003, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/apr/12/iraqbriefing.iraq>>, viewed 26 May 2011.

<sup>46</sup> George Packer, *The Assassin’s Gate: America in Iraq*.

<sup>47</sup> George Packer, *The Assassin’s Gate: America in Iraq*.

Tom Ricks, who had reported on the US military through the 1990s for *The Wall Street Journal* and thereafter for *The Washington Post* recognised that US forces faced a huge task:

*US commanders were growing concerned about activity in Fallujah and Ramadi, two conservative Sunni towns an hour to the west of Baghdad ...they'd been neglected in war planning which was dumb because Fallujah was the home of an estimated 40,000 former Baath party operatives, intelligence officials and Iraqi Army officers.*<sup>48</sup>

On Saddam Hussein's birthday the famous 82nd Airborne was attacked at their base in a Fallujah school. They reported they'd killed six in self defence. Iraqis said the death toll was twice as many. It was precursor of much more trouble. Shortly after marines had taken over responsibility of the city in March 2004, insurgents struck again. Nik Gowing, one of the lead presenters on BBC World, reflects on the first battle for Fallujah in March 2004:

*Fallujah 1 started with those four Blackwater contractors being ambushed in the street and their bodies being strung up on the river bridge and someone was filming it and those images went around the world. The marines then went in but there was no clarity on what they were trying to do in retaliation and that only embittered and radicalised the Fallujah population. I've met soldiers who were involved in the operation and they were often disgusted by what they had to do because they felt it had no tactical or strategic effect.*<sup>49</sup>

Gowing has made an extensive study of governments and military forces and their failure to adapt to the need for the quick, transparent release of information in the era of continuous news.<sup>50</sup> He says the images of the dead contractors had an "an asymmetric impact on policy makers and military strategy which was out of all proportion."

Having embarked on retaliation, the inability of 2,500 marines to defeat the insurgents was becoming embarrassing; at a high political level in Washington the decision was taken to cease and withdraw, much to the despair of senior marine officers on the ground.

Ricks quotes a marine commander as saying the first battle Fallujah had an importance far beyond the city. It was "like a siren, calling to the insurgents. It was like the bar in *Star Wars* with foreign fighters coming in." The US had led a coalition of nations into war in Iraq – at least rhetorically as part of the "war on terror" and yet had found that its actions had proved a magnet to Islamic terrorists who flooded into the country, most of them through Syria.

### **Abu Ghraib**

While Fallujah was a wake-up call from the battlefield, the revelation soon afterwards that Iraqi prisoners of war were being tortured, raped and humiliated at the Abu Ghraib

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco, The American Military Adventure In Iraq*, (Penguin: London, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Nik Gowing, London, 10 June 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Nik Gowing, *'Skyful of Lies' and Black Swans, The new tyranny of shifting information power in crises*, (RISJ Challenges: Oxford, 2009).

prison in Baghdad, which the Saddam Hussein regime had used for the torture, rape and humiliation of political dissidents, had profound international ramifications for the United States in particular and for the broader coalition.

Like Guantanamo before it, Abu Ghraib made a mockery of the much-vaunted commitment of US forces to rule of law and respect for human rights. The pictures broadcast by the *60 Minutes II* program on the CBS network showed, among other graphic scenes, hooded, naked men being forced to create a human pyramid. Within days an extensive article on the scandal at Abu Ghraib appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine. It was reported by Seymour Hersh, one of America's most respected investigative journalists who, decades earlier during the Vietnam War, had revealed the massacre of the villagers of My Lai by US soldiers.

Hersh's Abu Ghraib revelations were partly based on an inquiry by Major General Antonio Taguba, which found that between October and December 2003 there had been "sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses of prisoners" at Abu Ghraib. US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had been briefed on Taguba's report months before it became public and yet it was only when testifying to a congressional committee in May 2004 that he apologised, describing what the photographs depicted as "blatantly sadistic, cruel and inhuman" and conceding, "I failed to recognise how important it was."<sup>51</sup> The senators who called for his resignation had no doubts about the damage done to American prestige internationally and to the Bush presidency.

The "Coalition of the Willing" was showing the strain of a year of a war that was not going according to plan. No weapons of mass destruction had been found though even though a 1000 weapons experts hired by the Iraqi Survey Group, run by the CIA, had fanned out through the country expecting to find biological and chemical stocks. Instead they found that Saddam had been playing a double bluff pretending to have weapons when in fact they'd been destroyed in the early 1990s after the Gulf War. Even so in early 2004 the ISG leadership was pressured not to report that the search for biological and chemical weapons had proved fruitless. Spanish troops were pulled out and for the first time a majority of Americans polled by the Pew Research Center acknowledged that the war was not going well. Tom Ricks writes that May 2004 saw serious re-assessment:

*In the wake of the unravelling of the Bush Administration rationale for invasion and the tarring of the US military presence, expert opinion in the US started to catch up with facts on the ground. The op-ed pages of the New York Times, The (Washington) Post and Los Angeles Times looked like almost a reverse of the 2002 and 2003 stampedes that culminated in the gushing reviews of Powell's presentation to the UN.*<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road From 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (Sydney: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco*.

Ricks quotes Tom Friedman, whom he described as probably the most influential writer on foreign affairs in the US, writing in *The New York Times* in early May 2004: “This administration needs to undertake a total overhaul of its Iraq policy. Otherwise it is courting a total disaster for us all.”

*The New York Times* was also in a reflective mood and later the same month published an apology to its readers for failing to be properly sceptical about mooted justifications for war:

*Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more scepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper... Articles based on dire claims about Iraq tended to get prominent display, while follow-up articles that called the original ones into question were sometimes buried. In some cases, there was no follow-up at all. On October 26 and November 8 2001, for example, page 1 articles cited Iraqi defectors who described a secret Iraqi camp where Islamic terrorists were trained and biological weapons produced. These accounts have never been independently verified.<sup>53</sup>*

*The Washington Post* also felt compelled to re-examine its coverage before the war and in August published an article quoting Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr.:

*We were so focused on trying to figure out what the administration was doing that we were not giving the same play to people who said it wouldn't be a good idea to go to war and were questioning the administration's rationale. Not enough of those stories were put on the front page. That was a mistake on my part.<sup>54</sup>*

As the insurgency strengthened, Iraq became – even more than during the invasion the previous year – an extremely dangerous place for reporters, photographers, camera operators, drivers and other local staff. The ABC’s Mark Willacy:

*In 2004 it really started to heat up. It started to get ugly with kidnappings. There were horrific scenes, people in balaclavas, gruesome videos of a person's head getting cut off. That was when we started using a fixer and Iraqi cameraman going out, operating on their own with written questions from us. I remember getting blown out of bed by the bomb near the Australian embassy...There was a period there where in six weeks I only went outside once. We had a big house with eight bedrooms in central Baghdad, which we shared with NHK (the main Japanese network). It was an area with private*

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<sup>53</sup> “On Dec. 20, 2001, another front-page article began, ‘An Iraqi defector who described himself as a civil engineer said he personally worked on renovations of secret facilities for biological, chemical and nuclear weapons in underground wells, private villas and under the Saddam Hussein Hospital in Baghdad as recently as a year ago.’ Knight Ridder Newspapers reported last week that American officials took that defector — his name is Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri — to Iraq earlier this year to point out the sites where he claimed to have worked, and that the officials failed to find evidence of their use for weapons programs. It is still possible that chemical or biological weapons will be unearthed in Iraq, but in this case it looks as if we, along with the administration, were taken in. And until now we have not reported that to our readers.” *The New York Times*, 26 May 2004.

<sup>54</sup> *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2004.

*armies and controlled checkpoints, the BBC, the New York Times, the French embassy and us. Baghdad had broken into these fiefdoms and you could be just as much a victim of mistaken identity as you could of a planned insurgent attack.*

Michael Ware, who had gone from Afghanistan to Baghdad for *TIME* Magazine, found it was a difficult time to be an adventurous street reporter:

*The bloodletting was at a horrific rate. There was a day in September when there was a particularly furious battle on Haifa Street (central Baghdad) - when the Americans went in. After that battle, the Iraqi guerrilla commander who controlled Haifa Street sent one of his mid-ranking commanders to my house, and he said al Qaeda has taken over. So he said, the boss said to come and bring you in and show you. I clearly saw the multitude of al Qaeda fighters. You see a member of al Qaeda stepping out from the median strip pulling a pin on a grenade. Now that's the only film I have of my kidnapping.*

*There was an al Qaeda banner and I was put underneath that banner and, and I was being readied for my execution. So they were going to film my death with my own camera. As the group had paused to get the camera ready, the nationalist mid ranking commander who took me in there chose that moment to pipe up and the local commander said 'Well you know he's my guest, he's under my protection so if you kill him you dishonour me'. Through gritted teeth they literally shoved me back.'<sup>55</sup>*

Fallujah remained a festering sore for the Americans throughout the year. By November they had a plan to re-take the city. Key decisions included announcing loud and long that civilians should leave the city – which most did - and then to use overwhelming firepower.

Lindsey Hilsum of *Channel 4 News* witnessed the second battle for Fallujah:

*Being embedded with the Americans for the assault on Fallujah was one of the most rewarding journalistic experiences of my life. It was extraordinary because they are so confident that what they are doing was right that they really didn't care what you thought or what you saw. I found them incredibly open and, you know, if I was appalled that was my problem... It was very frightening at times. I spent a lot of time cowering in the armoured vehicle. My cameraman, who is my partner, who is ex-military, he was out with them and was able to get amazing pictures. At Channel 4 News we had an Iraqi doctor who was doing reporting for us who went into Fallujah afterwards and got the other side of the story. We couldn't get it simultaneously but got it afterwards and later we went back several times and over time we got the full story.'<sup>56</sup>*

The Coalition forces were acutely aware before the second battle for Fallujah that they not only had to re-take the city but that they had to do so in the context of an information war.

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Ware, *Prisoner of War*, Australian Story, ABC Television, 13 September 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Lindsey Hilsum.

Major General Jim Molan, an Australian Army officer, was Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Operations from early September 2004:

*To prepare for the propaganda attacks from a hostile media, General Casey gave me one very important task. He directed me to ensure that there was no more than one hour turnaround between an allegation appearing in the media and our response being fired back... we were not to deny anything immediately nor investigate everything in such detail that we could only reply five days later, far too late for the media cycle. I was aware that Western media would scrutinise the November battle live to millions in the US and around the world. Experts would second-guess and closely examine everything we did.<sup>57</sup>*

Molan writes that the Coalition struggled to be persuasive:

*From my perspective at the coalface it seemed most of the European networks were unreceptive to the evidence we found of torture, murder and intimidation on a vast scale in Fallujah. And of course the Arab networks had absolutely no interest in what we were saying... The headlines screamed that Fallujah had been destroyed. Repeated often enough that became an accepted fact: the city had been wantonly destroyed by US troops and the bodies of woman and children lay thick among the ruins. I admit the damage was visually spectacular.<sup>58</sup>*

The BBC's Nik Gowing says that the increasing availability and accessibility of social media makes it much more difficult for military forces:

*Fallujah 2 is a good example of the end of an era where they probably got away with it. They had embedded journalists but if there had been mobile phones and SD cards circulating, as has happened in North Africa now with time of day burned in and so on then I think the US marines would have had a much more difficult time sustaining that in terms of the public mind.<sup>59</sup>*

Fallujah still resonates around the world. In March 2010, John Simpson reported for the BBC that Iraqi doctors in the city were finding an exceptionally high rate of birth defects in newborns.<sup>60</sup>

Tom Ricks of *The Washington Post* started writing a book about Iraq in early 2005, an attempt to chart the extraordinary progress of the war over the previous two years:

*I was asked frequently by colleagues and others if I really intended to call it Fiasco ... some warned that the word seemed extreme, or at least premature. But when the hard cover appeared in the summer of 2006 almost no one questioned the title.*

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<sup>57</sup> Jim Molan, *Running The War In Iraq* (Harper Collins: Sydney, 2009).

<sup>58</sup> Jim Molan, *Running The War In Iraq*.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Nik Gowing.

<sup>60</sup> "Fallujah doctors report rise in birth defects", *BBC News online*, March 4 2010, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8548707.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8548707.stm)>, viewed 10 June 2011.

Ricks' conclusion was devastating:

*The US-led invasion was launched recklessly, with a flawed plan for war and worse approach to occupation. Spooked by its own false conclusions about the three the Bush Administration hurried its diplomacy, short-circuited its war planning and assembled an agonisingly incompetent occupation. None of this was inevitable.*

Ricks' second book on the Iraq war, *The Gamble*, traces the low points of the war: a massacre of innocents at Haditha by US marines in late 2005, which was publicised by *TIME* in early 2006, a dramatic escalation in communal violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims following the bombing of the famous Al Askari mosque in Samarra (blamed on al Qaeda); by mid-2006 insurgents were detonating as many as 1000 IED (improvised explosive devices) a month. Ricks concluded:

*In 2005 the United States came close to losing the war in Iraq. Even now, the story of how the US military reformation and counterattack came together is barely known. As The Washington Post's military correspondent, I followed events as they occurred, day by day, but it was only when setting out to research and write this book that I delved deeper and found there was a hidden tale to this phase of the war.*

*It would take nearly 12 more months, until late in 2006 for senior officials in the Bush Administration and the US military to recognise that the US effort was heading for defeat. Then, almost at the last minute, and over the objections of nearly all relevant leaders of the US military establishment, a few insiders, led by (retired General Jack) Keane, managed to persuade President Bush to adopt a new, more effective strategy built around protecting the Iraqi people.<sup>61</sup>*

Many former military officers had been appalled at the way that the war was being waged and by the middle of 2006 a gaggle of retired generals were using the op-ed pages of newspapers to make their voices heard; they blamed Rumsfeld for insisting on having too few troops on the ground and employing the wrong tactics. Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney hit back at the critics accusing them of being "intellectually confused" and "abetting terrorism". Ricks writes:

*The turning point in the war was the American mid-term elections of November, 2006 which transferred control of both houses of Congress to the Democrats. Without that "thumping" as President Bush terms it, the administration might never have contemplated the major revision in strategy and leadership that it would make in the following two months.<sup>62</sup>*

### **"Lions led by donkeys"**

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the Untold Story of the American Surge in Iraq* (Penguin, New York, 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble*

A British officer who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan pointed out during the course of my research that one of the dominant themes of British reporting on Iraq and Afghanistan focussed on “lions” – brave soldiers – being let down by “donkeys”, that is incompetent officers (Colonel Blimp-style) but more often faceless, callous, civilian bureaucrats in the Ministry of Defence, or even worse preening, unthinking, out-of-touch politicians. (The origin of the phrase is generally traced back to World War One or the Crimean War).

The tragic story of Sergeant Steve Roberts, the first British soldier to be killed in Iraq, in March 2003, helps illustrate the point. Within a week of his death *The Sunday Telegraph* reported that he’d died because of a shortage of the best quality body armour. It transpired that Sgt Roberts had been issued with enhanced body armour but was asked to give it back a few days before he was shot because it was deemed that another soldier had greater need. Another significant factor in the story was that Sgt Roberts was killed by so called “friendly fire” and that initially the MOD and the Defence minister were excessively defensive about the circumstances.

Shortages of military “kit” became a recurring story throughout the British experience in Iraq and then in Afghanistan; most prominently the decision to continue patrolling in non-armoured Snatch Land Rovers, which had been designed for use in Northern Ireland, even after Iraqi insurgents began using improvised explosive devices to deadly effect.

Dr Matthew Cavanagh was a special advisor to defence ministers during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and he says the senior ranks for the Ministry of Defence, both civilian and military, were often extremely resistant to changing decisions on equipment. But politicians and political advisers had to be more mindful of the influence the media stories were having on the public mood:

*Certainly by late 06/ early 07 I was asking questions – there seems to be an increase in IED attacks (in Afghanistan)- what are we doing to react to it? There was denialism in the MOD and in the senior military at the early stage saying these were legacy mines from the Soviet era. Some of it was, some of it wasn’t... What we did in 2006 was overrule the senior military and order some of the MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) vehicles with some additional money from the Treasury...it took a while to replace all the Snatch Land Rovers and so some were still being used in Afghanistan in 2008 and 2009... and they were still vulnerable to IEDs and people were still being killed in them and so that remained an issue. And the focus the media and the public was ‘well hang on you knew these vehicles are vulnerable as long ago as 2005 I can’t believe that people are still being killed in them now, isn’t this a complete dereliction of duty?’<sup>63</sup>*

Cavanagh says that the failure of the Defence department to invest sufficiently in helicopters – decisions going back many years before the wars – also played out badly in the

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<sup>63</sup> Interview Dr Matthew Cavanagh, London, 5 July 2011

media. By 2009 he was advising Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and public scepticism about the Afghan war was growing:

*All these things came together to create a clear view by summer 2009 that the government had not done its duty in supporting the mission. So whenever anything went wrong, whenever anyone was killed the narrative of the media was the oldest one in the book – lions led by donkeys, the guys on the front lines being betrayed by the higher-ups, just in this case it wasn't the top brass.*<sup>64</sup>

## Wikileaks

In 2007 Wikileaks, which promotes itself as the whistleblower website, published a US military document which showed that in 2002 and 2003 the International Red Cross was prevented from meeting and interviewing some prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. Not only was this a breach of international law it contradicted what the IRC had been told by senior officers at the prison camp.

In April 2010 Wikileaks made a much bigger media splash, releasing a video titled *Collateral Murder* shot from a cockpit mounted camera on an American Apache helicopter. The video showed in appalling detail the slaughter in Iraq in 2007 of civilians including a Reuters photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen and a Reuters driver Saeed Chmagh. They had been misidentified as insurgents carrying weapons. The video had an accompanying audio track of radio conversations in which airmen were asking permission to fire and then celebrated the killings.<sup>65</sup>

While the video was seen on televisions news bulletins and online sites around the world - to near universal condemnation - it had even more impact when seen at considerable length. Andrew Fowler's report for the ABC's *Foreign Correspondent* program<sup>66</sup> and John Pilger's documentary *The War You Don't See*,<sup>67</sup> to name just a few, showed the full horror of the killing. By the time Wikileaks released the video senior Reuters managers had been asking the US Defense Department for it for two years but had been refused. Pentagon officials had insisted that the men killed were insurgents but the video showed this was false.

The Editor-in-chief of Reuters at the time David Schlesinger wrote after seeing the video:

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<sup>64</sup> Interview, Dr Mathew Cavanagh, 5 July 2011

<sup>65</sup> "Collateral Murder", Wikileaks website, 5 April 2011, <[http://www.google.com.au/#sclient=psy-ab&hl=en&source=hp&q=wikileaks%20collateral%20murders&pbx=1&oq=&aq=&aqi=&aql=&gs\\_sm=&gs\\_upl=&bav=on.2,or.r\\_gc.r\\_pw.&fp=cafae0937baf7910&biw=1344&bih=694&pf=p&pdl=3000](http://www.google.com.au/#sclient=psy-ab&hl=en&source=hp&q=wikileaks%20collateral%20murders&pbx=1&oq=&aq=&aqi=&aql=&gs_sm=&gs_upl=&bav=on.2,or.r_gc.r_pw.&fp=cafae0937baf7910&biw=1344&bih=694&pf=p&pdl=3000)> , viewed 22 June 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Fowler, *Truth or Dare*, Foreign Correspondent, 22 June 2010, <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2010/s3040234.htm>

<sup>67</sup> John Pilger, *The War You Don't See*, Everyman Cinema, Hampstead, London, 15 May 2011, <http://www.johnpilger.com/>

*I believe that we as an organization and I as an individual must fight for journalists' safety. I will continue to campaign for better training for the military – to help as much as possible to teach the difference in form between a camera and an rpg (rocket propelled grenade), or between a tripod and a weapon. I will continue to press for thorough and objective investigations. I will continue to insist that governments the world over recognize the rights of journalists to do their jobs. I will continue to ensure that our rules and operating procedures are the safest in the industry.<sup>68</sup>*

A few months later Wikileaks collaborated with international news organisation to release “Afghanistan: The War Logs”. *The Guardian* devoted enormous space to the story leading with the following:

*A huge cache of secret US military files today provides a devastating portrait of the failing war in Afghanistan, revealing how coalition forces have killed hundreds of civilians in unreported incidents, Taliban attacks have soared and NATO commanders fear neighbouring Pakistan and Iran are fuelling the insurgency.<sup>69</sup>*

For military forces and governments Wikileaks was a new, uncontrollable element in the information wars and the US in particular sought to find ways to close it down.

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<sup>68</sup> David Schlesinger, “Video of our colleagues’ deaths in Iraq”, <http://blogs.reuters.com/reuters-editors/2010/04/06/video-of-our-colleagues-death-in-iraq/>

<sup>69</sup> Nick Davies and David Leigh, “Afghanistan: The War Logs”, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/25/afghanistan-war-logs-military-leaks>

### Chapter 3: Generals, politicians, diplomats – using the media

*This chapter looks at how military and government officials used the media to shape public opinion; how the media sometimes mangle the message; and as wars endure, the dynamic becomes more fractured.*

In April 2008 *The New York Times* published an extremely long article, under the banner 'Message Machine', revealing how the Bush Administration had adopted a policy in 2002 (in advance of the Iraq invasion) of briefing military analysts, many of them retired generals. There was a great deal of air time to fill on the 24 hour news channels on television, on radio and on network news special coverage. The Pentagon had realised that the analysts, perceived by viewers to be independent and authoritative, often had more airtime than the reporters who were actually reporting the war. David Barstow won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting:

*Records and interviews show how the Bush administration has used its control over access and information in an effort to transform the analysts into a kind of media Trojan horse — an instrument intended to shape terrorism coverage from inside the major TV and radio networks.*

*Analysts have been wooed in hundreds of private briefings with senior military leaders, including officials with significant influence over contracting and budget matters, records show. They have been taken on tours of Iraq and given access to classified intelligence. They have been briefed by officials from the White House, State Department and Justice Department, including Mr Cheney... In turn, members of this group have echoed administration talking points, sometimes even when they suspected the information was false or inflated. Some analysts acknowledge they suppressed doubts because they feared jeopardizing their access.*

*A few expressed regret for participating in what they regarded as an effort to dupe the American public with propaganda dressed as independent military analysis. "It was them saying, 'We need to stick our hands up your back and move your mouth for you,' " said Robert S. Bevelacqua, a retired Green Beret and former Fox News analyst.<sup>70</sup>*

Barstow reported that many of the military analysts had conflicts of interest. Not only were most being paid for their network appearances; many were consultants for, or on the

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<sup>70</sup> David Barstow, "Message Machine, Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon's Hidden Hand", *The New York Times*, 20 April 2003, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/us/20generals.html?scp=1&sq=david%20barstow%20'Behind%20TV%20Analysts'%2020th%20April%20%202008%20%20%20&st=cse>>, viewed 12 July 2011.

boards of, companies in the defence industry which were lobbying for government contracts (the Bush Administration in 2003 had sought congressional approval to spend US\$87 billion on the Iraq war.) The Times article quoted Lawrence Di Rita, a former senior aide to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld:

*Mr. Di Rita, no longer at the Defense Department, said in an interview that a “conscious decision” was made to rely on the military analysts to counteract “the increasingly negative view of the war” coming from journalists in Iraq. The analysts, he said, generally had “a more supportive view” of the administration and the war, and the combination of their TV platforms and military cachet made them ideal for rebutting critical coverage of issues like troop morale, treatment of detainees, inadequate equipment or poorly trained Iraqi security forces. “On those issues, they were more likely to be seen as credible spokesmen,” he said.<sup>71</sup>*

### **“We Must Quit Iraq says New Head of Army”**

So shouted the front page headline of London’s *The Daily Mail* on 10 October 2006. General Sir Richard Dannatt had given the interview, believing it was the best way to speak directly to ‘middle England’. Unfortunately for him the *Mail* mangled the message. Dannatt, now retired (though back in a form of official harness as Baron Dannatt, Constable of the Tower), writes in his memoir that his intention had been to highlight the importance of the Afghanistan deployment, not to diminish the commitment in Iraq.

As to why he’d felt it necessary to try to communicate directly with the British public, Dannatt confesses that he’d become increasingly unhappy with the Labour government’s media management of the Iraq war:

*One of the most anguished comments made to me by the young soldiers of 3 Para in Afghanistan in June and September 2006 was the worry that their civilian mates in England had no idea what they were going through. The focus of the government’s media effort was on the reconstruction and development aspects of the mission so fighting and dying did not fit the preordained narrative... perhaps a greater worry to commanders in the field was the widely negative view taken by the public at large of the mission in Afghanistan. If Iraq was so unpopular that few national leaders seemed prepared to speak up for it then Afghanistan was in real danger of being tarred by the same brush, as another of Blair’s wars that no one seemed to understand or support.<sup>72</sup>*

Alerted late at night of the report to be published the next day, Dannatt immediately understood the political dilemma posed by the paper’s portrayal of his comments. He didn’t need telling that Prime Minister Tony Blair and his micro-managing media team in Downing

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<sup>71</sup> David Barstow, “Message Machine, Behind TV Analysts”.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Dannatt, *General Sir Richard Dannatt Leading from The Front*.

Street would be alarmed and Dannatt damned as being “off message”. There was no choice but to confront the media storm.

Like any good general Dannatt sought to turn a tactical mishap to his advantage. According to his account he did so by stressing in a series of interviews the obvious difficulties of UK forces fighting two wars at the same time but stressing nonetheless their determination to carry out those missions. While some commentators called for Dannatt’s sacking, he survived, not least because he had earlier warned the Defence Minister Des Browne, in writing, that the Army was being asked to do too much in too little time.

Dannatt is quite candid that he sought to influence the media at a senior level through the course of both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars inviting senior editors including Rebekah Wade, of the Murdoch tabloid *The Sun*, and influential columnists such as the defence writer, Sir Max Hastings, who had become a national figure during the Falklands war, to accompany him on quick dashes around the battlefields.

In *The Sun’s* case there’s generally been unstinting support, expressed in a jingoistic tone, for the wars. British soldiers are invariably cast as heroes, while Defence Ministry bureaucrats are often pilloried. For his part Hastings has become increasingly certain that the Afghan war is being lost.

### **The *Rolling Stone* interview**

Another general who scored a spectacular own-goal did not survive. US General Stanley McChrystal would rue the day that he decided to allow Michael Hastings from *Rolling Stone* magazine to spend time with him and his staff in Paris.<sup>73</sup>

McChrystal had been the most senior American general in Afghanistan since 2009 and head of all NATO forces. He’d had been required to fly to Paris to make the case for France’s continued involvement in the Afghan campaign, given that The Netherlands and Canada had announced their withdrawal and the NATO coalition appeared to be fraying. Out of the battle-zone and at one stage under the liberating power of alcohol, the general’s aides let down their guard.

Hastings recorded vehement criticisms of some of Obama’s inner circle, specifically Vice-President Joe Biden and the National Security Advisor General James Jones (retired). *Rolling Stone* highlighted McChrystal’s officers ridiculing fly-in, fly-out American politicians who claimed expertise after less than 24 hours on the ground in Afghanistan. McChrystal himself was quoted as being dismissive of Richard Holbrooke, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Within 48 hours the general was summoned to Washington and

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<sup>73</sup> Michael Hastings, “The Runaway General: the *Rolling Stone* profile of Stanley McChrystal that changed history”, *Rolling Stone online*, June 22, 2010, <<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-runaway-general-20100622>> viewed 7 July 2011.

briskly sacked in the White House by Obama, to be replaced by General David Petraeus, hero of the 'surge' in Iraq.

The *Rolling Stone* article framed the American-led war as dysfunctional, with political leaders in Washington at odds with the military – which was accurate but embarrassing. The challenge for the new military leader was to prosecute the war more effectively, to promote a united public posture and to 'sell' the strategy.

### **The Petraeus doctrine**

In March 2011 Petraeus addressed the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London, *en route* to Kabul from having given evidence to a congressional committee in Washington.<sup>74</sup> "It's important to remember," he said, "that we really, only recently, got the inputs right in Afghanistan. It was only last year that we were able to halt that momentum [of the Taliban] and reverse it in some very important places."

For the serving and ex-military attending the seminar, the civilians from the Ministry of Defence, the academics, diplomats and journalists, this acknowledgment that the war had been failing disastrously between 2006 and 2010 was greeted with silent assent. No-one was rude enough to ask, "What have we been doing there since October 2001?" That was when the first US missiles slammed into Afghanistan in retaliation for the al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington.

Petraeus is the guru of asymmetric warfare. His masterly 90-minute presentation was absorbed politely. The RUSI insiders were grateful for being given time to probe, although they did so gently. Each question was answered clearly and at exhausting length. The four-star general earned a doctorate from Princeton University along his way to the wars and long ago mastered the art of convincing people of *his* view of the world.

It helps that Petraeus emerged with credit from Iraq garnering praise for his war-fighting and subsequently was seen to demonstrate excellent management skills in running the important city of Mosul after the initial conflict period.

The Washington Post's Tom Ricks showed in *The Gamble* (the successor to the best-seller *Fiasco*) that Petraeus had demonstrated, unlike most of his fellow senior officers, that it was possible to resist an insurgency.<sup>75</sup>

Back in the US in 2006 after two tours of Iraq, Petraeus and many others started putting some intellectual muscle into figuring out how to win the war. The answer lay in commissioning a searching review of counter-insurgency doctrine, known as COIN.

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<sup>74</sup> "The International Mission in Afghanistan: A Discussion with General David H. Petraeus", *Royal United Services Institute online*, 23 March 2011, <<http://www.rusi.org/events/past/ref:E4D8B7D0A5EEA7/>>, viewed 16 May 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General Petraeus And The Untold Story of the American Surge In Iraq* (Penguin Books: London, 2009).

Dr Conrad Crane, Director of the US Army Military History Unit, told a conference at Oxford University in May 2011 that Petraeus did something which for a military leader was close to revolutionary. He invited an enormous range of the best and brightest to come to Fort Leavenworth to talk about the war. One was British Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster, who had served in Iraq and had accused the Americans of “cultural ignorance, moralistic self righteousness and unwarranted optimism”, among other things.<sup>76</sup>

Also invited to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas were human rights lawyers, historians, academics and prominent journalists. Being brought inside the tent and being heard is seductive. So it's hardly surprising that when Petraeus rolled out the *Army/ Marine Corps Field Manual 3.24* at the end of 2006 he and Conrad Crane and other authors were promoted by the media, most prominently by the news weeklies *TIME* and *Newsweek*, as the men who could turn around the US's failing fortunes in Iraq. The publicity in turn made the counterinsurgency manual a publishing sensation. Amazon sold it by the truckload and 140,000 copies of *Field Manual 3.24* were downloaded from the internet.

Through the course of 2007 the gloss started coming off and the conflict seemed intractable; indeed it was the bloodiest year of the war. In August, *TIME* featured a heroic-looking Petraeus on its cover but the headline questioned whether Iraq could be won. Fast-forward to the Afghan war and Petraeus is nothing if not a realist. The other key point he made in his RUSI address was this: “You cannot kill or capture your way out of an industrial strength insurgency. You must re-integrate as many reconcilable members [of the Taliban] as you can.”

Petraeus claimed 700 former Taliban had re-integrated into society. Another 2,000 were going through the process. Additionally there were another “couple of thousand who have gone home and laid down their weapons”. The take-home message for the military leaders and opinion-formers was that the political side of the counter-insurgency operation in Afghanistan, aided by a huge civilian relief and reconstruction effort, is making progress. Unsurprisingly, not everyone is convinced.

### **“Diplomat attacks US Afghan commander”**

This headline in *The Guardian* was, if anything, an understatement. Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, former UK ambassador to Afghanistan and until last year the UK's Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, had turned his back on 30 years of diplomacy to scarify Petraeus:

*He has increased the violence, trebled the number of Special Forces raids by British, American, Dutch and Australian special forces going out killing Taliban commanders*

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor and Jamie Wilson, “US army in Iraq institutionally racist, claims British officer”, *The Guardian*, 12 January, 2006 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/jan/12/topstories3.iraq>>, viewed 2 July, 2011

*and there has been a lot more rather regrettable boasting from the military about the body count. Regrettably, General Petraeus has curiously ignored his own principles of counter-insurgency in the field manual, which speaks of politics being the predominant factor in dealing with an insurgency.*<sup>77</sup>

Cowper-Coles fired more verbal missiles on the BBC's *Today* program, which commands a daily audience of six million, and still more in a flurry of other interviews, articles and appearances. It was all part of the marketing of his book, the ultimate insider's account of the most recent four years of the Afghan war.<sup>78</sup> It's an engaging, well-written memoir, charting Cowper-Coles' growing disenchantment between 2007 and September 2010, when he resigned from the Foreign Office. His concerns were many: the strategies employed; the ineffectual Afghan government headed by what he called the capricious President Karzai; and the unreality of political posturing in London and Washington and other NATO country capitals:

*We stuck at it because we wanted to believe our generals. Every year they assured us that, at last, they had a strategy and the resources they needed to do the job. This year at last, they said every year, we are going to turn the corner. The Americans had a new plan, a new general, a fresh surge. Astronomical progress was being made. The momentum of the insurgency was being reversed. There was reason for cautious optimism.*<sup>79</sup>

Cowper-Coles say this official narrative is false, that the military campaign is failing because the rate of civilian casualties is at an all-time high, thus creating great resentment among ordinary people, and that without an overarching political strategy involving all the regional players like Pakistan, India, China and Russia, as well as the Taliban, there can be no chance of success. Now working for an arms manufacturer, Cowper-Coles said in an interview in London:

*This war is going to be lost, not in Kabul or in Kandahar, but in Washington. And above all on the 7th floor of the State Department, where there just isn't the political will to broker a serious peace that this problem requires.*<sup>80</sup>

Quizzed on the Cowper-Coles thesis, a senior Ministry of Defence spokesman chose his words carefully:

*Sherard's got a book to sell, so deliberately he's going to be confrontational, deliberately he's going to bring up these stories. Sherard also left – without wishing to denigrate him – over a year ago now before the surge of American troops really took place... I think that was game-changing. I think the situation on the ground has*

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<sup>77</sup> Julian Borger, "Afghanistan war tactics are profoundly wrong, says former ambassador", *The Guardian*, 25 May 2011.

<sup>78</sup> Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables From Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign* (Harper Press: London, 2011).

<sup>79</sup> Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables From Kabul*.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Sherard Cowper-Coles, London, 15 July 2011.

*changed quite a long way... at the time he left theatre he was probably correct; 15-18 months on I think there's a different situation and maybe 18 months (further) on history will paint this differently.<sup>81</sup>*

Offered the right of reply, Cowper-Coles expressed his irritation:

*Well that's complete and utter rubbish. Conditions on the ground have moved on, in fact they've worsened, violence is at record levels. We've seen in this last week, Karzai's brother assassinated in the heart of a city. General Carter said he was stabilising Kandahar, the centre of NATO strategy. We've seen the attack on the mosque, the attack on the Intercontinental Hotel (Kabul). I mean it is just cloud cuckoo land ... I'm afraid that a military spokesman who can say that to you with a straight face, its symptomatic of what was called in another war (Vietnam) – a bright shining lie.<sup>82</sup>*

In June 2011, the BBC aired the first of three one-hour television documentaries tracing and analysing the course of the war in Afghanistan. The first entitled *War Without End?* was a tough critique with a queue of the former US and British government ministers lining up to admit serious errors of judgement in the early stages of the war. And when the coalition finally tackled the Taliban resurgence, General Sir Richard Dannatt conceded:

*A lot of the people that we were killing were farmers who had AK 47s put in their hands by the Taliban, part-time Taliban, and not very well trained, and we killed huge numbers of them... that was not to our liking at all and we were conscious that every one we killed we were actually fuelling the insurgency.<sup>83</sup>*

Inevitably the program also focussed on Afghanistan's endemic corruption. A former minister, Kym Howells, recalls advising UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown that it would be hard to sustain a commitment to a government "up to its eyeballs in corruption." That kind of incisive reporting makes it more difficult for the military to keep making the case for staying the course in Afghanistan. The senior MOD official said:

*Yes, I watched the same program last night and it left me feeling also that we have a long way to go on this particular issue. Afghanistan's not a perfect place. It starts from a very, very low threshold and it's inching forward week by week. Corruption's part of that process and stamping out corruption is what we are trying to do. But we shouldn't be leading that process. It's for the Afghan government to tackle its own issues.<sup>84</sup>*

The challenge for the British government and military is to remain publicly upbeat about the contribution that is being made in Afghanistan. And so it makes considerable effort to embed visiting correspondents. But after many visits to Afghanistan, experienced reporters like Hilsum of *Channel 4 News* are weary of the process:

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<sup>81</sup> Interview Ministry of Defence officer, London, 23 June 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Sherard Cowper-Coles.

<sup>83</sup> John Ware, *War Without End*, BBC TV documentary, screened 22 June 2011.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Ministry of Defence officer.

*The British military don't make any distinction between the tabloid press and the rest of us and that is because the squaddies read the tabloids and they watch Sky, so that's what they like and they're interested in. And yet it is the tabloid press which is likely to stitch them up. It's a schizophrenic relationship because on the one hand 'They're Our Brave Boys' and on the other hand they're the tabloids and they always want to stitch someone up... I mean the most fundamental thing about all this is that the reason the public has turned against the war is not that the media has reported it badly, it's because the media has told the truth, which is that the British and the Americans are not winning this war. And they don't like it. They can do whatever they want in terms of their spin and messaging. It doesn't make any difference. However much they try and tell us that it is all going fine, we know it isn't, because we've been around this block before.<sup>85</sup>*

After many years of trying to report Afghanistan by flying in reporters and camera operators from the ABC's South Asia bureau in New Delhi – and more occasionally for specialist programs from Australia – in 2011 an ABC Afghanistan correspondent was appointed. Sally Sara had successfully made the case that she needs to live and breathe the story and she couldn't do that from Delhi. Her view is that embedding with military forces regularly is essential:

*Embeds are an important part of the story, but they're not the only story and it's important to have context with them. Also, there's the old saying 'dead journos don't write many stories'; you've got to stay alive out there and there are some regions where the only way to go in is with the military. You couldn't wander around in some of those places on your own, so they give limited and controlled access, but some access nonetheless. As long as you're balancing those stories out with civilian stories then it all fits into the bigger picture... It's an important turning point in the war. The past six months has been the bloodiest on record for civilians in Afghanistan, the war is peaking in some ways. June was the bloodiest single month in terms of civilian casualties.<sup>86</sup>*

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with Lindsey Hilsum.

<sup>86</sup> Interview Sally Sara, Skype, 22 July 2011.

#### **Chapter 4: Killing Osama Bin Laden and the long goodbye: ending NATO's combat role in Afghanistan in 2014**

*This chapter assesses the current state of the war in Afghanistan with reference to Osama Bin Laden's killing, inspiring calls for a speedier Coalition withdrawal; Pakistan's embarrassment and concerns about sovereignty; the ISI intelligence service, sections of which support the Taliban; the 'drone war' in the tribal areas along the Afghanistan/Pakistan frontier; and the Taliban reconciliation process and political negotiations.*

In media terms, it was historic. While Twitter came of age as a serious news source in Iran in 2009, and more generally in the Egyptian revolution in early 2011, it became a breaking news feed in early May 2011. A tweet from a Pakistani near the Osama Bin Laden compound in Abbotabad (although he didn't know it at the time), another tweet from a former senior defence official in Washington, plus other digital fragments snatched from social media, re-tweeted and picked up by 24-hour news channels heralded one of the most electrifying episodes of the Afghanistan war.

The image that stays in the mind is a single still photograph taken in the White House situation room: President Barack Obama, hunched and anxious in the corner; Secretary of State Hilary Clinton alarmed, hand to mouth. Months later we are still not permitted to see the SEAL helmet camera vision of the kill, nor photographs of the scene: allegedly they're too horrific.

Strangely, given the many months that the CIA and military had to plan the operation, the White House's media management seemed inept – the story of the SEALs killing bin Laden kept changing; then the body was conveniently dumped at sea. Hardly surprising then that the audiences which the Obama administration wanted to influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan were left variously outraged, offended and (initially at least) disbelieving. In the US, though, this hardly seemed to matter. Obama's poll numbers spiked and the Pew Research Center found in June 2011 that 56 percent of Americans wanted to quit Afghanistan as soon as practicable.

Several weeks after Bin Laden's death, the former editor of *The Guardian*, Peter Preston, a well-respected figure in the United Kingdom, used his regular column in the newspaper to advocate a speedy withdrawal of international forces:

*Bush invaded Afghanistan to get bin Laden. Both of them are history now, but any chance of a settled stable Pakistan will be history too unless the calamitous chain of events along the Khyber is broken. When you're not winning in Helmand, stop digging;*

*when you're losing in Islamabad, throw away the spade; when there's a chance of something better at last, seize it.*<sup>87</sup>

More surprising was the approach of Greg Sheridan, a long-time foreign affairs writer in *The Australian*, the conservative national daily:

*There are now more Afghans fighting us than there were nine years ago; the situation in Pakistan, politically and in terms of its own domestic security, is much worse than it was nine years ago. No matter what we do, we cannot win in Afghanistan while Pakistan helps the Pashtun-based Taliban in the south. We have known that for a long time. That the Pakistanis were so obviously sheltering Osama bin Laden is a sign of their continued deep investment in the Taliban and, by extension, in parts of al-Qa'ida.*<sup>88</sup>

Both Preston and Sheridan identified the key point. Pakistan, 180 million strong, nuclear-armed, hampered by a feeble government, dominated by a military which has been infiltrated and subverted by fundamentalists, is the biggest issue on the sub-continent. Afghanistan, while important, is just the current flashpoint of a much larger strategic game.

Columnists generally don't expect governments to do as they say, but they like to think they can nudge the debate towards their preferred course. In Australia, despite some opinion polls suggesting that the Afghan deployment is only supported by between 20-30 percent of the population, the government and opposition parties remain in lock-step with the US and the UK, reiterating a determination to stay in the fight until at least 2014 with no reduction planned in the 1550-strong contingent. Australia's key contribution are special forces units – the third-largest contingent in Afghanistan, notwithstanding Australia not being a member of NATO.

**“Is the Afghan campaign worth a further 42 Australian lives?”** [*The Age*, 12th July 2011]

Former journalist Hugh White, once Australia's pre-eminent defence bureaucrat and now a Professor of Strategic Studies at the Australian National University, raised serious questions in that newspaper article about a lack of government transparency:

*Something has changed for Australian soldiers in Afghanistan. You can see it in the arithmetic. In the past year the rate at which our soldiers have been dying has gone up almost eight-fold. We ought to be asking why? Perhaps they are facing stiffer opposition? But not if you believe what the government and the Australian Defence Force keep telling us. They say that the Taliban have been mauled and are on the back*

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<sup>87</sup> Peter Preston, “We must seize the day in Pakistan and Afghanistan: The death of Osama bin Laden gives us a chance to ease the problems of Kabul and Islamabad”, *The Guardian*, 15 May 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/15/pakistan-afghanistan-death-bin-laden>>, viewed 16 May 2011.

<sup>88</sup> Greg Sheridan, “We should withdraw with departing Allies,” *The Australian*, 25 May 2011, <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/opinion/we-should-withdraw-with-departing-allies/story-e6frgd0x-1226062282828>>, viewed 30 May 2011.

*foot. So the most likely explanation is that our soldiers are undertaking more hazardous operations.*<sup>89</sup>

White's analysis is that at the current rate, 42 more soldiers will be killed before 2014. He questions whether that sacrifice can be justified, given that there's no evidence that Afghanistan security will be any better than now.

In the United Kingdom, where Afghanistan is a much bigger political issue than in Australia, the government is keen to show that it has a staged withdrawal plan and the conflict is not, as the BBC documentary title suggested, war without end. Despite private warnings and public pressure by generals using the media, Prime Minister David Cameron declared that precisely 426 of the UK's 10,000 service personnel would be withdrawn this year. Another 500 would come home by the end of 2012.

When service chiefs also publicly voiced concerns about the stresses involving in undertaking operations in Afghanistan and Libya at the same time, Cameron felt the need to rebuke them, saying, "You do the fighting and I'll do the talking."

In Washington, too, the rationale for troop stability has been argued strenuously by the Pentagon. We have the Taliban under severe pressure, officials say; maintain troop levels at current levels through two more fighting seasons in 2012 and 2013, while simultaneously building up the Afghan forces; thereafter the prospects are that most combat forces can be withdrawn through 2014. But the White House had an alternative narrative. As *The New York Times* reported, citing unnamed sources:

*As the Obama administration nears a crucial decision on how rapidly to withdraw combat forces from Afghanistan, high-ranking officials say that al Qaeda's original network in the region has been crippled, providing a rationale for an accelerated reduction of troops. The officials said the intense campaign of drone strikes and other covert operations in Pakistan... had left al Qaeda paralyzed, with its leaders either dead or pinned down in the frontier area near Afghanistan. Of 30 prominent members of the terrorist organization in the region identified by intelligence agencies as targets, 20 have been killed in the last year and a half, they said, reducing the threat they pose.*<sup>90</sup>

(Several weeks later, the new US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, previously Director of the CIA, ventured to the same paper that America was 'within reach of strategically defeating al

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<sup>89</sup> Hugh White, "Is the Afghan campaign worth a further 42 Australian lives?", *The Age*, 12 July 2011, <<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/politics/is-the-afghan-campaign-worth-a-further-42-australian-lives-20110711-1halb.html>>, viewed 15 July 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Mark Landler and Helene Cooper "Qaeda Woes Furl Talk of Speeding Afghan Pullback", *The New York Times*, 18 June 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/19/world/asia/19policy.html?pagewanted=all>>, viewed 20 June 2011.

Qaeda.’ The American focus, he said, had narrowed to capturing or killing 10 to 20 crucial leaders of the terrorist group in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.)<sup>91</sup>

When all this inspired leaking had set the scene, President Obama rejected the military’s best advice, announcing that 10,000 troops would come home by Christmas this year and another 23,000 will return in September 2012; conveniently just in time for the presidential election in November. Subsequently General David Petraeus and Admiral Mike Mullen made it clear in congressional testimony that they regarded these troop reductions as risky, but Obama, who opposed the war in Iraq and has been a reluctant warrior in Afghanistan, wants to convince the American people that progress is being made in Afghanistan and the ‘surge’ forces can soon come home.

Having set 2014 as the exit date for combat forces, coalition officers have put increased efforts into training and equipping Afghan security forces. They’re trying to build up a force of 350,000 that can carry on the fight against the insurgency once foreign forces have left. There are many obstacles; poor pay, squalid barracks, tribal rivalries, high desertion rates, bribery by drug gangs, intimidation by insurgents. The US, UK and Australian media have reported on all these failures. Another, though less immediately obvious, problem is that only 14 percent of recruits are literate. US Lt. General William Caldwell IV told the New York Times:

*I can't even begin to tell you what that means... without literacy, they can't even account for their equipment because they cannot read the serial numbers. How can they call in air strikes, artillery fire? We have bought them 45,000 vehicles already, 56 airframes. We are buying a lot of equipment that requires basic reading to do maintenance on them.*<sup>92</sup>

Caldwell’s answer is to hire thousands of teachers to ensure basic literacy and numeracy in Afghan security forces.

### **Negotiating with the Taliban**

The US army counter-insurgency manual, written under General Petraeus’ direction and published at the end of 2006, emphasised classical theory (espoused as long ago as the French wars in Indo-China) that some form of political reconciliation is ultimately essential for a war to end. So finally, in mid-2011, President Hamid Karzai revealed, and Coalition governments confirmed, that the US was talking with the Taliban. But were they talks about talks or actually a substantial engagement?

Ahmed Rashid, one of the most respected journalists in Pakistan and widely read in the West, dug behind the rhetoric and unearthed some facts for the BBC. There had, he wrote,

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<sup>91</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, “Panetta says Defeat of Al Qaeda Is Within Reach”, *The New York Times*, 9 July 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/world/asia/10military.html>>, viewed 10 July 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, “US General Cites Ambitious Goals for Training Afghan Forces”, *The New York Times*, 24 August 2010, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/24/world/asia/24military.html>>, viewed 30 August 2011.

been three rounds of talks, beginning in November 2010, two in Germany and one in the Gulf state of Qatar. Rashid warned that the Taliban representatives want serious confidence-building measures, including the release of three senior Taliban commanders who have been held at the Guantanamo prison in Cuba since 2001.<sup>93</sup>

While politically and legislatively that would be a hard sell in the US, Cooper-Coles believes such obstacles could be overcome if there were sufficient political will:

*Well, I think the Americans would, could allow it to happen if they wanted to. The real problem has been below Obama. Mrs Clinton has not really invested in peace in Afghanistan... unfortunately the black-and-white world of American politics is divided into goodies and baddies and for them the Taliban are the baddies.*<sup>94</sup>

Rashid warned Kabul and Washington to stop promoting the talks for their own political ends. "At stake is not just peace for Afghanistan, but the entire region including Pakistan which is teetering on the edge of a meltdown."<sup>95</sup>

The military perspective on negotiating with the enemy revolves around leverage. A senior British defence spokesman asked rhetorically:

*Do you negotiate from a position of strength or a position of weakness? And were you to enter a ceasefire, are you not just giving the insurgents breathing space? Reconciliation is a process that's kicked off now but identifying the people whom you reconcile with and how you reconcile with them is a really interesting issue. Do you stop fighting while it happens? We believe not.*<sup>96</sup>

Rashid writes that while the US-Taliban talks are proceeding:

*Pakistan and Afghanistan are pursuing a separate talks process, in which Kabul is expecting Islamabad [the capital of Pakistan] to allow the Pakistan-based Taliban to participate. The most recent round in this dialogue, which took place in Kabul at the end of June [2011], failed to yield major results because the Pakistanis are still unwilling to allow Afghan government officials to meet Taliban leaders based in Pakistan.*<sup>97</sup>

Peter Bergen, one of the leading terrorism analysts in the US, struck the same theme in a CNN column paraphrasing evidence he had given to a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing:

*The arrest in Pakistan last year of Mullah Baradar, the Taliban No. 2 who had been negotiating directly with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, shows that the Pakistani*

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<sup>93</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Afghanistan: tense times for delicate US-Taliban talks", *BBC online*, 1 July 2011, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13991769>>, viewed 2 July 2011.

<sup>94</sup> Interview Cowper-Coles.

<sup>95</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Afghanistan: tense times for delicate US-Taliban talks".

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Ministry of Defence officer.

<sup>97</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Afghanistan: tense times for delicate US-Taliban talks".

*military and government want to retain a veto over any significant negotiations going forward.*<sup>98</sup>

In the wake of the Osama Bin Laden killing, the US has tried to get tough with Pakistan, holding up a US\$800 million tranche of the US\$2 billion which it annually provides to the military. The head of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, which the US also helps to fund, was invited to Washington for talks. Reports suggested that he'd been presented with a list of targets that the US wants to 'kill or capture'. For Cowper-Coles this notion of out-terrorising the terrorists is bound to end in failure:

*Anyone with any knowledge of the Pashtuns and the tribes would know killing them on an almost industrial scale, particularly the mid-level commanders first of all makes those that remain more radical, less tractable; it may buy you short-term respite, it doesn't buy long term peace.*<sup>99</sup>

The former diplomat believes that the coalition needs to radically re-think its approach to the Taliban:

*What they believe is that they were not defeated in 2001 – and they're right on that. They believe that they're winning – and they're right on that. And they would prefer to stop fighting and have an honourable peace. On that we haven't yet made them a serious offer.*<sup>100</sup>

Sally Sara, the ABC's Afghanistan correspondent, says it is important to recognise that the Taliban is not just a military organisation. In some parts of the country the central government has been noticeably absent and it is the Taliban which has been running, schools, the taxation and the judiciary:

*There's a strong view that this is a war that will never, ever, be won by military means, and there needs to be a political settlement but no one really knows what that means... there's been discussion for example about whether women's rights are going to be traded away with the Taliban at the negotiating table. Someone said you need to understand that if the Taliban come back it won't just be bad for women, it will be bad for everyone so there are concerns that the country will go backwards.*<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Peter Bergen, "Don't count on a peace deal with Taliban", *CNN online*, 24 May 2011, <[http://articles.cnn.com/2011-05-24/opinion/bergen.taliban.talks\\_1\\_taliban-leader-taliban-foreign-ministry-islamic-emirate?\\_s=PM:OPINION](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-05-24/opinion/bergen.taliban.talks_1_taliban-leader-taliban-foreign-ministry-islamic-emirate?_s=PM:OPINION)>, viewed 5 June 2011.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Cowper-Coles.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Cowper-Coles.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Sara.

## Chapter 5: Observations and conclusions

### Observations

Just before the 10th anniversary of the 11th of September attacks *The New York Times* published confronting statistics which summed up the costs of the past decade.<sup>102</sup>

- American military personnel killed in Afghanistan and Iraq: 6,204
- American contactors killed in the same battle zones: 2,300
- Coalition forces killed: 1,192
- Afghan and Iraqi forces killed: 18,678
- Iraqi civilians killed (minimum according to Iraq Body Count): 102,339

The Times' estimated total for financial costs of the wars and homeland security was US\$3.3 trillion.

Brown University's "Costs of Wars" project – a long-running, multi-disciplinary study involving economists, lawyers, and political scientists – reported in June 2011 a much higher death toll of at least 225,000 civilians and military killed. In part this was because it included Pakistan. The Brown study calculated the financial cost of the war to the United States as between US\$3.2 and US\$4 trillion, which includes estimates of treating wounded veterans decades into the future.<sup>103</sup>

The US Congressional Research Service earlier this year issued a highly detailed report of all war, diplomatic, aid and veterans' costs, publishing a figure of US\$1.28 trillion.<sup>104</sup>

These figures, whichever set one favours, illustrate the extraordinary investment the United States and coalition partners have made in the name of ensuring national, and to some degree, international security and why the media have a responsibility to continue reporting and analysing the wars.

Not least it is because the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been extremely complex. Even those with the highest authority and responsibility had trouble following them. President Bush was briefed on the wars every working day at 7am. Towards the end of his presidency in 2008, he urged his advisor Lt. General Douglas Lute to go out to Afghanistan and make a strategic review. Bob Woodward writes in *Obama's Wars* that Lute reported back:

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<sup>102</sup> "The Wars of 9/11, by the Numbers", *New York Times*, 8 September 2011, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/us/sept-11-reckoning/index-war-abroad.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/us/sept-11-reckoning/index-war-abroad.html?_r=1)>, viewed 12 September 2011.

<sup>103</sup> *Costs of War*, website, <<http://costsofwar.org/>>, viewed 12 September 2011.

<sup>104</sup> Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations since 9/11* (Congressional Research Service, March 29, 2011).

*He found 10 distinct but overlapping wars in progress. First there was the conventional war run by the Canadian general in charge of the region for NATO, second the CIA was conducting its own covert paramilitary war. The Green Berets and Joint Special Operations Command each had their wars tracking down high value targets. The training and equipment command ran its own operation. The Afghan National Army, the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Directorate for Security, the country's CIA sponsored intelligence service, were also fighting separate wars.*

The big questions for a media study such as this are whether audiences in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia have a clear idea of what really happened this past decade; and why it is continuing?

John Hanrahan has been studying media coverage of the wars for NiemanWatchdog.org, of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. He concluded that, apart from in 2001/02, US newspapers have grossly underreported Afghanistan:

*Perhaps no story other than the nation's continuing economic, jobs and housing crisis is as worthy of extensive reportage as this major and unpopular war in Afghanistan/Pakistan – but to say that the press overall is barely covering it is unfortunately all too true. The Pew Charitable Trust reported in January that for all of 2010 only 4 percent of the news hole in the nation's newspapers was devoted to war news originating either in Afghanistan or the United States. (The ongoing war in Iraq fared even worse, with 1 percent coverage in 2010.)*

*As skimpy as newspaper coverage of the Afghanistan/Pakistan war has been, TV has been even stingier. The Tyndall Report, which monitors network TV news (but not Fox or CNN), reported that in 2010 the Afghan war received a total of 416 minutes of coverage out of some 15,000 minutes of news broadcast by ABC, CBS and NBC in their 30-minute weekday evening news programs. This represented a 25 percent drop from the 2009 figure of 556 minutes...The NBC coverage figures out to average 21 seconds per newscast – or less than 2 minutes per week. The Iraq war fared even worse – 94 total minutes from all three networks, with CBS the lowest at 24 minutes – one minute every two weeks.<sup>105</sup>*

Needless to say, Hanrahan found an array of illustrious journalists and media academics to express their despair about press coverage of Afghanistan and he noted that Al Jazeera (English), which is mostly seen online in the US rather than on television, was out-reporting American television networks on stories which it was important for American citizens to know.

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<sup>105</sup> John Hanrahan, "The war without end is a war with hardly any news coverage", *Nieman Watchdog*, 10 August 2011, <<http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=background.view&backgroundid=00569>>, Viewed 9 September 2011.

My perspective from three months at Oxford was that the UK media was doing rather better. I was struck by the prominence, space provided and the nuanced reporting of the war in the broadsheet newspapers, certainly compared to Australia where the paucity of original print reporting is striking. UK broadcasters also take the war seriously and the BBC, through its enormous range of programs both nationally and internationally, has been outstanding. There's no doubt that news consumers in the UK are immensely better informed about the rollercoaster of the NATO/ISAF campaign and, as importantly, about the vagaries of Afghan and Pakistani politics than Australians. While I recognise the argument that digital convergence means that national boundaries are increasingly irrelevant, most people still turn to their own national news providers as prime sources.

Ask the same question about Iraq: whether audiences in the US, the UK and Australia have a clear idea of what really happened this past decade and why the situation is continuing, and you would have to doubt it.

### **Iraq – the forgotten war**

Baghdad is no longer the centre of the journalistic world. It's rare now to see on a mainstream television news bulletin, or in a newspaper, a report from anywhere in Iraq, other than a short take on a bombing or other atrocity. If such a reminder of Iraq emerges, it is invariably without much context, let alone characterisation. The main English language news agencies, *Reuters* and *Associated Press* (both in text, still photographs and video), and *Agence France Presse* all maintain bureaus in Baghdad and retain a network of local reporters throughout the country. They do a good job of recording daily incidents and identifying longer-term trends, so a reliable base of information is available. But many big news organisations appear to have adopted the view that without a focus on their own soldiers at war, Iraq no longer deserves attention. The BBC World, Arabic and Farsi services retain a meaningful commitment to the story.

But in the advanced economies where most people are informed by television news, Iraq is no longer a story, certainly compared to the uprising in Syria or the war in Libya. (The British media regulator, Ofcom, says that in the UK a staggering 74 percent of people reported that television was their main source of news.<sup>106</sup> Martin Chulov closed *The Guardian's* Baghdad bureau in March 2011 and is now covering the Middle East by travelling widely from Beirut. He arrived in Baghdad as the US media was leaving:

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<sup>106</sup> Executive Summary, Ofcom Report on Media Ownership Rules, 19 November 2009, *Ofcom online*: 1.14 Television remains by far the most popular medium for UK news, with 74% of people in the UK using it as their main source of UK news. There are indications that television may have become even more important over recent years. Newspapers, radio and the internet are considered to be the main source of UK news by a broadly similar number of consumers (8%, 7% and 6% respectively). <<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/consultations/morr/statement/morrstatement.pdf2009>>, viewed 7 July 2011.

*By that point, late 2008, the American networks NBC, CBS and ABC had all but lost interest and when they did hit town they were doing embed stuff and very little that was reflective of the broader story. I thought the New York Times and CNN, in particular, were doing some very good work. They were still committed. CNN was at that point still spending around eight million bucks a year. The Times was still spending around two and a half million dollars. And their commitment stayed the course through the next two and a half years. I think their coverage had depth, it was professional, it was rigorous and they were still committed to a story which was probably the most defining story for them of the past decade.<sup>107</sup>*

Chulov says he intends returning to Baghdad periodically because there's much to say about Iraq's fractured government, about the investment surges in the south and north which have started to benefit people and the expected withdrawal of the last 45,000 American troops at year's end. At that time there'll be a serious analysis of the costs of the war:

*It has been a strategic defeat for the Americans; Iraq is very much under significant influence from Iran. The most significant players in Iraq in 2011 are Iran first, Turkey, second, America quite a distant third, followed by Saudi Arabia. The White House clearly wants this misadventure to be over but the military is very much aware of legacy issues. They don't want this to be all for nothing - eight to nine years of sacrifice. 10 billion dollars a month for two years during the most difficult period, a trillion dollar misadventure in the heartland of Arabia and all that you achieve out of it is that your mortal foe, the Iranians are going to run the place.*

*They don't want that to happen, so they're trying very hard to stay behind and see what they can do to stabilize the place throughout 2012 and 2013, but Maliki (Prime Minister) now has to make a very significant decision about whether he will allow US forces to stay behind in any capacity because that's something that will not be tolerated by his key patrons.*

Tom Ricks, formerly with *T Washington Post* and now a senior fellow at the Washington think-tank, the Center for New American Security, agrees with the analysis that the US has suffered a strategic defeat in Iraq and that Iran has gained influence. As for a US military presence in Iraq, Ricks writes, "I think they probably will leave and then a small contingent will come back in as advisors or trainers or something."<sup>108</sup>

Michael Ware, who reported from Iraq between 2003 and early 2009, initially for *TIME Magazine* and then *CNN*, concludes:

*It is a fact that to an enormous degree the undisputed winner is Iran, as America's Arab allies regularly warned them would happen. Washington handed Iraq to the Iranian government on a silver platter. From the moment that the first American*

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with Martin Chulov, Skype, 1 July 2011.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Tom Ricks by email, 6 July 2011.

*armour crossed north over the Kuwaiti border in March, 2003 America was at war with Iran; it's just that America didn't realise it for four years.*

*Through successive elections Iraqi governments have been comprised of factions created by Iran, sponsored by Iran, or like the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) in the north, have a long standing relationship of convenience with Iran; indeed the CIA listed the president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, as Iran's number one agent of influence in the country.<sup>109</sup>*

## **Conclusions**

I set out to focus on three issues:

- to chart the course of reporting from Afghanistan to Iraq and back to Afghanistan and to make some broad assessments about quality;
- to examine the means by which governments and military forces have sought to influence reporting and commentary and the inherent tensions in that process;
- and to look at those times when media coverage has influenced the way the wars were fought.

## **Quality**

The observations at the start of this chapter make the case for persistence. News organisations have invested enormously in Iraq since 2002; indeed, the better ones didn't stop paying attention after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The costs, human, financial and reputational, are massive. There is an obligation on correspondents and news managers not to ignore the continuing insurgencies, political intrigues, ethnic and religious tensions and social problems which flowed from the invasion of Iraq. And clearly that imperative is just as important in continuing, indeed enhancing, the reporting of Afghanistan.

It is clear that in making their case for war against Iraq governments in the US, UK and Australia misrepresented intelligence on weapons of mass destruction and links between the Iraqi government and al Qaeda. In doing so, media organisations and through them the citizens of the nations going to war were seriously misled. Some reporters and commentators were complacent, transcribing or broadcasting what they were told, treating government pronouncements with undue reverence and making no further inquiries. Others sought to scrutinise the claims, sought expert international opinion and challenged governments on the urgency for war.

Beyond the first blush of triumphalism following the capitulation of the Saddam Hussein regime, the official narrative was increasingly challenged. Media in all three countries highlighted the gulf between rhetoric and reality on weapons of mass destruction and

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<sup>109</sup> Interview with Michael Ware, Skype, 2 July, 2011.

reported that far from reining in terrorism, the war had made Iraq a magnet for terrorists from around the world. In quick time liberators had become occupiers and the tide of blood washed away good intentions.

*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have apologised for their failures in 2003 and 2003 in interrogating the arguments for war and in not giving space and prominence to sceptics. These newspapers have properly set a standard of responsibility which has been remarkably lacking by many other newspapers, magazines and broadcasters in the US, UK and Australia which effectively joined the campaign for going to war.

Mark Damazer, the former Controller of *Radio 4*, the intellectual heartland of the BBC, argues that reporting of the Afghanistan War was too often overshadowed or ignored because of Iraq:

*To a considerable extent what happened to the armed forces, diplomacy and politics happened to journalistic appetites. Iraq sucked up all, or nearly all, the BBC's energies and that was unsatisfactory. There was the occasional report (Afghanistan) - on the BBC and in the serious newspapers, which indicated that the enterprise was not going swimmingly, but nothing that I can recall that really tipped the public off that it was going rather poorly.*

*It seemed to come as a surprise several years later, say 2007, when Hamid Karzai, the smooth, English-speaking fashion icon of 2002 emerged as a corrupt obstacle to Afghan reconstruction. Indeed I recall trying to launch an Afghan season in 2007/08 on Radio 4 after a conversation with a senior western diplomat who told me that things were going very badly indeed; and (I was ) having a great deal of trouble persuading some brilliant program editors that there was enough of a story. We did it, but it went off with less conviction than necessary and made insufficient impact.<sup>110</sup>*

This analysis seems persuasive and not just for the BBC, though some American and Australian media showed a renewed interest in Afghanistan a year or two earlier. Some reporters and editors, during interviews in the course of researching this paper, have recognised this failure; others have sought to argue that just as the US, UK and Australian governments found it hard to fight two wars at the same time, so too had they struggled to cover all fronts. My view is that those in the latter camp failed their audiences in that period.

In many of the interviews for this paper, I asked people to nominate those news organisations which they felt had done best overall on Iraq and Afghanistan. This was hardly scientific but most respondents rated *The New York Times* on top or high on their lists, though *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian* and the BBC also stood out. This is hardly surprising; after all these have been American-led wars and would not have happened but

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<sup>110</sup> Mark Damazer, "In the Pursuit of Purity: Reflections on the BBC, RISJ Lecture, Oxford, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2011

for the decisions taken in Washington. Both US newspapers, after the aforementioned failures pre-war, took up the challenge of searching out why Americans were fighting and dying – and why Iraqis and Afghans were doing the same.

The wars have been testament to the incredible value of long-form journalism in *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *Foreign Policy*, *Vanity Fair*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Economist*, *The New Statesman* and other outlets. Most incisive of all, though, have been the books: *Fiasco*, *The Gamble*, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, *The Occupation*, *State of Denial*, *The War Within*, *Obama's Wars*, *Chain of Command*, *Manhattan to Baghdad*, *In Baghdad* to name just some. There has been some excellent long-form television reporting: I'm most familiar with the BBC's *Panorama* and *Newsnight*; the ABC's *Four Corners*, *Foreign Correspondent* and *Lateline* programs and the SBS *Dateline* program; long form US television reporting and feature documentaries for reasons of time and access were regrettably outside the scope of this paper.

### **Government and military influence**

Government ministers, political staffers, bureaucrats and senior officers seek to influence media organisations at all levels – reporters, editors, managers, even the board members of media organisations. This is an age-old part of the government/military/media merry-go-round.

Governments adopt the same tactics in trying to manage the media in wartime as they do in peacetime but in wars, at least initially, they have extra leverage. Governments consciously if metaphorically wrap themselves in the national flag, casting decisions in terms of national and international security. Political opponents and media, lacking access to diplomatic traffic and, importantly, intelligence, find it difficult to oppose decisions for fear of being characterised as un-American or un-Australian.

The ferocity of the 9/11 attacks demanded a quick and dramatic response; for the US going to war was a reflexive decision and it had no difficulty finding willing allies. Characterising the attack against the Taliban regime and al Qaeda as a “War on Terror” rather than a war against Afghanistan was also a recognition that the Taliban government was already fighting a civil war and the international coalition had allies on the ground in the shape of the Northern Alliance. The other practical advantage was that the speed with which the US-led coalition began its assault – and the relative weakness of the Taliban's conventional military forces – meant that it didn't need to worry about the initial period of conflict dragging on for very long.

Inevitably in Afghanistan and Iraq, in the early stages of both campaigns, there were a flurry of stories which cast the soldiers of each nation as ‘brave’, even ‘heroic’ and many were. Equally inevitably though battles rarely go to plan, military forces are bogged down, words like ‘quagmire’ are thrown up, civilians are killed and wounded, allies are found wanting. The list of what can go wrong in war is endless. The growth of social media and of 24 hour

new channels during the decade has made it much more difficult for military organisations to ignore civilian casualties in the first instance and/or then to try to cover up the incident. The Wikileaks video referred to at the end of Chapter 2 is stomach-churning but should be mandatory viewing for all military public relations people dealing with journalists, though of course it needs to be recognised that often senior officers prefer obfuscation to transparency and instruct those dealing directly with media inquiries to act accordingly.

Military organisations by their nature are conservative, hierarchical, imbued with a sense of nationalistic mission and with a natural tendency to close ranks. These generalisations are even more ingrained in intelligence services and with more justification. This instinctive defensiveness means that governments, let alone the media, often find it difficult to get clear answers to questions. If all else fails, military leaders and government ministers always fall back on the “fog of war” defence – we didn’t know.

At the same time media management is now recognised by military forces and governments as key to not just winning the war, but as importantly, winning the war of perceptions. So they hire former journalists as media trainers to help officers perform on television, they devise strategies to manage reporters through embedding and pooling. And, they seek wherever possible to dictate the message by deciding what access will be given, what information will be released, what will be held back, what might need to be censored, what issues will be buried as deeply as possible.

Yet as the body count rises, as soldiers find that they’re being forced to fight with less than ideal equipment, fighting for a second or third time for territory which they’d already won but didn’t have the troops to hold, or finding themselves rotated back into the battle ‘theatre’ for a second or third time, the notion that wars are unwinnable takes hold. Generals and other senior officers don’t like losing and as we’ve seen they readily adjust the narrative and start briefing media privately and sometimes publicly about how the government which sent them to war failed to give them the tools to win. This is fertile territory for reporters and as the Iraq and Afghanistan wars staggered on we saw more and more revisionism, though this has been much less pronounced in Australia. The problem for the current governments in the US, the UK and Australia is that though in each country it was their political opponents who embarked on the wars they’re now stuck with Afghanistan and will be for years. The best they can hope to do is curb the body count, progressively lower the expectations of home audiences about what constitutes an acceptable outcome and develop defensible exit strategies.

### **Media influence on the management of war**

The conclusions which follow are drawn primarily from Chapters 2 and 3.

Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib are part of a continuum. Neither prison need necessarily have become an embarrassing scandal for the Bush Administration, but they did because of the inherent contradictions in their management. Post 9/11 some US military and government officials took the view that the imperative of national security – and there was genuine fear

of more such attacks – allowed them to discard traditional ethics in the process of interrogating suspects. And that by denying alleged combatants prisoner of war status they could be held indefinitely without charge or trial. But at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in the extraordinary rendition and torture program in jails outside the United States, there were personnel with the sufficient moral courage and knowledge of bureaucratic procedure to complain. Media coverage had three key effects – weakening support for the Iraq war in the US and among coalition partners, inspiring insurgents throughout Iraq, inflaming public opinion in the Muslim world thus acting like a magnet for foreign terrorists. Abu Ghraib in particular materially weakened Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s political standing in Washington and his authority within the military.

### **Iraq after the invasion**

As many of the reporters interviewed for this research paper have revealed, the joy of most Iraqis at the defeat of the Saddam Hussein regime quickly turned to outrage at the reality of foreign occupation and trigger-happy troops. While some reporters like Lindsey Hilsum and John Simpson detected this shift within days and weeks, reporters for US, British and Australian media progressively turned to the lack of a coherent plan for occupation, the incompetence of those appointed to run the occupation, the fruitless search for weapons of mass destruction and the rapid descent into insurgency and sectarian violence. As Tom Ricks points out a little more than a year after the invasion not only was news reporting highly critical of the shape of the war but so too had the opinion pages of establishment newspapers changed from pro-war to warning of a failing war.

While Rumsfeld derided reporters for using words like “quagmire” and personally refused to use the word “guerrilla” to dignify the sort of war the US was fighting in Iraq, the Bush Administration stepped up its program of trying to influence public opinion by giving an inside track on military briefings and trips to the battlefields to retired senior military officers who were being used by television networks as analysts. While this helped underpin the administration’s position for a time it also led to military officers who saw flaws in the war strategy using the media to make the case for change. One said cuttingly that he’d seen the movie before – “it was called Vietnam.”

The battles for Fallujah in April and November 2004 were significant militarily and in terms of the media war. The firepower, tactics and determination of the insurgents surprised the US military and the failure to win the battle quickly became a focus for media reporting which in turn led to a decision in Washington to order a withdrawal. By August that year US General George Casey had issued the first road-map for tackling the insurgency. While the re-taking of Fallujah was good for Marines’ morale and sent a strong signal to the insurgents that they could not win set piece battles it also inspired them to focus more on classic guerrilla warfare to combat the occupation forces and employed terrorist tactics (IEDs) against the civilian population. This in turn led General Petraeus and others to re-think the

Coalition approach, adopting a counter-insurgency doctrine designed above all to protect civilians, to have US forces live in communities rather than in isolated secure bases and to undertake campaigns to win “hearts and minds” - and more pragmatically when dealing with Sunni tribal leaders –distributing cash and weapons to encourage their attacks on al Qaeda forces.

Iraq was a bad news story from 2004 onwards. The tide of reporting was a factor in the military changing strategy and was instrumental in leaching public support for the war; this fed into the political cycle and contributed to voters dumping Republicans in the Congressional elections in late 2006. Bush finally dumped Rumsfeld as Defense Secretary.

With the installation of Petraeus as overarching commander in Iraq – the fourth in four years - and the implementation of counterinsurgency doctrine through 2007 the media narrative gradually improved. Not least because Petraeus recognised that he had to renew media trust in the Iraqi mission and to show that “the surge” was working. Petraeus made himself available and encouraged other senior officers to allow media to observe them in the field in a program known as “Battlefield Circulation”. Yet even though the level of civilian violence began to decline by 2008 it was good strategy for a young ambitious senator from Illinois to characterise Iraq as a “bad” war and to remind voters that he’d had the foresight to oppose it from the start.

In the UK, where the war wasn’t popular from the start, reporting fell into two spheres. Politically it was an extremely “live” issue: Blair versus the BBC; the death of the weapons inspector David Kelly; argument about weapons of mass destruction; all of which over time tarnished the government’s reputation. And there was reporting of the war itself - dispatches from Iraq. As described in a section of chapter 2, “lions led by donkeys”, some newspapers and broadcasters concentrated on “their boys” on the frontline and campaigned on issues of inadequate or faulty “kit”. The broadsheets, liberal and conservative, and the BBC and Channel 4 News gave considerable coverage to the massive ructions in Iraqi society which had been unleashed by the war, causing tens of thousands of civilian casualties. While initially British forces in the south of Iraq had faced less of an insurgency, progressively they found that they didn’t have enough troops on the ground to exert control. The final withdrawal from Basra was a debacle. A senior officer at the Ministry of Defence offered the following conclusion:

*I think the press coverage on Iraq in the first instance probably led to a decision to look for extraction as soon as practicable while at the same time leaving with some kind of exit which is honourable and deliverable. So public perceptions there probably did seep into political decisions.*<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Interview MOD officer.

Reporting of the Iraq war in Australia declined markedly through 2004 as the perils of street reporting rose and the costs of security rose even higher. Also, as referred to in chapter 2, the Australian defence force had sent a relatively small contingent and had not made it easy for media to have any serious access to troops in the field. Consequently the war was not a vote changing issue at the election even though the Opposition leader had promised to have the “troops back by Christmas”, a proposition that no less than the US president was moved to declare would be “disastrous”. By the November 2007 national election however, the war was deeply unpopular and the Labor Party promise that in government it would withdraw all ground forces was timely. Even so Iraq was not a decisive issue. The conservative government lost because it was perceived to have held power for too long and was out of touch with people in the street. The military was not unhappy about quitting Iraq, recognising that Afghanistan was becoming the more important war and that they would likely be there for many years to come.

### **The Afghan war**

After ten years in Afghanistan the NATO-led coalition is struggling to define what it has achieved, why it is fighting on behalf of a corrupt, discredited government and what it can potentially achieve in the next three years such as to justify withdrawal of all international combat forces by the end of 2014. As media coverage of the Afghanistan war has become increasingly negative the governments of the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia – and their military forces - have constantly adjusted their narrative frameworks about what constitutes ‘progress’, while ‘victory’ is a term slipping into irrelevance, just as it did during the Iraq war.

As noted in chapter 3, General Petraeus claimed in early 2011 that it was only “recently” that NATO started getting the Afghan strategy right. While such candour helped to re-frame the argument it also had the effect of validating critics lamenting failed strategies employed in previous years. UK Ambassador to Afghanistan and then Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles had a broad view of the war and could see it was failing disastrously not least because Afghans had no confidence in government officials whether at a regional or national level; a decade of war had not improved their lives, nor in many areas made them safer than during the Taliban period. Inside government Cowper-Coles sought to influence the British government to change tack, moving away from supporting President Karzai, while briefing journalists, off the record, on what was going wrong. Now out of government and unconstrained he’s been using the media to generate a more open public debate about Afghanistan policy:

*And we’ve lacked in Afghanistan a sort of Walter Cronkite figure, someone with the stature and authority with the American people, who could say to the American people*

*and American politicians as Cronkite did in 1968. It's alright you can relax now - the honourable thing is to talk to the enemy.*<sup>112</sup>

In fact US President Obama has authorised the CIA to talk to the Taliban, while also overruling General Petraeus and Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the US joint chiefs, and insisting that most American “surge” troops will leave Afghanistan next year. These proposed withdrawals are a sop to public opinion, with a keen eye to the presidential election timetable.

In the UK Prime Minister David Cameron has said that an Afghan government may well include the Taliban as long as they put down their weapons and engage in serious talks. Until then British soldiers will keep fighting, but combat operations will end in 2014. As a down payment on this exit strategy some UK forces are already slated for withdrawal this year and next.

It can reasonably be argued that media coverage of the war has hastened political commitments to end the involvement of all coalition members in Afghanistan. Yet media exposure has not discernibly altered the most dramatic feature of current war fighting methods in Afghanistan and Pakistan, namely night raids by special forces on “kill or capture” missions and the use of drone strikes for what are essentially targeted assassinations; which in some cases have resulted in innocent civilians being killed.

Whether as acts of reciprocal ferocity or as a simple demonstration of their own power – and of the weakness of the Karzai government – Taliban groups and their allies the Haqqani network, now directly linked by Admiral Mullen to Pakistan’s ISI intelligence agency, have staged some spectacular attacks in recent weeks; they came close to killing more than 70 Coalition troops in a truck bombing on the 9/11 anniversary and a few days later they launched an extremely successful raid near the US Embassy in Kabul killing almost 20 local security personnel. Most spectacular of all was the assassination of former president Burhanuddin Rabbani. As chairman of Afghanistan’s High Peace Council he was meant to be leading the effort to negotiate a ceasefire with the Taliban and the start of substantive talks. Prospects for a negotiated end to the war seem dim.

In summary I’m drawn to a deeply personal article by the former executive editor of *The New York Times* Bill Keller as part of the newspaper’s 40 pages of reflections on the tenth anniversary of 9/11:

*The remedy for bad journalism is more and better journalism. Reporters at The Times made amends for the credulous pre-war stories with investigations of the bad intelligence and with brave, relentless and illuminating coverage of the war and occupation.*

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<sup>112</sup> Interview, Cowper-Coles, London 15 July 2011

More and better journalism.-A simple formula, but essential, if journalists are to learn the lessons of the first wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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