

Britain's media fashions its "warrior prince"

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Rarely has the servility of the British media been given such free and full expression.

The dispatch of Prince Harry—third in line to the British throne after his father, Charles, and elder brother, William—to Afghanistan's Helmand province was as naked a piece of political propaganda as could be imagined. Orchestrated by the Ministry of Defence (MOD), it was carried out with the compliance of every single newspaper and TV channel in the UK.

All the major news outlets throughout the world were also part of the conspiracy to deceive the public, with both CNN and Reuters publicly admitting their complicity. When the story finally broke, it did so only as a result of an article published in an Australian magazine, *New Idea*, whose editors said they were unaware of the worldwide media embargo. It was then the subject of a short article in the German daily tabloid *Berliner Kurier* and finally made known to a wider audience when it was picked up by the right-wing Internet news-aggregator site, the Drudge Report, on February 28.

The agreement to conceal Harry's posting was brokered during three meetings of 30 to 40 media representatives and top brass in the army between September and December.

The media accepted a collective blackout until after Prince Harry's tour of duty was due to end in April, in return for access to a pre-deployment interview and several "embeds" being placed with the Blues and Royals Household Cavalry regiment, who would pool interviews, video footage and photographs. The prince would even be brought home on a Friday for the convenience of daily and Sunday newspapers.

When the story broke, newspapers across the political spectrum published—without seeming embarrassment—a statement by Gen. Richard Dannatt, head of the British Army, praising the British media for their "highly responsible attitude." Only some news sources felt obliged to justify their actions in lying to their readers and viewers. Jon Williams, world news editor of Britain's state broadcaster, the BBC, said that as "journalism is about telling people things they don't know," not doing so "was something we thought long and hard about."

The BBC's explanation for doing so was that "A news black-out is unusual, but not unique" and was carried out to "minimise the danger" to Harry and other troops fighting alongside of him and in return for being allowed to film "up close and personal with him" in Helmand. The same line was repeated by Britain's two nominally liberal broadsheets. Feigning Olympian detachment, the *Independent* did not feature the story on its front page. Its deputy editor-in-chief, Ian Birre, told Reuters that "We don't share our rivals' incredible fascination with every aspect of the royal family's lives," adding that he did not see "a problem at all" with the news blackout.

The *Guardian* did not publish its own comment on February 29, running instead an opinion by Bob Satchwell, the executive director of

the Society of Editors, who played a key role in arranging the deal alongside Neil Wallis of Rupert Murdoch's "sex and sleaze" scandal sheet, the *News of the World*, and the right-wing *Mail on Sunday* editor, Peter Wright. This piece added to the justification for censoring the news, the claim that it merely facilitated the wishes of a prince "desperate to join his army colleagues in the front line," army chiefs who "wanted him to go to war like any other young officer" and a family that "wanted him to fulfil his ambitions too."

Only on March 1, amidst much criticism from its readers, did the *Guardian* explain that the danger to Prince Harry and "the luckless soldiers around him" had determined its actions, especially when there was "no overriding public interest" in reporting his posting. "If exposing his posting would have brought peace in Afghanistan even infinitesimally closer, the judgment would have been different," it continued.

All such efforts to rationalise the media's actions are hollow. If the issue was Harry's safety and that of his fellow soldiers, how was this facilitated by having reporters and cameramen follow him around Helmand, supposedly only hundreds of metres away from the front line? And can anyone seriously believe that a royal heir is simply another young soldier who should be allowed to do his duty, just like "one of us"?

Everyone who participated in the effort to send Harry to Afghanistan was well aware that they were offering their publications up as a direct propaganda tool of the MOD.

In the first instance, there was the agreement to conceal what was happening.

Contrary to the claim by Jon Williams that "there are no other 'voluntary agreements' in place at the moment, there's nothing else we're not telling you," cover-ups happen all the time. The elaborate arrangements over Harry were only made necessary because it was considered impossible to issue a Defence Advisory (DA) notice barring reporting, given that no serious claim could be made of a threat to national security.

DA Notices, more popularly known as D Notices, have been repeatedly issued to conceal Britain's dirty war secrets—most recently against ex-SAS officer Ben Griffin who has alleged direct British collusion with rendition and who was silenced amidst the reporting of Harry's exploits in Afghanistan. It should be noted that, while DA Notices are not legally enforceable, the media almost universally complies.

It is the exposure of how fully the media is at the beck and call of the armed forces, the government and the Royal Family that prompted one of the few genuine expressions of outrage from a major mainstream journalist, Jon Snow. The presenter of Channel 4 news wrote in his blog praising the Drudge Report for ending the "British media's conspiracy of silence."

"One wonders whether viewers, readers and listeners will ever want

to trust media bosses again,” he continued, a statement for which he was savaged by sections of the press.

Secondly there is the willing participation in the actual propaganda campaign mounted by the MOD, in support of a war that most people in Britain do not believe should be fought and utilising the newly dubbed “warrior prince” to do so.

The efforts to get Harry to Afghanistan followed the decision in May last year not to send him to Iraq for fear of his being targeted for assassination. This was viewed by the military as a major setback. An insight into the reaction was provided by military historian Peter Caddick-Adams in a contemporary article for the BBC on “the long history of royal service in wars.”

“In some eyes this will be seen as caving-in to insurgent threats to kidnap or target the prince,” he wrote. “In a wider context this may be seen as a break with a long tradition of British royals serving in the military in war zones. Both Harry’s uncle, Prince Andrew, who served in the Falklands as a helicopter pilot, and his grandfather, Prince Philip, who was decorated during World War II for his service with the Royal Navy, faced very real danger in different combat zones.

“Prince Harry’s great uncle, King George VI’s brother, the Duke of Kent, joined the RAF and was killed while flying in 1942. A more distant ancestor, Prince Maurice of Battenberg, a grandson of Queen Victoria, was killed near Mons in 1914 as an officer in the King’s Royal Rifle Corps.

“Some scholars argue that it is the very proximity of the royal family to danger—sharing the suffering of their subjects and soldiers—that has won great respect for the institution of monarchy.... It is indeed a shame that politics has got in the way of this young man’s aspirations to serve his country and follow the tradition of military service that almost every generation of British royals has followed.”

The Army, the Brown government and House of Windsor were determined that, this time, politics would not “get in the way” of efforts to popularise and legitimise the Afghan war—using Prince Harry as a royal “Action Man.”

One can only give a sense of the torrent of bloodthirsty jingoism and patriotic drivel that has been heaped upon the British people by the media in the days since the Harry story broke: page after page of photos of Harry on patrol, in a tank, firing a machine gun, washing his socks in a camp sink and eating curry with the Ghurkhas.

The *Daily Mirror*’s coverage was fairly typical. “Prince Harry has been battling the Taliban on the front line by calling in air strikes using a surveillance system known as Kill TV.... [O]n New Year’s Eve Harry used it to oversee his first bomb strike.”

Under the headline, “Prince Harry in Afghanistan: Fearless Harry’s frontline battlecry,” another *Mirror* article read: “His hands expertly grip the machine gun, his face a mask of steely determination as he homes in on his target.”

“Prince Harry, 23, looks like a battle-hardened veteran as he sits surrounded by sandbags and with a box of ammo at his feet to fire on Taliban fighters 650 yards away. And with nerves of steel he declared: ‘It’s just no-man’s-land. They poke their heads up and that’s it.’ ”

Finally,” the *Mirror* opines, “we have a prince with a purpose. His mother would have been hugely proud of him—and so should we.... Not many members of the royal family can claim to be ‘one of us.’ Harry can.”

Taped interviews reveal a very limited man, someone previously known for a propensity for alcohol and cannabis and dressing in Nazi

regalia, who is being used by others far savvier. “All my wishes have come true,” he says. “I haven’t really had a shower for four days. I haven’t washed my clothes for a week. It’s very nice to be sort of a normal person for once, I think it’s about as normal as I’m going to get.”

Speaking of the Queen, who made clear how anxious she was for Harry to see active service, he adds, “I have told my grandmother—she actually told me. She told me I’m off to Afghanistan so that was the way it was supposed to be.”

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, the paper’s former editor and biographer of Margaret Thatcher, Charles Moore, had no compunction about admitting what was really at stake in sending Harry to Helmand. In his unabashed support for the operation, he provides a damning indictment of the role played by the British media in the sordid affair.

Noting that George Galloway MP “has accused the BBC of being part of the ‘war effort,’ ” he stated, “Would that this were more often so!... Leave it to the Taliban Broadcasting Corporation (if their fundamentalism permits such a thing to exist) to put their case.”

“Something important was at stake here. It was not the fulfilment of Prince Harry’s personal desire to fight.... [O]ne young man’s longing to be a good soldier is not a big enough reason for so much upheaval. What matters much more is the symbolism.”

That “symbolism” is regarding the Royal Family as the embodiment of Britain’s imperial ambitions and a mechanism for suppressing dissent through the whipping up of patriotism.

“The Royal Family should try to be with the nation for the difficult bits,” Moore continued. “The Queen understood this so strongly 25 years ago that she made sure her own son risked his life. By Prince Harry’s account this week, she did the same with her grandson.... Some may argue that this is a very controversial war, and therefore it is dangerous for the Royal Family to be associated with it.... But it is all the more important to stand by the Army when the politics are rough.”

The *Guardian* has tried to minimise the impact of its complicity in the media blackout, blandly stating, “The army may try to use Harry’s tour of duty to win popularity for the Afghan mission,” while “the royals may hope the war will lend legitimacy to the prince.” It then asserts, “While the prince was serving in Afghanistan, his role could not be safely debated. Now he is returning, it must be.”

By their actions, the *Guardian*’s editors and those of their counterparts stand hopelessly compromised. They have forfeited any right to posture as leaders of such a debate.



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