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**A SPIRIT OF MUTUAL ANTAGONISM? MILITARY-
MEDIA RELATIONS AND THE DEFENCE
ESTABLISHMENT IN BRITAIN**

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A SPIRIT OF MUTUAL ANTAGONISM? MILITARY- MEDIA RELATIONS AND THE DEFENCE ESTABLISHMENT IN BRITAIN

Stephen Blackwell

Abstract

This paper seeks to account for the development of the current state of military-media relations in the United Kingdom. It will argue that the military-media relationship is not the conflictual one that is often assumed. Though this in large part is due to the evolution of military strategy and technological advances in information, it is also due to changes in the traditional relationship between the defence bureaucracy and media commentators. In this sense the military-media relationship can reflect both bureaucratic rivalries in the defence policy-making establishment and also the fragmentation of the media sector itself. In the British case it is arguable that further research is needed on the diversification of media coverage of military issues, media links with corporate interests and the impact this has on public opinion.

Introduction

Much of the discussion concerning the relationship between the media and military since the end of the Cold War has focussed on the 'CNN effect', the added pressure on decision makers and the deployment of military forces caused by the growth of 'real time' news and information services.¹ It is, however, also arguable that the growth of rapid information flows has to some extent 'democratised' and fragmented military-media relations in mature democracies such as Britain. This paper seeks to develop three main issues. The first is that the media in Britain has often acted as a forum for elite debates over the formulation of defence policy and has also been utilised as a means of furthering the conduct of bureaucratic tussles at the governmental level over the development of defence policy. The second is that this tendency, despite the best efforts of Downing Street to 'centralise' media management, is likely to be consolidated by the increasing diversification of the media in the Internet age. This tendency has already had a discernible impact on Britain's recent participation in coalition military operations in areas such

¹See, for example, Martin Shaw, *Civil Society and the Media in Global Crises: Representing Distant Violence* (London: Pinter, 1996).

as the Balkans. The third issue is the persistence of an uncertain media-government relationship over official secrets and national security. These factors combined will in turn be further complicated by the questionable ability of the media to remain completely independent as it becomes increasingly subject to a competing array of interests at the interface of the corporate, government and military sectors.

This view contrasts with the assumption, based on relative public indifference, that cosy agreement between elites of policy-makers, senior military officers and specialist defence correspondents can 'frame' the terms of debate over military policy in Britain. This is increasingly apparent in the care that the British Ministry of Defence (MOD) attaches to its mechanisms for co-operating with the media. The growth of electronic media, the increasing size of the defence bureaucracy and the well-established tendency of elements in the bureaucracy to forward their agendas through selective briefings are also important. Above all, the growth of the 'common risk society', with greater sense of facing threats such as those posed by terrorists and weapons of mass destruction is also likely to favour a growing concern with 'security' as opposed to merely 'defence'. This will also serve to diminish the 'expert-layman' differential, though it should also be stressed that public opinion has never been divorced from the military policy-making process to the extent that some political elites would like to imagine. Above all, military operations are now more dependent on public opinion and awareness that actual conflict will be closely supervised. Institutions such as the MOD therefore are aware of the need to be increasingly skilful in the exercise of news management or what may also be called 'Strategic Public Diplomacy'.²

It would be simplistic to argue that in the UK a recidivist military establishment has been reluctantly dragged into the sunlight by the media and public opinion. Cultural changes at the government level have been an equally significant factor along with democratised information flows. Overall, these interlocking factors are combining to create an increasingly complex military-media relationship. An increasingly independent journalistic contingent operating in a conflict area and the speed of reportage offered by modern communications technology have ensured that the military-media relationship has become more balanced. This has led to a tacit admission by the British defence establishment that they are in no position to manage flows of information even if they are so inclined. In the aftermath of the Kosovo intervention the MOD conceded that more needed to be done in terms of 'rapid response' to stories that it saw as

²Stephen Badsey, 'The Media, the Military and Public Opinion', from Stephen Badsey (ed.), *The Media and International Security* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 238-41.

misleading and inaccurate.³ An increasingly complex nexus of government, military, media and public opinion interests will further complicate the situation in the near future. The following will consider these issues by focusing on three key areas in the military-media relationship; relations in peacetime, relations in conflict situations and the broader concern of the media and information restrictions due to considerations of national security.

The military-media relationship in peacetime

Popular attitudes to defence issues in Britain are shaped by a perception of British decline since 1945. The 'declinist' issue is hotly debated, with academics divided over whether British overseas policy in this period represented contraction or merely a reorientation of priorities and roles.⁴ While the Ministry of Defence is primarily concerned with media relations, the formulation of broader 'security' policy does involve other departments such as the Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Ultimate authority resides with the Prime Minister's Office and the highest level of inter-departmental policy-making in the form of the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee. The general point can be made that though the 1980's saw the British military conceive operations almost entirely (with the obvious exception of the Falklands campaign) in terms of NATO-planned Cold War operations in Europe. The last decade, however, has seen a greater degree of internationalism in British security and defence policy. Starting with the US-led coalition operation to evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1990-91, British forces have also been at the forefront of operations in Bosnia and Kosovo.⁵ It is notable that all of these operations have enjoyed broad parliamentary and public support despite some scepticism being expressed by the media. The greater readiness to undertake 'out-of-area' operations has become more pronounced following the election of the Labour government in 1997. The Strategic Defence Review (SDR) announced in 1998 is partly based on a premise

³UK Ministry of Defence, *Kosovo: Lessons from the Crisis*, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Defence, June 2000 (London: HMSO, 2000), Chapter 6

⁴For a summary of the main points in this debate see Andrew Dorman, 'Crises and Reviews in British Defence Policy', from Stuart Croft, Andrew Dorman, Wyn Rees and Matthew Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000: A Policy Re-evaluation* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), pp. 9-28.

⁵Wyn Rees, 'Britain's Contribution to Global Order', from Croft, Dorman, Rees and Uttley, *Britain and Defence 1945-2000*, pp. 29-48.

that combined joint intervention forces will be projected wherever they are required in the world.⁶

The evolution of British defence policy during this period has been intertwined with the emergence of the 'postdeferential society' and the at least superficial breakdown of social class structures, which has had a significant impact on attitudes towards military issues. A principal distinguishing characteristic of what has been called the 'post-modern military' is the 'increasing interpenetrability of civilian and military spheres, both structurally and culturally'.⁷ This is also likely to impact increasingly on military-media relations. Christopher Dandekar has noted how the British armed forces, being increasingly involved on complex multinational operations, have shown an increasing awareness of the concepts of the 'soldier-statesman' and the 'soldier-scholar'.⁸ Military officers need to be more and more adept at handling the media. As much as the growing complexity of missions, this tendency is also a consequence of the 'revolution in communications':

This revolution has compressed the time in which political and military decisions must be made, while exposing the consequences to immediate media scrutiny. Thus it is increasingly risky to give the armed forces missions without the appropriate means and to use technology to micromanage operations; the consequences harm the operation as well as civilian-military relations.⁹

These kinds of demands have ensured that the 'post-modern' soldier has to be confident in an increasingly wide range of roles that require a relatively sophisticated political awareness. In general the operation of military-media relations in Britain in the post-1945 period supports the view that this relationship, as in other countries, has been one of co-operation rather than

⁶Colin McInnes, 'Labour's Strategic Defence Review', *International Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (1998), pp. 823-45.

⁷Charles C. Moskos, John Allen Williams and David R. Segal 'Armed Forces after the Cold War', from Moskos, Williams and Segal (eds.), *The Postmodern Military: Armed Forces After the Cold War* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1-13.

⁸Christopher Dandekar, 'The United Kingdom: The Overstretched Military', from Moskos, Williams and Segal, *The Postmodern Military*, pp. 36-8. See also Dandekar, 'The Military in Democratic Societies: New Times and New Patterns in Civil-Military Relations', from Jürgen Kuhlmann & Jean Callaghan (eds.), *Military and Society in 21st Century Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (New Brunswick & London: Transaction, 2000), pp. 27-43.

⁹Dandekar, *Ibid.*, p. 37.

conflict.¹⁰ This to an extent has reflected established consensual social structures, with public opinion being a largely passive if occasionally uncertain element in the equation. The situation is further complicated from the perspective of the defence establishment by the decline in the numbers of the general public and politicians with direct experience of military affairs.¹¹ This trend carries with it the risk of enforcing a kind of siege mentality within an armed forces culture that sees itself as a 'society within a society'. The traditional view that external policy is not a central concern of the British public opinion, to the extent that the 'informed public' has 'only a peripheral and reactive role in the policy process' is seen as increasingly questionable.¹² Greater access to information, the pro-active role of non-governmental organisations and academia through media outlets is likely to increase scrutiny of government policy. While the impact that these trends may have on security and defence issues remains debatable, the importance of 'informed opinion' is being tacitly acknowledged by government efforts to engage with and inform these kinds of interest groups.

The relationship between the public, the media and the defence establishment remains, however, increasingly problematic in view of the debate over what purpose/s the British armed forces serve in the post-Cold war era. The issue of the 'legitimacy' of the armed forces in society is a key factor in military-media relations. Legitimacy in the British context centres on how representative of society the military is seen to be. As well as cultural values this also incorporates ethnic issues and the persistent inability of the MOD to adequately deal with the issue of homosexuals in the armed forces. These are issues that are of increasing sensitivity, not least because on-going recruitment shortfalls and the need for the military to compete with other government departments for limited resources. In the British case, this is a problem given extra complexity by the historic tendency of the country's armed forces to perceive themselves as a society within a society. Though the military sees itself as at being least partially reflective of society, it also has an inherent tendency to see detachment as the only way in which its

¹⁰Philip M. Taylor, 'The Military and the Media: Past, Present and Future', from Stephen Badsey (ed.), *The Media and International Security* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 179-82.

¹¹Dandekar, *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹²Michael Clarke, 'The Policy-Making Process', from Michael Smith, Steve Smith and Brian White (eds.), *British Foreign Policy* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 77. See also David Capitanchik, 'Public opinion and popular attitudes towards defence', from John Baylis (ed.), *British Defence Policy in a Changing World* (London: Croon Helm, 1977), pp. 255-82.

efficiency and professionalism will not be compromised.¹³ The problem of military 'uniqueness', in terms of its relation to the rest of society, thus has to be addressed.

The military, the media and bureaucratic politics in Britain

Much of the standard literature on civil-military relations emphasises an ideal model of depoliticised armed forces able to perform at an optimum level of professionalism. Samuel Finer, writing from the perspective of the civil authorities, argued that governments must be perpetually vigilant to prevent the military intervening either directly or indirectly in civil politics.¹⁴ Yet the very nature of bureaucratic structures and the allocation of limited resources almost inevitably leads to political activity on at least a covert level within the defence establishment. Denis Healey, Minister of Defence under the 1964-1970 Labour governments, commented that he 'sometimes felt I had learnt nothing about politics until I had met the Chiefs of Staff'.¹⁵ Senior military officers have been quite ready to utilise the media for confidential briefings when convenient, most often in the cause of fighting proposed treasury cuts in funding. In this vein Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had a bleak warning for his Minister of Defence in 1958: 'Service Chiefs can get up quite a lot of ill-informed or old-fashioned agitation on their behalf. Ministers are not so popular'.¹⁶ The very nature of these kinds of interactions illustrates how difficult it is for a defence establishment to present a united front to the media. The manifestations of inter-service rivalries over funding through leaks to the press and parliament were a feature of the post-war period, most particularly during defence reviews. An obvious example of this was the strained civil-military relationships and intense politicking that accompanied the Sandys defence reforms in the late 1950's.¹⁷

¹³For a discussion of these issues see Jean Callaghan, Christopher Dandekar & Jürgen Kuhlmann, 'Introduction: Armed Forces and Society in Europe – The Challenge of Change', from Kuhlmann & Callaghan, *Military and Society in 21st Century Europe*, pp. 1-9.

¹⁴Samuel E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: the role of the military in politics* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1962).

¹⁵Cited from Keith Simpson, 'Frock Coats, Mandarins and Brass Hats: The relationship between politicians, civil servants and the military', *RUSI Journal*, February 1992, p. 61.

¹⁶Letter from Macmillan to Duncan Sandys, Private and Confidential, [undated] June 1958, Duncan-Sandys Papers 15/5, Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge

¹⁷Franklyn A. Johnson, *Defence by Ministry: The British Ministry of Defence, 1944-1974* (London: Duckworth, 1980), pp. 47-8.

Overall, the relationship between civil authorities, the military and the media is not as adversarial as is often assumed, and that a complex and mutually beneficial relationship can sometimes be discerned. An example of this was seen during the debate on Michael Heseltine's attempts as defence minister to reform MOD structures to ensure greater centralisation of decision making and introduce greater cost effectiveness in 1984. Central to this was the proposal to create increased powers for the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) at the apex of a more centralised policy-making structure. The proposals which eventually formed the basis of the subsequent Defence White Paper were introduced as a result of the Minister's conviction that the creation of a unified ministry in 1964 had not gone far enough in eradicating inter-service rivalries and that the MOD bureaucracy was top-heavy and wasteful. In this case the media, particularly *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, acted as a 'vehicle for correspondence' from mainly retired senior officers that mirrored the debate within the services and the MOD.¹⁸ There have also been more recent instances of collusion between the elements of the defence establishment and the media, such as criticism of army equipment used in the 1999 Kosovo intervention that was leaked to the press. It was suggested that this was intended to strengthen the MOD's hand *vis-à-vis* the Treasury over the threat of spending cuts on force levels and new procurement projects.¹⁹

Media-military relations differ in three situations: peacetime, in times of crisis involving the threat of war, and during the actual conduct of operations. Each of these situations naturally alters the dynamics of policy-making within elite bureaucratic structures and their relationship with the press and public opinion. Added to this is the fact that the British military has faced to need to maintain its public standing in the face of more complex threats and also consistent pressure for efficiency and the elimination of wasteful practices.²⁰ The increased diversification of the media, the ease with which information can be obtained and the tentative introduction of a culture of openness by the British government with ensure the undermining of any residual notion of an adversarial military-media relationship. The issue is further complicated by the number of former officers working for institutions such as Jane's, Brassey's and the Royal United Services Institute that feed into the on-going formulation of policy at government level and act as 'feeder points' of information to more broad based media outlets. Given the greater availability of information,

¹⁸John Sweetman, 'A Process of Evolution: Command and Control in Peacetime', from John Sweetman (ed.), *The Sword & The Mace: Twentieth Century Civil-Military Relations in Britain* (London: Brassey's, 1986), pp. 44-54.

¹⁹Ian Kemp, 'SDR on Track, says UK White Paper', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 19 January 2000.

²⁰Dandekar, *Ibid.*, p. 38.

development of transnational flows and diversification of corporate interests in keeping with a broader conception of 'security' this tendency is likely to become more apparent in the future.

The military-media relationship in a conflict situation: the case of the Kosovo intervention

Smooth military-media relations were a characteristic of Operation 'Allied Force', NATO's bombing campaign aimed at preventing the Yugoslav army's suppression of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo in 1999. The progress of this operation appeared to justify the perception that the British military-media relationship has traditionally shown little of the antagonism seen during the United States' experience in Vietnam. Although the Falklands War has been cited as an example of ruthless media management by the government of the day, coverage of the war was affected by the isolated geographical position of the theatre of operations and also the peculiarly jingoistic national atmosphere that was incited by the tabloid newspapers. Military-media relations have in effect been 'rebalanced' in the post-Cold War era by more effective media coverage and governmental awareness that the nature of the operations now most likely to be carried out by the armed forces requires a more sophisticated approach. The British government is working on a more sophisticated approach towards military-media relations during conflict situations, with the manipulation apparent during the Falklands campaign being seen as increasingly obsolete.²¹ In this spirit the MOD now has an established system of accreditation and regular press conferences to assist journalists. This has led to the ministry publishing a 'Green Book' outlining facilities and responsibilities for both accredited and non-accredited journalists in a conflict situation.²²

Like that of the United States, recent British military doctrine concerning the fighting of limited wars was largely coloured by the Vietnam experience. The legacy of this has been a cautious strategy based on the concentration of overwhelming military force in order to quickly subdue an enemy and obtain the desired objective. The 'sandcastle' model of public opinion, which assumes that popular support will initially be high to subject to erosion if a military operation is protracted and/or casualties are significant, conditions this approach.²³ The evidence in support

²¹Dandekar, *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²²UK Ministry of Defence, *The Green Book of Defence and the Media in Times of Emergency* (http://www.mod.uk/news/green_book).

²³Badsey, 'The Media, the Military and Public Opinion', pp. 242-47.

of this model remains inclusive. In the case of the Kosovo operation the levels of public support for the operation remained largely constant despite the campaign being more protracted than was originally envisaged. In many ways the media's unwillingness to criticise and lack of influence over the decision to launch the Kosovo intervention stemmed from the high 'policy certainty' that informed the decision made by Washington and its NATO allies. It is more likely that the media will be effective when governments are indecisive and the media can provide empathetic coverage of suffering people.²⁴

This perception nevertheless did not mean that the British government did not learn lessons from the conduct of the NATO operation against the Yugoslav army. In the aftermath of Kosovo the MOD felt that 'in many ways getting our messages across in the broadcast and written media was as crucial as the military campaign'.²⁵ Though the ministry felt that it could do more to cultivate its relationship with the media, it did appear that in the South Eastern Europe region at least public opinion was prepared to accept national participation in peace-building and peace-enforcing coalition operations. Polling evidence available at the time of the Kosovo conflict suggested that in general a small majority of the British public favoured operations overseas intended to resolve ethnic disputes and prevent atrocities.²⁶ The MOD report on the intervention presented in 2000 emphasised that 'satisfying the media appetite for timely news stories was a major challenge in an age of instant, 24 hour media operations, and in particular given the multinational nature of the operation'. In the aftermath of the operation the MOD felt that 'in many ways getting our messages across in the broadcast and written media was as crucial as the military campaign'.²⁷

The British government has consequently aimed at improving its presentation of military issues as part of its central strategy for media relations. One feature of recent conflicts involving British armed forces is that the defence establishment has taken advantage of the opportunity to reach the public directly through the Internet. The MOD has also put increasing emphasis on its own Website as a means of engendering a positive image with the British public. In early 2002 the

²⁴Piers Robinson, 'The Policy-Media Interaction Model: Measuring Media Power During Humanitarian Interventions', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (2000), pp. 613-33.

²⁵UK Ministry of Defence, *Kosovo: Lessons from the Crisis*, Chapter 6.

²⁶Badsey, 'The Media, the Military and Public Opinion', p.241.

²⁷UK Ministry of Defence, *Kosovo: Lessons from the Crisis*, Chapter 6.

average number of 'hits' per month was approximately 750,000.²⁸ One other issue that will have to be addressed in the future is the relationship between national ministries and multinational bodies. Given the increasing number of multinational operations that British forces are likely to be involved in, the MOD press office will have to co-ordinate its media relations with bodies such as the EU and NATO. It was fortuitous that NATO press briefings given during the Kosovo intervention were carefully prepared in co-operation with national governments. However, private reservations expressed by some British officers over the development of the new EU Rapid Reaction Force give some indication that the defence establishment's relations with this new force may not be as harmonious as those with NATO Headquarters.

The DA-Notice System and the Official Secrets Act

The one issue that continues to impair military-media relations in Britain is the policy on official secrets, though again it is likely that pressure for reform will mitigate the difficulties in this area. Perhaps the best illustration of the established relationship between the defence establishment and the media in this case is the principal of public access to sensitive information related to security. This has evolved through the twentieth century into the 'D-Notice' (subsequently 'DA-Notice') system, in essence a typically British institution based on a combination of formal and informal structures. The essential aim is a mechanism whereby government and the media can pre-empt the need for censorship by prior agreement over what material can and cannot be published. Operational since 1912, the D-Notice committee underwent after 1945 a major shift away from the 'gentleman's club' of representatives of the service departments and press proprietors in favour of a system more weighted in favour of the government. Journalists rather than proprietors now sat on the committee, which came under the chairmanship of the Permanent Under Secretary of the Ministry of defence in 1962.²⁹ Suez started to undermine media's trust in the system, which led to increasing questioning over whether the 'national interest' injunction more to do with covering the government's political embarrassment than legitimate security concerns. The consequence of this was an increased reluctance of the government to open up the system. Though the government increased Foreign and Home Office representation on the Committee at the expense of the MOD, these changes were

²⁸Cm. 5661, UK Ministry of Defence, *Performance Report 2001/2002*, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Defence, November 2002 (London: HMSO), pp. 33-4.

²⁹Sadler, *D-Notice System*, pp. 37-8.

qualified by a controversial government initiative for 'vetting' officials accessing sensitive information that formed part of legislation approved in 1967.³⁰

From the media's perspective the situation worsened with the election of the Conservative government in 1979. The media and many parliamentary critics soon concluded that the government was trying to prevent open discussion of national security issues, the freedom of the press was compromised, there was lack of clarity concerning the relation between D-Notice and the law, and that the system as a whole was obsolete. Though reforms were recommended, the government sought to use injunctions preventing publication rather than prosecution under the Official Secrets Act after material had been published.³¹ A classic example of this was the *Spycatcher* case when the government pursued the author and ex-MI6 officer Peter Wright as far as Australia in order to prevent publication of his memoirs. The Thatcher government's humiliating failure to prevent the publication of *Spycatcher* hastened a change of emphasis. The 1990s have seen a partial relaxation of the system. D-Notices, now DA ('Defence Advisory) Notices, were reduced from 8 to 6 in 1993 and to 5 in 2000.

The 'DA-Notice' system is thus seen as 'uniquely British' institution in that its administration is the responsibility of a loosely structured committee made up of representatives from the media and government departments rather than through legal commitments or sanctions. The smooth operation of the system is very much dependent on the personality of the Secretary of the Defence, Press and Broadcasting Advisory Committee. The DA-Notice system is 'still by any measure a comfortable arrangement between the media and the government'. The 'public interest' is in itself a loose concept with no concrete legal foundation in this case.³² The same is true of the controversial Section 5 of the 1989 Official Secrets Act, which suffers from an absence of a public interest defence clause while having a well-defined 'harm test'. The media thus remains vulnerable to prosecution on the basis of 'secondary disclosure' of material deemed prejudicial to national security.³³ Though the Labour government has introduced legislation concerned with freedom of information (for example, the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998), the government has still shied away from tackling transparency in relation to aspects of coverage of the security and intelligence services.

³⁰Sadler, *D-Notice System*, pp. 39-45. The second Radcliffe Committee Report in 1967 formed the basis of White Paper Cmnd 3312.

³¹Sadler, *D-Notice System*, pp. 49-54.

³²Pauline Sadler, *National Security and the D-Notice System* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 62.

³³*Secrets, Spies and Whistleblowers: Freedom of expression and national security in the United Kingdom*, Article 19 and Liberty, November 2000, pp. 21-2. See also the DA-Notice Website (<http://www.dnotice.org.uk/notices.htm>).

The DA-Notice system can either be seen as a classically British *ad hoc* structure, or a scarcely veiled coercive relic of the Cold War era.³⁴ It is likely that this issue will remain pertinent, particularly given the need to harmonise the existing British legislation with European Human Rights Law. The public and the media nonetheless remain subject to prosecution for breaches of Section 5, and the recent high-profile cases of former MI6 highlights the willingness of the government to pursue individuals even if newspapers are now tacitly exempt from legal censure in these cases. The military-media relationship being cultivated by the British government is liable to be jeopardised particularly if journalists are unaware of or choose to deliberately ignore the inevitable overlap between intelligence/security and purely military matters. The contrast between issue and that of actual military operations is stark. The spirit of co-operation seen over Kosovo continued to work effectively during the military operations against the Taleban regime in Afghanistan, with the British media respecting an MOD request to refrain from naming host nations for operations undertaken as part of 'Enduring Freedom'.³⁵ Security and intelligence issues are self-evidently the most sensitive dimensions of British national security policy: the imperative now is a reform of the existing system that will acknowledge the legitimate interests of the government, public opinion and the media.

Conclusion

At present the state of military-media relations in Britain shows elements of both a new openness and a traditionalist reticence towards the media. While the MOD has been co-operative in terms of working with journalists both in peacetime and conflict situations, the government has been less ready to address concerns over the confused legal situation that presently inhibits free discussion of national security issues. This however, seems likely to change as Britain comes under more pressure to align its secrecy laws with European Union human rights legislation. Much of the resistance to these kinds of changes stems from an ingrained reticence regarding the British establishment and security and defence issues. To a considerable extent the Blair government's greater willingness to engage with and cultivate the media can be seen as manipulation; another perspective would highlight a *quid pro quo* that concedes an enhanced role for the media in exchange for a greater centralisation of central government's media relations unit. Central control does not rule out limited autonomy for individual ministries. In general the MOD can be commended on its information culture and

³⁴*Secrets, Spies and Whistleblowers*, Article 19 and Liberty, pp. 22-3.

³⁵Craig Hoyle, 'RAF support vital for "Enduring Freedom"', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 14 November 2001.

commitment to explaining its operational structures and objectives. However, the residual secretiveness as embodied by the DA-Notice system and the provisions of the Official Secrets Act still needs to be addressed.

Aside from the parochial aspects of British military-media relations, these of course will increasingly be subject to the international context in which they are operating. The growing likelihood of coalition operations also means that the British armed forces need to consider how they fit in to the media strategies adopted by NATO and most probably in time the European Union. Another factor is the greater immediacy of information flows and the increasing importance of transnational over national interest groups for many people, as manifested in the development of NGOs and Internet news coverage. It is also important to consider the extent to which there is overlap between the interests involved in military-media relations and the way in which this affects reporting. This is apparent in the number of defence correspondents drawn from the military establishment that are consequently granted privileged access. The ownership of broadcasters such as CNN and Sky raises fundamentally important issues for the future of media coverage of military operations. The ongoing debate of the very concept of independent, objective media that underpins the current controversy over the future funding of the BBC. The media also now faces the challenge of addressing criticisms that it is event-driven rather than issue-driven, particularly in the reportage of actual conflict situations. Greater explanation of the context behind crisis situations is also the responsibility of institutions such as the MOD as well as the media themselves. That said, the level of public indifference to the details and context of overseas military operations does beg questions over whether more explanation as opposed to reportage will actually change the current situation.³⁶ It nevertheless seems inevitable that the British government's and military establishment's relationship with the national media will evolve into a more open and cautiously supportive relationship in the future.

³⁶Taylor, 'The Military and the Media', pp. 197-200; Badsey, 'The Media, the Military and Public Opinion', pp. 243-44



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