

Why has the British Ministry of Defence Tried to Ban Its Own Book on Afghanistan?

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Global Research, April 17, 2014

[Matt Carr's Infernal Machine](#) 13 April 2014

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Attempts by democratic governments to ban books rarely work out well. If the book is banned on grounds of public morality (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*), then the writer nearly always wins in the end and the government that tried to suppress their work is likely to end up looking puritanical, cloven-footed and often pig-ignorant.

If, like Peter Wright's *Spycatcher*, the book is banned on 'political' or national security grounds then it is immediately going to attract a great deal more media interest than it might otherwise have done, so that if one publisher drops it another is likely to pick it up. When the Thatcher government tried to ban *Spycatcher* under the Official Secrets it ended up looking ridiculous and impotent when the book was published abroad – even in Scotland – for three years before the ban was lifted, so that anyone who wanted to know what was in it could find out.

Rather than silencing books, such efforts tend to generate more curiosity about them. And attempts at censorship and prohibition are almost guaranteed to attract attention when a government tries to ban a book that it has commissioned itself, as was the case last week, when the Ministry of Defense [attempted to block the publication](#) of *An Intimate War – An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict 1978-2013*, on the grounds that it breached the Official Secrets Act.

What makes this effort so extraordinary was the fact that the book was written by Dr. Mike Martin, a former captain in the Territorial Army, who was commissioned three years ago by the army to write a study of British military operations in Helmand. That study became a Phd dissertation, which the MoD has had in its possession for 14 months. Yet it is only in February that it raised objections to its content, to the point when Martin resigned his ten-year commission in order to be able to publish the book.

To its credit, Martin's publisher Hurst & Co has gone ahead with publication, even though it was reduced to handing out flyers instead of hardbacks at the presentation of his book at Kings College London last Thursday. I should confess at this point that I have a dog in this hunt. Hurst is also my publisher, and I am proud to be associated with a company that has refused to buckle in the face of such idiotic and ham-fisted official pressure, which shames the army and the British government.

I was also curious as to why the MoD would feel the need to go to such lengths, and undertake an effort that was bound to backfire. The news about Martin's book broke the day after I appeared in a BBC documentary about the Sergeant Blackman/Marine A case. One of the recurring themes in that program was the idea that the Marines in Helmand were

in Afghanistan in order to protect the population against 'the Taliban'.

Martin's effectively destroys these simplistic representations. His meticulous study, based on 150 interviews conducted over four years, and his own experience as a serving officer in Helmand, presents a view of the war that is radically different from the one the British public has been hearing ever since Tony Blair ordered British troops to deploy in Helmand in 2006.

At various times over the last eight years we have heard from politicians and army spokesmen that British troops were engaged in counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics, that they were building democracy, providing security to the local population, ensuring development and protecting women's rights, or – most fatuously of all – that they were there 'to keep us safe.'

This last trope rested on the assumption that our troops were fighting 'Taliban insurgents', allied to al Qaeda, who needed to be defeated in order to ensure that Helmand did not become a 'terrorist base' or a 'springboard' for 9/11 attacks. During those years it was rarely, if ever, explained who the Taliban were or where they came from or why they were fighting. We simply assumed, as so many soldiers did, that they were killable 'terrorists' and 'bad guys' motivated by fanaticism and evil.

It is therefore astonishing and even breathtaking to see these representations blown out of the water by one of the army's own. Like US Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Davis's searing 2012 report [Dereliction of Duty](#), Martin shows the Afghan war as it is, rather than how our political and military leaders would like us to see it, and the picture that he paints is often jaw-dropping.

What Martin reveals, in painstaking – and from the military's point of view – painful detail, is that British politicians and army officers did not have the remotest idea what they were doing in Helmand, and that the war was conducted with staggering naivete and ignorance.

Martin shows again and again that neither Britain, the United States, nor the various international institutions involved in the Afghan war really understood Afghanistan's complex local politics, and that this incomprehension resulted in a series of mistakes and misjudgements that made the conflict worse.

In Helmand, it meant that the British were often manipulated by local warlords and politicians, to the point when they did not actually know who they were fighting against and on whose behalf. In some cases, British troops took part in opium eradication programs only to find that they had been steered by opium growers connected to the Afghan police towards the destruction of crops owned by their rivals.

At other times air strikes or raids were carried out on 'Taliban' villages on the basis of intelligence supplied by elements within the Afghan police who were using the 'Angrez' – as Helmandis call the British – as instruments of an inter-tribal feud or clan vendetta.

Rather than protecting the population, the British army effectively became allies of a predatory Afghan police that was despised and feared by the local population, and whose depredations were instrumental in driving Helmandis to seek support from the various 'Talibans' in the province. Rather than making things better, providing security, or reducing violence, Martin argues, the presence of the British army actually increased the level of violence from the moment it was deployed.

It is a military truism that armies should understand the nature of the enemy they are fighting. If Martin's analysis is correct, then the British army did not understand the enemy it was fighting in Afghanistan. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is the main 'secret' that the government is now clumsily attempting to conceal from the British public.

So Hurst should be congratulated and supported for holding firm and seeking to ensure that these efforts fail. And anyone interested in the truth, rather than propaganda, about the disastrous and misconceived campaign that has killed more than 400 British troops and thousands of Afghans, should get hold of this compelling and absolutely essential account of the war, and drink its bitter but salutary antidote to the dangerous delusions of the last eight years.

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