

BOOK REVIEW

Don't mention the war: the Australian Defence Force, the media and the Afghan conflict

by Kevin Foster

*Monash University Publishing: Melbourne; 2013; 168 pp.; ISBN 9781922235183; RRP \$24.95
(softcover)*

Kevin Foster's main argument in *Don't Mention the War* is that the war in Afghanistan was the "worst reported and least understood conflict in Australian history". While there is merit in some of his criticisms regarding media reporting and the level of public understanding, I don't believe that his claims of being the 'worst' and 'least' are justified.

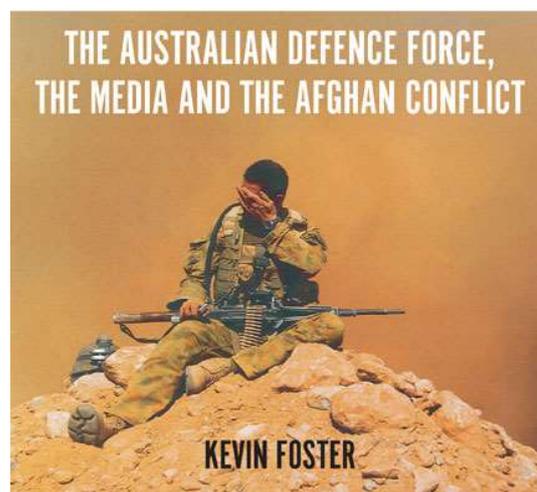
Foster makes his point not by comparing the Afghanistan experience with other wars in Australian history, but largely by comparing the Australian approach to public and media relations in Afghanistan to that of Canada and Holland. His view is that in relative terms the Australian Defence Force (ADF) restricted the media's access to and freedom of movement among its troops, and ensured positive coverage of its endeavours by bringing many aspects of the reporting of the war in-house. He also accuses the Australian Government of evasion and obstruction, half-truths and hype regarding public information about the conflict, which served to conceal the facts and neuter public debate about the war.

Foster is an associate professor in the School of English Communications and Performance Studies at Monash University and currently teaches media and cultural studies. He has written widely on war, cultural history and national identity; and his work has appeared in a range of national and international journals. Foster is the author of *Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative and National Identity* (1999) and *Lost Worlds: Latin America and the Imagining of Empire* (2009); and is the editor of *What are we doing in Afghanistan? The Military and the Media at War* (2009) and *The Information Battlefield: Representing Australians at War* (2011). It is not too difficult to discern the broad theme of his academic work through these titles.

Foster identifies a deeply entrenched antagonism and an irrational fear of the media within the Department of Defence – stemming back to the Vietnam War era – as well as an increasing degree of spin and control in the political and government sphere. Together, they conspire to manage organisational reputations and 'deny the truth' to the Australian public and the media – the 'guardians' of the public interest.

Foster claims that other militaries have come to the realisation that their earlier hostility to the media was not only ill-founded but counter-productive. He asserts that: "US commanders have discovered that they needed the media to furnish a credible account of their deeds for a domestic audience and to project compelling images of US power to their adversaries. The media were not a threat to the military but an asset." I am not convinced that the ADF is too far off having the same

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perspective and the media embedding programme in Afghanistan continued a viable mechanism that goes back to Gallipoli.

While the war in Afghanistan is the vehicle for Foster's argument, this is a book mainly about the relationship between a government and the media (the 'fourth estate'). He is of the view that there must be 'full and frank' disclosure of anything that happens within public sector institutions – including the ADF. While public sector institutions serve the public interest and must be ultimately accountable to the public, organisations of any kind will inevitably have information that is used internally and information that is deliberately shared externally.

Foster's assessment that war in Afghanistan was poorly understood by the Australian public does have some merit, but there are several reasons for this in addition to his argument that the Australian Government failed to effectively engage and communicate with the Australian public about the war and Australia's involvement in it. The complex and dynamic social and geo-political environment, the protracted duration of the event and the nature of the war itself all contributed to a relatively low level of public understanding about the war in Australia. But I do agree with Foster – and James Brown – that we need to ensure we do not fall into the habit of understanding our wars simply through the periodic reports of soldiers' deaths.

I don't believe that Foster argues convincingly that the war in Afghanistan was the "worst reported and least understood conflict in Australian history". Could it have been better reported and more understood? Probably ... but the ADF and its antecedents have been bitten many times by journalists seeking to make a name for themselves by reporting on 'a scandal' or 'a disaster'. The public interest is not always the only motivator for journalists. Foster must accept that the 'fourth estate' is a large, diverse and uncontrollable group of people that structured organisations with missions, priorities, responsibilities and reputations must positively manage. Rather than making claims about being the worst reported and least understood, amongst a range of other wider criticisms, his book would have far greater utility recommending practical ways to improve and enhance the military-media relationship from both parties' perspectives.

If you are a media studies student this book represents a view; if you are a public relations officer in Defence this book may be of some professional interest; but for the average reader in military matters *Don't Mention the War* does not warrant being on your 'must read' list.

Marcus Fielding