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Shadows of Vietnam: reforming military–media relations in the USA and Australia

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This paper contrasts Australian and US military responses to the media coverage of the war in Vietnam. It examines the "oppositional media thesis", considers how this shaped subsequent US military-media relations, and examines the experiences leading to the review and reform of the military's official position in relation to the media. The paper then compares the US experience with that of the Australian military, examining the factors shaping Australian media coverage of the war in Vietnam, the mutual hostility this bred, why it has survived, and how it has shaped military-media relations in the war in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Vietnam War; military–media relations; Afghanistan War

As Rodney Tiffen has rightly reminded us: "the debate about American media coverage of the [Vietnam] war cannot be simply translated to Australia".[1] The differences between the numbers and nature of reporters committed to cover the war by media organisations in the two nations, the disparities in freedom of movement and facilitation of access that they enjoyed, and the varied editorial policies they worked under produced profoundly contrasting visions of the conflict.[2] In turn, these framed, and were themselves framed by, differing political responses to the war in Australia and the United States where they also played a key role in shaping public opinion.[3] Yet if Australian and US reporting of the war was marked by its differences, the consequences of this treatment—its influence on how the militaries in the two countries regarded and responded to the perceived effects of the media coverage of Vietnam—reveal marked similarities. In this case, the dominance of US coverage and the prevalence of American cultural memory of Vietnam have exercised a significant influence over how the Australian military remembered the war and on how this shaped its thinking about the reporting of future conflicts. It may be a little more than four thousand kilometres from Saigon to Kabul, as the crow flies, but as I will demonstrate here, for the Australian Defence Force, when it comes to the reporting of war, the cultural distance between the two is negligible.

Soon after helicopters lifted the last US personnel off the roof of the CIA's Pittman Apartments on the morning of April 30, 1975, leaving Saigon to the advancing North Vietnamese tanks, the belief was already widespread within the US military that the responsibility for its defeat rested squarely with the media. General

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Maxwell Taylor, former US ambassador to South Vietnam, claimed, during the Paris peace negotiations that ended that war, that the communists:

> bombarded our domestic opinion with continuing propaganda from Paris and Hanoi, often using for that purpose the "free world" media . . . The press—not all, but the vast majority—was opposed to our Vietnam policy and very vocal. The television also. Allowing television on the battlefield after our troops got there created an impossible situation at home.[4]

Free to travel where they wished, witness what they would, and write as they pleased, US and international reporters proffered an increasingly critical analysis of America's aims, strategies, and performance, which, the military argued, eventually turned the politicians and the public against the war. While the Pentagon proposed that the most effective means of securing victory lay in "calling up reserves . . . bombing the North more heavily . . . mining Haiphong harbor; destroying bridges to China . . . attacking 'sanctuaries' . . . invading the North and stopping 'infiltration' from that area", the media's determined focus on the human costs of such a strategy ensured that neither politicians nor the public would lend their support to it.[5] Accordingly, the proponents of the oppositional media thesis contended, "By harnessing public squeamishness, the media had served to limit strategic options to the point at which victory became untenable".[6] As a consequence of this, Robert Elegant claimed: "For the first time in modern history the outcome of a war was determined not on the battlefield, but on the printed page and, above all, on the television screen".[7]

Daniel Hallin notes: "the view that . . . television turned the American public against the war is accepted so widely across the American political spectrum that it probably comes as close as anything to being conventional wisdom about a war that still splits the American public".[8] Yet studies have not only demonstrated that the belief that "the media were adversaries to American policy in Vietnam or a decisive factor in the outcome in the war" is false; they have also shown that television exercised far less influence over US and international public opinion than conventional wisdom would have us believe.[9] As Michael Mandelbaum has noted, while it may have been the case that:

> By the middle of the 1960s, surveys of their habits showed, Americans were watching a great deal of television. Or rather, the many American television sets were playing much of the day. This did not necessarily mean, however, that their owners were paying close attention to them.[10]

In a 1969 study sponsored by the National Association of Broadcasters:

> Of 232 viewers who were asked, "What do you recall from tonight's broadcast," 51 percent failed to recall a single story out of an average of nineteen that had appeared. Of the 49 percent who could remember at least one, the commentary . . . at the end of the program, in theory the most influential in terms of public opinion, was the least remembered.[11]

Nor were the attitudes of the American public towards the war shifted by a nightly diet of blood and gore. Studies showed that coverage tended to reinforce viewers' existing opinions about the war rather than changing them, while images of blood and gore were not nearly as commonplace as has been assumed.[12] Despite the large number of reporters in Vietnam, Henry Allen of the *Washington Post* argued that at most times: "No more than forty reporters were where bullets were flying", and during the Tet offensive, that number scarcely doubled.[13] Technical constraints and editorial caution ensured that the footage reporters captured and screened remained mostly inoffensive. Camera teams in Vietnam were a three-man operation—cameraman, soundman, and a reporter—the latter two yoked together by a cable. Because the camera was cumbersome and difficult to operate from a prone position, and because most of the combat up until the Tet offensive took place in the jungle, the mountains, or the delta, with a good deal of that happening at night, television showed little of the fighting. When it did capture combat, it tended to show it "from a distance or to depict its aftermath... There was considerable commotion . . . but little of the violence characteristic of Vietnam".[14] The tepid nature of the resulting coverage was reinforced by a combination of military circumspection and editorial diffidence. While the military were determined to keep deceased US soldiers off the small screen, ostensibly in deference to the sensitivities of the bereaved, with one eye ever-fixed on the bottom line, the networks "cut film that showed too much violence rather than lose viewers to another channel".[15] As a result, Daniel Hallin notes: "only about 22% of all film reports from South East Asia in the period before the Tet offensive showed actual combat, and often this was minimal—a few incoming mortar rounds or a crackle of sniper fire".[16] Lawrence Lichty observed that between August 1965 and August 1970, "of some 2,300 reports that aired on evening television news programs no more than 76 showed anything approaching true violence – heavy fighting, incoming small arms and artillery fire, killed and wounded within view".[17]

Regardless of its objective inaccuracy, the conviction that the media had lost the war in Vietnam, prevalent among US and international armed forces personnel, bred hostility towards the press that "soaked deep into the military's cultural tissue".[18] Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the prejudices of senior officers who had first-hand experience of the war were "transmitted down the line" to the point where they constituted a key component of the military's "organizational wisdom . . . no official document articulated let alone demanded an emotional bias against the fourth estate", as no such edict was necessary: "that bias was deeply entrenched in military culture".[19] Thus, hatred of the media rapidly became what scholars of organisational communications call a routine knowledge asset, part of the organisation's conventional wisdom, absorbed not through explicit direction but via the more natural processes of group socialisation.

Not only was this belief that the media had stabbed the military in the back widely dispersed within the organisation, it was also stubbornly enduring. When former Special Forces officer and Vietnam veteran Henry Gole invited outstanding journalists to the Army War College's media days for discussions with students, he noted that despite the passing of decades, "Some 20 years after their experience in Vietnam, student attitudes towards the media were overwhelmingly negative and seemingly permanent, at least in that generation of embittered officers."[20] When Colonel John Shotwell of the US Marine Corps arranged similar sessions at the Amphibious Warfare School, he noted how, as a result of the "depth of suspicion" between the parties, discussions rapidly degenerated into "fingerpointing antipathy": "Officers who'd never once had to confront either a reporter or an armed opponent blamed the media for losing the war for us in Vietnam, impugned their morals, and maligned their loyalties."[21] In 1990 Bernard Trainor noted that "Today's [US] officer corps carries as part of its cultural baggage a loathing for the press . . . Like racism, anti-Semitism, and all forms of bigotry, it is irrational, but nonetheless real".[22] And, being real, it had concrete outcomes. Despite the fact that the principal lesson the US military took from Vietnam was wrong, the belief that a free press had lost it the war, Thomas Rid notes that it: "became a defining feature of the US military's public affairs policy for the next quarter century. The lesson, translated into practical advice for future operations, was that the press needed to be treated like an adversary and that media access to the battlefield should be strictly denied".[23]

The lessons of Vietnam were first applied by the Americans during the invasions of Grenada in October 1983 and Panama in December 1989.[24] In the case of Grenada, the media were aggressively excluded from the island. Four journalists who made it ashore were arrested by US forces and transported to the invasion force's flagship, the USS *Guam*. Six more were intercepted and also taken to the *Guam*, while photographers taking pictures of US military aircraft bound for Grenada were arrested, strip-searched, and had their film confiscated.[25] When the shooting was over, the first media contingent granted access to the islands was a pool of reporters from the major networks who were escorted around the key sites of the conflict by a posse of zealous public affairs personnel; the reporters were only permitted to gather material that the military vetted. While their flight to Barbados, from where they were scheduled to transmit their copy in time for the evening news bulletins, was unaccountably held up, President Reagan made a live address to the nation, carried by all the networks, announcing victory in Grenada and the safe evacuation of the nearly one thousand US citizens marooned by the fighting. The networks followed the live cross from the oval office with the only visuals available, footage shot by the US Army showing "young American students making the 'V' sign and smiling at the cameras as they walked up the ramp of the 'rescue' aircraft".[26] It was a worrying, if prophetic precedent. While the US media raged against the restrictions imposed on them, the government and the military exulted.[27] As Peter Young noted, Grenada:

> was a lovely war from the public information point of view . . . The images were of a war that had been fought without dead bodies, without fighting or blood, and without suffering or civilian casualties. Only a guaranteed showing of success and an emotive pictorial rationale of the reasons the United States went to war appeared on the television screens of America and the world.[28]

In public information terms, the first Persian Gulf War may have seemed no less lovely. Here, the Americans applied the lessons of Vietnam on a grand scale. Two thousand of the world's media gathered in Dhahran where they registered with the US-led Joint Information Bureau (JIB). One hundred and sixty of the more fortunate reporters, most of them Americans, were assigned to small Media Reporting Teams (MRTs) and accompanied the troops into battle, providing pooled dispatches for their colleagues in the rear. Their movements closely monitored by Public Affairs Officers (PAOs), their copy vetted and transmitted by the military, as traffic allowed, the MRT journalists were little better off than the hotel warriors back in Riyadh and Dhahran, sifting through the barrage of briefings, smart-bomb footage, and military hard sell.[29] Yet this was not the media management triumph that it appeared to be.

While the military were busy corralling the media and feeding them a carefully regulated diet of good news, they were being wrong-footed by a sophisticated Iraqi information campaign; it took considerable time and resources for the military to counter Iraq's propaganda triumphs.[30] As such, far from demonstrating the defeat and humiliation of the fourth estate, the Gulf War provided an object lesson in the military's dependence on the media and set in motion the most comprehensive reform of military-media relations since Vietnam.

The *Gulf War Air Power Survey* (1993), a five-volume study commissioned by the United States Air Force (USAF), laid the groundwork for a wholesale revision of the lessons learned from Vietnam when it concluded that a principal message from the first Gulf War was that "press coverage is an unavoidable yet important part of military operations".[31] After eight months of negotiations with network bureau chiefs, the Pentagon issued a directive adopting nine principles dictating the media coverage of future fighting, the most important of which stated that "open and independent reporting" would be the standard "means of covering a conflict".[32] The Pentagon decided to embrace the US Marine Corps' approach to media relations, detailed in a 1991 *Marine Corps Gazette* article titled "The Fourth Estate as a Force Multiplier".[33] However, while the article offered "a snapshot of the most sophisticated attitude on public affairs in the entire US military at the time", it still failed to address what emerged as the prime force leading military-media relations out of the post-Vietnam default postures of disdain and desperation, namely, the growing recognition that, like Saddam Hussein, future adversaries were going to employ their own increasingly sophisticated information operations aimed at undermining public support or dismantling multinational alliances by exploiting existing fault lines.[34]

The USA and their North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies were given a hard lesson in such information operations, and an insight into their consequences, during their intervention in Kosovo in 1999; greater armed forces, even victory on the battlefield, afforded them little advantage when divorced from a corresponding triumph in the information war. In March 1999 NATO launched Operation Allied Force, a bombing campaign purposed to end the killing and expulsion of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population and force Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic to the negotiating table. Because the operation was exclusively airborne, there were no NATO ground forces with whom reporters might embed, and therefore no one on the ground to relay NATO's version of events as they occurred. This failure to consider the conflict's informational dimension was deftly exploited by the Serbs. On April 14, 1999 US Air Force F-16s mistook a convoy of tractors evacuating refugees from advancing Serb forces near the village of Djakovica for a Serbian armoured column and bombed them. In excess of sixty people were killed, and scores more were wounded. Serb authorities moved swiftly to capitalise on the blunder, offering Western journalists in Belgrade free transport to the site of the bombing. The resulting images of "mangled tractors and minibuses…burned and bloodied corpses…limbs scattered among destroyed vehicles" and their accompanying reports made headlines across the world.[35] Over the next five days CNN featured more than sixty reports on the Djakovica attack, and both the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* featured the disaster on their front pages—the latter under a headline proposing that "Convoy Deaths May Undermine [NATO's] Moral Authority".[36] After initial denials, it took NATO five days to muster a coherent response, albeit a shamefaced admission of responsibility, by which time it had ceded the information advantage to the Serbs and paid the price in damaged legitimacy and rising public disapproval of the campaign.[37]

Three weeks later, acting on flawed intelligence, NATO missiles slammed into the Chinese Embassy compound in Belgrade, killing three and wounding fifteen.[38] This time the international media were on hand to witness the debacle, and it became the single most publicised event of the war. Once again, it took NATO days to present a plausible public explanation of what had happened. In the meantime, the Serbs took full advantage both on the battlefield and in the information environment. As Jamie Shea noted, during the five days that the Djakovica bombing dominated the news, while the Western media and their publics were focused on the deaths of a few dozen unfortunate refugees, Serb militias drove more than two hundred thousand civilians out of Kosovo.[39] Likewise, in the wake of the Chinese Embassy bombing, Serb spokesmen took to the airwaves to claim that it was they, not the Kosovars, who were the victims of terror and indiscriminate assault. So complete was the Serbs' command of the information agenda that they were able to leverage concrete military gains from it. After the Djakovica attack, when NATO cancelled daytime sorties and abandoned the bombing of Belgrade in the wake of the Chinese Embassy incident, General Wesley Clark, NATO's supreme allied commander in Europe, conceded that: "The weight of public opinion was doing to us what the Serb air defence system had failed to do: limit our strikes".[40] As a result of experiences such as these, commanders and planners realised that, like their adversaries: "the US military needed to engage in what doctrine would call counter propaganda activities".[41] This would only be possible, they discovered, by bringing the media into the fold, working with them, harnessing their broadcasting power, and tolerating their intrusive introspection.

Hence, in late 2002, as the USA prepared to invade Iraq for a second time, the Department of Defense issued a set of Public Affairs Guidelines (PAGs) that required the military to "ensure the media are provided with every opportunity to observe actual combat operations".[42] Only by keeping the media at the tip of the spear could they provide an objective account of events and thereby counter enemy propaganda and no small degree of public scepticism about the veracity of the military's own accounts. In doing so, the military offered the clearest commitment to the core democratic values ostensibly advanced by the allies in their invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan: "Our ultimate strategic success in bringing peace and security to this region will come in our long-term commitment to supporting our democratic ideals. We need to tell the factual story—good or bad—before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions".[43] Accordingly, the policy explicitly forbids any attempt by the military to "prevent the release of derogatory, embarrassing, negative or uncomplimentary information".[44]

If the US military are pledged to the provision of relatively unfettered media coverage of their men at war and all that may bring, the public affairs policies and practices of the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) offer no such commitment and no such opportunity. Indeed, it is difficult to measure the ADF's media-relations performance against its stated policies, as it has none. Former Director General of Communication Strategies for the Department of Defence Brian Humphreys notes that like the Department of Defence, the ADF "has no formal strategy for media relations…While there are tactical public information plans, a general policy direction and a number of informal strategies, there is no considered and documented media strategy".[45] As a consequence of which: "it is little surprise that the ADF struggles in its dealings with the fourth estate".[46] Despite its claims that "Defence is committed to working with the media to expand access opportunities to our Operations", ADF practice, as amply demonstrated in Afghanistan, reveals a different story—that it has no interest in letting reporters loose on the battlefield.[47]

As a token force, with a negligible impact on the progress of the broader fight against the Taliban, the true measure of the ADF's success or failure rests less on whether the coalition forces emerge triumphant in Afghanistan than on the manner in which ADF personnel conduct themselves in the field and on base, in particular whether or not they live up to the intangible traditions of Anzac.[48] The value of the ADF's contribution thus resides not in the political or military outcomes of its actions but in the performance itself and the extent to which it can be linked with Australian military tradition. Consequently, the ADF is highly sensitive about how it is portrayed by the fourth estate and maintains an iron grip over the coverage of its troops and their operations in Afghanistan. It exercises absolute control over who among the media travels to Afghanistan, where they can go, what they can see, and whom they can talk to when they get there. Though it has, belatedly, introduced a program of embedding reporters with its forces, its continued imposition of strict controls over their movements led one senior Defence correspondent to argue that what the ADF was offering was not "media embedding" but "media hosting".[49] Determined to minimise the scope for negative coverage by the media, the ADF has brought the greater portion of the media's duties in-house. The nomination, gathering, editing, and production of news from Afghanistan are overwhelmingly undertaken by the ADF's uniformed public affairs personnel, working in small, mobile groups called Military Camera Teams (MCTs). As a result, the vast majority of words and pictures depicting the ADF at war in Afghanistan that find their way into Australia's newspapers and onto its television screens have been gathered by the military themselves. This arrangement ensures a seamless unity between Defence Public Affairs' (DPA) representation of the ADF's role and purpose in Afghanistan and embodied evidence of its truth and fulfilment.

What is most striking about the ADF's media operations practices in Afghanistan is their underlying assumption that the fourth estate is the enemy—their continuing fidelity to the lessons of Vietnam. How does this postulation stack up against the evidence of the actual coverage of Vietnam by the Australian media? What did the media do to mark themselves out as hostile? What were the lessons that the Australian military might reasonably have taken from their interactions with the media, and do they in any way explain the dysfunctional nature of contemporary military-media relations? Regardless of the international response to events in Vietnam, the Australian press never regarded the war as a story justifying the presence of a reporter dedicated to its coverage: "Although some papers sent correspondents for lengthy periods, none ever had a permanent Vietnam correspondent".[50] Some newspapers failed to muster a single visitor: "The *Sydney Morning Herald*, which had sent more correspondents to World War II than any other Australian newspaper, did not manage to send one to Vietnam".[51] As a result, for the duration of the conflict, the "most constant source of material for Australian newspapers came from the international news agencies".[52]

Those correspondents sent to Vietnam on assignment found that the first constraint on their freedom to report came not from the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) or the Australian military, but their own employers. Keith Smith of the Australian Associated Press (AAP) discovered that he "was expected to self censor and not send material that was critical of the government's position".[53] John Mancy and Alan Ramsey, also of AAP, "were told to stick to reporting stories and not to carry out investigative pieces or editorialise".[54] Likewise, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) imposed "strict guidelines" dictating "what its news division staff could say and could not say", which resulted in the prohibition of "any form of commentary".[55] These restrictions were backed up, as of October 1968, by guidelines originating with Defence Minister Allen Fairhall, which "required that any Australian journalists quoting Australian soldiers had to submit their copy for approval to military officials in Vietnam".[56] Earlier in the year the government had signalled its dismay at perceived media hostility to its policies in Vietnam. When Prime Minister John Gorton was asked if he would look into Vietnamese communist denials that they were responsible for the deaths of three Australian journalists killed in a Vietcong raid on Cholon, he declined, in the process taking a swipe at "press coverage in Vietnam which . . . does not support as it might, the efforts of Australians in that area".[57] The introduction of the "guidelines" suggests that the government, having failed in its efforts to win the media's support for its policies, had determined to compel it.

As a consequence, reporters were regarded with increasing suspicion by the military. Tim Bowden's biography of the Australian combat cameraman Neil Davis notes that: "Unlike the Americans and other allied groups fighting in South Vietnam, the Australians did not welcome foreign correspondents; they had a deep seated distrust of the press. It was known in the trade as the 'feel free to fuck off' approach to public relations".[58] Despite a show of cooperation, the military regarded the Australian media with wariness, if not hostility, and sought to keep them at arm's length: "A telegram from Austforce, Vietnam, to the Department of the Army in Canberra stated that their senior officers 'had been advised on a confidential basis that they should as far as possible avoid contact with press representatives without making it obvious that they are doing so'."[59] The reporters weren't stupid and recognised that "they were at best tolerated and at other times actively discouraged".[60] Expected to support the cause and burnish the military brand by concentrating on home-towners or bland colour pieces, reporters who showed any inclination to investigate or criticise were frozen out and implicitly, if not more directly, invited to fuck off. Creighton Burns, who covered the war for the *Age*, and later edited the paper, noted how difficult it was to work with the military, recalling that their attempts to impose censorship in Vietnam were "horrific . . . you couldn't talk to an Australian soldier without the presence of an officer there".[61] Veteran correspondent Denis Warner, who had covered Korea and the Second World War, responded with fury to the restrictions, describing them as "the most blatant attempt to impose censorship at source that I have ever encountered in any Army in any war at any time".[62] Yet the restrictions evidently had the desired effect. As a result of government interference, military coercion, and editorial diffidence, Tiffen concludes, "there was less independent probing, less willingness to devote adequate resources to reporting the war, and a far more restricted range of opinion and analysis"—in sum, "the performance of the Australian media was overwhelmingly timid".[63] The Australian military may have lost to the Vietcong, but it had clearly triumphed over its own media, helping to ensure that coverage of the war occupied a narrow range between "general support" and vociferous partisanship.[64] As a consequence, the Australian military regarded its experience of working with the media in Vietnam as a vindication of the benefits of limited contact and strict control.

Where the Americans learned from the first Gulf War, Kosovo, and elsewhere that the lessons of Vietnam were wrong, that the media were not the enemy but an ally, and a handy force multiplier at that, the ADF seems to have hung onto and reinforced the lessons it learned in Phuoc Tuy. To some extent, this can be accounted for by the relative paucity of the ADF's contemporary operational exposure. Where the Americans, the British, and many NATO forces have had sufficient opportunity to trial new ways of working with the media since Vietnam, to experience for themselves the failures of the post-Vietnam model, and to arrive by trial and error at something better suited to a new world of communications technology, information operations and their changing needs, the ADF, until their deployment to Afghanistan and with the exception of East Timor, have scarcely been in a serious shooting match since Vietnam. Its contribution to the first Gulf War was negligible, and the Australian troops sent to "fight" in the second Gulf War were kept so safely out of harm's way that the only casualty they suffered was self-inflicted.

A further explanation for the continued currency of the so-called lessons of Vietnam within the ADF resides in the failure of the Department of Defence's organisational systems to accommodate or affect systemic renewal in its relations with the media. Assuming that the ADF was prepared or even keen to reform its relations with the media, it seems to lack the organisational means to direct and drive the cultural change that this would demand. The Department of Defence is one of the nation's largest employers, with a workforce in excess of 100,000 personnel. It has a presence in every state and territory, manages over three million hectares of land, and operates advanced fleets of aircraft, ships, submarines, and other fighting vehicles. Its "assets and inventory amounts to $73 billion, and its annual budget of $26.5 billion is equivalent to around 1.8% of our gross domestic product".[65] Jointly managed under a diarchy by a civilian secretary and the uniformed Chief of Defence Force (CDF), the department has long been regarded by politicians, the media, and expert commentators as dysfunctional. A sprawling congeries of entrenched practice and uniformed fiefdoms resistant to civilian oversight, beyond the capacity of any minister to manage, let alone reform, it is "a source of profound frustration to the government".[66] A recent report from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) described the department's current state of operation and organisation as "beyond intolerable", noting its "manifest inefficiency and clouded accountability".[67] Because the department lacks a governance infrastructure commensurate with its size and complexity, neither the minister, nor the CDF, nor the secretary is able to "impose a regime of performance management and accountability over the organisation".[68] While the ASPI report recognised that the department was desperately in need of "stronger central strategic control", it conceded that because of its Byzantine structures and the "seriously dysfunctional" state of "authority and accountability across much of Defence", the department's ministers "are caught in an invidious situation from the day they take up the job with limited ability to hold Defence officials to account".[69] Were they able, Dan Oakes notes, there is little incentive for them to do so: “ministers are typically reluctant to hunt out who is responsible for mistakes because an antagonistic relationship with Defence is more likely to result in the replacement of the minister, rather than the secretary of the department or chief of the Defence Force”.[70] Even then, as former Defence Minister Dr Brendan Nelson noted, when the minister does seek to assert his authority it is uncertain that his orders will be followed: “I think it’s fair to say that at times the uniformed side of Defence finds it difficult to respond to directives that come from civilians in the form of the government and minister of the day”.[71] With a dysfunctional department and an emasculated leadership, it is little wonder that it has been so difficult to organise and effect change within the Department of Defence, particularly change that encourages greater openness.

By contrast, the US military were able to bring off a spectacular turnaround in the culture of hostility that marked its relations with the media. As the Pentagon came to realise that in the rapidly transforming information environment of the new millennium, the attitudes towards the media that the US military had brought with them out of the Vietnam War were hindering their strategic and operational efficiency, they set about shifting the organisation’s perceptions of the press. They were able to do this because they had both the ways and the means of instituting deep-rooted organisational change. Weber observed that reliant on routine, repetition, and established processes, bureaucracies are inherently resistant to change. Military organisations offer a prime case in point, with their organisational culture held in place by “rigid adherence to rules, clear chains-of-command, and a hierarchical rank system”.[72] Yet militaries face a unique challenge to their inherent cautiousness. The imperative to adapt to the fluid operational environment of the battlefield and the ever accelerating pace of technological and informational innovation requires that they do not resist change but embrace it. The US military has responded to this challenge by developing a comprehensive process of review, evaluation, simulation, and reform. Military campaigns, one’s own and others’, are observed and analysed, performances appraised, new methods trialled, and new processes developed and disseminated, before the whole process of review begins again. Thus, the organisation’s institutional memory is endlessly refreshed; new doctrine, the precepts, principles, and practices that teach and conserve the military’s explicit knowledge base are amended and renewed by fresh experiences and the tacit knowledge they generate.

Like all modern militaries, the ADF pursues a similar process of perpetual self-review and improvement of its battlefield practices. But it is the quality and capacity of its internal communications and not its military performance that is the cause for concern here. While it has no shortage of dedicated and intelligent personnel with an interest in public affairs, it has neither a public affairs doctrine nor a leader capable of resisting political and military hostility to push through the requisite cultural change. Defence public affairs has no overarching communication plan, no explicit statement of its precepts, principles, practices, or, more pertinently, the attitudes and aims dictating its relations with the media—in short, it has no doctrine. In the absence of any distilled expression of the organisation’s explicit knowledge about the media, and the opportunity this would create for debate, review, and revision, the ADF’s views about and interactions with the media are defined instead by ingrained cultural attitudes, the tacit knowledge that shapes the organisation’s conventional wisdom. Unexpressed, though deeply and widely held to be true, these opinions are virtually impervious to change.

Hence, on February 24, 2010 the former Defence Minister John Faulkner addressed the C. E. W. Bean Foundation Dinner in Canberra, proposing a new contract between the government, the military, the media, and the Australian public. He called on the military to follow his own example, to exercise greater openness in their dealings with the press and the public, to accept the scrutiny and criticism that this brings, to live up to their democratic responsibilities, and to finally come clean with the Australian public:

> In a democracy, power supposedly belongs to the people, and is exercised only on their behalf. Democratic governments like ours can only say we act on **behalf** of the community when we act with their **consent**. And that consent, ladies and gentlemen, is not genuine if gained with coercion, or with deception. Nowhere is this more important than it is when it comes to a nation's military actions. When the Australian Government commits Australian forces, we put Australian lives at risk, and exercise potentially – often actually – lethal force in the name of the Australian community. It is essential therefore that the community knows not only the reasons but also the costs of such action.[73] (Emphasis in original)

As heartening as this speech is in its recognition of and refusal to tolerate the ADF's failure to deal openly with the media or honestly with the public, it also represents a cry of desperation, a statement of political intent with no bureaucratic or organisational means to give it effect. Translating political edict into operational practice is, as Faulkner knows, easier said than done. Vietnam is alive and well up at Defence HQ in Russell, where it not only provides a veneer of legitimacy to the ADF's continuing restrictions on media freedom, but also validates the bureaucratic inertia opposed to change. The lessons of Vietnam might be false, but for thirty-five years they have worked like a charm for the ADF, so why change them now?

But it isn't only the military that inhabit a world of myth resistant to cultural reform. The media share that space and, just as for the military, Vietnam occupies a prized place in their myth of personal and professional valorisation. Michael Herr's observation that Vietnam was what he and other reporters "had instead of happy childhoods" neatly expresses the role of Vietnam as a media fantasy land—a place where unfettered access, unlimited mobility, freedom from censorship, and a supportive community of like-minded professionals combined with a good cause and a villainous establishment to make the war a model to which the coverage of all subsequent conflict should aspire.[74] Yet as *Newsweek*'s Tony Clifton noted, the whole experience was a "one-off", not the logical outcome of an increased process of liberalisation, but an aberration that is unlikely ever to be repeated.[75] Accordingly, while it is understandable why the ADF would fight to hang on to the norms and "lessons" of Vietnam that have so advantaged them in their relations with the media, it is clear that Australian reporters pining for the freedoms of Vietnam have mistaken the US legend for the mostly miserable experience that their colleagues endured. Only when the ghosts of Vietnam have been exorcised from Russell and the editorial rooms of the country can the Australian public begin to hope for the credible account of their countrymen at war that has been denied them for so long.

Notes

1. Quoted in Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath, *Witnesses to War: the History of Australian Conflict Reporting* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2011), 230.
2. At the height of the Tet offensive, there were 637 correspondents accredited by the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, a substantial proportion of who reported for American broadcasters and publications. The US-based wire services United Press International (UPI) and Associated Press (AP), and the *New York Times*, retained a presence in Vietnam from the outset of the fighting until its cessation. By contrast, for the Australian press: "Although some papers sent correspondents for lengthy periods, none ever had a permanent Vietnam correspondent". Rodney Tiffen, "News Coverage of Vietnam," in *Australia's Vietnam: Australia in the Second Indo-China War*, ed. Peter King (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 166.
3. For example, where in the US the Tet offensive coincided with and stimulated increased criticism of military conduct and political direction in Vietnam, Tiffen notes that it "prompted little questioning among Australian editorialists". Tiffen, "News Coverage," 177.
4. Quoted, Tiffen, "News Coverage of Vietnam," 185. Robert Elegant claimed: "South Vietnamese and American forces actually won the limited military struggle. They virtually crushed the Viet Cong in the South, the 'native' guerrillas who were directed, reinforced, and equipped from Hanoi; and thereafter they threw back the invasion by regular North Vietnamese divisions. None the less, the War was finally lost to the invaders *after* the US disengagement because the political pressures built up by the media had made it quite impossible for Washington to maintain even the minimal material and moral support that would have enabled the Saigon regime to continue effective resistance". Robert Elegant, "How to Lose a War," *Encounter* 57.2 (1981): 73.
5. Jeffrey P. Kimball, "The Stab-in-the-Back Legend and the Vietnam War," *Armed Forces and Society* 14.3 (Spring 1988): 438.
6. Susan Carruthers, *The Media at War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 100. Kimball notes that "A nearly pure form of the theory is represented in the writings and statements of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, William Westmoreland, U.S. Grant Sharp, the John Birch society, writers for *National Review* and Accuracy in Media". Kimball, "Stab-in-the-Back," 438.
7. Elegant, "How to Lose," 73. In the same article, he famously asserted that the press "was instinctively 'agin the Government'—and at least reflexively, for Saigon's enemies". Elegant, "How to Lose," 73.
8. Daniel Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": the Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 105–6.
9. Hallin, *Uncensored War*, x.
10. Michael Mandelbaum, "Vietnam: The Television War," *Daedalus* 111.4 (Fall 1982): 159.
11. William Hammond, "The Press in Vietnam as Agent of Defeat: A Critical Examination," *Reviews in American History* 17.2 (June 1989): 315.
12. For a more detailed discussion of television's tendency to reinforce existing opinions, see Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 106–8.
13. Quoted in Thomas Rid, *War and Media Operations: the US Military and the Press from Vietnam to Iraq* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 56.
14. Hammond, "Press in Vietnam," 315.
15. Hammond, "Press in Vietnam," 316.
16. Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 129.
17. Hammond, "Press in Vietnam," 315.
18. Rid, *War and Media Operations*, 61.
19. Rid, *War and Media Operations*, 61.
20. Henry Gole, "Don't Kill the Messenger: Vietnam War Reporting in Context," *Parameters* (Winter 1996–97), 151.
21. John M. Shotwell, "The Fourth Estate as a Force Multiplier," *Marine Corps Gazette* (July 1991), 72.
22. Bernard Trainor, "The Military and the Media: a Troubled Embrace," *Parameters* (December 1990), 2.

23. Rid, *War and Media Operations*, 62–63.
24. The first conflict in which the lessons of Vietnam were used to shape an alternative media policy was the Falklands War of 1982. For more on this, see *inter alia*: Valerie Adams, *The Media and the Falklands War* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Kevin Foster, *Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative and National Identity* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).
25. For more on this, see Peter Young and Peter Jesser, *The Media and the Military: From the Crimea to Desert Strike* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1997), 129–31.
26. Young and Jesser, *Media and Military*, 132.
27. See Young and Jesser, *Media and Military*, 132–4.
28. See Young and Jesser, *Media and Military*, 133.
29. For an analysis of the MRT experience, see Carruthers, *Media at War*, 132–5.
30. For an analysis of Iraqi propaganda triumphs in the first Gulf War, in particular the bombing of the "Baby Milk Plant" and the destruction of the Al Firdos (or Al Amiriya) bunker on February 13, 1991, see Rid, *War and Media Operations*, 84–86; and Carruthers, *Media at War*, 138–9.
31. R. L. Olson, *Gulf War Air Power Survey, Volume Three: Logistics; Support* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1993), 135.
32. Rid, *War and Media Operations*, 86.
33. Shotwell, "The Fourth Estate," 72.
34. Rid, *War and Media Operations*, 87. For a discussion of Saddam Hussein's thraldom to the Vietnam Myth, his conviction that US public support for Operation Desert Storm would crumble at the sight of casualties from Iraq, as it had in Vietnam, see Carruthers, *Media at War*, 131–2.
35. Rid, *War and Media Operations*, 98.
36. Quoted Rid, *War and Media Operations*, 98.
37. Of the 23,000 bombs dropped by NATO during Operation Allied Force, only 30, or 0.0013 percent failed to hit the intended target. It is a mark of the deftness of the Yugoslav information campaign that it was able to make such effective propaganda capital out of such a minuscule sample.
38. NATO had been led to believe that the building housed the Yugoslav Federal Protectorate for Supply and Procurement.
39. Dr Jamie P. Shea, "The Kosovo Crisis and the Media: Reflections of a NATO Spokesman," in *Lessons from Kosovo: the KFOR Experience*, ed. Larry Wentz (Washington, DC: Department of Defense Command and Control Research Program, 2002), 162.
40. Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 444.
41. Rid, *War and Media Operations*, 87.
42. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, *Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) on Embedding Media During Possible Future Operations/Deployments in the U.S. Central Commands (CENTCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR)* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2003), 3, Section G.
43. *Defense*, PAGs, 2, Section A.
44. *Defense*, PAGs, 4.
45. Brian Humphreys, "The Australian Defence Force's Media Strategy: What it is and Why, and Why it Needs to Change," in *What are we Doing in Afghanistan? the Military and the Media at War*, ed. Kevin Foster (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009), 31–2.
46. Humphreys, "The Australian Defence Force's Media Strategy," 31.
47. Captain Chris Linden, Defence MediaOps, email correspondence with author, November 22, 2010, 1. Linden goes on to note that: "The ADF embed program offers access to the MTF [Mentoring Task Force] for two representatives from a single media agency for up to 21 days. Each MTF rotation will host a minimum of two embed cycles." Linden, email correspondence, 1. This compares very unfavourably with the embedding programs run by the Dutch and Canadian militaries, which embed, respectively, twenty and forty times as many media per unit rotation as the ADF.

48. Politicians and the media have persistently sought to establish direct links between the performance of the troops in Afghanistan and that of their Anzac forebears, particularly in the context of casualties: "The Prime Minister led the nation's mourning . . . 'Our troops in Afghanistan are engaged in dangerous work . . . And they perform their role with distinction and with dedication, with bravery and with professionalism. They perform their work in the best traditions of ANZAC. There is no higher call for any person than to wear the uniform of Australia and today we are tragically reminded of the terrible risks that come with that calling.'" Michael Harvey, "Road Bomb Kills Aussies," *Herald Sun*, November 28, 2008, 9.
49. Ian McPhedran, "Defence Coy on Embedding Media," *Australian*, September 14, 2009, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/media/defence-coy-on-embedding-media/story-e6frg996-1225772465856. In fairness to the ADF, it is important to note that the embedding program has been rapidly expanded in 2012, with an almost constant media presence in Afghanistan and with a regular rotation of media personnel.
50. Tiffen, "News Coverage," 166.
51. Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 231. John Brittle tried, without success, to persuade the Adelaide *Advertiser* to send him to Vietnam in 1968 "but they did not think it was worthwhile". Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 231.
52. Tiffen, "News Coverage," 166.
53. Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 233.
54. Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 234.
55. Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 234.
56. Trish Payne, *War and Words: the Australian Press and the Vietnam War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), 4.
57. Payne, *War and Words*, 8. The dead Australian journalists were Michael Birch, Bruce Cantwell, and John Piggott; Frank Palmos survived.
58. Tim Bowden, *One Crowded Hour: Neil Davis Combat Cameraman, 1934–1985* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1987), 141. For a further explanation of the origins of this description of the Australian "policy", see Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 238.
59. Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 237.
60. Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 237.
61. Fay Anderson, "The New and Altered Conventions of Reporting War: Censorship, Access and Representation in Afghanistan," in *What are we Doing in Afghanistan? The Military and the Media at War*, ed. Kevin Foster (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009), 127.
62. Quoted in Payne, *War and Words*, 5.
63. Tiffen, "News Coverage," 187.
64. Tiffen, "News Coverage," 184.
65. Mark Thomson, *Serving Australia: Control and Administration of the Department of Defence* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2011), 5.
66. Thomson, *Serving Australia*, 1.
67. Thomson, *Serving Australia*, 2.
68. Thomson, *Serving Australia*, 2.
69. Thomson, *Serving Australia*, 2, 11, 19.
70. Dan Oakes, "Defence in 'Beyond Tolerable State' Says Analyst," *Age*, June 27, 2011, http://www.theage.com.au/national/defence-in-beyond-tolerable-state-says-analyst-20110626-1glsj.html. The coming and going of five defence ministers since 2006 eloquently attests to the insurmountable challenges that the position brings.
71. Cynthia Banham and Deborah Snow, "They Don't Follow Orders: Nelson Opens Fire on Top Brass," *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 26, 2009, 1.
72. Rid, *War and Media Operations*, 15.
73. Senator John Faulkner, "2010 C. E. W. Bean Foundation Dinner Address," accessed July 6, 2011, http://www.senatorjohnfaulkner.com.au/file.php?file=/news/KSBKDMDOTF/index.html.
74. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (London: Picador, 1977), 195.
75. Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 236.

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