

Military reporting needs new fronts

Andrew Gray

Journalists are allowing retired officers to dictate defence coverage, which does everyone a disservice, says a former Reuters correspondent

The headlines were full of the sort of dramatic language that might describe defeat in a major field battle. The country had taken a “military gamble” and was reported to be “at risk”; troops had been “wiped out”, “slashed” and “axed” by “savage” attack from a “ruthless” enemy. The Army was at “its weakest since 1750”.

In fact, newspapers were reporting on the government’s plans, announced in July, to cut the size of the British Army and most of the colourful phrases had their origins in quotes from former military officers, some of them now members of parliament.

Such coverage highlights a broader problem with how the media reports on military issues. Far too often, journalists allow members of the military establishment to dictate the terms of public debate, with retired generals leading the charge. Retired professionals should, of course, have their say. When health and education policy are debated, we expect to hear from doctors, nurses and teachers. But we accept that they have vested interests and expect to hear a range of other views too. When it comes to military matters, however, journalists and editors seem to believe that old generals should be treated as distinguished impartial experts, and as pretty much the only people qualified to have an opinion.

Yet the military is just one instrument – and still a pretty blunt one at that – in the pursuit of foreign policy. Journalists should try to reflect that context. Decisions about the structure, size and use of our armed forces are more complex than a game of toy soldiers. Ultimately, they are about how and when we as a nation send some of our citizens overseas in the expectation

that they may kill and be killed. This is a debate for the whole of society but it is skewed by the way in which it is often reported. That does not serve the public and it does not even serve the armed forces themselves. No institution benefits in the long term from slavish repetition of what it wants to hear.

Officers lead, reporters follow

A closer look at the coverage of the government's plans to cut the Army from 102,000 to 82,000 full-time soldiers and beef up the reserves illustrates how completely journalists can delegate the framing of the debate to former officers. While the cuts are clearly distressing for soldiers who will lose their jobs, one rather obvious and important fact seemed to go unremarked upon in mainstream coverage. If a British government – a Conservative-led one, no less – feels it can reduce the Army's size to a historic low, the country must surely face less of a conventional military threat than it has for centuries. Some newspapers made supposedly unflattering comparisons with the size of the Army during the Cold War and the conflict in Northern Ireland. But no one paused to acknowledge, or even celebrate, the fact that these security threats are long gone.

The *Daily Mail* reported “top brass” had accused the Defence Secretary Philip Hammond of “taking a risk” with Britain's security. *The Sun* decried a “cull” of the Army. “Shame on you! Fury as battalions are axed,” roared the *Daily Express* headline. *The Times* said the Army had been “put at risk”, according to “military and political leaders”.

In traditional political terms, newspapers and broadcasters acted as if ministers had taken a position on the extreme left and the only debate to be had was to the right of it. In other words: Have they gone too far? In much of the coverage, no one saw fit to point out that Britain would still have the world's fourth largest defence budget. The overall tone was “big army good, small army risky”. If the years since September 11, 2001, have taught us anything, it is surely that life is more complicated than that.

It is perhaps not surprising that right-of-centre newspapers followed the military establishment. But the *Mirror* did the same, with a news story declaring four battalions had been “ruthlessly scrapped”, accompanied by a highly critical column by the Tory MP and former infantry officer Patrick Mercer. Even *The Guardian* gave over a column in its news pages to the former Parachute Regiment officer and now Labour MP Dan Jarvis, who declared that “our insurance policy has been downgraded”.

Broadcasters also took their cues from the brass. The Army's "hands have been tied" in decisions about the cuts, Radio 4 reported – a curious way of saying a democratic government had told the military what to do. On *Channel 4 News*, Jon Snow and a retired major general sat in front of a world map pondering whether Britain could undertake various imaginary missions.

Right across national newspapers, radio and television, more than a dozen former soldiers dominated the debate with cautionary or critical comments. In the vanguard was Lord Dannatt, the urbane former head of the Army, whose views featured on Radio 4's *Today*, BBC 2's *Newsnight* and in *The Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Independent*, *Mirror* and *London Evening Standard*. An ex-adviser to the Conservative party, Dannatt did not criticise the changes outright, but declared them risky. "Let's hope the next decade is a rather more peaceful decade than the last decade. But I wouldn't bet on it," he said.

Other military veterans, such as the retired colonel, Bob Stewart, a former peacekeeping commander in Bosnia, lined up in the House of Commons to lambast the plans. Yet none of these people is even remotely impartial. As former soldiers, they will hardly welcome the dismissal of old comrades or the closure of historic units. They have a professional and emotional attachment to the Army. Moreover, as the *Sunday Times* "generals for hire" investigation published in October highlighted, many including Dannatt are capable of making large amounts of money working for military suppliers. They have a commercial interest in policy debates too. None of this is to say that their voices should not be heard. It is simply to say that they should be heard with a note of caution and challenged more robustly.

On the *Today* programme, the presenter Sarah Montague asked Dannatt if the cuts would make us "less safe". That's obviously a legitimate question. (Dannatt dodged it.) But it would have been legitimate to ask also if they could make us safer – by reducing the chances of engaging in wars that fuel hostility towards us. It has been argued that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had exactly this effect and this is hardly a view far outside the mainstream. The Joint Intelligence Committee warned Tony Blair's government that invading Iraq would make Britain more of a target for al-Qaeda and radicalise British Muslims – a prediction apparently borne out by events including the 7/7 attacks on London. Dannatt himself famously said in 2006 that our military presence in Iraq exacerbated Britain's problems around the world. Dannatt was not asked about any of this on *Today*.

Yet there was no need for coverage to be so narrow. A broader range of views could be found, even among former soldiers, but it was largely hidden

away. In a late-night *Newsnight* discussion, the foreign affairs commentator Bronwen Maddox and the military historian Antony Beevor said the cuts might mean Britain would be less inclined to “punch above its weight” and both Britain and the United States were much more realistic now about what could be achieved by military force.

Some perspective was also tucked away in the margins of newspaper comment pages. Richard Williams, a former SAS commander, wrote in *The Times* that troop numbers were a red herring in modern warfare and increasing the role of reserves would unleash “more of the country's martial potential”. The retired brigadier Ben Barry offered a nuanced, cautiously upbeat assessment of the plans in *The Guardian*.

Little to none of this broader view made it into print or broadcast news reports, however. Why not?

Ignorance and deference

Any explanation for these shortcomings is bound to be speculative to an extent. But my own experience of covering military affairs suggests several possible reasons.

The first is ignorance. At the risk of over-generalising, most journalists and, perhaps more importantly, editors who shape news coverage have little experience of military life. Most editors probably don't know a captain from a colonel or a brigade from a battalion. The military is an alien world, full of structures, traditions and jargon civilians do not comprehend. Perhaps it seems safer to fall back on clichés. Hence the frequent references to historic regiments and Britain's military traditions in coverage of the Army cuts.

The media should not be judged too harshly for this ignorance. In a sense they are simply reflecting modern Britain. As a nation, we have largely outsourced the job of fighting our battles to a small sub-group about which we know little. Similarly, in the political world, military policy is a specialist area rather than one about which most politicians are knowledgeable.

Britain is by no means alone in having former top brass opining on policy. But in the United States, for example, a significant number of politicians, policy experts and academics are well versed in military issues even if they have never served in the armed forces. This may be because the military plays a much more central role in American public life. (A veteran military reporter in Washington has compared his beat to covering wine and cheese in

France.) Whatever the reason, Britain seems to have failed to develop a critical mass of civilians with similar knowledge.

Journalists seeking a range of views are also not helped by the homogeneity that seems to prevail in the British political establishment today. Only a few decades ago, there were radical disagreements about military policy. Now all three main parties seem to have broadly converged, anxious not to be painted as “soft on defence”, even if this means ignoring a large swathe of public opinion. The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats all continue to support the war in Afghanistan, for example, even though 57 percent of Britons think it is impossible for British troops to win there, according to a YouGov poll in April.

It is also worth considering whether a certain deference towards the military means its leaders do not face the same questioning and scepticism journalists direct at others in public life. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken an extremely high toll in terms of lost lives, horrific injuries and mental trauma, principally among the people of those countries, but also among our soldiers. The country and the media have blamed political leaders for our failings in those conflicts while the troops have been widely hailed as heroes. More than eight out of 10 people hold a high or very high opinion of the armed forces and 18 percent say their opinion has gone up in the past few years, according to the latest British Social Attitudes Survey. Perhaps we – both journalists and the public – feel uncomfortable about challenging members of an institution which is held in such high esteem and has faced danger and hardship on a scale most of us would not be willing to endure.

Do not underestimate, either, the intimidating effect of a senior rank and a military bearing. Reporters who would not shrink from questioning a politician aggressively may hold back with even a retired general, such as the growling Sir Mike Jackson, another former Army head who appears regularly in media coverage.

To get better at reporting on military issues, news organisations must ensure that ignorance and deference are not stopping them from asking important questions. They need to understand the military but not surrender their critical faculties in the process. One sign of healthier coverage would be an end to the regurgitation of military jargon. Reports on the Army cuts contained dozens of references to battalions but I could not find one story that mentioned what a battalion actually is or how big it is. (In the British Army today, a battalion is a unit of somewhere between 500 and 700 soldiers.)

Journalists also adopt dehumanising euphemisms, reducing life and death to the cumbersome language of bureaucracy or the banality of video games. There should be no place for talk of “kinetic power delivery” (a phrase used by Hammond without challenge on *Newsnight*). Neither should journalists refer to “theatres” when they mean places of war or “green-on-blue attacks” when they mean Afghan troops killing British soldiers. No news organisation should use “friendly fire” in any form.

Finally, journalists can seek a broader range of sources. By all means make sure that senior officers have their say but place the military in context by speaking to diplomats, international relations experts, independent-minded ex-officers and groups beyond the three largest political parties. Finding alternative voices may not be quite as easy as quoting high-profile MPs or pro-military lobby groups. But they can be found, as opinion page editors and *Newsnight* producers showed during the Army cuts debate.

The British military is a battle-hardened institution. It can certainly survive, and may even thrive on, smarter questions and broader-based reporting from journalists. One of the fashionable military phrases of recent years has been “full spectrum operations” (conducting a broad range of tasks, from reconstruction to combat). It’s time for more full-spectrum reporting on the military.

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