

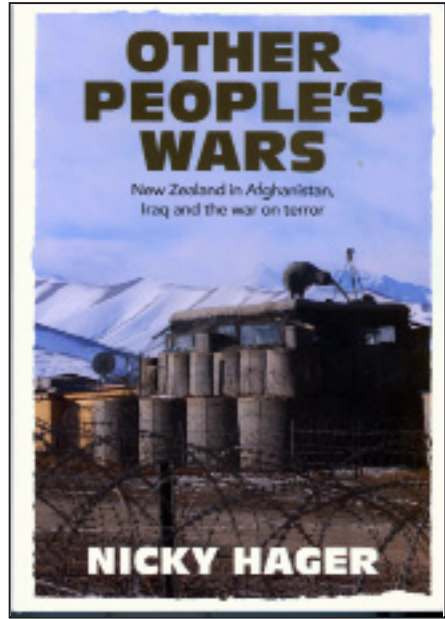
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Complacent media fails debate over ‘empire’ wars

Other People's Wars: New Zealand in Afghanistan, Iraq and the war on terror, by Nicky Hager.
Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2011.
439 pp. ISBN 978-1-877517-69-3.

NICKY HAGER'S main charge in *Other People's Wars* is that New Zealand's defence and foreign affairs establishment has developed a culture where some senior officers 'wanted to obey the government only when they agreed with it', and otherwise 'quietly undermined' its policies and decisions. They believed they could 'go to war without telling the public most of what they did'—and Hager provides convincing evidence that, for most of the last decade, they have been successful.

His sprawling, densely footnoted and referenced book is built on a solid



foundation of thousands of government documents, obtained under New Zealand's *Official Information Act* and from confidential sources, and copies of diplomatic cables that were dispatched from the United States Embassy in Wellington and obtained by Hager from the Wikileaks' collection.

Dismiss Hager's analysis and conclusions, if you will, but it is difficult to dismiss the original source material he uses to carve through the New Zealand defence mythology that has been spin-fed to a trusting public.

Myth 1: The ANZUS fracture

At the end of 1999, Helen Clark

led her Labour-Alliance coalition government into office, determined to avoid any impression that it was looking for a revival of the ANZUS alliance. She walked into a wall of resistance from some of the country's most senior defence and foreign affairs officials.

A member of Clark's political staff told Hager that 'every draft coming from defence and foreign affairs was worded to reshape the government's new policies, back into the old ones'. The issue quickly came to a head when the officials delivered their draft of the government's Defence Policy Framework early in 2000.

Clark rewrote it personally. From this point on, the New Zealand government would contribute to global security and peacekeeping through 'participation in the full range of UN and other appropriate multilateral peace support and humanitarian relief operations'.

The Clark Framework did not stop the officials' drift back to the old alliance relationship. Hager documents the presence of two NZDF officers at the start of a week-long 'interoperability' discussion between representatives of the armies of the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand at Fort Benning, Georgia, on 11 September 2001. The focus of their discussions:

preparing the five armies to integrate into an effective coalition force during conflicts in the 2001 to 2010 timeframe. ANZUS may have been defunct since 1984, but the old military alliance club was still operating.

Myth 2: 9/11 provoked the wars

Hager produces testimony from US Secretary of State Colin Powell confirming that, 24 hours before the 9/11 attack, White House officials decided to give the Taliban a final ultimatum: hand over Osama Bin Laden or they would channel funds to anti-Taliban forces. If that failed, the US would intervene directly and throw them out. The next major conflict of the new millennium was already planned. The only surprise on 9/11 was that Al Qaeda struck first.

The next day, President Bush already had his eye on the next target—Iraq. Citing US counter-terrorism co-ordinator Richard Clarke, Hager portrays Bush in the White House situation room, muttering: 'See if Saddam did this ... Look into Iraq, Saddam.'

Myth 3: NZ's UN mandate

Helen Clark was flying to Europe when the hijacked aircraft hit the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. She rushed home to confront the first pressure test of her Defence Policy

Framework. Five days after the 9/11 attack, her government advised the US that ‘if there were a specific role for New Zealand special forces, we would of course consider it’.

Hager does not try to explain the Prime Minister’s sudden transformation from Helen the Peacemaker to Helen the Warrior Princess. She did not wait for the formation of the UN International Security Assistance Force before committing the SAS to the war against terrorism. They entered as part of US-controlled Operation Enduring Freedom. That, together with their precise date of entry, was concealed at the time under the cone of silence that governing politicians and officials are both happy to place over SAS operations.

Hager cracks the cone to produce the evidence that by the time SAS troops set foot in Afghanistan the real war-fighting was over and Bin Laden had left the country. The Kiwi troops found they had ‘no specific role’ to play. Step by step, he shows how NZDF senior officers proceeded to invent one, and sold it to the Americans. Through no fault of the troops, this new role would soon see the SAS demolishing another tenet of the Clark Defence Policy Framework.

Myth 4: Protecting human rights

The Clark Defence Policy Framework stated: ‘New Zealand will not

engage in military cooperation or exercises with the armed forces of a nation which sanctions the use of their armed forces to suppress human rights.’

It has taken nearly nine years of digging by Hager and another independent New Zealand free-lance journalist, Jon Stephenson, to unearth the unsavoury truth about the botched raid by an American-Canadian-New Zealand joint special operations task-force on the village of Band e Timur in May 2002. Two 70-year-old village leaders and a 6-year-old girl died in the attack. 55 prisoners were taken, transferred to US custody and beaten and mistreated. Fifty were released without apology or compensation. Five are still unaccounted for. The New Zealand SAS led the raid, but was not equipped to identify the prisoners taken and had no ability to track their welfare in custody. All this was concealed, but is now conceded.

Nine years later, no-one is held accountable, and intelligence botch-ups, civilian deaths, and allegations and evidence of the suppression of human rights by New Zealand’s allies in Afghanistan continue to plague the operations of the SAS in and out of Kabul.

Myth 5: Saying No on Iraq

When George Bush and Tony Blair started conditioning other alliance

leaders for the invasion of Iraq in April 2002, Helen Clark was quick to say no. She was not prepared to be involved in an intervention that did not have a UN mandate.

New Zealand Navy frigates and RNZAF Orion aircraft were sent to the Persian Gulf from November 2002. Their assigned role was to break the Al Qaeda Gulf-Afghanistan supply line—not to protect the Gulf-Iraq invasion supply line. But US controllers were running both operations in the Gulf and made no such distinction. The same problem arose in June 2003, when NZDF engineers arrived in Iraq to support a UN-mandated reconstruction effort. They were embedded in a British unit that was part of the Operation Iraqi Freedom invasion force. Hager shows that evidence of mission ‘blur’ was gathered by the NZDF, but he leaves one crucial question unanswered: was it ever drawn to the government’s attention?

Myth 6: Bamiyan reconstruction

Since September 2003, Kiwi Base, Bamiyan, has been the centre-piece of the NZDF’s campaign to project the softer side of its war effort—as the model of a successful provincial reconstruction team.

Hager shatters some of the illusion by quoting from a previously unpublished report on ‘New Zealand

Official Development Assistance supported activities in Afghanistan’, dated June 2009. It concludes that NZDF was ‘not an effective aid provider’ and ‘projects overseen by the NZDF through the PRT do not appear to be sustainable in any way and anecdotal evidence is that some have already failed’. None of the critical detail from this report appears in the publicly released government review of Afghanistan policy, which, nevertheless, recommended ‘civilianisation’ of New Zealand’s contribution to provincial reconstruction.

The main function of NZDF at Kiwi Base has never been reconstruction, as we use the word. Its main role is to operate security patrols, gather signals intelligence, and build Afghan army and police capacity to take over these roles. In military operations, NZDF’s Bamiyan deployment answers to a US commander in Bagram. A contingent of American troops shares quarters with the Kiwis at the base. Among them, under the terms of an official NZ-US administrative arrangement document that Hager has discovered, can be a ‘counter intelligence team at NZ PRT Bamian (2-4 pers.)’. This is the basis for his claim that New Zealand is contributing to the protection and support of a CIA base. It is probably the most debatable claim in his book.

Hager casts his net much further than this in *Other People's Wars*, but these six myths have been pivotal in shaping the public perception of New Zealand's involvement in the 9/11 wars. We are only now beginning to appreciate the yawning gap between the honey-coated vision of UN-driven peace-building, mentoring and aid-focused reconstruction and the blood and grit reality of our war-fighting in Afghanistan.

However, the blame for this does not rest solely with secretive, manipulative officials in defence and foreign affairs. It also falls on leading politicians of all persuasions and a largely complacent mainstream media for failing their public duty to foster informed debate on policies that consign brave young New Zealanders to kill and die in the graveyard of other people's empires.

BEING THE FIRST SOLOMON ISLANDS WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE



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