

Smile For the Camera: Prince Harry in Afghanistan

Written by Jennifer Morgan Jones

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JENNIFER MORGAN JONES, MAR 6 2008

I have to wonder why it was so incredibly important that Prince Harry be sent to a war zone in the first place. I have nothing but respect for soldiers who face combat in the front lines of Afghanistan, Harry included. His desire to serve his country and make a difference in the world by putting himself in physical danger is admirably brave, just as it is for any other man or woman who signs up to do the job. However, Harry is not just any other man, no matter how desperately he wants to be considered this way.

Harry is a media darling. Third in line to the British throne, he has grown up in the spotlight with news stories being printed about him ranging from ski holidays to fancy dress costumes. It would be naïve to pretend that Harry was just another bloke; his death in a theatre of war would shake the British public and resonate with foreign policy implications throughout the world. Thanks to his public persona we feel that we know him and because he is no longer a stranger, the things that happen to him feel in some way personal to us.

An interesting question to ask is: would the government and MoD really have gone to all of this trouble just to fulfill Harry's ambition to serve at the front? Surely if the answer is yes, then we are painting the prince as a petulant child and the government as his indulgent godparents. The sheer magnitude of what was done to allow Harry to go to Afghanistan in terms of resources, the media blackout and the risk of increased danger to fellow troops suggests that there was more at stake than giving Harry the opportunity to fulfill career ambitions. The ends simply would not justify the means.

So what exactly did the government hope to achieve by the deployment of Harry of Wales? His skills and experience did not offer a crucial or unique contribution to the war effort and his personal development, though I am sure much enriched, was not central to the decision. The answer is surely that sending Harry to Afghanistan was a carefully orchestrated media circus that was just too good to miss.

It is exactly because Harry is not just another man that this plan was so appealing. It has become common place for celebrities to lend their fame to the promotion of things ranging from mobile phones to ecological awareness. With public support and interest in the war flagging, an injection of celebrity pizzazz was just what the doctor ordered. A feel good story about a heroic prince who just wants to do his part is a fantastic PR coup for the army and the way that the press was organized and managed has made it even more so.

Although there was genuine risk in putting the prince in harms way, this risk was minimized by the likelihood that the media blackout would not hold for long. The leak and Harry's prompt exit from the line of fire was the cue for the media to start rolling out footage of a smiling prince kicking around a rugby ball in the sand with his troops and soundbites giving details of the toilet habits of soldiers at the front. Harry is affable and retains his cheeky charm with a grin and a cap that claims "we do bad things to bad people". We are familiar with Harry appearing in the media; seeing him give interviews, phone home, play sport and generally frolic in the desert serves to normalize his surroundings, despite the fact that they are the front lines of a war zone.

The problem with this coverage is that it shows the public a tame version of life at the front where the main problems are slow post and bad food. Harry is asked what he thought his mother would feel about his deployment, which brings to mind the small ginger lad that the nation took into their hearts at Diana's funeral and we glow with the pride

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she surely would have felt. It is glossy and contrived; what it covers up are the glaring problems with the operation and how much more the government needs to be doing to support the people at the front if it chooses to engage in these conflicts. The resources used on this PR stunt could surely have been put to better use providing adequate equipment to protect British soldiers, or at the very least improving their rations.

There has been some outrage expressed at the idea that the media colluded with the government to suppress a story from being printed in the ostensibly free press, but what is truly outrageous is the way a large portion of news outlets have gleefully played into the hands of MoD PR by presenting a feel good human interest story that just happens to feature a war zone. The intimate view of the war given by media access to Prince Harry's adventure in Afghanistan looks like a boy's dream summer camp where video game play becomes reality. The prince has become the new poster child for recruitment and I am sure in this capacity will serve the army and the government well.

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