

'Oh Well, Just Keep Shooting C---s *Orientalism and Australian War Crimes in Afghanistan*

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*A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of unit
CT9229T: Political Theologies of the Neighbour
28 June 2021*

Word Count: 3297

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Introduction

On 19 November 2020, Australians were made aware that certain allegations which were put forth by the media regarding the conduct of our armed forces in Afghanistan had substance. A heavily redacted report had been handed down by Major Paul Brereton, and in a press conference, Chief of Defence Force, General Angus Campbell, explained that there seemed to be truth to some of these claims. There had been allegations reported by the media for several years leading up to this point, including the ABC's *Four Corners* program in 2011. While the allegations had first been made by the Australian media, the confirmation came from the Australian Defence Force, with the news that these events were not being swept under the rug, and that charges were being laid against several members of the Australian Defence Force, following recommendations made by Major Paul Brereton, a judge in New South Wales' Court of Appeal, who had been appointed to investigate the allegations. In addition, the squadron about which most substantiable claims had been made, the 2nd Squadron of the Special Air Service Regiment, was disbanded. It was found that were legitimate allegations that 'Australia's highest decorated soldier', Corporal Benjamin Roberts-Smith, a Victoria Cross recipient, had committed war crimes. He is among those under investigation by the Australian Federal Police. The following essay explores this background briefly, before discussing the work of Edward Said which will be used as a way to explain how some of these events could have taken place.

Background

Over the duration of Australian military involvement in Afghanistan, scattered reports of unethical and illegal actions by Australian soldiers made it to the media. An independent review of the culture was undertaken by Dr Samantha Cromptoets, a sociologist, and in 2016 the Chief of Army requested an inquiry by the Inspector-General of the ADF into the issues

that had come to light, particularly in relation to the treatment of unarmed persons and non-combatants, including killings that were contradictory to the rules of war.¹ All-told, the inquiry (heavily redacted in the public release) identified 23 separate instances of such crimes that appeared to be credible, which could potentially proceed to a jury trial, and in which 39 people were killed and 2 cruelly treated. There were 25 soldiers who were alleged to have carried out these crimes.² Many other incidents were either unsubstantiated or ruled to have been lawful.

There are some notable characteristics of these alleged crimes. They were often covered up by placing non-ADF issued weapons and equipment on the bodies to make it seem as though the victims were armed combatants. The intended purpose for this grew from being a way to avoid questioning about the particulars of any incidents, later morphing into the express purpose of covering up war crimes.³ Many of the killings were of unarmed combatants for the purpose of giving soldiers their 'first kill'. The fact that such crimes were committed by the SASR and not the Commandos suggests that there was a more toxic culture in the SASR, or that the Commandos were better at covering their tracks.⁴ As the war continued, the culture in the SASR became disturbingly focused on the number of people each soldier had killed. It has been suggested that for those who engaged in these alleged crimes, the mechanism that allowed the men to stretch so far past their ethical constraints was a 'moral injury'.⁵ This is a concept related to post traumatic stress disorder, which has its roots in the healthcare industry. It is a psychological injury that attacks one's moral values. The main way that this

¹ "Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Afghanistan Inquiry Report" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020), chap. 1.01, accessed June 18, 2021, <https://afghanistainquiry.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/IGADF-Afghanistan-Inquiry-Public-Release-Version.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 1.05.

develops is through exposure to the traumatic circumstances of war, but it is primarily a clash between what one is experiencing and what one believes to be ethical.⁶ For some, straying beyond the bounds of one's conscience repeatedly over multiple deployments results in a state where it becomes easier to transgress these ethical norms over time. As one soldier's attitude had been described: 'Oh well, just keep shooting c***s'.⁷

Although the official report of the inquiry is severely redacted to avoid prejudicing any potential criminal cases, a parliamentary paper outlining the media reporting around these issues were published online. Some of the cases include reports of torture – soldiers were alleged to have entered Afghan villages, and when they were gone 'the men and boys [who had been tortured] would be found dead, shot in the head, sometimes blindfolded and throats slit.'⁸ In another incident, an Afghan man in handcuffs was kicked down a cliff face and then shot – although different accounts of the incident rendered it in slightly different detail, twisting the facts in dramatic ways. His family had reported finding him at the bottom of the cliff with a radio, which was often used by Australian soldiers instead of weapons as a way to cover up the facts.⁹ In another incident, a medic was tending to wounds to an Afghan man. The wounds were not critical. The man was taken under duress by another soldier and taken into a building. He was found dead afterwards. Ultimately these are just a handful of the many allegations, all troubling, which demonstrate a poor relationship between the local population and the Australians supposedly working with them. There are reports of casual dehumanisation, trophy-taking, unnecessarily rough conduct. A fact recognised by the

⁶ Harold G. Koenig, Nagy A. Youssef, and Michelle Pearce, "Assessment of Moral Injury in Veterans and Active Duty Military Personnel With PTSD: A Review," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (2019): 443.

⁷ Karen Elphick, "Reports, Allegations and Inquiries into Serious Misconduct by Australian Troops in Afghanistan 2005-2013" (Parliament of Australia, November 9, 2020), 19, accessed June 18, 2021, https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/7623329/upload_binary/7623329.pdf.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

Inquiry, albeit subdued in nature, is that this is just the latest chapter in a long history of Australian military misconduct since the Boer War. Indeed it would be an interesting study to compare the slaughter by ANZACs of at least 50 Bedouin tribesmen in Surafend, Palestine with the massacres of indigenous Australians throughout the country.¹⁰

Orientalism

There are, it is no surprise of course, questions around the nature of the war in Afghanistan. There is a continued sense in which Islamdom has been marginalised and othered progressively since the supposed end of the Cold War. In pivoting away from the Soviet Bloc, there has had to be some kind of enemy for the west, and Islam became the scapegoat. Thus NATO allies were able to join with the United States quite easily in its imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This kind of worldview must surely be at least partially responsible for our soldiers' ability to dehumanise the Afghan population and more easily suspend their moral codes in such a way that they so casually committed war crimes.

Edward Said provides a framework for interpreting these tragic events. His 1978 work *Orientalism* was reprinted in 2003 with a new preface, shortly before Said's death, owing in part to the enduring value of Said's critique decades after its inception. The destabilising war from which Iraq is still reeling had just begun as the Bush Administration sent the United States' machinery of war in a wild goose chase for weapons of mass destruction. The war in Afghanistan was ongoing, and I write after two decades of the Biden Administration's supposed withdrawal of all its remaining troops from Afghanistan. Said may not have been able to predict such longevity. He may not have been able to predict the commercialisation

¹⁰ Paul Daley, "The Moment That Forever Changed My Perspective on Anzac Mythology," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2018/dec/10/the-moment-that-forever-changed-my-perspective-on-anzac-mythology>.

of war would increase to such an extent that the number of US troops deployed in Iraq in 2019 was only 34% of the number of US-employed mercenaries in the country.¹¹ The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan does not mean the end of decades of Western involvement, as private military contractors are expected to expand their operations in the country.¹² This will leave things in a potentially murkier state. Contractors have limited accountability a reputation for savagery.

The primary critique from Said is around the way in which the orientalist worldview has cemented itself so deeply in a range of systems of political and economic thought, literature and art, to military interventions. The Western encounter with the East has been coloured by a Eurocentric worldview. The Orient is therefore not so much understood as it actually is, but is characterised by European ways of thinking. Western views of the East reflect European values and taboos. Orientalist literature is therefore intended for occidental consumers. These kinds of understandings are complicated, and the Orient has been seen as both pure, but also backwards, romantic, but also frightening.

Even the very nature of the science of philology is suspect, as texts for the study of semitic languages which dominated for many academic generations were written from an occidental perspective for an occidental audience, and served to 'canonise' the study of, for example, Arabic, providing generations of set texts.¹³ Modernism also allowed for those from the orient

¹¹ Heidi Peltier, "The Growth of the 'Camo Economy' and the Commercialization of the Post-9/11 Wars," June 30, 2020, accessed June 19, 2021, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2020/Peltier%202020%20-%20Growth%20of%20Camo%20Economy%20-%20June%2030%202020%20-%20FINAL.pdf>.

¹² Lynxy Billing, "The U.S. Is Leaving Afghanistan? Tell That to the Contractors. American Firms Capitalize on the Withdrawal, Moving in with Hundreds of New Jobs," *New York Magazine*, May 12, 2021, accessed June 19, 2021, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/05/u-s-contractors-in-afghanistan-are-hiring-amid-withdrawal.html>.

¹³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 129.

to be viewed as inferior to the west from a biological (Darwinian) standpoint. This is perhaps a key element that would help us understand the conduct of our soldiers in regard to the local population.

Orientalism has also a distinct relationship with colonial power. As time goes on, the 20th century has seen a closer relationship with the East and the west, to the extent that Orientalists are no longer simply passive observers in a quest for knowledge and power. There has been an enmeshment with the lives of those from east and west, for the purpose of increasing western knowledge of their colonial subjects to better focus their rule. Indeed even after the end of colonial rule, neo-colonialism has meant enduring need for the gathering of knowledge and the expression of power. This leaves us now in a position where stereotypes such as the Arab-as-terrorist have pervaded western culture.¹⁴ The Orientalist attack on Islam, variously conceived, no doubt aids in the kind of thinking that leads to dehumanisation.

Orientalism and Imperialist War

Islam, Said states, in the conception Jacob Burckhardt, is 'wretched, bare, and trivial.'¹⁵ Those western scholars who have adopted Islam as a field of study often have a poor opinion of it. One recalls Said's contemporaries Patricia Crone and Michael Crook who penned the book *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* in 1977. Even if one accepts they provided an important revision of confessional accounts of Islam's origins, it is hard to ignore the smug and gleeful subtext to many lay uses of Crone and Crook's work.¹⁶ It is very difficult for the casual observer to separate such revisionism from islamophobia, itself a loaded term and an imprecise critique. More recent works carry the same subtext and implications, such as *Die*

¹⁴ Said, *Orientalism*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁶ *Exempli gratis* English author Tom Holland's documentary *Islam: The Untold Story* (Channel 4, 2012)

Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache (Verlag

Hans Schile, 2000) by 'Christoph Luxenberg', the pseudonym of an unidentified German scholar whose thesis is that the Quran is best understood as an imperfect Arabic translation of a Syriac lectionary. Luxenberg remains unidentified and his work incomprehensible to many scholars, requiring a knowledge of eight different Semitic and Indo-European languages to decipher his text.¹⁷ Said demonstrates that this kind of thinking is not novel, listing *inter alia* Duncan Macdonald's view of Islam as 'heretical Christianity' and Carl Becker's belief that Islamic civilisations were 'sadly undeveloped'.¹⁸ The old imperial powers were essentially paternalistic, as in pre-revolutionary Egypt where the British served to 'not so much...train the Egyptian's mind as to "form his character"'.¹⁹ There is something even more sinister at play in the modern imperialism. To put it crudely²⁰ in the words of singer-songwriter Sturgill Simpson, the capitalist class 'send their sons and daughters off to die for some oil.'²¹

Despite the increasing role of women in our armed forces, the link between war and toxic forms of 'masculinity' lends itself to a far more expansive study. Indeed, the conduct of war as an act of orientalism and othering finds its shape in the form of Ben Roberts-Smith, a man who appears to exude many of the worst characteristics of Australian masculinity. One watches his defamation cases in puzzlement at the abject arrogance in his defence of suspicious behaviour, his crocodile tears, and his increasingly implausible explanations ('I've

¹⁷ Richard Kroes, "Missionary, Dilettante or Visionary? A Review of Ch. Luxenberg, *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart Des Qur'an.*," *Die Wahrheit Hat Flügel*, December 11, 2013, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://diewahrheitthatfluegel.wordpress.com/2013/12/11/missionary-dilettante-or-visionary-a-review-of-ch-luxenberg-die-syro-aramaische-lesart-des-quran-1/>.

¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 209.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁰ Pun intended.

²¹ Sturgill Simpson, *Call to Arms*, track 9 on *A Sailor's Guide to Earth*, compact disc (Atlantic Records, 2012).

burned laptops in 2010 and 2012. It's not anything to do with anything.²²). Should he be successful in suing for defamation, it still will not release him from the cloud of suspicion that surrounds him. Everyone is owed fair treatment under Australian law, of course, but if there's any possibility that the brutalising, dehumanising conduct of Australian special forces against innocent Afghanis is true, the farce of a defamation case becomes an orientalisising affair. War, it must be said, is a series of supreme acts of othering. Combat against a declared enemy has always tended to breed a kind of brutality that flies in the face of the image of a dispassionate and 'professional' soldier that the ADF advertises of its warriors.

What I want to stress is that Australian war crimes in Afghanistan are not an aberration in the course of war. They are the very purpose of imperialist war. What separates these incidents from the regular conduct of war is simply that we are aware of them. Indeed, the presence of an ostensibly independent press is all that separates wars since 1945 from those before it. Few have avoided the images of non-combatants slaughtered on the altar of capital in Mỹ Lai in 1968, but this was not an isolated incident. There is a sense in which the very concept of 'war crimes' ignores the fact that all wars are a crime against the sanctity of human life and the love of neighbour. I do not mean to equate Serbian ethnic cleansing of Bosnians and Albanians in the 1990s with the allied landing on Normandy, except to say that we should recall that the allies bombed French towns in the lead up to the invasion with minimal regard for civilian life, and NATO ended Serbia's war in Kosovo by bombing Belgrade, a city of some one-and-a-half million citizens in 1999.²³ There are, however, particular wrinkles to the

²² Candace Sutton, "Ben Roberts-Smith Secret Text Messages with Wife Revealed," *News.Com.Au*, June 21, 2021, sec. Courts & Law, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.news.com.au/national/courts-law/ben-robertsmith-secret-text-messages-with-wife-revealed/news-story/4283fbc5f9d59b5a2f7c2b0e71f3e1eb>.

²³ Population counted at 1,576,124 as per 2002 census. See Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, *Dissemination Database Search*, last modified 2021, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/31030101?languageCode=en-US>.

imperialist wars in the middle east. The importance of oil in contemporary conflict is well recognised, if denied by some.²⁴ As recently as March of this year (2021) Yemeni Houthis attacked Saudi oil refineries in apparent recognition of the strategic importance of oil.²⁵ Edward Said has outlined the way that Arab Muslims have become integrated in popular culture since the Arab-Israeli wars. No doubt this rose to new heights after the 9/11 attacks. Already othered – as characteristically clothed and mounted on camels – there could hardly have been much effort that went into targeting the new global enemy. The United States has remained inextricably mixed up in Middle Eastern affairs, a fact that Said was unable to miss even in 1978.²⁶ So what difficulty was there in ‘Judeo-Christian’ Australia joining this tenth crusade? The United States reacted to the attacks immediately with an invasion of Afghanistan to root out Osama Bin Ladin and the Taliban – illegal under international law, but nonetheless a more opaque *casus belli* than the search for imagined weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Australia followed only two weeks after the United States, and John Howard was hardly dragged reluctantly by the terms of the ANZUS treaty.²⁷

Australia remains a bitterly anti-Islamic society.²⁸ Accounts unearthed in the Afghanistan Inquiry seem to indicate a tense relationship between our soldiers and even their purported allies in the Afghan National Army. The savagery of the attacks on unarmed and innocent Afghani civilians cannot be seen as an aberration of war, but the very nature of war. War, it

²⁴ Michael Lind, “The Wars That Really Are about the Oil,” *The Spectator*, August 30, 2014, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-wars-that-really-are-about-the-oil>.

²⁵ Raya Jalabi and Lisa Barrington, “Yemen’s Houthis Warn of Stronger Attacks after Drone Strikes on Saudi Arabia,” *Reuters*, March 26, 2021, sec. Emerging Markets, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-saudi-idUSKBN2BI184>.

²⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 321.

²⁷ Daniel Flitton, “Australia’s Mission in Afghanistan – What Was It Again?,” *The Interpreter*, November 20, 2021, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-s-mission-afghanistan-what-was-it-again>.

²⁸ Kevin M Dunn, Thierno MO Diallo, and Rachel Sharples, “Segmenting Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Australia: Insights for the Diverse Project of Countering Islamophobia,” *Ethnicities* 21, no. 3 (June 1, 2021): 538–562.

seems, never really changes. An orientalising, imperial war against enemies who are Muslim – a vilified politico-religious category – naturally results in innocent non-combatants being dehumanised and degraded. It is the product of orientalism, an othering factor. Although seemingly oxymoronic, western judgment of Islamic societies is both the result of orientalism and its cause. War on the other hand is a universal othering factor which may well be built into human DNA. All these factors taken together serve to highlight human frailty. I serve them here as a way to adopt some of Said's ideas to explain these Australian war crimes, but we should never forget that all wars are criminal and originate excuses for human savagery. Those wars waged for capital and empire, following orientalist streams of thought, remain by far the most indefensible. It results in othering of an enemy for imperial interests. As long as the narrative is controlled by government, we are reliant on being shaken by occasional injections of brutality into the public's awareness of world events. Perhaps the response of the capitalist class to all of this is best summed up in the words of former prime minister Tony Abbott in response to the death of Jared MacKinney in Afghanistan in 2011: 'It's pretty obvious that, well, sometimes shit happens.'²⁹

Conclusion

We began this brief study by looking at the nature of recent allegations of Australian war crimes committed in the course of the Afghanistan Invasion and decades of subsequent imperial intervention. This was examined through Edward Said's magisterial study of orientalism. Orientalism explains what may crudely be called 'Islamophobia' and primes westerners to dehumanise innocent Muslims to such a degree that it was possible to commit such war crimes. Ultimately these events are inseparable from the nature of warfare and

²⁹ "Shit Happens': Abbott Grilled over Digger Remark," *ABC News*, February 8, 2011, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-02-08/shit-happens-abbott-grilled-over-digger-remark/1935128>.

should be recognised as supreme acts of othering. Nonetheless the particular circumstances of Afghanistan and its place in the history of western wars must be acknowledged, both as an oriental war and an imperial one.

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