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**Reporting War? The Charge of the Knights / Janet Harris**

**Abstract:** George W. Bush declared that the war in Iraq was over in May 2003, yet the Coalition forces stayed on. What was the British military doing there from 2003 to 2009? The evidence given at the Chilcot Inquiry points to a role for the military involving politics and governance. This role is largely ignored by the television news media.

In this article I look at the coverage of the “Charge of the Knights” operation, launched by Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki to restore order in Basra on 25 March 2008, and consider how a purely military discourse contributed to a lack of understanding about the war, and to the silence about the military’s role as an occupier and hence to a lack of questioning about its responsibility and performance in Iraq.

**Keywords:** Iraq war, Occupation, News coverage, Chilcot Inquiry, British military

<1> Much has been written about the media coverage of war (Carruthers 2010; Chomsky 1999; Hallin 1989; Hoskins 2004; Ignatieff 2000; Knightley 2000; Hoskins & O’Loughlin 2010), especially the coverage of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Allan & Zelizer 2004; Hammond 2007; Lewis et al. 2006; Maltby & Keeble 2007; Miller 2003; Robinson et al. 2010), but much of the literature on war reporting covers the period of the invasion, ending with the withdrawal of most of the “embedded” reporters around the time that President George W. Bush gave his “mission accomplished” speech on 1 May 2003. It was, however, six years later, on 30 April 2009, that the media announced the end of the six-year British military “mission” (not “war”) in Iraq. In this article I look at the coverage of one of the major events of the “mission” to see what the British military was doing and what television news understood, and perhaps did not understand, of this “mission”.

<2> I contend that the media reported military operations according to the same discourse of war, describing the post-invasion period as war, but not as an occupation. My argument is that although the British military was still war fighting, especially in 2006-2007, this discourse silenced the political discourse and wider role of the British military’s involvement and failed to take account of its responsibilities in Iraq. My analysis follows Foucault’s (1985) assertion that discourses are productive, in that they produce the objects of which they speak; they are constitutive in that they construct a particular version of the subject as being real, so define and establish what is “truth” at particular moments (Carabine 2001: 267). For Foucault, power constitutes discourse, and discourses construct truth.

Power...institutionalises the search for the truth, professionalises it and rewards it. We have to produce truth in the same way, really that we have to produce wealth...truth lays down the law; it is the discourse of truth that decides, at least in part; it conveys and propels truth-effects. (Foucault 2004: 25)

Different regimes of knowledge determine what is true and false, and it is the claims to “truth” which dominate the discourses of news and documentary. According to Hill, “Truth claims are a defining characteristic of factuality” (2007 216). The discourse of war – that is, of battles, of soldiers, of equipment and machines of war – excludes other discourses, and, it can be argued, leads to the media’s silence. The silence is not only of soldiers as politicians, as occupiers, but also what DeLanda calls the “squishy problem” (1991: 97) of what defines victory in war. DeLanda (1991: 97) asks: is it casualty levels, ground gained, or the control of strategic objectives, and over what time period? What constitutes “victory” will define what alternatives to war are offered in the “post-war”

situation in Iraq, and what questions are raised about future conflicts. In the coverage of the British military this also leads to some blindness regarding the changes in war itself, as noted by Smith (2005) and other generals and politicians who gave evidence at the Chilcot Inquiry, the UK government's post-war inquiry into the Iraq War (Shaw 2010; Reid 2010). I argue that this contributed to the emotional discourse whereby war is judged by the visuals of the battles and the number of deaths, but not analysed by the political involvement of the participants or outcome of the conflict which does not just involve those fighting. This lack of discussion about the political involvement of the military also leads to a lack of wider discussion about the future role of the military in wars such as Afghanistan where American counter-insurgency tactics rely heavily on the military's knowledge of local culture and politics, requiring non-military responses (Kilkullen 2009). The media have perhaps forgotten Clausewitz's dictum that war is an extension of politics, and that conflicts are as much about politics as about military exercises.

### **Methodology**

<3> To examine the dominant discourses of the news coverage of the Charge of the Knights (CotK), I look at how the coverage is framed. According to Entman, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (1993: 52). The way the CotK is framed establishes the causes for the turmoil and hence the solution. By establishing it as a sectarian or "factional" battle other associations of war are primed, and alternative solutions and issues of responsibility are ignored. It is by examining the resonant words and images that constitute the specific event that the operation can be studied. Iyengar writes that television news is "distinctively episodic" in its depiction of political issues (1991: 2), and demonstrates that this episodic framing makes viewers less likely to hold public officials accountable, instead focusing on individuals and punitive attributions. Episodic reports also produce "good pictures", rather than the talking heads of experts to explain the issues (1991: 14).

<4> The Iraqi-led Charge of the Knights began on 25 March 2008. The Iraqi Prime Minister came to Basra in the South East of Iraq, the area which had been controlled by the British. It heralded a major up-turn in security in Basra, and was conducted with apparently very little British involvement a year before the British withdrawal from Iraq.

<5> In the period leading up to the study, the UK communications regulator Ofcom noted that television was the main source of news for 72 percent of people (Thussu 2007: 2). This study analyses the seventeen main evening news programmes from the BBC1, C4, ITV1 and BBC2's *Newsnight* from 25 March to 1 April 2008, examining the introduction and item about the operation in Iraq. After this date the event vanished from the television screen, even though it was not until mid May that the clearing operations in Basra were largely complete. An analysis of how the problem is defined, what the causes are and what remedies are endorsed is undertaken to identify the framing of the operation. The predominantly episodic framing is noted and the silences are identified by comparing the analysis of this interpretation with the narrative of the interpretation constructed from the Chilcot Inquiry. In making this comparison, I also draw on my own experience of filming with the British army in Iraq.

<6> I acknowledge that any analysis is an interpretation and note that it is only a small selection of texts studied from which to draw conclusions, but argue that it is perhaps an interesting contribution to the argument about whether the "new media ecology" (Hoskins & O'Loughlin 2010) does in fact contribute to a pluralisation of power. The criticisms of the news coverage of this event are similar to those noted by Entman (1991), Tumber & Palmer (2004) and Lewis (2006M). The tools available to

the journalist might have increased, but it is still the news journalist who interprets and frames events, and it is the framing which establishes the subsequent reporting.

<7> As part of the framing, the difficulty for the media and the military was the ongoing problem of defining an occupation, and, for the military and government, of justifying it. Occupation does not have the same moral certainty as liberation, and the framing of the mission is very important both to the media and to the military. Wars primarily involve killing, and since the writing of the first wars the killing has to be justified to make sense and legitimise an act that would otherwise be outside civil and moral laws. Walzer writes that "It is important to stress that the moral reality of war is not fixed by the actual behaviour of soldiers but by the opinions of mankind" (2006: 15). Former US assistant Secretary for Defence Joseph P Nye stated "it is not whose army wins, but whose story wins" (quoted in Michalski & Gow 2007: 199).

### **The Frame - Mission Vs. Occupation**

<8> Lewis (2001) states that public support depends heavily on a powerful mythic frame that dominates media coverage, and a framework of occupation is not as appealing to a public as war. Stirk (2009) argues that military occupation has come to be seen as an inherently disreputable activity. Paul Bremner, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) administrator in Iraq said it was an "ugly word" (Stirk 2009:1). There is confusion both as to what constitutes an occupation: is it both military and civilian or either military or civilian? This is something that was unclear in Iraq. The assumption of authority on 28 June 2004 by an Iraq government was a sham, and a desperate attempt by the US not to be seen as an "occupier", yet they still remained and held control in the country. Even the act of handing over sovereignty was logically, and possibly legally, dubious. Bush declared on 8 June 2004 that "we have been making a transfer of sovereignty all along", yet as Stirk writes, "since the occupier is by definition not the sovereign, it is not at all clear how any such transfer is to be understood" (2009: 167). Self-determination as justification for the invasion of the country is inherently contradicted by the act of imposing a government as part of that process of self-determination. Rory Stewart, Deputy Governorate Coordinator of Maysan for the Coalition Provincial Authority in 2003 acknowledges this paradox: "We emphasised that democracy was the only legitimate form of government, yet we were unelected foreigners" (2007: 427). Likewise, if part of the democratic rights imposed by the occupier is the right to oppose tyranny and domestic oppression, "then surely such a right exists in relation to alien forms of oppression" (Stewart 2007: 123); that is, the Iraqis have a right to resist the occupation by the British and American forces. It is also debatable whether "freedom" can be achieved through the imposition of force. If freedom possesses some content, then "it is the negative liberty of security necessary for elections and the principal agenda is freedom from certain forms of threat" (Owens 2007: 151).

<9> From my observations of making a documentary series with the British military in Iraq in 2004, and from filming in Iraq in 2009, I understood that part of the role of occupation is government and politics, yet it is this discourse which seems lacking in the coverage of the military. However, if the media were confused about the role of the military in occupied Iraq, it is a pale reflection of the confusion of role experienced by the military and government themselves. This seems to have originated in part from the confusion as to the British role overall in Iraq. It was as late as October 2003 that Britain realised that it would be put in charge of the South (Hoon 2010). However, Sir Hilary Synnott, head of the CPA South, remarked at the Chilcot Inquiry that as the occupying powers under the UN Security Council Resolution it is surprising that the British had not anticipated having a high degree of civilian authority in the South (Synnott 2009:11). In fact UN Resolution 1483 gave the USA and Britain the right to govern and to change Iraq's government system (Steele 2008: 125). Steele writes that although the job of the British military was to provide "containment" and create a

stable environment while reconstruction got under way, “this role in the invasion and its aftermath gave senior British officers a vital stake in how the war was conducted and what policies should be pursued when Saddam’s regime fell” (2008: 176).

<10> When Stewart arrived in Iraq as CPA deputy governor of Maysan province, he was told by General Lamb that the military “was forced to perform political and economic roles that were better done by civilians” but Lamb referred to himself as the de-facto governor of the province (Stewart 2006: 25). However unwilling Gen. Lamb might have been to undertake this role, it is arguably a role that should be considered when the British media depicts the actions of the British military abroad. With the hand over to an interim Iraqi government, Lt. Gen. Jonathon Riley took over as General Officer Commanding, Multi-National Division South East (GOC MND SE). He says that reconstruction was not strictly speaking his task, but his responsibility was coordinating day to day operations with the coalition forces on the ground in close partnership with the Iraqis, and “interface with the national and provincial governors” (Riley 2009: 11). Thus the military did not just have a military role, but was closely involved in political negotiations and in the administration of the South East. The military worked with the Department for International Development in implementing “Quick Impact Projects” in the initial year of the occupation. These were designed to win the hearts and minds of the local population and so improve the security situation, and were behind the Emergency Structure Programme developed by the military and Hilary Synnott, whereby 40 different projects largely identified by the Royal Engineers helped to improve the supply of power and water supplies in Basra (Drummond 2009). The Provincial Reconstruction Teams introduced in 2006 were also made up of the military and civilians. In 2005 after the Iraqis had elected their government, the military was still very much involved in politics. Major Gen. Jonathan Shaw, Commander Multi-National Forces, South East (MNF SE) worked closely with the British Consul General on the political plan for the Southern Iraq Steering Group, where he brought about the execution of the plans for this group and his office was the coordinating headquarters for the organisation as well as where the orders originated (Shaw 2010: 36). Des Browne, the Secretary of State for Defence from May to October 2008 states that he:

accepted shared responsibility for development of this country [Iraq] and its governance and its ability to look after its own security, and latterly I became involved in a whole list of other things including economic development and...so did the troops that we deployed.  
(Browne 2010: 6)

These statements emphasise that the role of the British military throughout the duration of the occupation was not just that of patrolling and fighting. They were also involved in politics and, especially in the early days, in actually governing the country and working closely with civilians, both British and Iraqi. Yet, as stated, this is a silence in the discourse of military coverage.

### **Charge of the Knights**

<11> The television coverage of the Charge of the Knights operation presents it as an event which is another addition to the increasing violence in the war in Iraq. In most of the coverage, the “defining problem” (Entman 1993) is the factional divide and battle for control of Basra between the Prime Minister of Iraq and Moqtada al Sadr’s militia; the identified cause is the absence of the British military who handed control of the city to the Iraqis when they pulled out of the Palace in December 2007, and the endorsed remedy is either the possible intervention of the British forces sitting at Basra airport watching the situation, or the military success of the Iraqi security forces trained by the British.

## The Defining Problem

Gavin Hewitt: A new battle for Basra....The operation was so important that the Iraqi Prime Minister personally came to the Iraqi city to oversee it. The main target were fighters from the powerful Shia militia the Mahdi army and they were defiant. (BBC News, 25/3/08, reporting the CotK)

<12> The BBC defines the operation as an event, as a battle where "Iraq government is facing its biggest crisis" (BBC News, 25/3/08). C4 calls it a "show down" (C4 27/3/08) and an "ultimatum" (C4 26/3/08), where "Iraq's army takes on the Shia militias who control Basra" (C4 25/3/08). ITV states that the "Iraqi army launched a ferocious attack against the city's militias (ITV 25/3/08). The operation is reported as a spike in the violence in Iraq, but not as an issue of Iraqi domestic politics. Admittedly, it would be difficult to cover Iraqi politics in depth in a news bulletin, but some effort to put the CotK operation into a political context might perhaps have led to greater understanding and hence greater watchability of the news (Philo & Berry 2004: Lewis 2001).

<13> Major Gen. Shaw, the commander of the Multi-National Force from January to August 2007 talked, at the Chilcot Inquiry, of dealing with the "Shia polit". He referred to Charles Tripp's (2000) analysis of the "Shadow State" of Iraq, that is, the militias who actually ran Iraq, and of the "dark state", that is, the people who made themselves illegal by their action but who were also part of the shadow state (Shaw 2010). It was the shadow state that had to be dealt with and "reconciled" with the de jure state if Iraq was to gain any semblance of self-government. This was in part what the Charge of the Knights was trying to achieve.

<14> In the BBC report of the CotK, Gavin Hewett describes it as a battle in which "The main target [of Maliki's army] were the fighters from the powerful Shia militia, the Mahdi army" (BBC News, 25/3/08). *Newsnight* also stipulates that, "It's become a battle between two very different Shia leaders, both wanting total control of Iraq" (*Newsnight*, 27/3/08).

<15> As stated, CotK can be explained as an attempt to reconcile not just the "two (Shia) states" of Iraq, but the shadow state and the actual Iraqi state. Prior to the spring of 2008, the Governor of Basra, Governor Wa'ili was under the sway of a number of Sadrist Ministers in Baghdad, and the Fadhila party in Basra. The Chief of Police, General Hamadi, was in thrall to the militia in Basra, and to the Sadrist supporters on the Provincial council; the governor and 40 Provincial Council members were known locally as Ali Baba and the 40 thieves (Haywood 2010: 9). By January 2008, however, as a result of Maliki's alliance with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and with the two Kurdish parties, his reliance on the Sadrists was lessened. In addition, in early October 2007 Moqtada al Sadr and Abdul Aziz Hakim announced a peace agreement to end clashes between the Mahdi Army and Badr brigades militia. Maliki was also seeing the results of the US forces' "surge", which had dealt a serious blow to Al Qaeda in the centre and West of the country. There was also open talk by Governor Wa'ili in Basra of the South-East attempting some form of secession from rest of Iraq, and Maliki realised he had to move to counter this threat. The conflict was more complex than the sectarian fighting of two Oriental Muslim factions.

<16> Charge of the Knights could only have happened when it did. The previous operation by the British, "Operation Sinbad", was unsuccessful in part because the political scenario was not right, and it was in the new political context described above that the CotK operation could go ahead and be understood. Yet the coverage of the operation in the news reports studied was only couched in terms of a military operation. The defining problem was a military encounter between two factions. There was no mention of political activity, of "meetings" and "dialogue", no mention of the politicians behind the military, or even (and just as importantly) the role of the military in the

political decisions. Maliki could take few major decisions which involved the coalition forces without consultation with them, yet this role of the military is not considered at all. A deeper look at the consultation process also raises interesting questions about the relationship of the British military to the Americans and the Baghdad government. Richard North writes that neither the British nor the Americans were in fact consulted nor asked for assistance by Maliki, but only given notice of the operation on 21 March, three days before it began (North 2009: 196), which perhaps begs the question of what value Maliki put on the role of the British forces in the South East. The silence about politics, and particularly about the agreement brokered at the end of March in Iran by the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force, Qassem Suleimani, following negotiations between Moqtada al Sadr, Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organisation and Ali al-Adeeb of Maliki's Dawa party, also excludes questions about the influence of Iran in Iraq, a subject of enormous interest to the Coalition politicians and military. CotK was a military manoeuvre, but as pointed out above, war cannot be understood without politics, and if the politics of the situation are ignored then the causes of the problem cannot be fully comprehended.

#### The Identified Cause – the disappearance of the British

<17> In the news coverage studied, where the problem is defined as military, the reasons for the violence in Basra are also given as military, i.e., that the British forces withdrew from Basra city the previous December, and this caused a vacuum into which the militias surged. In the BBC report Gavin Hewett states that, "Just a few months ago British forces controlled these streets" (BBC News, 25/3/08). This is a misrepresentation of what was actually happening on the streets of Basra. North writes that by May 2006 one person was being murdered in Basra every hour (2009:104). He adds: "The British had long since lost their grip, resembling a somewhat ineffectual referee in a game where the players had abandoned the ball and were beating each other up" (2009: 104). Kilcullen states that in December 2006 125 people were being killed a night in Iraq (2009: 126).

<18> The idea that the British had controlled Basra up until they left the city, whereupon the Iraqis came in and spoiled the game, is also echoed by other television news reports. For example, on C4 News the military spokesman Major Tom Holloway states:

In the intervening months since December [i.e., when the British pulled out of the city] there has been some form of a turf war being fought in Basra between three main groupings of militia. (C4 News, 25/3/08)

Although this view is later challenged by presenter Alex Thompson, who says to James Arbuthnot, Chairman of the Defence committee, that the problem was that the British ceded Basra to "a bunch of militias to run it as they saw fit", Arbuthnot replies that it was a problem with the police and that it is now the army which is sorting things out. "The Iraqi army has been pretty well trained by the British" (C4 News, 25/3/08). The programme does not mention that it was also the British who trained the police in the South East (see below). The subject might not have been brought up for reasons of time, but it might also be an effect of the dominant discourse silencing other avenues of inquiry, namely, an investigation into the military as occupiers, whose role was to set up the infrastructure of state and security, and in this case their failure to do so. On *Newsnight* the reporter states:

In August Moqtadr Al Sadr ordered a ceasefire but his militia have controlled much of Basra particularly since British forces moved out of the city centre in December. (*Newsnight*, 27/3/08)

The lack of knowledge of the situation in Basra over the previous couple of years, and the acceptance of the story spun by the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD), that they had left Basra because

it was secure, stands out. The implication is that British forces were there to provide security and did so until the Iraqis arrived.

<19> So what was the British military doing in Iraq? The MoD argued that its inactivity at this time was because its presence was exacerbating the violence:

British soldiers won't join the operation in Basra. Their commanders recognise that could only inflame the situation, but further north as the violence spreads, the Americans are joining the fighting. (BBC News, 27/3/08)

Yet the International Crisis Group had challenged the MoD's assumption that the security situation was inflamed by the army of occupation. Basra's problems, they wrote, were not to do with sectarianism or anti-occupation resistance; instead they "involve the systematic misuse of official institutions, political assassinations, tribal vendettas, neighbourhood vigilantism and enforcement of social mores" (International Crisis Group 2007: 4). Theirs was a political and legal assessment, not one couched in purely military terms. Interestingly, this recognition of a failure in politics and security is cited by Brigadier Sandy Storrie (Commander 7 Armoured Brigade 2007-2009) as the reason why the British military's withdrawal from Basra and non-involvement in the CotK was in fact a success:

By early 2007 the army's legitimacy had expired...[the pull-out from Basra city] was not an abrogation of responsibility; more a recognition of lost and irrecoverable legitimacy and an active effort to empower the ISF [Iraqi Security Forces] as a more appropriate force. (Storrie 2010: 18)

It was by leaving the field clear for the militia to "hang themselves in Basra by their actions that the British were able to re-engage with their role clarified, not as occupiers, but as direct supporters of the Iraq Army" (Storrie 2010:19). The argument that the absence of the British troops in Basra led to the violence, and was one of the causes of the CotK, neatly aligns with the remedy proposed, that is, that their absence allows for the Iraqis to take control of the situation themselves.

#### The Endorsed Remedy –the return of the British/training legacy

<20> The MoD line that the Iraqi forces had been successfully trained by the British, which therefore meant that the British had accomplished their mission and could now successfully return to fight the war in Afghanistan, seems to have been swallowed by the reporters and forms part of the exit strategy discourse promoted by the MoD (North 2009 :187). The BBC's Gavin Hewett, for example, says: "Today's battles were a critical test of the British strategy of training Iraqi forces to handle security" (BBC News, 25/3/08). Similarly, two days later MoD Spokesman Major Tom Holloway says:

It's an Iraqi-led, -planned and -executed mission....It's encouraging for us in that the training we have been providing them with in the past few months has been effective. (BBC News, 27/3/08)

ITV News also highlights the fact that the troops are British-trained:

This is the first major test of the army, trained of course by British troops since control of Basra was handed over last year. (ITV News,25/4/08)

The 14th Iraqi Army Division, which had been trained by the British, led the Charge of the Knights. Admittedly they were only just out of training and both the Americans and British thought they were not ready for combat, but by the last week of March 1,000 Iraqi Security Force members deserted or refused to fight (*New York Times*, 14 April 2008). So on 1 April, troops from the Iraqi Army's Quick Reaction Force arrived from Anbar, with US Marine Military Transition Teams embedded.



<21> The outcome of the CotK operation was in doubt at this time, but as an *Iraqi* battle, its outcome perhaps could not be seen as of much relevance to the British military's role and responsibility as trainers of the Iraqi security forces, or to the British public, and as a military exercise the political causes or possible political solutions were deemed immaterial because battles are won in theatre by armies. ITV news reporter Neil Connery states: "The British troops insist they are not about to become involved in what is an Iraqi situation" (ITV News, 25.3.08). Yet the British military had surely been "involved" in the Iraqi situation for quite a few years. The stated responsibility of the coalition forces was a shared "common goal of creating a secure and stable Iraq" (ministerial statement to House of Commons by Geoff Hoon, 21 Oct 2004).

<22> One of the major issues brought up at the Chilcot Inquiry was the training of the police and their infiltration by the militias. It was clear even when I was in Basra in 2004 during the first Sadrist uprising that the militia had infiltrated the security forces, especially the police. In September 2005 the British forces stormed the Jamiat Police station, the headquarters of the Serious Crimes Unit which had captured two SAS operatives. By this time the British were not allowed into the station, and it was apparent that the police, and this unit in particular, were being run by the militia. At the Chilcot Inquiry, Sir Roderick Lyne asked General Houghton, senior British military representative from October 2005 to March 2006, why it had taken two and a half years to realise the corruption of the police. He replied: "I don't think that we had a full understanding of that at the back end of 2005. That was more revealed to us incrementally, as 2006 ensued" (Houghton 2010: 6). Maliki declared a state of emergency in Basra in May 2006, which should have given Gen. Houghton some idea that things were not well. A report by the International Crisis Group states that in September 2006 the MoD claimed that only 9% of the police stations in Basra city were assessed as up to a satisfactory standard. Miraculously by February 2007 after the British operation (Operation Sinbad) to clear the city, the MoD was claiming that 92% of the police stations within Basra city were assessed at a satisfactory standard (International Crisis Group 2007: 16). Again, with no idea of what was actually happening in the city, reporters merely reiterated the stories put out by the MoD, a criticism frequently levelled at embedded reporters in 2003 (Miller 2003).

<23> The International Crisis Group reports that first-hand witnesses in Basra assessed the performance of the police as "wholly inadequate". They judge that "some British data defies credibility" (International Crisis Group 2007: 16). They further state that the British appeared to have given up on the idea of "establishing a functioning state, capable of equitably redistributing wealth and resources, imposing respect for the rule of law and instituting a genuine and accountable democracy" (2007:18). This diagnosis of political failure is echoed by Cordesman writing about the British failure in Iraq: "The British were not defeated in a military sense, but lost in the political sense if 'victory' means securing the southeast for the central government and some form of national unity" (Cordesman 2007: 3).

<24> As the operation continued and it became clear that Maliki's army was in trouble, the British army continued to sit in its base outside the city. Again reporters accepted the line from the MoD about the Iraqi fighting capacity, and it was on fighting ability that the event was judged. The BBC was the only news channel out of those I examined which had a reporter in Basra, Paul Wood, and he was based at the airfield with the British forces: there was no footage of him in Basra city. ITV News included a quote from the military spokesman saying that it was an "indication of the Iraqi government's confidence in the ability of its army and police services in that they are conducting this operation largely without our support" (ITV News, 25/3/08). *Newsnight* echoed this in an interview with Amyas Godfrey from the Royal United Services Institute who stated without being challenged: "It's actually very right that the British army right now is standing back, because it's not needed at

the moment" (*Newsnight*, 27/3/08). Even *Newsnight's* Jeremy Paxman, known for his tough interview style, did not follow through the question, to Major General Patrick Cordingly, of what 4,100 British soldiers were doing sitting around when the citizens of Basra were going hungry as no UN Convoy could get in, and war was erupting on the streets:

Paxman - No chance of the British being committed?

Cordingly – No chance at all.

Paxman – None at all? What are they doing there then?

(*Newsnight*, 27/3/08)

Major General Patrick Cordingly answers that they are there for training and for keeping the supply routes open, and Paxman asks no further questions regarding this.

### Visuals

<25> As Iyengar notes, episodic framing favours make "good pictures" (1991: 14). In part the emphasis of the news on reporting the military exercise can be explained by the dependence on visuals. The dominance of visuals and especially live footage in war reporting has been noted by many writers (Hoskins & O'Loughlin 2007; Lewis et al. 2006). The footage of CotK is vulnerable to common criticisms levelled against war coverage in this respect, as summarised by Michalski & Gow, for example, who write that in war coverage moving image media there is a "focus on individuals or small groups, [a] dominance of the striking image over information of other kinds, [and an] emphasis on action and emotion, rather than reflection and reasoning, that derives from the nature of the medium" (2007:16). In the CotK coverage, the same footage of individual militia firing rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and riding around in a pick-up truck are used in every bulletin. Footage from Iraqi television of Iraqi security forces is also used, and points to the lack of available specially shot footage by the British news companies. The security situation meant that British crews could not film in the streets of Basra, but the reliance on militia footage again emphasises the military discourse of the coverage.

### **Conclusion**

<26> The fact that the Americans seemed to be intervening in Iraq with some success is not picked up by these media reports, and this again might be explained by the dominance of the military discourse in reporting the operation, and a failure to take into account the politics behind the CotK, indeed, a failure to understand that modern war cannot be fought without taking politics into account. Smith (2005) writes that conventional war (that is, war where the clash of arms decides the outcome) no longer exists; the utility of military force depends on the ability of that force to adapt to complex political contexts and engage non-state opponents. John Reid commented at the Chilcot Inquiry that it "was difficult to explain to the public through elements of the press, who couldn't conceive of a struggle, or a conflict that didn't end with a victory parade on a given day, because they didn't actually understand the nature of modern conflict" (Reid 2010: 50). The terrestrial broadcast news coverage of the Charge of the Knights demonstrates a wider silence in news discourse which sees what the military does as only war, and which neglects the wider role and responsibilities of the occupying forces. If these responsibilities are not interrogated, how can an accurate assessment of the military's role in Iraq be achieved, and how can other solutions apart from battle be presented to a democratic public in the coverage of war and occupation?

## News Items

BBC News at Ten 25/3/2008

BBC News at Ten 26/3/2008

BBC News at Ten 27/3/2008

BBC News at Ten 28/3/2008

BBC News at Ten 29/3/2008

BBC News at Ten 1/4/2008

BBC Newsnight 27/3/2008

C4 News 25/3/2008

C4 News 26/3/2008

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