

Bob Bergen. *Scattering Chaff: Canadian Air Power and Censorship During the Kosovo War*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2019. Pp 344.

“It was a huge fuck up. Let me use the words properly: Huge Fuck Up. It was incredibly stupid and typically Canadian” (p. 109). This is how retired Canadian Forces member Lieutenant Colonel William Flynn remembers the lack of basic technology and preparedness during the Kosovo War. If you find this type of criticism from a retired Canadian Forces member, surprising, then the rest of Bob Bergen’s *Scattering Chaff: Canadian Air Power and Censorship During the Kosovo War* will leave you shocked.

*Scattering Chaff* is a highly readable and enjoyable book that illustrates how the Canadian Forces severely restricted, if not fully censored, the Canadian news media during the Kosovo War in 1999 by invoking operational security concerns. Bergen is critical of the policy preventing pilots, except in rare exceptions, from being interviewed, and banning the use of identifiable information. *Scattering Chaff* is bold in its criticism of the military. Bergen describes how the military “absolutely mastered the news media” and he asserts that “it scattered context-less facts, ambiguity, half-truths, and outright lies like chaff from a CF-18 trying to thwart a radar-guided missile” (p. 258). Even the most basic information such as the rank of pilots flying Canadian sorties was withheld from journalists. The challenges that pilots and ground crew endured during the Kosovo War went unreported. This meant that the long days, little sleep, inappropriate footwear, insufficient technology, bad weather, debilitating injuries, psychological stress and staffing issues that the Canadian forces faced and ultimately overcame went unreported. The results of the Canadian Forces’ approach to the news media during the Kosovo War was that the line of accountability integral to democracy was erased. As a result, service men and women were denied the recognition they deserved, and the Canadian public and their representatives in the House of Commons were denied the opportunity to debate what their own military was participating in.

Bergen’s pursuit of the truth goes far beyond the actions of the military. The author also performs in-depth analysis of multiple Canadian and American newspapers to illustrate the type of coverage, and lack of coverage, Canadians in the Kosovo War received. Most impressive is Bergen’s analysis of the “body bag incident” during

the Gulf War. This incident involved alleged threats towards the families of military members during the Gulf War by those opposed to Canadian involvement, including body bags left on their lawn for intimidation. This incident was widely reported in Canada. As a result, in the Kosovo War, little information was allowed to be shared in the media to avoid similar incidents and threats against military families. However, Bergen conducted a thorough search of the Department of National Defence records for military police records about the body bag incident and found nothing. A thorough analysis of media reports also failed to yield substantiated proof that the incident actually happened. As Bergen states, “given the far-ranging effect on Canada’s democratic institutions years later of an urban myth, the body bags, its origins are worth pursuing” (p. 140). Such examples provide readers with valuable new insight as to how Canadian democracy has functioned, and at times failed, in times of war and peace.

The strength of *Scattering Chaff* is the quality and quantity of primary research that Bergen undertook. The Chretien Government, Department of National Defence, and Canadian Forces documents obtained through the federal *Access to Information Act* provide unique insight into the policies and disinformation that surrounded the Kosovo War. In cases where Bergen was denied access to requested documents, he is careful to explain why, based on the *Access to Information Act* (p. 7). As the old adage goes, “Sometimes you can learn more from what is left unsaid than what is said.” In *Scattering Chaff*, Bergen makes sure the reader learns from what is left unreleased, as well as what is released.

The quality of Bergen’s research is commendable, but what really sets the book apart is his use of oral history. *Scattering Chaff* includes oral testimony from interviews with some of Canada’s most prominent journalists including Paul Workman, Neil Macdonald, Geoffrey York, and Joy Malbon. Bergen was also given permission to interview service men and women of all ranks including, to his surprise, the highest-ranking officer in the Canadian Forces, Chief of Defence Staff General Ray Henault. One might presume that Bergen’s thankfulness for access to high-ranking military officials means that he was less critical of their performance during the Kosovo War; however, borrowing Bergen’s oft repeated phrase, “That was not the truth.” Bergen does not shy away from criticizing the actions of Henault or the actions of other military officials.

When it comes to other service members, Bergen is less critical. Bergen quotes the interviewees at length giving the reader what is often surprising insight into the life of a Canadian servicemen and women, as well as the shortcomings of the Canadian Forces. Like in any profession, the members of the Canadian military do not always agree, and Bergen is always sure to present the differing opinions. Military histories often run the risk of becoming bogged down in specifications of technology, official documents, and plans. Bergen's use of oral testimony and his ability to incorporate candid admissions and reflections from his interview subjects makes this book an enjoyable read for military historians, academics, and the general public alike. The quotes from the pilots who dropped bombs in Yugoslavia both humanize the pilots involved and question the official narrative of the Canadian Forces. However, the author's use of oral testimony would be improved by consulting theories from the oral history field. Both the readability and the believability of the book relies heavily on the recollections of those interviewed. A scholar must be able to both present memories and respectfully analyze them. Historians trained in oral history study the use of interviews and oral testimony, create theories on how to respect the interviewee while still analyzing the content of the interview, and importantly recognize the potential limitations of memory. An analysis of what is included, omitted, and how it is remembered and spoken of often tells scholars as much as the content of the testimony itself. Bergen was a journalist in the twenty-five years before pursuing a Ph.D. in History. If he did critically engage in these theoretical questions while analyzing the oral testimony of service members, he did not include it in his book, which would have made it a more useful source for scholars.

One of the central tenets of Bergen's arguments is that Canadians could not have known anything substantial about Canada's military's participation in the Kosovo War because of the information vacuum in which they were kept (p. 264). Information that was withheld, included the absence of night vision goggles and unjammable radios, as well as a shortage of bombs. As the servicemen explained to Bergen, these shortfalls put their lives and risk and harmed Canada's reputation within the alliance (p. 71). Canadian service members had to work up to eighteen days without even the basics needed for a successful military campaign. When explaining how the standard issue boots were totally inadequate for the Aviano weather, Bergen

explains “their misery nearly repeated the experience of the First World War” (p. 75). He also asserts that the publically released after-action reports by the Canadian Forces continued to hide information on failures by the Canadian Forces that service members on the ground and in the sky had to overcome.

Overall, *Scattering Chaff* is an informative and enjoyable read which illuminates a largely-overlooked war in which Canadians service members risked their lives, the Canadian Forces manipulated and suppressed the news media, and for which Canadian citizens paid without knowing what they were buying. Bergen’s highly readable book is a significant contribution given that scholars are only slowly starting to examine the Kosovo War in greater detail.

KRENARE RECAJ, *UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO*