Title Conflicts of Interest, National Army Museum

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Imagine a fine-art curator accepting personal gifts from a dealer in return for displaying works from a commercial gallery. Or an auction where a museum director bids against her own institution to acquire an artefact for her private collection.

Both would be guilty of conflicts of interest and of seriously undermining public trust in museums. That’s why the Museums Association’s code of ethics warns museum staff against undertaking private activities that “conflict with the museum’s interest or wider public interest”.

Conflicts of Interest is therefore a significant choice of title for the National Army Museum’s redisplay of its Modern Army Gallery. Examining “the role of the British Army across the world over the last 40 years”, it will interest anyone who has asked that most profound of moral questions: is war ever justified?

Wrapped up inside that dilemma are a multitude of individual conflicts. This is visualised along the corridor leading to the gallery.

Down one side is a series of army recruitment posters; down the other are family photographs. This pairing shows how “each soldier needs to reconcile the personal and professional sides of being in the Army”.

At the end of the corridor is a gigantic portrait of private Michelle Norris. On closer inspection, we see that her image is made up of hundreds of tiny portraits. This reminds us that the Army with a capital A is actually made up of individuals.

Conflicts of Interest gives voice to some of them. Tucked away in the small print of the introductory panel is written: “This exhibition conveys the views of individuals and does not necessarily reflect the position of the Council of the National Army Museum or the Ministry of Defence.”

Conflicts of interest are clearly inherent in the National Army Museum putting on an exhibition about present-day conflict. Is it really able to put the British Army under scrutiny and ask awkward but necessary questions?

The answer comes as soon as you turn the corner and find yourself in a section called At Home. There’s a sofa next to a fire, a coffee table, TV and phone. But this is no ordinary living room.

If you pick up the phone you hear soldiers giving different views on being treated equally in the army. Look at the coffee table and you are reminded that it took a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in 2000 to make it unlawful for gays to be discharged from the military.

And written in bold letters on the wall outside this imaginary house is a text panel that I was amazed to see. Entitled “A difficult homecoming”, we learn that nearly one in ten prison inmates are former members of the armed forces and that there are more than 1,000 homeless veterans in London alone.

**“Hero to zero”**

In the space of a few steps, I had encountered frank admissions of inequality and discrimination, plus the detrimental impact military service has had on at least one former soldier as he struggled to cope with going from “a hero to a zero”.

If there were any conflicts of interest in putting on this show then the unnamed curators behind it have been courageous enough to fend them off.

From the living-room diorama, visitors are free to plunge into a conflict of their choosing, ranging from Iraq and Afghanistan to Sierra Leone and the Falklands plus, closer to home, Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia. Each is allocated a touchscreen console, text panels, objects and audiovisual material.

Events of the recent past are placed in historical context. The account of the Gulf War does not shirk from the fact that “the British used air attacks and poison gas against the Iraqis” in 1920. Reading this alongside war artist John Keane’s self-portrait during the gas alert that he endured in 1991 is challenging.

It comes as no surprise to find the past overshadowing the present in Afghanistan. “We’ve been here before,” declares one headline, followed by the war years 1839, 1878, 1919 and now. This raises an unspoken question: if we’ve been there before, to what extent are Afghanistan’s problems of our own making?

And what about the future? It’s claimed that the British Army’s mentoring of Afghan troops and police is leading to “real development”.

But there is clearly lots of scope for improvement, given staff sergeant South’s description of the police as “thugs” and captain Beattie’s reference to the Afghan Army as “a bunch of trigger-happy cowboys”.

These frank opinions reveal Conflicts of Interest to be a genuinely open exchange of views. And the accompanying display pulls no punches either. In a vitrine we see a shirt that a member of the Parachute Regiment wore during four gruelling months.

The shoulders are almost completely worn through by the soldier’s body armour. If that was the impact on his clothes, what were the repercussions for his mind?

Alongside the shirt is a piece of shrapnel with shreds of warrant officer Stockton’s uniform still attached to it. It took off his arm – as we see and hear in the audiovisual above.

How I would have welcomed the chance to talk to soldiers such as these or one of London’s hundreds of homeless ex-servicemen. The exhibition would make the ideal venue for such a meeting.

Further ways to improve Conflicts of Interest would be to give visitors access to some of the literature listed in each section. This could be linked to the museum’s Templer Study Centre or talks such as the Afghan panel discussion planned for mid-June.

Technological problems are less easily resolved. The audio clips are triggered by movement, meaning that you have to keep moving around. And the live vote asking if “troops should be sent into a conflict zone” is oddly worded, making it sound like we are being asked if soldiers should be redeployed in Northern Ireland.

Of course, British soldiers are still in Northern Ireland, and many across the sectarian divide will no doubt have much to say about the museum’s account of this conflict. How should the Troubles be defined? Were the troops there on a peace mission or engaged in war?

These questions really matter given that, by its own reckoning, more than 250,000 troops have been deployed there at a cost of 655 dead soldiers.

There are no statistics about the number of civilian and other deaths in Northern Ireland, Iraq, Afghanistan or the Falklands.

Nor is voice given to the “enemies”, even if one Argentinean organisation, the Fundación Veteranos Guerra de las Malvinas is credited as one of the sources used.

The fact that such voices could so easily be incorporated into a display that dares to raise so many contentious issues speaks volumes for this exhibition. It fully deserves to have been longlisted for the Art Fund Prize.

Rarely can so many conflicts have been tackled in such an interesting and thought-provoking manner. These are indeed Conflicts of Interest.

**Project data**

Cost £573,000

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Exhibition design Met Studio

Interactive agency GR/DD