

The Failure of Academia: British University endorses the “War on Terrorism”

The Book that Was Not Meant to Be Published

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Deepak Tripathi’s most recent book, *Breeding Ground: Afghanistan and the Origins of Islamist Terrorism* (Potomac Books) raises several issues, both within and outside of its content. It is based on research for his doctoral dissertation, the qualification for which he never received.

Tripathi, a former BBC producer, is immensely proud of his latest volume, even while it is associated with a tumultuous experience at the University of Sussex, a renowned British university.

For a while, things had gone according to plan, and the future seemed promising. Tripathi was told to prepare for his graduation by his supervisor, Dr. Stephen Burman, Dean of the School of Humanities.

Tripathi is an accomplished researcher and a prolific writer. He had every reason to believe his research, which began in 2002, would lead to earning his PhD from the university’s American Studies Program. His findings, which partly relied on the Cold War International History Archive material of the Smithsonian Institute, were praised by such intellectuals as Walter LaFeber, Howard Zinn and Johan Galtung.

Moreover, Tripathi already had an impressive and well-respected background in the field. His career at BBC News (1977-2000) would have gone on longer, were it not for him falling seriously ill with heart disease. Some of his noteworthy achievements have included setting up the BBC Bureau in Kabul in the early 1990s, covering conflict in India and Sri Lanka, and contributing to public understanding of many matters involving this part of the world. His previous book, *Overcoming the Bush Legacy in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Potomac Books, March 2010) helped many to decipher the power rivalries in South and West Asia, and specially US foreign policy regarding these regions.

Tripathi’s latest work, *Breeding Ground* was initially slated as his doctoral dissertation. That work was already well-received in many circles and yet failed to meet the examiners’ expectations suggests to Tripathi that biased political agendas were involved.

Despite the triumphant release of his book, the author feels it is important to revisit the academic ordeal, as both issues are intrinsically linked.

The “Viva”, or the oral examination of a doctoral thesis, usually takes an hour. In Tripathi’s case, it involved nearly two hours of “sheer hostility”. “Viva was not an oral examination,

but an-hour-and-fifty-minutes of sustained interrogation during which the external examiner shouted throughout, not allowing me to answer, while objecting to matters of trivial importance." All of this seemed to negate not only the feedback of Tripathi's supervisor, but also the rules of the university.

Tripathi further alleges that the internal examiner didn't read the thesis, as "no markings or signs of handling were found on any of pages." As for the external examiner, he seems to have read only a third of what took years for Tripathi to studiously research and write. This was evident by the "angry notes on about a third of the pages, then nothing."

Tripathi speculates that what has taken place has less to do with his research or writing skills, but more on his take on the subject matter and the affiliation of the examiners.

The internal examiner was newly appointed Pro-Vice Chancellor, whose academic interests include the Northern Ireland conflict. She has co-authored a book on the subject of policing, and has ties with security establishments in Britain and the United States, where she became an advisor to the Homeland Security Management Institute, University of Long Island, New York. She also regularly ran training courses for the British military.

When contacted regarding this matter, the internal examiner, who had since then left her post at the University of Sussex, declined to comment – possibly because of academic confidentiality associated with such cases.

The external examiner, a career military officer, specialized in British military doctrines, the application of force and counterinsurgency. He had joined the Northern Ireland security service at the height of the conflict in the 1970s. Upon retiring from the British military in 2003, he was immediately appointed Professor of Politics and International Law and Head of the Department at Royal Holloway.

The external examiner too declined to comment "on the basis of confidentiality as between the University and the candidate." He is also no longer affiliated with the university.

Tripathi's thesis was submitted in early December 2006, with his supervisor's blessings. However, Dr. Stephen Burman was absent from the viva, where Tripathi found himself defending his ideas to "two academics with strong ties to the military". Considering Tripathi's approach, which shows little enthusiasm for military solutions to convoluted conflicts, he felt that his research stood little chance. "It was more of an assault, than a discussion," he said. "It was as if I was accused of some wrong-doing and had to defend myself." Even the Cold War International History Archive material of the Smithsonian Institute was deemed "unacceptable" by his examiners, according to Tripathi.

To rectify the problem, Tripathi was told by the external examiner that he "would have to rewrite the thesis in a year, without the Cold War History Archive that gave (him) access to the Russian and East German archives, and resubmit only for MPhil." Even then, Tripathi would still need to endure another viva.

Tripathi feels betrayed. For a man who has spent most of his adult life helping many understand the nature of conflict in areas where the US, Britain and other major powers have played a seminal role, the rejection – and the style in which it was expressed– has come as a major shock.

For Tripathi, there is no question that he was punished for daring to chart a course deemed unfavorable from the viewpoint of academics with links to the military. In some countries, government interference in academic matters is hardly shocking. But in this case – especially if Tripathi’s assertions are indicative of a larger phenomenon – the matter is of immense urgency.

For Tripathi’s readers, the story may still have a happy ending. Although the author is yet to receive his academic degree, the book is now widely available for all to read.

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