Two Australian wars, two prime ministers: Australia's virtual Vietnam, and lessons for today

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The Sydney Morning Herald

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by Garry Woodard

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I. Introduction

At the tenth anniversary of the decision to commit Australian troops to the Iraq war, Garry Woodard of Melbourne University reconstructs the previously unknown, and remarkably casual, process by which the Menzies government committed Australian troops to Vietnam. Woodard argues that the dismaying similarities between the Australian entries into these two wars strengthen the call for an Australian Iraq War inquiry, following those in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, "in the hope that what is learnt from it will lead to improved procedures for decision-making, under which the government will have to level with the Parliament and the people."

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II. Policy Forum by Garry Woodard

Two Australian wars, two prime ministers: Australia's virtual Vietnam, and lessons for today

For a decade after the Korean War Australian leaders recognized, grudgingly, that there would be 'no more Koreas', no more American 'boots on the ground' in Asian wars. They had had confirmation as late as October 1963, when President John F. Kennedy in an agreement with Australian Foreign Minister Garfield Barwick had for the first time conceded that the ANZUS Treaty could apply to a non-Communist country, Sukarno's Indonesia, but under stringent conditions which ruled out American ground forces. Shaped by memories of 1942, the military and official advisers to Prime Minister Robert Menzies argued that the exclusion of ground troops derogated from the Treaty. Australian prime ministers have consistently sought to have American troops on the ground, witness Bill Clinton holding John Howard at arm's length on the issue in East Timor in 1999 and Julia Gillard hugging close with Barack Obama on the deployment of US Marines in Darwin in 2012.

In 1964 the gods gave Australian leaders their wish when Kennedy's untried successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, agreed that American credibility was under test in Vietnam from militant Asian communism in which the North Vietnamese were China's surrogates. Vietnam proved Australia's most divisive war and worst defeat.

In 2001 the god smiled on Australian leaders again and set in train a course of events over the next 18 months when they could line up behind George W Bush in the war against terrorism. Iraq competes with Vietnam as Australia's most divisive war because the majority was against it from the start and the 10th anniversary on 19 March has shown that that dissent continues.

Howard, who will be using the anniversary month to put his case on the Iraq war again, has dismissed comparisons between Vietnam and Iraq as politically inspired, historically inaccurate, and designed not to help but to hinder. I had no difficulty in finding 50 features in common in 2004 for my book *Asian Alternatives: Australia's Vietnam decision and lessons on going to war*[i]. I was able to chart, first in 2005, the course of Australia's commitment from the earliest stages to involvement in the Iraq war alongside the US and UK from our allies' open sources.[1]

It was a US channel which provided the earliest clues to crucial facts about Australia's decision to go to war in Vietnam. The informant was Menzies himself. He said in an oral history for the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library that 'it did not take five minutes to decide that when it came to the point of action we would be in it'[ii]. In other words, the decision in principle to commit troops was made early and quickly. As the *Pentagon Papers* confirmed in 1971, it could not have been done, as the government claimed, on a request from the government of South Vietnam (GVN).

Howard too has acknowledged that there was an early and straightforward tipping point for him, and that it had little to do with the justification later advanced for Australia going to war: he writes in his autobiography:

Within hours of the attack on 11 September 2001, Michael Thawley, our Ambassador in Washington, said to me that as a result of the attack, Iraq would be back on the agenda for the Americans. This was because of continued American suspicion about the willingness of Iraq to support, facilitate and promote terrorist activities by others as well as the general view in the United States that Iraq and, in particular the removal of Saddam Hussein renamed unfinished business.[iii]

A unique insight into decision making on going to war

The Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee of Cabinet (FADC) took the decision in principle to commit troops in Vietnam on 17 December 1964. The decision was thus made in the last days before the Christmas exodus from the national capital (the better-known ratification and announcement taking place in April 1965). Under an accelerated declassification policy, the Cabinet Secretary's minutes of the meeting have recently been released.[iv]

A summary in eight points of the FADC meeting had been retained unusually from 1964 on a Prime Minister's Department (PMD) file.[v] The file had been overlooked by Michael Sexton[vi] and other critics of the war. The team which wrote the official history[vii] also overlooked this file. They would have had privileged access to the notebook of the Cabinet Secretary (in this case the acting Secretary, Peter Lawler, secretary John Bunting being on Christmas leave) but underestimated its importance. The official history preferred to concentrate on the Cabinet meetings in April which led up to the announcement. It ignored the clue that Bunting recommended to Menzies that if asked when the decision to send a battalion to South Vietnam had been made he should blur the answer, referring to a period from November/December 1964 to April 1965.

The full record confirms Menzies' estimate of five (perhaps ten) minutes of discussion and devastatingly amplifies the eight-point summary.

Personalities

The dominant figure, as in all discussions on going to war, is the Prime Minister. Menzies is not at

the top of his form. He has been in poor health for some time and has been advised by his doctor to take a long rest. He is suffering from exhaustion at the end of a victorious half-Senate election, which had been celebrated the night before at a 70th birthday dinner tendered by his Party. The most vigorous interventions in the FADC come from the Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Country Party, John McEwen, whose nationalist approach on trade, particularly from 1961-63 during Britain's first application to join the European Economic Community, had raised his political stocks.

These two leaders would have caucused together before the FADC met. The deputy leader of the Liberal Party and Treasurer, Harold Holt, may also have been present, and certainly would have wished to, as he has become sensitive about McEwen's higher profile, and fears it could threaten his smooth passage to the top.

The other two ministers have been members of the FADC for less than a year and have subordinate status. The Minister for Defence, Shane Paltridge, a former publican, well-regarded by Menzies, speaks but twice, and inconsequentially. The Foreign Minister, Paul Hasluck, after a long apprenticeship in a minor portfolio and a few months in Defence, is, unusually, an intellectual. He is a maximal realist, and is the doctrinal architect of intervention in Vietnam. He believes that the superpower, the United States, must accept its responsibilities to contain the rising superpower, China, and North Vietnam, which he has to fit into his theoretical framework as China's 'puppet'.

In the only advice before the FADC, the Chiefs of Staff Committee is recommending sending a battalion to South Vietnam. There is no record of the Chairman, the politically savvy Air Marshal Frederick Scherger, whom Menzies likes, being present, but he too may have had a prior meeting with Menzies.

Definitely missing is Australia's most powerful mandarin, External Affairs Secretary Arthur Tange, who is rebuffed when he protests his banishment to Hasluck, but nevertheless foists departmental advice on Hasluck.

Virtual Decision-making

We can now enter into the Cabinet room. The time is 11.30 am, Wednesday 17 December. This is an unusually late start. For the purpose of 'virtual Vietnam', we assume that the meeting starts on time.

My comments are in italics.

11.30

The first third of the proceedings is taken up with an introductory presentation by Hasluck. He begins his peroration with the rather insensitive suggestion that it is not necessary to decide on all matters, but only to settle the terms of a reply to President Johnson. Hasluck provides his view of American policy, which is based on visiting Washington while planning was going on in November, in anticipation of Johnson defeating Barry Goldwater in the Presidential election. He paints a picture of tentativeness, far short of a determined progressive squeeze, with the US initiating 30 days of bombing of the North. In the light of the assessed results for South Vietnamese morale and North Vietnamese resolution, the US may move on to a second phase involving ground forces. The suggestion has been made to the Australian and New Zealand ambassadors by Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, believing he was carrying out presidential wishes, but apparently speaking prematurely, that a ground force might include contributions from Australia and New Zealand.[viii] Initially the idea is for a static border force checking infiltration. It is envisaged that the role would

be elucidated in military staff talks, but by the time they are held, at the end of March 1965, the deterioration in the military situation will require involvement in active operations.

Hasluck suggests that the reply can acknowledge that the significance of the second phase meaning more direct US involvement in South Vietnam is fully appreciated. The President's specific requests pose difficulties, but 'we will do what is in our power', and would like military staff talks. Hasluck says we've arrived at a point where we can ask to be more closely consulted', though 'the more we get involved the more we stick our necks out'.

Hasluck then lists seven points, mainly related to American war aims, which he says Australia is now in a position to raise at the political level. This suggests he may have read the departmental paper pressed on him by Tange, although it is not his practice to refer to departmental thinking in Cabinet. He concludes by asking whether the military recommendation for a battalion should also be mentioned. He concludes 'let us direct our minds to the immediate reply to the President'. The exhortation falls on deaf ears.

11.34

Holt asks Hasluck if the bombing has commenced. Hasluck replies that it is about to (which proves wrong), and reverts to what he was told in Washington: 'I formed the impression when in the US that the Americans are terribly worried. The problem is political stability, we won't get it without Phase I. But this involves a risk of Phase 2'.

Hasluck will hold to the line that he Americans must commence bombing and ties it to achieving political stability in South Vietnam, although it is plain to almost everyone else that it is disintegrating.. The feeling is that this is an American responsibility, which probably goes back to the Australian view that things began to go badly wrong when the US started the process which ended with the downfall of Ngo Dinh Diem.

Minister for Air Peter Howson, who had been in Washington at the same time as Hasluck, had pressed for Australia to participate in bombing North Vietnam. Another ex-airman, Minister assisting the Minister for External Affairs John Gorton, had expressed strong scepticism about this when he saw the reporting of Hasluck and Howson from Washington, but the issue was never joined.

Holt asks about other countries responding to the American request, and Hasluck replies soothingly that they will provide token aid. Holt notes that it will not be regarded as an operation under the SEATO Treaty. Menzies asks why it should not be a SEATO operation. Hasluck replies that he does not know. Menzies grumbles that it should be a SEATO operation. McEwen quashes them by saying that SEATO is a paper outfit and it is better to leave it that way rather than bring about its disintegration.

No one else could have put Menzies down in this way. McEwen's down-to-earth common sense about SEATO will not prevent Hasluck later putting his name to an article in the Fairfax press written for him by public information officer Richard Woolcott claiming that Australian involvement in Vietnam came under SEATO.

Holt returns to the question of others becoming involved, including Taiwan, McEwen notes the need for brown skins, Thais and Filipinos. Menzies makes the same point, in general terms. Hasluck expresses confidence about the Thais, but says they will not be making a public announcement.

The issue of other participants keeps recurring, but no one realizes that Britain, despite the fact that it has a small advisory mission in Saigon, will have none of it, and that ANZUS partner New

Zealand will be a stubborn standout to whom pressure will have to be applied.

Australia has a preference for being part of coalitions. Only during the Laos crises of 1959 and 1961 did it have to face the prospect of going with the US without the UK. Southeast Asian allies Thailand and the Philippines are expected to fall into line. However, they will prove notably laggard. The GVN's mistreatment of the Buddhists had alienated many. Even the anti-Communist Lee Kuan Yew will stand out, criticize Australia's 'insurance policy', and wonder at its likely cost. Japan advocates negotiations.

However nothing will be allowed to deflect Australia's commitment. As I point out in Asian Alternatives, Hasluck's predecessor, Garfield Barwick, could have been expected to repeat his standard position about the importance of Australia not rushing into military action in Asia without the support of Asian countries. Between December 1964 and April 1965 it became apparent that there would be no Asian countries volunteering to join the war. But this did not induce second thoughts in Canberra in the rush to war. In the event the Asian countries that did come in were all mercenaries. The largest contributor, South Korea, will be from outside Southeast Asia.

As for Taiwan, which had long had covert psychological warfare teams in South Vietnam, it was too hot to handle. From 1949 the Australian government wished to avoid anything which would encourage Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) in his aspirations to return to the mainland. This position became increasingly difficult to reconcile with the rationale for going to war in Vietnam, that the war's real target was China. The supporting Catholic Democratic Labor Party was committed to Taiwan, and to winning in Vietnam. As the rhetoric against China rose, Hasluck would take concrete steps to encourage regional cooperation, incorporating Taiwan, to contain China. Holt had a record since his student days of contacts with the KMT, and in 1966 would unilaterally reverse a consistent policy since 1949 of not opening an Embassy in Taiwan.

11.36

McEwen makes several points which come to be accepted. An American request for support is the acid test. 'Either we go in or we crawl out. I would go in, asking almost no questions of the US. It is up to the US to decide whether to make Vietnam a battleground and to hell with Vietnam' (if the Buddhists join with the Vietcong). Australia would have to have a request from the Government of South Vietnam.

Holt expresses agreement with McEwen and offers an observation about the inevitability of an escalating force build-up: 'formations require further formations. We don't run away from this'.

11.37

Menzies sums up what should go in the reply to President Johnson. We want to broaden our participation with the US. We begin by showing willing – every bit of assistance put beside the US is good in the common interest. Australia will examine what can be done to encourage others. The President's requests will be examined. We will do whatever we can.

McEwen asks about the battalion. Menzies says 'if we can provide a battalion we've got to think hard before we refuse' (though it is not a matter of 'refusing' a request the President has not made and has only vaguely foreshadowed, but of seizing on a suggestion by an official, Bundy). McEwen says 'I'd go with it. But we'd be in'.

This is a decision in principle. Essentially it is the decision of two strong characters who came into the meeting agreed on what they wanted. Holt is a supporting but lesser voice. It must be rare in the

history of making decisions on going to war for the Foreign Minister to seem irrelevant.

It is ironical that as Prime Minister Holt's political reputation would crash in 1967 as he faced increasing disquiet over the implications of his 1966 pledge to go all the way with LBJ and as the US demanded more forces from Australia.

While it is incontestable that no one could have foreseen the scale of the American build up, the stakes were such that Australia could hardly have expected to get off lightly, with but one battalio . At a conference held by the Australian Institute of International affairs on 19 February 2013, official historian Peter Edwards said an extenuating factor in the Australian decision was that it had in mind only one battalion. In contesting the accuracy of this, I cited Holt's and McEwen's statements. Bunting and new Department of External Affairs secretary James Plimsoll were unsuccessful when they asked the Defence Committee to put a cap of one battalion on the Australian contribution. The outcome in the Defence Committee suggests that from the outset the military perceived the inevitability, and the political acceptability, of a continuing force build-up.

*A single battalion would indeed have been consistent with Australian practice since World War II of making a minimal offer like a battalion, albeit highly professional. (In Korea, it had to add another battalion and was under pressure from President Harry Truman to do more). However, more would be needed to achieve the strategic aim which had been articulated, by Menzies, of avoiding a great Chinese victory in Southeast Asia, and by Hasluck, of building up countervailing power against the rising China, as had been done 20 years earlier against the Soviet Union. These statements are directed towards the US and Australian public opinion. Meeting the downward thrust of Communist China would be the government's justification in April 1965, in the face of advice from the Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy that there was no threat from China to Australia. In this meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee of Cabinet Communist China is not mentioned once.**[ix]***

It would have been inconvenient but not impossible to send the additional military instructors Johnson requested. Offering a battalion which it was envisaged would be deployed alongside n American combat troops made the desired American build-up of boots on the ground more certain.

Addressing Hasluck, Menzies says he does not favor Hasluck's idea of asking questions. McEwen says we must not appear to be playing for time by asking questions.

Australia had understood from the time of the Korean War that if the Americans decided to use nuclear weapons it would not be consulted. Australia had been rebuffed first in 1955, after SEATO had been created, when, I was told by Tange, the Americans had said they were 'never going to tie their hands again in hostilities against the goddamned Chinese'. It was in at least some ministers'minds that nuclear weapons could be used. In October 1964 China had carried out its first nuclear weapons test.

Earlier, when Australia had the luxury of being able to take the British side against the Americans, it had opposed nuclear intervention in Vietnam in 1954 at the time of Dien Bien Phu. In the Dien Bien Phu crisis, Menzies had said that 'we are being asked to participate in a forlorn hope… the Americans are not incapable of unreality… I do not believe that the US has thought this out… how can we justify a war which will fail merely to keep in with the US?'. Foreign Minister R. G. Casey had said the Americans had never had a defined objective in war. In 1962 Barwick had argued to US Secretary of State Dean Rusk the need to raise the threshold before nuclear weapons would be used in Asia, and had unsuccessfully sought further consultations.

But in 1964 Menzies forbids exploring America's unsettlingly obscure aims in Vietnam. Menzies

words 'everything we put alongside the US is good in the common interest' convey a mood of dependency. There is impatience with Hasluck's lone caution. Here is a chance of drawing in American military power that had to be grasped.

11.39

The second last comment is made by McEwen, perhaps wishing to soften his earlier 'make it a desert and call it peace' sentiment. He says the real problem will be if we end up by fighting against the will of the people of South Vietnam. McEwen is possibly giving Hasluck a flick in adding that the Washington embassy should make soundings.

*Tange in retirement recalled (as one of many slights he suffered at the hands of his Minister Paul Hasluck) that there was no opportunity to provide 'the customary External Affairs estimate of the likelihood of effective government with popular support'. Hasluck, he went on, writing in his Defence memoir, 'would not have felt the need to have the Department advise him on such a matter'**[x]**.*

There is a volume of intelligence on Australian files about all the issues, poor morale and war-weariness, and whether more foreign intervention will be matched by less South Vietnamese war-fighting, but it has been swept under the rug.

Australia knows less about Vietnam than about Indonesia. It knows less again about Iraq in 2002, despite a big increase in the intelligence community, but again the politicians had made up their minds.

11.40

Menzies concludes by telling Paltridge and Hasluck to draft from himself to Johnson a forthcoming reply, with no foot dragging.

Hasluck will do the work. He, will be the only minister to remain in Canberra for another week, flying to Perth on Christmas Eve.

Segue to today

The processes by which Australian governments have taken the decision to go to war, from Korea in 1950 to Vietnam to Iraq in 2003, do not stand up to scrutiny. There are lessons to be learnt from history. Iraq is the current issue, in which Howard is an active participant. His autobiography raises many questions:

- Just when did Howard make up his mind (p.345) and why was he never challenged by any Minister or in the National Security Committee of Cabinet?
- As 'the combination of the even looser relations we have established with the Blair administration and the quality of Michael Thawley's representation in Washington meant that we had a direct pipeline to Administration thinking through the first half of 2002' (p.427), what we were saying to George Bush, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, how consistent was it, and where did we stand on the Blair administration's unsuccessful representations to the Bush administration, on Israel, on progress on Israel-Palestine relations, and (at least up until the end of August) on recourse to the United Nations?
- What were we saying about another big issue which was debated over several months and on which Howard says we sided with the Americans against the British, legality (p.432)?
- As a corollary, can Howard's statement that 'from the very beginning we knew… how we might

contribute in the most efficient manner possible and in a way that safeguarded, as best they could, the position of any Australian troops which (sic) might ultimately be committed' (p.430) be reconciled with the fact that the Special Air Service Regiment went into action at a time when they were not protected legally?[xi]

These are but a few questions, culled from Howard's autobiography. Many others have been raised. Therefore concerned citizens are calling for an inquiry, as is being mounted in the UK, into how Australia decided to join the Iraq war[xii], in the hope that what is learnt from it will lead to improved procedures for decision-making, under which the government will have to level with the Parliament and the people.

III. References

[i] Garry Woodard, *Asian Alternatives: Australia's Vietnam decision and lessons on going to war*, Melbourne University Press, 2004. See Chapter 10, "The die is cast: December 1964". See also Garry Woodard, "We Now Know About Going to War in Iraq", Nautilus Institute, *Austral Special Report, 22* November 2007, at https://nautilus.org/apsnet/we-now-know-about-going-to-war-in-iraq/#axzz2OcVsed2F.

[ii] AC74-219. The statement was first cited by American Australian Professor Joe Siracusa, RMIT.

[iii] John Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, Harper Collins, 2010, p. 425.

[iv] Cabinet Secretary's notebook: record of the meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, Thursday, 17 December 1964, National Archives of Australia, A11099 225.

[v] Woodard, *Asian Alternatives*, *op.cit.*, p. 196-6.

[vi] Michael Sexton, *War for the Asking*, New Holland, 2002.

[vii] Peter Edwards with Gregory Pemberton, *Crises and Commitments,* Allen & Unwin, 1992.

[viii] Woodard, *Asian Alternatives*, *op.cit.*, p. 192.

[ix] Cabinet Secretary's notebook: record of the meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, Thursday, 17 December 1964, National archives of Australia, A11099 225.

[x] Arthur Tange, *Defence Policy-making*, Australian National University Press, 2008, p.44.

[xi] Tony Kevin, "Australia's secret pre-emptive war against Iraq, 18–20 March 2003", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Volume 58, Issue 3, 2004.

[xii] Jeff Waters, "Campaign for Iraq war inquiry gathers momentum", *ABC News*, 28 November 2012, at http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-11-28/former-war-commander-says-iraq-inquiry-worth-considering/4397404; and *Why Did We Go to War with Iraq?,* Campaign for an Iraq War Inquiry, Melbourne, 2012, at http://iraqwarinquiry.org.au.

Iv. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSES

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