

SUBMISSION TO THE WAR POWERS PARLIAMENTARY ENQUIRY

Introduction

This submission has been prepared by John Phillips and Noel Turnbull who are both veterans. John Phillips was a career Royal Australian Infantry Officer who served in Vietnam in 1971 with 3rd Battalion RAR. Noel Turnbull was a conscript who served in Vietnam as a Royal Australian Artillery Officer in 1968-1969 with 104 Field Battery.

The situation

What do Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan have in common? All three were entered into with justifications which were expedient politically rather than militarily necessary. They epitomised the traditional adage that “truth is the first casualty of war.”

In all of them the commitment, loss of life, ongoing costs and economic and social impacts far outweighed any perceived benefits.

In all of them the stated justification was in fact dishonest or at least questionable.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident justification for the full blown US invasion of Vietnam was based on a fabrication. Similarly, the justification for invading Iraq was also dishonest in that the UN had already established that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction were non-existent. Subsequent investigations at the end of the war confirmed this finding.

In the case of the Afghanistan invasion this was allegedly to eliminate terrorist enclaves. In fact, it created more of them than eliminating them. We were there for 20 years while Afghans suffered and died. Moreover, in Australia’s case the frequent deployment of elite special forces inserted them into a combat mincer with disastrous impacts on morale and behaviour.

It has been argued about all of these decisions to go to war were necessary to secure our relationship with the US. In reality, our relationship is already based on the manifold benefits Australia provides to the US. For instance, spy bases linked to ICBMs such as Pine Gap (one of the most vital US military installations) are already rock hard benefits the US gets from the relationship.

The US has been at war in 225 years of its 243 years history since 1776. It has become addicted to armed conflict and we have become addicted to supporting this destructive behaviour.

Despite Australian attitudes to our military involvement with the US the reality is that in many cases our forces have been not defending our national interests or international peace but rather providing the US with the appearance of solidarity and international support for its many wars.

Moreover, it has provided a rationale for major purchases of US military equipment and missile systems such as AUKUS nuclear submarines and the F35. In military capability terms rather than cementing relationships with the US we have subsidised the US military industrial

complex with the result that we have a myriad of procurement projects which are both excessively over budget with delivery times stretching out to 97 years and of dubious benefit.

Significantly, this subservient relationship with the US has superseded our previously subservient relations with the UK. For instance, the Menzies Government's preparedness to send troops to the Suez Canal in support of the British was only avoided by the intervention of the Eisenhower Government in the crisis.

We have an endemic problem of ingratiating ourselves and obsessions with others' strategic priorities rather than mature and considered ones of our own.

What has this meant for Australia?

The cases of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan were characterised by poor decisions and dire unintended consequences. They involved:

- Hyperbole and exaggerated claims about alleged national threats;
- Following the US in a reflexive ill-considered politically expedient response;
- Ultimate failure – in Vietnam a triumph for Ho Chi Minh, General Giap and their troops; and, in Iraq and Afghanistan enormous suffering and chaos still being inflicted on the people of those countries;
- The unique experiences of veterans in these situations have made them sceptical of government and traditional returned service organisations which can no longer be considered as representing veterans as a whole and have declining membership as a result;
- Ongoing suffering for veterans many of whom still affected adversely 50 years on;

All commitments were the result of a Prime Minister alone making a decision – a captain's call in effect - without proper reflection, debate or analysis of consequences.

These political and military failures have resulted in many veterans suffering moral injury which is defined as:

An injury to an individual's moral conscience and values resulting from an act of perceived moral transgression on the part of themselves or others, which produces profound feelings of guilt or shame—and in some cases a profound sense of betrayal and anger toward colleagues, commanders, the organization, politics, or society at large—moral disorientation, and societal alienation.

The direct and indirect impacts of moral injury on veterans are ultimately a significant cause of veterans' mental health.

The wider impact of this moral injury were the divisions created in the Australian community; loss of faith in the integrity of Government; increased cynicism about governments and their military decisions; and the enormous cost of treating and supporting veterans and their families.

Why a democratic approach is required now

There are two fundamental reasons why a new approach to Australia going to war is necessary.

First, open debate in Parliament provides a basis for accountability and transparency. The rationale and evidence for military commitments need to be debated and analysed.

While the Committee terms of reference have regard to “the security implications of pre-notification of ADF deployment that may compromise the safety of ADF personnel, operational security, intelligence and/or may have unintended consequences”.

The reality is that where there is a direct and immediate threat to Australia’s sovereignty the security implications and possible mobilisation actions are self-evident.

However, none of the wars in which we have been involved since Korea have threatened our sovereignty. Indeed, rather than knowledge of deployments needing to be hidden by secrecy politicians have sought as much publicity as possible about them.

Therefore, the exceptional and self-evident cases are not relevant to the current Committee’s deliberations

Second, a strong independent nation such as Australia should be making its own democratically determined decisions on war. In each case of Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan the decisions were made entirely because of our relationship with the US – a country which the late Liberal Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, described as “a dangerous ally.”

Recommendations

We submit that:

Some other similar democracies have at least a notional commitment policy to reference their Parliaments. In Australia’s case we ought to develop a best practice policy approach from these other examples and systems. We hope at the least this Committee process will provide a foundation for governments to develop a policy on going to war appropriate for an independent democratic nation.

Power should remain with the Prime Minister and the Executive only in national emergencies where there is a direct threat to Australia.

Given the concrete examples of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan we submit that the Committee should recommend to Government that it become the firm policy that Parliament conduct a full debate and vote on whether Australia should go to war. Consideration could also be given to defining situations in which the Parliament is advised but given the opportunity for a full debate

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