

'Good Allies': How Australia and New Zealand entered the Vietnam War

Dr Caroline Page received a British Academy Small Research Grant to study the interplay between official propaganda and public opinion on the Vietnam War in Australia and New Zealand, 1965–1973. Here she reveals how the need to be perceived as good allies of the US drew the two countries into greater involvement in the war.

AUSTRALIA'S MILITARY participation in the Vietnam War lasted from 1965 until the withdrawal of the last troops in December 1971, and at its peak combat forces numbered 8,300 men. Right from the start of the war there was opposition to Australia's military commitment, increasing in both numbers and violence as the war ground on – continuing through the troop withdrawals from 1970 to 1971, and even after the Peace Treaty was signed in 1973. It was not until after 1974 that anti-war opposition finally subsided; and it was not until a decade later that Australia began to take stock of what involvement in the war and its outcome meant for Australian politics, policy, and society. There was strong and vocal opposition to the war in New Zealand too – despite the much smaller professional military contingent that it contributed. But whereas Australia's relationship with the US survived the Vietnam debacle, New Zealand's did not, and the end of the Vietnam War heralded a new direction in foreign policy, which was no longer aimed at retaining US goodwill, and thus protection, at any cost.

Yet in 1965, the war was considered to be so important to Australia and New Zealand that they decided to dispatch combat troops – even though the UK refused to involve itself militarily – thereby breaking with their traditional foreign policy alignment with the UK. However, the substantive reasons for Australasian military participation (as distinct from their previous non-military assistance to South Vietnam) were little known for many years, obscured by official rhetoric that was regarded as essential for the maintenance of some semblance of popular support, national pride, and retention (if possible) of the international moral high-ground that initially accompanied a major conflict in support of a Western ally against a Communist enemy.

Private justification

Privately, for both the Australian and New Zealand governments, combat involvement in the Vietnam War alongside the US was viewed as a necessity in terms of national security. Both governments believed that the US presence and power were needed to



Figure 1. Front page headline from Australia's 'The Sun' newspaper, 29 April 1965.

replace the clearly diminishing British role, and thereby guarantee their safety as Great Britain had formerly done prior to World War II. Thus, soon after the end of World War II, they signed the SEATO and ANZUS security pacts, with the latter being a pact solely between Australia, New Zealand and the US. At this time both countries perceived Communist China as a particular regional threat, along with other Communist-inspired insurgencies in Malaya and Indonesia. But, despite this shared perception about national security requirements and regional threats, the Australian and New Zealand governments approached military participation in the Vietnam War with radically different attitudes and expectations.

Australian ministers perceived the war as an event requiring a US military force which, by its very presence in the region, would bolster Australian national security. Moreover, it was also an event which offered a valuable opportunity to demonstrate Australia's virtues as a faithful ally, and thereby incur US gratitude in the form of a continuing US security umbrella for Australia and the region.¹ There was thus, to begin with, a degree of official Australian 'enthusiasm' for the war which could, on occasions, make life more difficult for its Antipodean neighbour (and sometimes for the Americans).

New Zealand ministers, by contrast, regarded the war as something of a necessary evil: necessary because New Zealand too needed the US security guarantee, and would therefore be required to pay its dues; but an evil because, as Roberto Rabel relates in his analysis of New Zealand's involvement, the decision to increase and change the commitment was accompanied by considerable misgivings about the war. As the Secretary for External Affairs expressed it: 'We can't afford to be left too far behind Australia and we can't afford not to support the Americans – though I have the gravest doubts about their coming out of this with any degree of success.'²

Public propaganda

What is striking about both governments' perceptions of the important aspects of the conflict is the fact that the fate of South Vietnam was absent from their private calculations. Neither government went to war in order to keep South Vietnam 'free' and 'democratic' (nor to assist it in any possible aspirations to become free and democratic), or even to repel international Communist encroachment. And yet it was these latter claims that formed the major themes in

Figure 2. Australian troops shown crossing the Dong Nai River, as they pushed deep into Viet Cong territory in the first full Australian operation combined with New Zealand artillery units in the Northern sector zone, 10 August 1965. Photo: © 2004 Topham Picturepoint/TopFoto.co.uk.



the Australian and New Zealand official propaganda campaigns: admitting publicly that combat troops would be dispatched to Vietnam mainly in order to retain US goodwill, against a future day when it might be needed, would be rather less likely to generate popular support for the war than these nobler justifications. So, from the very beginning of escalation of the war in 1965, there was already a wide gulf between these governments' private and public reasons for the need to increase military involvement. And over time it was this gulf, with its underlying contradictions, that caused problems not only in regard to domestic support for the war, but also with their principal fighting ally, the Americans, because of the impact that it had on war and propaganda policies.

Limited deployment

The underlying rationale had important implications for these governments' decisions concerning the numbers of troops to be dispatched. For though the Australian government displayed an enthusiasm for the war that was lacking among New Zealand's ministers and sent more troops, nevertheless it shared the New Zealand government's desire to send as small a force as was consonant with being perceived as a 'good ally' – which was the primary purpose of the venture. This set both governments on a policy path that it was difficult to tread successfully, in terms of both domestic support and allied satisfaction. When Australian Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies first announced the decision to send around 800 combat troops to Vietnam, on the following day, 30 April 1965, *The Australian* newspaper commented in front-page editorial extractions: '... Australia's contingent can

have only insignificant military value ... it will be purely a political pawn in a situation in which Australia has no responsibility.' And the editorial labelled the government's decision 'reckless', reckoning that the country might live to regret it, opining that the decision was taken '... so that America may shelve a tiny bit of her embarrassment'. Despite these editorial judgements, US President Lyndon Johnson expressed his delight with the Australian government's actions, and *The Australian's* front-page also carried the text of the President's appreciative letter to Sir Robert Menzies. Thus the initial troop commitment appeared to have fulfilled its purpose of satisfying US requirements whilst remaining limited in numbers.

In the case of New Zealand, after receiving a private request for a military contribution at the end of 1964 from the US President, Prime Minister Keith Holyoake and his advisers deliberately chose to send an artillery battery, which, whilst undoubtedly constituting a contribution of known excellence – 'the best artillery available in the world' according to the Prime Minister – was also designed to minimise New Zealand casualties, and thereby both reassure the public and render the increased involvement more acceptable (*Evening Post*, 29 May 1965).

US reactions

However, by the beginning of December 1965, only eight months later, and after an August increment of 350 support troops, the size of the Australian force – which was considerably larger than New Zealand's – was already a source of dissatisfaction in the US, according to a 1 December report in *The Australian*:

The United States has asked Australia to send more combat troops to Vietnam, and the Federal Government has agreed in principle to do so.

Australia already has 1500 troops fighting in Vietnam. The number of extra men and the timing of their departure has not yet been decided

The chairman of the U.S. Senate armed service committee, Senator Richard Russell, was reported yesterday to have called on the U.S. State Department to put more pressure on America's allies to send more troops to Vietnam.

'Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines will all be affected drastically if the Viet Cong win, and they should be contributing a great deal more support,' he said. 'They should be allies in fact, not just in name.'

And Russell was not alone among US Senators in calling for increased allied contributions to Vietnam. In the same week that Russell commented, the Chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator William Fulbright, also took US allies to task for failing to contribute enough to their own defence; unhappily for the Australian Government, Fulbright was actually in Canberra when he made his remarks:

... Senator Fulbright, said Australia should contribute more to the defence of the West.

He is understood to have told ministers privately that Australia's defence spending should be higher and that we should have as many as 8,000 men in Vietnam. (*The Australian*, 1 December 1965)

Predictably, Fulbright's remarks in particular, pinpointing as they did the disparities in force size and delivered in Parliament's backyard, twanged nerves, and not only in Canberra: the Administration scrambled to assuage Australian sensitivities using another presidential effusion:

Washington, Thursday. – President Johnson has thanked Australia for its 'gallant efforts' in the Vietnam war ...

Authoritative sources said the message was sent on Tuesday to clear up any misunderstandings about the U.S. Government's position following a statement in Australia by Senator William Fulbright ...

A State Department spokesman, Mr R. McCloskey, said President Johnson was

deeply appreciative of Australia's contribution of about 1,700 men.

He denied a report that that the United States had asked for more Australian troops for Vietnam.

Washington officials, while taking the view that Senator Fulbright had been caught unprepared, acknowledge that his remarks had led to resentment in Australia. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 December 1965)

Junior partners

This minor contretemps encapsulated not only the difficulties associated with the Australasian governments' policies of keeping their troop commitments limited, it also highlighted this continual US requirement for more allied troops – a requirement that



Figure 3. Australian soldiers marching through Sydney before leaving for Vietnam, 25 April 1966. Photo: Central Press/Getty Images.

neither the Antipodean governments nor the Administration wished to surface publicly, much less acknowledge as fact – and it also emphasised the status of Australia and New Zealand as junior partners in the war.

And this latter problem, taken with the way in which the US ran the war – to suit US requirements – could prove very tricky for them to negotiate publicly, making it much harder for either government to 'sell' the war to their populations, as the following 17 July 1967 report from the *Australian Financial Review* makes clear:

Last week's Washington discussions on Vietnam were curiously disturbing – even to those who believe that the U.S. and its allies had little choice but to become involved in that unhappy struggle.

They were disturbing, not merely because of the atmosphere of doom, doubt and dissension which surrounded them (for a notably lucid man, Mr McNamara managed to present a totally confusing picture of American thinking), but also because of the sidelights they threw on the U.S. attitude toward less powerful allies.

Without exception, all the reports of last week's events in Washington implied that American officials expected allied nations to go along automatically with the Administration's plans and proposals.

All pretence that Australia and other nations with troops in Vietnam gave their support in response to a request from the Saigon Government was abandoned.

In addition to the military and political implications of the reported US attitude, this was also a major propaganda problem for Australia and New Zealand which continued

throughout the war and the later peace negotiations – indeed it bedevilled most activities relating to the US and Vietnam. For example, Prime Minister Holyoake was forced to issue the following statement on the February 1966 Hawaii meeting between the US and South Vietnam:

No significance could be read fairly into New Zealand's non-attendance at the talks taking place in Hawaii between the United States and South Vietnamese leaders, said the Prime Minister (Mr. Holyoake) today.

He was commenting on a Committee On Vietnam statement (see leader page) that New Zealand's omission meant that the United States merely regarded our troops as cannon fodder. (*Evening Post*, 7 February 1966)

This was precisely the impression that the New Zealand Government did not wish to be disseminated – that of a subordinate ally which was not consulted on developments and whose troops were of little regard. In his rebuttal of the Committee on Vietnam's statement, Holyoake pointed out that neither Korea with 15,000 troops in Vietnam, nor Australia with 1,400 had been invited to Hawaii – but lengthening the list of absentees was hardly an endorsement of the way in which the US treated its allies.

Considering that these problems emerged in the early stages of the war, when neither country had significant numbers of troops in Vietnam, it is obvious that as the war ground on and intensified, and as casualties mounted, these propaganda problems, and others associated with the war, could only worsen. And they would become ever more acute as organised opposition to the war increased in both countries – violently so in

Australia – questioning the official versions of the necessity for the Vietnam War, and demanding an end to the conflict.

Notes

1 See Michael Sexton, *War For the Asking: How Australia Invited itself to Vietnam* (New Holland Publishers (Australia) Pty Ltd., 2002; originally published by Penguin Books, Australia Ltd., 1988) for analysis of the underlying rationale for Australian combat involvement.

2 Roberto Rabel, *New Zealand and the Vietnam War: Politics and Diplomacy* (Auckland University Press, 2005), p. 98.

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