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Dien Bien Phu, and the Defence of Australia

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June 2007

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**Published by the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre
at The Australian National University, Canberra**

Working
Paper
No. 404

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Stephens, Alan, 1944–
Dien Bien Phu, and the Defence of Australia

ISBN 9780 7315 5480 5 (pbk.)

1. Dien Bien Phu, Battle of, Vietnam, 1954
 2. Australia – Strategic aspects. 3. Australia – Military policy.
 4. Australia – Defenses. 5. Western countries – strategic aspects.
- I. Australian National University. Strategic and Defence Studies Centre.
II. Title. (Series: Working Paper (The Australian National University.
Strategic and Defence Studies Centre); no. 404).

355.033594

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Abstract

In May 1954 Vietnamese nationalists won one of the great military victories of the modern era when they defeated a French expeditionary force at the remote outpost of Dien Bien Phu. Vietnam's stunning triumph ended French colonialism in Indochina and set the scene for the United States' disastrous intervention eight years later.

Although the fall of Dien Bien Phu occurred more than half a century ago, the battle continues to present a compelling metaphor for contemporary Australian military strategy. Numerous factors contributed to the Viet Minh's triumph, but the most crucial was the local army's ability to conduct war amongst the people—something that was entirely beyond both the comprehension and the competence of the French invaders.

Since federation, Australian defence strategy has oscillated between two main forms, expeditionary campaigns and the defence of Australia. Expeditionary campaigns have been the dominant model even though, with the notable exception of the Second World War, their unintended consequences have diminished rather than enhanced national security.

One influential school of strategic debate has currently created something of a self-serving dynamic between expeditionary campaigns and the associated notions of war amongst the people and the so-called three-block war. As Western strategists struggle to develop a theory for defeating today's elusive asymmetric enemies, that school has propagated the circular argument that war amongst the people and the three-block war are the keys to success, only boots on the ground can execute those concepts (boots on the ground implies the occupation of territory, which implies expeditionary campaigns, which are based on war amongst the people, and so on).

Yet as Dien Bien Phu revealed, one man's expedition is another man's invasion. Thus, we should not be surprised that Western armies have proven entirely incapable of fighting amongst the people in Indochina, Iraq, the Middle East and Central Asia. For example, Australia's scorecard from the recent decades of the expeditionary strategy reads as follows: one disaster, one fiasco, one disaster-in-waiting, and a few blunders. It is impossible to believe that this outcome has served the national interest.

Those campaigns have starkly exposed the innate limits of land power. Almost by definition, an army of occupation is incapable of conducting war amongst the people; while the unavoidable limits on personnel imposed by recruiting standards and resignation rates make the notion of the three-block war not merely unrealistic but unachievable. The fact is that expeditionary campaigns are predicated on capabilities that armies do not have and cannot acquire.

Australia is in the fortunate position of being able to adopt a primarily defensive military strategy which both avoids the flawed logic of expeditionary campaigns and offers a credible method for *controlling* the immediate environment and defending the fundamentals of our national wellbeing. Affordable, rational, militarily credible, non-threatening and achievable, the defence of Australia remains the nation's best strategic option.

Dien Bien Phu, and the Defence of Australia

Alan Stephens

Introduction

In May 1954 Vietnamese nationalists won one of the great military victories of the modern era when they defeated a French expeditionary force at the remote outpost of Dien Bien Phu. Located some 500 kilometres northwest of Hanoi and only 30 kilometres from the Laotian border, the powerful French garrison at Dien Bien Phu was regarded by Western military experts as almost impregnable. Vietnam's stunning triumph ended French colonialism in Indochina and set the scene for the United States' disastrous intervention eight years later.

Although the fall of Dien Bien Phu occurred more than half a century ago, the battle continues to present a compelling metaphor for contemporary Australian military strategy. That metaphor has three dimensions.

First, the battle of Dien Bien Phu was fought between one polity, Vietnam, which was defending its homeland, and another, France, which frequently used so-called expeditionary forces to apply military power in pursuit of political objectives. To the Vietnamese, 'expeditionary' was, of course, a euphemism for 'invasion'. The relevance of this model to Australian military strategy should be clear. From the time of federation in 1901 to the present, the central question for the defence of Australia has always been: should national forces be sent abroad to fight as part of a coalition, almost invariably under the leadership of a 'great and powerful friend' as a means of earning security credits with that friend; or should they instead concentrate on the largely self-reliant task of the direct defence of the Australian continent?

Second, Dien Bien Phu provides an intriguing window into a form of conflict which in the past decade has been popularly characterised as 'war amongst the people'. Best examined in General Rupert Smith's book *The Utility of Force*, war amongst the people is described as 'a new paradigm' in which political and military developments are ineluctably intertwined, to the extent that people in their homes, in their towns, in their countryside—indeed, anywhere—'are [now] the battlefield'.¹ The concept has been brought into sharp focus by the high incidence of urban warfare over the past 20 years in the Middle East, the Balkans and Central Asia, where a diverse range of militarily primitive militias, nationalists, religious zealots, professional terrorists and the like have exploited the complex environment of cities to become a vexing, sometimes seemingly intractable, problem for their technologically superior Western opponents.

War amongst the people is not, however, an entirely new phenomenon. Urban and rural masses have always been part of the fabric of war, from the time of the sieges recorded by Thucydides 2500 years ago to the suicide bombers of today's mega-cities.² And it was as true for Thucydides as it is today that the context of warfare shaped by 'the people' has often been decisive, especially when one protagonist has been perceived as indigenous and the other as foreign. What *is* relatively new is the people's ability to decide the outcome of military conflict, not through the force of arms but in the court of world opinion. Winning hearts and minds is no longer a hollow slogan from the American war in Vietnam but an essential component of any campaign plan.

Finally, and as a corollary of the preceding point, Dien Bien Phu brutally exposed the innate physical, social, strategic and intellectual limits of land forces—that is, of armies—when they are used for expeditionary or, more correctly, invasion operations.

This paper contends that at a time when the West's strategic preferences are being severely challenged, if not confounded, by militarily inferior groups, a number of fashionable concepts which claim to reveal a way forward and which invariably imply the need for expeditionary campaigns have not been adequately tested. These concepts are: war amongst the people; complex and adaptive (that is, close-up) warfare; and the so-called three-block war. Even though those and similar theories have not been satisfactorily critiqued, they already shape force structures. More significantly, the imperative they create for expeditionary/invasion operations can fundamentally influence national defence policies. It is for this reason that the epic campaign at Dien Bien Phu remains relevant to contemporary Australian defence strategy.

Dien Bien Phu

The claim is regularly made that only boots on the ground can defeat insurgents and guerrillas.³ So frequently has this mantra been chanted that for many defence commentators it has become a self-evident truth, to the extent that the full scope of its implications has not been adequately questioned. The fact is, though, that there is no self-evident truth here.

For example, the more than half-a-million sets of boots eventually on the ground in Indochina could not win the war there for the United States between 1962 and 1975; and the Israeli Army's massive and permanent presence for 40 years in the occupied territories and the Lebanon has made no difference whatsoever to Israel's long-term security prospects. Indeed, it is because boots on the ground are unlikely ever to provide an answer to the 'war amongst the people', which defines the context of conflict in the Middle East, that successive Israeli governments have clandestinely and illegally assembled an arsenal of some 200 nuclear weapons as their (perceived) ultimate security safeguard for the future. Nor has the constantly increasing number of boots on the ground made the slightest difference to the current invasion of Iraq by the United States. In mid-2007, at the height of yet another build-up of ground forces, insurgents continued to detonate bombs in major population centres on an almost daily basis, including one for the first time in the Iraqi parliamentary building inside Baghdad's heavily fortified 'green zone' administrative centre.⁴

None of the foregoing is to suggest that there is no place for invasion and occupation strategies in defence planning. On the contrary, it would be facile to argue otherwise. Thus, for instance, the objective circumstances which obtained during the Second World War

clearly demanded the seizure by force and the occupation of enemy-held territory, as they also did following Argentina's annexation of the Falkland Islands in 1982. Similarly, there can be a strong case for humanitarian operations such as the UN-endorsed intervention in East Timor in 1999, which was sanctioned by both the aggressor nation, Indonesia, and the people of the host polity, the East Timorese.

It is to suggest, however, that there are powerful pressures that can make boots on the ground a mere number rather than a universal panacea. As Dien Bien Phu demonstrated, those pressures expose the innate limits of land power.

Unlike air forces and navies, armies are ineluctably tied to geography. Almost every action an army commander takes is to some extent dictated by the imperatives of the lie of the land. Thus, while air and sea forces are generally able to train and prepare for operations within a single geographic context, armies tend to focus on the specific nature of their current theatre, which might be desert, jungle, mountain, metropolitan, littoral, and so on. Furthermore, an army's ability to manoeuvre is defined by features such as rivers, ravines, roads and railways. The end result is that those kinds of objective circumstances are likely to shape or even decide tactics and strategies. That was the case for the French Army in Vietnam.

France's hold on its Indochinese colonies had been weakened during the Second World War, when Japan's occupation of much of Southeast Asia shattered the myth of Western superiority and facilitated the rise of nationalist movements. Either too arrogant or too ignorant to appreciate that the game was up, French politicians tried to reassert their rule after the war. But in Vietnam the chaos of wartime had enabled nationalists led by Ho Chi Minh to strengthen their position. In September 1945, he declared the establishment of the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Although subsequently driven out of most major urban centres by French expeditionary forces, Ho Chi Minh's army, commonly known as the Viet Minh, began to fight an increasingly effective 'war amongst the people' through a rural-based guerrilla campaign.

It was at this stage that one of the fundamental and enduring limits of land power was exposed.

The French commander in Vietnam, General Henri Navarre, wanted to fight a war of movement, as opposed to a war of (largely fixed) position. Navarre appreciated that, if he were to counter the Viet Minh, his soldiers, like those of the enemy, needed to manoeuvre rapidly around the countryside and amongst the people, taking the initiative and meeting threats when and where they arose. Navarre's problem was that his army was inadequate for the task: in his own words his military options were constrained by 'the lack of adaptation of our forces'.⁵ Simply put, the French Army was unsuited to the terrain, the climate and, most importantly, the social context of Vietnam. However, because his army was already on the ground in Indochina, Navarre had to do something with it. Consequently, he was compelled to fall back on a strategy of position, which he did by establishing a system of fortified camps known as 'hedgehogs' throughout Vietnam. This was, Navarre acknowledged, a 'mediocre solution', but it was his only choice.

The system of hedgehogs was the antithesis of flexibility and movement. Indeed, even to call it a 'system' is flattering because in practice it quickly degenerated into a series of disconnected outposts, each difficult to resupply and reinforce and each vulnerable to a concentrated attack by the enemy at the time of his choosing. The establishment of the major

garrison at Dien Bien Phu during the second half of 1953 represented a super-sized version of the thinking behind the hedgehogs.

By mid-1953 Navarre had become disturbed by his inability to contain the Viet Minh, let alone defeat them. The French expeditionary force might have been occupying the major population centres, but the Viet Minh held sway over much of the countryside. Frustrated by his enemy's elusiveness, Navarre became increasingly eager to engage the Viet Minh in a large set-piece battle which he believed his forces could dominate with their superior artillery and air power. Simultaneously, Navarre was concerned that the Viet Minh might make a move against the Laotian ancient royal capital of Luang Prabang, which was regarded as a strategic centre of gravity for Indochina. Overland access to Luang Prabang from Vietnam was dominated by the Muong Thanh valley some 60 kilometres away, so Navarre decided to establish a powerful garrison at the village of Dien Bien Phu in the centre of the valley. Subsequently, the idea of using the garrison to lure the Viet Minh into the sought-after set-piece battle began to gain favour.

Navarre had been drawn into a static posture at Dien Bien Phu more by circumstance than by choice. It should not be surprising, therefore, that his commander on the spot, Colonel Christian de Castries, became hostage to the combination of geography and his army's inherent limitations. Nor should it be surprising that, reacting in a manner not uncommon in armies, de Castries tried to make the geography fit his preferred campaign plan. This was, needless to say, tactically dangerous in the extreme.

All-out fighting in the set-piece battle the French had been seeking began on 13 March 1954 and ended in humiliation two months later when de Castries surrendered unconditionally. Conducted more in the nature of a siege than anything else, the battle nevertheless involved many of the features of modern warfare: massed assaults and counter-attacks, heavy firepower, desperate infantry clashes, complex trench systems, airborne offensives, aerial resupply, close air attack, paratroop drops, armed reconnaissance patrols, attempted breakouts and reinforcements, and, on the final day, the detonation by the Viet Minh of a massive mine at the very edge of de Castries' command post.

De Castries' original plan for victory at Dien Bien Phu had incorporated all of those missions and more. Three of his planning assumptions were, however, of superseding importance. These were: that he would have artillery dominance; that his army would be able to hold the airstrip inside the garrison; and that he would enjoy an abundance of resupply which the Viet Minh could not hope to match. In the event, all three assumptions fell victim to the French expeditionary force's inability to conduct war amongst the people—a result that should sound a warning to today's strategists.

The Muong Thanh valley is about 18 kilometres long and eight kilometres wide and is surrounded by steep, heavily wooded hills.⁶ Paths are few and narrow; ravines and rivers are many and awkward. All approaches to the valley are extremely difficult for men on foot, let alone for the movement of heavy machinery and supplies. De Castries and his staff believed that the Viet Minh were unlikely to have much artillery and that, even if they did manage to manhandle some batteries onto the heights overlooking Dien Bien Phu, the guns would be small and lack the range to bombard the garrison. Consequently, the French believed they would derive a battle-winning edge from their own artillery. No less important to de Castries was the airstrip at Dien Bien Phu, which would be used for resupply—artillery shells, small arms ammunition, weapons, food, perhaps even reinforcements—and for launching close air attack sorties by fighter and light bomber aircraft.

Central to both assessments was the assumption that the airstrip would remain open. It was at this phase of their planning that Navarre and de Castries twisted the objective circumstances to suit their army's innate limitations.

The commanding heights of the Muong Thanh valley were some 10 to 12 kilometres from the airstrip—a distance the French believed was 'superior to the useful range of any enemy artillery'.⁷ As a means of both strengthening this perceived advantage and offsetting his army's relative immobility, de Castries established artillery support bases on two hill outcrops known to the Vietnamese as Doc Lap and Him Lam, respectively three and two kilometres north and northeast of the airstrip and both about 500 metres high. The geography of the Muong Thanh valley also led de Castries to establish a third, more powerful, artillery support base seven kilometres south of the main garrison and airstrip at Hong Cum.⁸

These fire support bases were fundamental to de Castries' plan. It seemed that as long as they were held he would have a battle-winning advantage in what was expected to be the decisive use of artillery fire; furthermore, French aircraft would be able to use the airstrip at Dien Bien Phu for resupply and to deliver additional firepower. As events transpired, de Castries' plan had failed on one count even before any heavy fighting began and it failed on a second as soon as it did.

Against the odds, the Viet Minh had manhandled two regiments of medium-range artillery pieces together with heavy mortars onto the hilltops surrounding Dien Bien Phu.⁹ Their commander, former history professor General Vo Nguyen Giap, had mobilised some 30,000 peasants, and it was these porters who overcame the hostile terrain to give their army the weapons and the logistics chain that to all intents and purposes decided the battle of Dien Bien Phu.¹⁰ Artillery pieces were broken down into component parts to facilitate their movement by individuals, who in turn converted bicycles into 'pack cycles' that could move as much as 200 kilograms.

More than any other single event, this remarkable achievement revealed that Giap was fighting a war amongst the people that the French could never hope to emulate. The instant the Viet Minh guns started their bombardment on 13 March 1954, de Castries knew his situation was dire. It quickly became worse.

Geographically separated from the main force, difficult to support and even more difficult to reinforce, the forward artillery bases at Doc Lap and Him Lam immediately came under intense fire and then assault. De Castries' defensive problems were compounded by his inability to use the guns at the third forward base, Hong Cum, which were out of range. When both of the northern artillery bases fell inside the first 48 hours, the strategic calculus had shifted dramatically in the Viet Minh's favour. Giap was able to move some of his own artillery onto Doc Lap and Him Lam and bombard the main French garrison from close range. Even more important, he was able to make operations from the airstrip almost untenable. De Castrie's entire plan had been undermined and the very survival of his 13,000 soldiers was at risk.

For the next seven weeks the French fought courageously and inflicted far more casualties on the Viet Minh than they themselves sustained. But numbers, weight of fire and, most critically, the support of the people in the form of the logistics train, all favoured the locals. Attempted breakouts failed, as did all efforts to reinforce the besieged garrison. At one stage consideration was given in Washington to mounting a massive air strike against the Viet Minh positions—even perhaps with nuclear weapons—but President Dwight Eisenhower

decided that the potential costs were likely to exceed any strategic gains. Dien Bien Phu fell on 7–8 May 1954 following a recklessly brave frontal assault on de Castries' command post by the Viet Minh. Some 10,000 of the 13,000 French soldiers (including many Vietnamese mercenaries) died either during the battle or in subsequent captivity. Like Navarre's strategy, they were victims of the innate limits of land power. Dien Bien Phu represented a massive failure of mindset, organisation and culture by the French Army.

The strategists who had advised Eisenhower not to intervene on France's behalf included the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, Admiral Arthur Radford, and the air force chief, General Nathan Twining (both of whom favoured an air strike against Giap's forces); and the army chief of staff, General Matthew Ridgway (who was opposed to any direct American involvement). It was to be nothing less than a tragedy that Ridgway's counsel, which prevailed in 1954, had been forgotten by 1962, when the United States next considered putting troops on the ground in Indochina to fight a war amongst the people.¹¹

War amongst the People

The notion of having to fight amongst the people is directly related to the long-standing army compulsion to seize and hold ground, which in turn is an invariable consequence of expeditionary or invasion campaigns. The impulse to occupy territory as a tactical warfighting reality and, more significantly, as a strategic given, is as old as warfare itself; indeed, for land forces it has been not so much a doctrine as an article of faith whose rationale is apparently so obvious as to require no explanation. A brief review of the tactical implications of the doctrine of seizing and holding ground is necessary here for the insight it provides into the strategic dimension of the logic that promotes expeditionary campaigns.

Few factors are more important to a soldier than the lie of the land. High ground is usually preferable to low ground; ground hidden from observation is safer than open ground; only by dominating ground can a population be controlled and lines of communication sustained; the capture of a particular location might in the right circumstances achieve a strategic effect by itself; and so on. And there is the self-evident truth that human beings depend utterly on land for their existence. We nevertheless need to understand that, as is the case with many seemingly sacrosanct military beliefs, attempts to translate ambitions into outcomes can generate a range of unintended consequences.

Because armies primarily move on a two-dimensional surface, they have customarily campaigned by working their way through a linear sequence of objectives, some of which may have no strategic value. It would of course be simplistic to suggest that every attempt to seize and hold ground should invariably satisfy a superior strategic logic. There could be a wide range of opportunistic but nonetheless compelling reasons for wanting to occupy a certain piece of land that may of itself be irrelevant to the objectives of the overall campaign but which promises short-term advantage, such as offering a superior position from which to launch the next manoeuvre, or providing access to shelter or food. It is a fact of life that continental operations almost invariably must remain responsive to the realities of geography regardless of any other consideration. Put simply, what this means is that in order to arrive at, say, ultimate objective 'D', land forces, unlike sea and air forces, will first have to occupy, however briefly, waypoints 'A', 'B' and 'C'. Progress through those points and across the intervening terrain is commonly characterised by extended campaigns involving a great deal of manoeuvre and numerous engagements.

When Alexander the Great set out in 334 BCE to expand his empire, he very reasonably started at the beginning—at the border of his Macedonian homeland—and worked his way progressively eastwards through Asia Minor, Persia and India. Similarly, when the allies began the liberation of Europe in 1944, they came ashore at Normandy—one of the closest landing points to their base in England—and fought their way across France and the Low Countries to their ultimate objective of Germany. Unlike their air and sea counterparts, the allied armies had little option other than to progress sequentially.

Exceptions can be found, primarily when outflanking manoeuvres are attempted, often with airborne parachute landings or amphibious assaults, to insert forces rapidly behind existing enemy frontlines or to establish a new frontline. Douglas MacArthur's landing at the rear of the North Korean Army near Inchon in September 1950 provided a spectacular example of the former, while his 'island hopping' campaign in the Southwest Pacific Area in the Second World War, when some enemy strongholds which stood along the line of his advance from Australia to Japan were simply bypassed, represented an equally effective instance of the latter. Such examples are, however, the exception rather than the rule. The history of land campaigns is predominantly one of sequential operations.

At the same time, like every other strategic notion, the perceived need to take and hold ground should be questioned, not simply accepted. Ultimately war is a clash of wills and, like any other military operation, the mere taking of ground need not of itself represent an end or a desired effect, just as it will not necessarily break an enemy's spirit. Ends should never be confused with ways.¹²

The emphasis modern armies continue to place on seizing and holding ground as an end in itself—as automatically representing a strategic objective—can perhaps be attributed to a redundant obedience to the great Prussian soldier/philosopher, Carl von Clausewitz.¹³ When Clausewitz analysed strategy in the early 19th century, it was reasonable to argue, as he did, that the destruction of the enemy's army was the highest objective of warfare, because in that era the army often embodied the national will. From that, it followed that the most effective model of combat would be one predicated on the annihilation of soldiers and their machines, which in turn implied the necessity to invade and to occupy territory.

But circumstances have changed since Clausewitz formulated his treatise. As the distinguished historian Sir Michael Howard has noted, from the time at least of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, defeating a nation's armed forces has not necessarily equated to achieving a political victory. Even when the entire French regular army was captured following the siege of Metz in October 1870, the conflict continued for another five months as a people's or guerrilla war. In other words, regardless of the defeat of an army or any occupation of territory, a nation is beaten only when its population capitulates. It is precisely this linkage which has been apparent in contemporary 'wars amongst the people' and which underlies the strategic dimension of this poorly understood, frequently misrepresented notion.

The fact is that for the past 137 years—that is, since the siege of Metz exposed the truth of the matter—Western armies have been singularly unsuccessful at fighting amongst the people. The list of failures is long and depressingly consistent in theme and content.

France's disaster in Indochina stands as a case-study of how not to conduct a military campaign. Both the primary weapon (the army) and the strategy were unsuited to the social, political and geographic environment. The French expeditionary force had little interest in the

Vietnamese and their society, instead imposing a foreign culture onto the landscape. Locals who wished to advance had to become de facto Frenchmen; and those who joined the French Army were formally relegated to second-class status.¹⁴ Not that the nationalists were always exemplary citizens. Systematic brutality, including assassination and torture, was commonly used by Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap and other senior leaders in the struggle to control the people. But the nationalists could not have won at Dien Bien Phu or anywhere else without the remarkable self-sacrifice, courage and widespread support they generally received from the population.

The contrast with the communist insurgency in Malaya is instructive. At the same time that France was blundering to defeat in Vietnam, the British Commonwealth was fighting an ultimately successful campaign against communist terrorists in the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960.¹⁵ The fundamental difference was that, unlike the situation in Indochina, the British never really had to fight a war amongst the people. To start with, the insurgency was largely confined to members of Malaya's minority Chinese community, and the enemy force rarely exceeded 5,000.¹⁶ And in a ploy which effectively removed many of 'the people' from the conflict, the British established a system of fortified strategic hamlets into which vulnerable villagers were moved at night to isolate them from the insurgents. It is noteworthy that the Americans subsequently tried to introduce strategic hamlets in South Vietnam, but after some early success the tactic ran out of steam simply because of the sheer scale of the popular resistance to the Western invasion.

When the Americans and their allies (including Australia) started arriving in Vietnam in strength in the early 1960s, they were aware of the French expeditionary force's failure to win the battle for the local 'hearts and minds' and from the outset instituted civic aid programs intended to address the matter. But at no stage did they display any real understanding of what they needed to do. Indeed, given that they were widely regarded as invaders, it was always likely that they would fail. Their problems, and those of the army's generally, started from Clausewitz's enduring truism that war is an extension of politics.

The succession of South Vietnamese governments that American military power propped up from 1962 onwards were corrupt, fragile, and of dubious legitimacy, and many indigenous military units were incompetent and unwilling to fight. At the time the US commitment was starting to grow, some senior American officials were largely ignorant of the country: of its customs, its culture, its values, its history, even its location.¹⁷ (The parallel with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is depressing.) As late as 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson still had not articulated a coherent strategy for the conflict he was in the process of escalating. Not surprisingly, combat operations came to reflect that lack of policy direction.

Under the pedestrian leadership of General William C. Westmoreland, American and allied forces eventually adopted a strategy of search and destroy as their broad approach to defeating the communist army (which consisted of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers) in South Vietnam. Search and destroy amounted to a series of limited duration, large-scale operations into communist dominated territory, mounted from vast, secure—and, therefore, culturally isolated—base camps. The intention was to demolish enemy strongholds, capture supplies, cut lines of communication, encourage surrender, and kill troops and their supporters.

If this particular version of attrition warfare had been related to the objective circumstances in Vietnam and to some over-riding strategic goal—to some clearly defined, credible, higher political effect—it might have been appropriate. In practice, search and destroy was

operationally questionable, culturally insensitive, and strategically irrational. The alleged comment that 'we have to destroy this village to save it'—a grotesque sentiment of uncertain origin—came to define the US approach to the war, together with Westmoreland's notorious response to a media question about high Vietnamese casualties: 'They're Asians, and they don't really think about death the way we do'. Search and destroy's most telling effect was to alienate many of the South Vietnamese civilians whose interests it was purportedly serving.

Additionally, reacting to the all-pervasive quantitative analysis of operational activities that was then in vogue in the Pentagon and which was directed by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and his immediate staff, nicknamed 'the whiz kids', American field commanders began to use statistics, first, as a measure of achievement, and second, as a de facto strategy. Numbers started to become ends in themselves, as daily lists of 'achievements' were reported back to Washington from Saigon: so many bridges destroyed, so many food and weapons caches captured, so many villages pacified and, most perniciously, so many enemy troops killed in action.

Given the strategic lacuna at the highest levels of government and McNamara's managerial passion for quantifying war, it was almost inevitable that ambitious field commanders would start to inflate the figures in their reports. Worse still, those figures (especially the daily reporting of communist killed in action) came to be seen as an indicator of progress. Counting body bags became a substitute for strategy. Rather than win hearts and minds, this approach revealed an underlying contempt for the Vietnamese people.

In an unwitting parody of the French at Dien Bien Phu, the American Army was ignoring both the objective circumstances and its own inherent limitations. Tragedies like the My Lai massacre on 16 March 1968 exposed the true nature of the invasion and made it almost impossible for the United States and its allies to fight amongst the people.¹⁸ Far more harmful in the long-term, events such as My Lai and, later, the Abu Ghraib prison torture and abuse committed by American military police in Iraq in 2004, severely damaged the West's moral standing.

* * *

The argument is often made that the Australian Task Force which was based in Phuoc Tuy province some 60 kilometres southeast of Saigon from 1966 to 1972 performed better than the Americans in combat against the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, and in managing civic action programs.

There is no doubt that the Australian Army fought with distinction in Vietnam. Collectively and individually the army was well-trained, disciplined, and militarily effective. During daylight hours at least, the Task Force established a degree of control over its area of responsibility which was absent from much of the rest of the country. And several minor incidents notwithstanding, standards of behaviour were of the highest order for an army on operational service. Nevertheless, the Task Force's ability to conduct war amongst the people must be questioned. Enemy resistance was never extinguished; numerous population centres were never 'pacified' and continued to support the guerrillas; and 24 hours after the Australian withdrawal in 1971, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese had re-asserted their dominance in Phuoc Tuy province. Moreover, despite a reasonably comprehensive civic action program, the Australian Army never came close to gaining the degree of acceptance by the local community that the concept 'amongst the people' implies. Given the circumstances under

which the Task Force was established, and the army's recruiting and posting practices, this should not have been surprising.

The Australian Army's then-chief of the general staff, Lieutenant General John Wilton, personally decided to locate the Australian Task Force in a rubber plantation at Nui Dat in the middle of Phuoc Tuy in order to isolate the troops from the locals, a mindset later described by one historian as typical of the army's 'barrier mentality'.¹⁹ Nui Dat was remote from major towns but close to a number of villages, two of which were believed to be populated by Viet Cong sympathisers. Consequently, the decision was taken to 'relocate' the 4,000 inhabitants of those villages. The Australian official war history records that the relocation was regarded as a military necessity and that the local Vietnamese province authorities readily gave their approval.²⁰ The history also admits, somewhat ingenuously, that problems arising from the forced resettlement 'took a little time to resolve'.

In fact, notwithstanding a well-intentioned and reasonably thoughtful civic aid program that ran for the duration of the Australian occupation of Phuoc Tuy province, the ATF never succeeded in convincing enough Vietnamese of the righteousness of either their presence or their cause. To refer again to the official history, Australian aid programs were 'implemented unilaterally' and 'without sufficient coordination with local officials', too often the needs of the locals were not met, and the 'somewhat transient' nature of the program negated much of its intended social and political influence.²¹

These impediments to the establishment of any genuine accord with the people in whose backyard the war was being fought, and whose interests allegedly were being served, were unintentionally exacerbated by the army's recruitment and posting practices.

Because of concerns over security in Southeast Asia generally and the looming demand for foot soldiers in Vietnam in particular, in 1965 the Australian Government introduced a compulsory military service scheme.²² Conscripts were drafted for two years (later reduced to 18 months), which for those who were sent to Vietnam involved a year's training followed by a year's tour on active duty. National servicemen were integrated into regular army formations but were not allowed to exceed 50 percent of any unit.

This recruitment and posting policy led to two almost inevitable consequences. First, while the regular army did a fine job training the conscripts and the latter in turn performed admirably in combat, it was clear that, given the time limits involved, everyone's overriding priority would be to learn how to fight and how to survive. Cultural sensitivity plainly would be a secondary consideration at best. And second, since everyone served a one-year tour, it followed that the Task Force turned over its entire complement of soldiers annually. Again, this plainly was inimical to developing and sustaining any sort of worthwhile connection to the Vietnamese population. Since gaining that population's voluntary support was the ultimate aim of the war, it might seem that Australian policymakers and strategists had missed the point.

Conscription was abolished in 1972, but the practice of relatively short-duration tours continues in today's Australian Defence Force (ADF). Personnel management for the major deployments to theatres in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Solomon Islands and East Timor over the past decade has been predicated on tours of 4–12 months, periods that are manifestly inadequate for most individuals, let alone units, to develop and sustain constructive relationships with local societies. It is true that individual soldiers occasionally develop close relationships with indigenous populations, but they are the exception rather than the rule, to

the extent that the officer associated with one such success story in 2007 was described as a 'maverick' within the Australian Army.²³ Any policy that relies on a few individuals is neither sound nor likely to succeed.

Assimilation problems caused by short tour-lengths are aggravated by the ADF's continuing inability to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of suitable people. Despite extensive and costly public relations campaigns, the Australian Army has consistently been unable to meet its recruiting targets, falling around 10 percent short each year for the past decade at least. Because of that long-term failure, the permanent force's strength actually fell between 2004–05 and 2005–06.²⁴ The highest proportionate loss rate occurred in the enlisted ranks; that is, among the men and women who do most of the frontline fighting and who have most contact with the 'people' when they are engaged in expeditionary campaigns. The army fell 19 percent below its recruiting target in 2004–05 and 11 percent in 2005–06. Worsening this situation was a separation rate in 2005–06 of 12 percent, with 20 percent of all army recruits quitting in their first 12 months. Furthermore, those overall figures tend to disguise the extent of the problem amongst the enlisted (operational) ranks because they incorporate the better recruitment and retention data relating to officers.

It is important to appreciate that none of these problems is new. In 1987 an Australian parliamentary committee felt compelled to enquire into the high wastage (loss) rates of people from the ADF and came to the conclusion that the problem was more institutional than transitory.²⁵ In the 20 years since, the relative numbers have not changed substantially despite greatly improved conditions of service—better housing, pay, retention bonuses, family care, etc—intended to make life in the defence forces more attractive. Nor is it likely that recently announced reduced entry criteria will help; on the contrary, some commentators believe they may only make things worse by lowering standards.²⁶ Described by one authoritative source as a crisis, the 'accelerating' rate at which the ADF generally and the army specifically turns over its frontline people suggests that any attempt to construct and maintain a force capable of conducting war amongst the people is unrealistic.²⁷ If the ADF is to achieve its objective of raising two new army battalions—around 2,600 combat troops—by 2016, it will have to lift its annual recruitment of fulltime personnel from 4,670 to 6,500—an increase of 39 percent, and a demand which seems likely only to aggravate the problem.²⁸

In summary, the competency limits imposed by recruitment and retention difficulties should be regarded as a continuing feature of the ADF and should therefore be factored in to concepts of operations and the national defence strategy.

The Myth of the Three-block War

The concept of the three-block war has been promoted with great success by Western armies and marine services. It is a subset of the notion of war amongst the people, and in combination with that broader scheme provides the essential justification for expeditionary (invasion) campaigns. But like its progenitor, the three-block war is an intellectual house of cards.

First postulated in the late 1990s by the then-commandant of the US Marine Corps, General Charles Krulak, the concept attempts to define a model by which land forces can successfully operate in an unfamiliar, probably hostile, primarily urban environment. It is noteworthy that the model grew out of the persistent failure of Western armies to cope with

precisely those conditions during expeditionary campaigns in places like Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, the Gaza Strip and the Lebanon.

Krulak speculated that in any three contiguous urban blocks a soldier might be required to deliver humanitarian assistance in the first, act as a peacekeeper in the second, and fight a life or death combat in the third.²⁹ (Some theorists have since suggested a fourth 'block' in the form of information operations.) The model itself is an accurate enough description of the complex and challenging environment favoured in the past decade by many of the West's enemies. The problem is finding an army capable of satisfying the model's demands.

Australia's pre-eminent strategic scholar, Robert O'Neill, has identified those qualities which Western land forces require to operate successfully within the setting of expeditionary operations, war amongst the people, and the three-block war.³⁰ His findings describe a land force whose hypothetical standards frankly stretch credibility.

O'Neill starts by stating that Western armies are too small and must be expanded, but he does not say how this might be achieved without risking an unacceptable decline in quality. In the case of the ADF, the perennial recruitment and retention factors discussed above and the decision already taken to lower recruiting standards indicate that there is no quick or easy answer to this problem.³¹ Nor would a return to conscription be feasible. In Australia, for instance, conscription is politically unacceptable; while in the United States the poor performance of some US Army units during the Vietnam War was in part blamed on reluctant conscripts and was one of the reasons the draft was abolished by President Richard Nixon in July 1973.

If the situation with quantity is worrying, there is even less reason to believe that armies can achieve the qualities asserted as essential to prosecute a three-block war. Before discussing those qualities, it is important to acknowledge the longstanding and deservedly fine reputation of Australian Army combat troops, and to note that substantial numbers who join at the most junior enlisted level eventually progress to senior rank through ability, hard work, and formal study. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the educational entry requirement for most combat mustering, including riflemen, patrolmen, and commando special forces, is Year 9; that is, three years below the standard for completing secondary school.³²

According to O'Neill a successful expeditionary campaign demands soldiers who are able substantially to 'erode' the cultural barriers that separate them from the people they are trying to help. In itself that is a sensible objective. But when those barriers are listed as language, religion and social mores, and a knowledge of local history, geography, institutions and economics, the argument stretches belief. And if that is not enough—remembering that in many circumstances these same soldiers are going to be, properly enough, in fear of their lives—they also have to master civilian skills (for civic aid programs) and have some capacity to 'enter into an informal exchange with indigenes'.³³

At the risk of labouring the point, we should always remember that to the local population our 'expeditionary' troops are their 'invaders'. The distinction is not mere semantics: it is utterly fundamental to any credible analysis of the contemporary battlefield. As Douglas MacGregor has argued, 'the days when armies of Christian Europeans and Americans could occupy the countries of non-Europeans and dictate developments are over'.³⁴ It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that O'Neill's army of the future is based more on wishful thinking than on an objective analysis of what armies can, and cannot, do.

The truth of the matter is that rather than assimilate with the various populations whose countries they have invaded, Western forces have preferred to isolate themselves. There is a very good reason for this: as the commanders of the Australian Task Force at Nui Dat appreciated, armies of occupation are far less likely to be killed if they operate from secure bases. Nothing has changed in the 40 years since then. The point here is that contemporary strategists cannot have it both ways—a reality the Israelis and the Americans have both tacitly acknowledged in the Middle East.

From the first day the state of Israel was established in the former British mandate of Palestine in 1948, the Israelis have been fighting amongst the Arab people of the Middle East. Conflict has ranged from major wars to the constant struggle to contain terrorist attacks, in recent years most notably by suicide bombers. Given the clash of cultures that characterises this situation, it is probably unrealistic to expect that the Israeli Defence Force could ever fully assimilate itself with the diverse range of Islamic states and interest groups whose incursions it must attempt to prevent. Nevertheless, the decision taken in 1994 to erect a number of so-called security fences to control the movement of non-Israelis and Arab Israelis into and out of Israel is a telling monument to the realities of modern warfare.

The first barrier was completed in 1994 in the Gaza Strip. Work on the second, a much more ambitious project along the West Bank frontier, was started in 2002; by April 2006 some 408 kilometres of the total of 703 kilometres approved by the Israeli Government had been constructed. Three gates are opened for 20 minutes each day to allow the strictly controlled entry and exit of those Palestinians fortunate enough to be permitted access to their jobs or relatives on the other side of the wall. Much more to the point from the Israeli perspective, the incidence of terrorist attacks has been greatly reduced.

Putting aside the intransigence of Middle Eastern politics, the Israelis have every right to defend themselves. In the context of this paper, though, the most telling commentary on the barriers comes from the names they have been given by the protagonists. To the Israelis they are 'security fences'; to the Arabs they are 'racial segregation walls' and 'apartheid walls'. The sad terminology could scarcely be further removed from the simplistic notion of the three-block war.

Similar problems in Iraq have seen similar measures taken by the American army of occupation. Reference has already been made to Baghdad's 'green zone', the heavily fortified restricted area in which the US and allied senior leadership and their support staff, and Iraqi politicians and civil servants, isolate themselves from the community they serve. Every individual who lives in the green zone is entitled to self-preservation, but local perceptions of what is in effect a gated community for the privileged inevitably have been jaundiced.

The implicit message of the green zone was reinforced when in early 2007 numerous massive concrete walls were built in selected areas of Baghdad, with the objective of separating the inhabitants of some of the city's most violent neighbourhoods. Thus, Sunnis were kept apart from Shi'ites and vice versa, and the Americans and their allies were kept apart from everyone.³⁵ Within weeks of the walls going up, (the minority) Sunni communities were complaining that their suburbs were being turned into ghettos, a grievance which prompted Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to order the US military to stop construction.³⁶ Once again, the barriers may have been militarily sensible, but they gave the lie to any suggestion that the Western armies were part of the community.

A different manifestation of the same problem emerged in nearby Afghanistan, which was occupied in 2001–02 when Western expeditionary forces drove the medieval Taliban regime from government. Afghanistan historically has fractured along regional and tribal fault lines, with local warlords remaining indifferent to any nominal central government in the capital of Kabul. A brief period of national unity followed the Taliban's overthrow, but the political scene soon declined back into warlordism and the Taliban soon started to reassert itself, especially in the southeastern region around the shared border with Pakistan. Unable to pacify the more hostile regions, the US-led expeditionary forces concentrated on securing Kabul by surrounding it with thousands of soldiers and their weapons. In other words, the barrier mentality asserted itself and Kabul was turned into an oversized green zone.

The war against the Taliban is of course one of culture, not of arms. The area in which Australian forces have been active—the southern province of Uruzgan—has been a hotbed of recruitment for new Taliban foot-soldiers since the Western invasion in 2001. Elsewhere the occupying forces have had little influence over law and order; for example, Afghanistan produced a record opium crop in 2006 and is on track to reach a new record in 2007.³⁷ Furthermore, the regular death of Afghani civilians as 'collateral damage' from the invaders' air and ground fire constantly undermines popular support.³⁸

Pakistani officials have a unique and intimate knowledge of Afghanistan, of al-Qaeda, and of the Taliban; indeed, Pakistan's directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence has long been a sponsor of the Taliban. Those officials are derisive of the West's efforts to win the local hearts and minds, dismissing as 'mission impossible' the expeditionary force's clumsy efforts to conduct war amongst the people.³⁹ It is simply one more epitaph for a familiar and depressing story.

The Limits of Land Power

The central point to emerge from this discussion so far is that for the past 60 years the outcome of most Western expeditionary campaigns has been dubious at best, disastrous at worst. The primary reason for this long history of failure has been the patent inability of Western armies to fight amongst the people in general and to demonstrate the (unrealistic) range and level of skills implicit in the concept of the three-block war in particular. No rational analyst could be happy with the unintended consequences of the expeditionary strategy: as Robert O'Neill has noted in relation to Iraq, any gains that might have been made have been far 'outweighed by the damage and insecurity' they have generated.⁴⁰

None of this is to say that Western defence forces should forgo the ability to occupy hostile territory by seizing and holding ground. Quite the contrary, the most cursory study of history indicates that this remains a necessary military capability, especially in the modern era of humanitarian intervention operations. The question is: how can we do it in a way that maximises the West's comparative military strengths and minimises its vulnerabilities? and the answer is, 'quickly and precisely'. There is no shortage of models, as the following examples illustrate.

The first model is provided by China, which early in 1979 gave a deft demonstration of matching the application of force to its army's inherent limitations. Irritated by a series of perceived insults and alleged illegal behaviour by Vietnam, on 17 February China's leaders sent 120,000 troops across their shared border to conduct 'punitive military operations'.

Population centres were occupied and assets seized as Chinese soldiers penetrated some 40 kilometres into Vietnam. Then after only three weeks they withdrew. Although the fighting had often been intense, the scale of the incursion had been carefully controlled and the Chinese were satisfied that they had, in their words, 'taught Vietnam a lesson'. By keeping their action brief and focused, the Chinese Army minimised the dangers of unrealistic expectations and unintended consequences.⁴¹

An equally measured but quite different model was revealed on several occasions by American-led coalitions during the 1990s in the Middle East, the Balkans, and Central Asia. Three features of those campaigns are noteworthy. First, on each occasion the Western coalition fully exploited the immense comparative advantage it enjoys in applying precise firepower from a distance, primarily from air and sea platforms. Second, to the extent that Western land forces were involved, they tended to be relatively small numbers of highly mobile, highly skilled special forces. And third, whenever the warfighting situation needed large numbers of soldiers on the ground, indigenous armies were used, invariably to considerable effect, especially when fighting amongst the people.

Thus, during a humanitarian intervention against Serbian forces in Bosnia in 1995, Bosnian Croat and Muslim armies were successfully used to supplement NATO air power which was provided by air force, navy, army and marine manned and unmanned aircraft and by ship-launched missiles. Four years later, a similar approach in Kosovo involved the Kosovo Liberation Army; while in Afghanistan in 2001–02 Western special forces and air power combined with a number of local armies, notably the Northern Alliance in the north and a number of predominantly Pashtun tribes in the south, to overthrow the Taliban.

While the indigenous armies played a minor albeit necessary role in the Balkans, they were critical in Afghanistan. The question was one of how to kill or force the surrender of substantial numbers of seemingly intransigent Taliban and al Qaeda terrorists. Periodically the Americans were confronted by besieged fortress-cities (Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Kabul, Kunduz, Kandahar) whose enemy garrisons could have been destroyed either by bombing, which would have caused the death of non-combatants, or by massed warfare between the local armies, which was likely to involve heavy casualties, massacres and war crimes. In the event, precision bombing was more effective against urban targets than perhaps ever before, but on most occasions indigenous ground forces were required to clean up pockets of resistance.

Muslim extremists will continue to 'fight with America' and the other nations that actively oppose them. What they are unlikely to do in future is to fight in mass, seeking instead to adopt the classic guerrilla tactic of operating in small groups that make high-value, high-publicity hit-and-run attacks against civilian as much as military targets. Land forces will have a critical role to play in that campaign, but they will be land forces of a different shape and outlook from those that characterised 20th century armies. In the Australian setting, the most useful soldiers are likely to be those who will be capable, first, of exploiting information derived from sensors such as airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft, surveillance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and perhaps satellites; and second, of complementing the operational flexibility and precise stand-off firepower of weapons systems such as strike/fighters, long-range missiles launched from surface platforms, unmanned combat air vehicles (UCAVs), AC-130 gunships, attack helicopters, and loitering weapons.

The final indicative model was developed by the American Army officer Robert Scales, who has proposed a combined arms methodology in which armies 'would not need to occupy key

terrain or confront the mass of the enemy directly'.⁴² Implicit in Scales' concept is the judgment that in many circumstances it will be preferable either to destroy an enemy's assets or briefly but decisively strike against one vital point, rather than routinely try to occupy and seize his territory.

Under Scales' model, doctrinally and technologically advanced land forces would use fast-moving air and surface vehicles to make rapid and unexpected manoeuvre one of their primary characteristics. They would also work as an integrated whole with air strike forces, with the lead element at any one time being decided by the enemy's disposition. Should the enemy concentrate, he would be identified and attacked with precision weapons launched from air platforms operating at standoff distances. Should he disperse and go to ground, not only would he negate his own ability to concentrate force, but he would also leave himself vulnerable to attacks by numerically and qualitatively superior land forces exploiting their rapid manoeuvre capabilities. Prototypes of this kind of operation were evident on occasions during the American-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001–02 and Iraq in 2003.

For example, in the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, a small group of Australian, American and British special forces won a remarkable victory. Their immediate objective was to ensure that western Iraq was free of Scud missiles which might have been fired at Jordan and Israel, thus dangerously broadening the pending war. Not only did the allied forces meet that objective, but they also effectively controlled about one-third of the Iraqi land mass. According to then-chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff General Richard Myers, the key to that extraordinary achievement was the availability of air—surveillance, reconnaissance, information and strike—24-hours a day, seven days a week, which was fully integrated with the action on the ground.⁴³ This little-known operation may represent the epitome of the 90-year history of air/land warfare.

The crucial common feature in each of those illustrations is the brevity of the occupation and warfighting phases. It was only when Western armies overstayed their (strictly limited) period of usefulness and tried to become something they are not that they started to experience serious problems in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Defence of Australia

From the time of federation in 1901, Australian defence strategy has taken one of two main forms. Expeditionary campaigns officially styled as 'forward defence' have been the dominant model, with Australian troops fighting overseas alongside their British and/or American allies as a means of contributing to the defeat of (perceived) common enemies and of accruing security credits to be called-in should the Australian homeland itself ever be directly threatened. Examples include the First and Second World Wars, Malaya, the Korean War, Vietnam and, more recently, the Middle East and Central Asia.

The second, less practised, form has been the so-called defence of Australia, a strategy implicit in the Defence Act, which established the Australian Army in 1903 and which brought together the colonial (state) militias as a national Citizen's Military Force forbidden by law to deploy outside Australian territories. That defensive posture was superseded by the decision to raise the expeditionary army which fought at Gallipoli and on the Western Front during the First World War. In the 1930s the Australian Labor Party briefly revived the defensive approach by advocating a continental defence strategy, largely because of its greater

independence. The strategy slipped off the agenda once more during the expeditionary campaigns of the Second World War, Malaya, Korea and Vietnam before resurfacing again in the mid-1970s and finally achieving official status in the 1987 Defence white paper.⁴⁴ Vigorously challenged by the Australian Army, whose leaders believed the strategy marginalised their service, and then brought into question by a surge of expeditionary commitments under US leadership in the 1990s, the 1987 white paper enjoyed only a short official life-span.⁴⁵

Despite prevailing for the majority of federation, the expeditionary strategy has been a doubtful, even dangerous, proposition, as a review of the results (as opposed to the promotion of vested interests) has shown. The single unquestionably successful application was the Second World War, in which the territorial ambitions and moral depravity of the axis powers clearly threatened Australia's national survival and demanded an unconditional military response. Otherwise, though, throughout a diversity of eras and contexts, the return has been dismal.

Forests have been sacrificed to the debate on cause and effect in the First World War: was it a genuine global conflict whose geopolitics demanded an Australian contribution, or was it just the last hurrah of a jaded and degenerate group of aristocratic European cousins? Regardless of our answer, the 60,000 Australian dead and 156,000 wounded, gassed or taken prisoner from an enlistment of 300,000 and a total population of less than 5 million remains by far the heaviest price ever paid for any expeditionary campaign mounted in the perceived national interest. Yet even that shocking premium was unable to return a dividend in 1941 when, for the very good reason that it was fighting the Nazis in Europe, Great Britain was unable to send forces of any substance to help Australia in its most dire hour of need against the threatened Japanese invasion.

The return on Australia's participation in post-Second World War expeditionary campaigns is similarly contentious. Two firm observations can nevertheless be made. The first is that, notwithstanding Australia's substantial contribution to the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, the United States—chosen during the Second World War to replace the United Kingdom as our 'great and powerful friend'—still sat on the fence when military tensions arose between Australia and Indonesia over the future of Irian Jaya in the early 1960s. As the aphorism has it, in international relations there are no enduring friendships, only enduring interests. And second, the decade-long invasion of Vietnam was a disaster for all concerned. None of the Western armies involved could do what it said it would, despite a massive and continually increasing commitment of soldiers and firepower; millions of young Vietnamese, American and Australian men, among others, were killed; untold destruction was inflicted on Vietnam; and enormous damage was done to Western prestige.⁴⁶ It is hard to see how those outcomes served Australia's national interests.

It is not yet clear whether a similar disaster will emerge from the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but the indications are that the author Thomas Ricks' characterisation of this latest expedition as a 'fiasco' will be more right than wrong.⁴⁷ Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of the occupation has been the torture and abuse committed by American military police at Abu Ghraib prison, a shameful episode which has severely damaged the West's moral standing. Yet in an appalling postscript to Abu Ghraib, three years later, a survey of US Army and Marine forces found that only 47 percent of soldiers and 38 percent of marines believed that non-combatants should be treated with dignity and respect; more than one-third believed that torture should be permitted to save the life of a comrade; and less than half said that they would report a colleague for unethical behaviour.⁴⁸

To summarise thus far, for 60 years now some of the most advanced Western armies, including those of France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Israel, and Australia have excelled in brief air/land battles, but have been singularly unsuccessful trying to fight protracted campaigns amongst the people. Two obvious questions arise: why do politicians continue to authorise such campaigns; and why do armies continue to believe they can win them?

For Europeans, shared land borders might provide a partial answer to the first question: reasonable fears of, say, a rapid spread of communal or ethnic violence might make an armed intervention seem the least worst option. But any government taking such a decision must be prepared for the long haul, as the British found in Northern Ireland, as the NATO-led Stabilisation Force found in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and as the US-led coalition and the International Security Assistance Force are currently finding in Iraq and Afghanistan respectively.

A fortuitous accident of geography has eased that kind of dilemma for Australia. As the only island continent, Australia is uniquely placed to exploit its geography as a factor in defence policy. Indeed, that is precisely what the 1987 Defence white paper did, articulating a strategy based on controlling the air and sea approaches to the country's north and northwest, from which directions any significant military threat would have to materialise. There is no need to revisit in detail the long and heated debate which the 1987 paper generated. But its effect on the national defence strategy needs to be understood. Two points are central.

The first is that the paper did not discount either expeditionary campaigns or other expressions of offensive military action. What it did do was place a hitherto absent emphasis on self-reliance and the ability to *control* events in the air/sea gap that surrounds this island continent. In essence, the paper shifted the essential strategic form from expeditionary to defensive. The verb 'control' is the key to strategy's logic, and it has frequently been the subject of misrepresentation.

Threat assessments generally start by considering three variables: capability, motive, and intent. Plainly, it would be misleading to suggest that any country or interest group presently possesses enough of each to threaten an invasion of Australia, a conclusion that has been seized upon by opponents of the defensive strategy to assert its irrelevance.⁴⁹ The issue is, of course, more complex than that. Because of the difficulty of determining motive and intent, and because of the decrease in interstate wars (especially between the liberal democracies), the art of threat assessment has started to look less to the traditional approach and more to the central question of: *what is it that we need to defend?*⁵⁰ In other words, what are the fundamentals that establish the national well-being? If we accept that the world remains a dangerous and uncertain place, then strategic planning that focuses on defending those vital and largely identifiable assets and values makes eminent sense. Hence the emphasis on *controlling* events in Australia's air/sea gap.

The second point arising from the 1987 white paper was the Australian Army's belief that it had been marginalised by the emphasis placed on a defensive as opposed to an expeditionary strategy. There was some truth in that, since any strategy directed towards controlling an air/sea gap is likely to give its force structure priorities to air and naval capabilities. The sensibilities of any of the single Services should not, of course, be allowed to influence strategic determinations. In this instance, army supporters mounted a forceful, wide-spread and sustained public attack on the defence of Australia policy, drawing on

history, politics and tradition, and using the full spectrum of argument from scholarly analysis to personal ridicule.⁵¹ In essence, the campaign contended that Australia's defence strategy had always been based on expeditionary forces in general and boots on the ground in particular, that the invasion model has served Australia's national interests, and that it should continue to do so.

It is hard to assess precisely the effect of the army's publicity campaign.⁵² What can be said with certainty is that, from the early 1990s onwards, the ADF's increasing involvement in expeditionary campaigns indicated that the 1987 policy had been overturned in practice.

Yet, as the proverb goes, we should be careful what we wish for. So far the unintended consequences of this policy reversal have been many and various and, more often than not, disastrous. By any measure they have been overwhelmingly inimical to Australia's national security. Of the major commitments, Afghanistan remains a work-in-progress of uncertain duration and outcome, and in the long-term the Iraq fiasco may prove far more dangerous than Vietnam.⁵³ Robert O'Neill's conclusion in relation to Iraq bears repeating: any gains that might have been made have been greatly 'outweighed by the damage and insecurity' they have generated.⁵⁴ That conclusion is disturbing, but it should not be surprising given that the expeditionary strategy which informed those campaigns is predicated on a capability that does not exist.

Summary

The remarkable victory won by Vietnamese nationalists over a French expeditionary force at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 should sound a warning to contemporary Australian strategists. Numerous factors contributed to the Viet Minh's triumph, but the most crucial was the local army's ability to conduct war amongst the people—something that was entirely beyond both the comprehension and the competence of the French invaders. Dien Bien Phu represented a deep-seated failure of mindset, organisation and culture by the French Army.

Since federation, Australian defence strategy has oscillated between two main forms: expeditionary campaigns and the defence of Australia. Expeditionary campaigns have been the dominant model even though, with the notable exception of the Second World War, their unintended consequences have diminished rather than enhanced national security.

One influential school of strategic debate has currently created something of a self-serving dynamic between expeditionary campaigns and the associated notions of war amongst the people and the so-called three-block war. As Western strategists struggle to develop a theory for defeating today's elusive, asymmetric enemies, that school—almost exclusively the domain of armies—has propagated the circular argument that war amongst the people and the three-block war are the keys to success, that only boots on the ground can execute those concepts (boots on the ground implies the occupation of territory, which implies expeditionary campaigns, which are based on war amongst the people, and so on).

Yet as Dien Bien Phu revealed, one man's expedition is another man's invasion. Thus, we should not be surprised that Western armies have proven entirely incapable of fighting amongst the people in Indochina, Iraq, the Middle East and Central Asia. For example, Australia's scorecard from the recent decades of the expeditionary strategy reads as follows:

one disaster, one fiasco, one disaster-in-waiting, and a few blunders. It is impossible to believe that this outcome has served the national interest.

Those campaigns have starkly exposed the innate limits of land power. Almost by definition, an army of occupation is incapable of conducting war amongst the people; while the unavoidable limits on personnel imposed by recruiting standards and resignation rates make the notion of the three-block war not merely unrealistic but unachievable. The fact is that expeditionary campaigns are predicated on capabilities that armies do not have and cannot acquire.

Australia is in the fortunate position of being able to adopt a primarily defensive military strategy which both avoids the flawed logic of expeditionary campaigns and offers a credible method for *controlling* the immediate environment and defending the fundamentals of our national wellbeing. Affordable, rational, militarily credible, non-threatening and achievable, the defence of Australia remains the nation's best strategic option.

Notes

- 1 General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, Allen Lane, London, 2005, especially pp. xiii-xiv, 3–4, 327–31.
- 2 Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1975.
- 3 Greg Mills, 'Ten Counterinsurgency Commandments from Afghanistan', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 10 April 2007.
- 4 'Toll tops 200 in wave of attacks', *Australian*, 20 April 2007, p. 10; Hamid Ahmed, '45 dead as bombs rock Iraqi capital', *Canberra Times*, 17 April 2007, p. 8. Less than a week after the bombing in the Iraqi parliament, scores of bombs were detonated around Iraq (especially in Baghdad) killing hundreds of people. At the time, Baghdad was defended by three army divisions.
- 5 Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1967, pp. 22–52; Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy*, Schocken Books, New York, 1972, p. 316.
- 6 Observations here are drawn from the author's field visit to Dien Bien Phu and surrounding areas in February 2007.
- 7 Vo Nguyen Giap, *Dien Bien Phu: Rendezvous with History*, The Gioi Publishers, Hanoi, 2004, p. 317.
- 8 The French named these hills Gabrielle, Beatrice and Isabelle, reportedly after some of the commanders' mistresses.
- 9 These comprised one regiment of 105mm howitzers and one of 75mm howitzers—some 40 guns in all. Fall, *Street Without Joy*, p. 322. Giap, *Dien Bien Phu: Rendezvous with History*, pp. 205–206 and 221, also mentions 120 mm heavy mortars, as does Fall, *Hell in a very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu*, pp. 126–27.
- 10 Giap, *Dien Bien Phu: Rendezvous with History*, pp. 185, 189–90.
- 11 John Prados, 'Ike, Ridgway, and Dien Bien Phu', in *Military History Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Summer 2005, pp. 16–23.
- 12 For a more detailed discussion of this, see Alan Stephens and Nicola Baker, *Making Sense of War: Strategy for the 21st Century*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2006.
- 13 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1982.
- 14 For an example see Fall, *Street without Joy*, pp. 292–94.
- 15 For the best account of this war, see Noel Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs*, Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1981.
- 16 Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, *Emergency and Confrontation: Australian Military Operations in Malaya and Borneo 1950–1966*, Angus and Robertson, St Leonards, 1996, p. 165.
- 17 See Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect*, Random House, New York, 1995, p. 32; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1989; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam*, Penguin, New York, 1991; and David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1993.
- 18 On 16 March 1968 a platoon of US Army soldiers murdered up to 500 unarmed Vietnamese civilians in the hamlet of My Lai. Many of the victims were women and children. Three years later the US Army charged 14 officers with suppressing information relating to the massacre; most charges were subsequently dropped. For details of the torture conducted by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib, see Seymour M. Hersh, 'Torture at

- Abu Ghraib', *New Yorker*, 10 May 2004, available at http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa_fact, accessed 31 May 2007.
- 19 Greg Lockhart, cited in David Horner, *Strategic Command*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2005, pp. 246–50.
- 20 Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950-1966*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1993, pp. 240–44.
- 21 Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins, *On the Offensive: The Australian Army in the Vietnam War 1967-1968*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2003, pp. 195–96.
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- 23 The reference is to Major Michael Stone's role in East Timor: see 'The Peacemaker', Australian Story, ABC Television, broadcast on 9 April 2007, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/austory/specials/thepeacemaker/default.htm>, accessed 31 May 2007. For a similar experience involving another Australian Army officer, this time in Indonesia and the Middle East, see George Packer, 'Knowing the Enemy', *New Yorker*, 12/18 December 2006.
- 24 Department of Defence, Annual Report 2005-06, Chapter 4, Table 4.2. In 2004–05 the Army's permanent force strength was 25,356, while in 2005-06 it was 25,241, a decrease of 115. For the enlisted ranks the figures were 20,076 and 19,796, a decrease of 280. The discrepancy between the two reductions is largely accounted for by the recruitment of additional junior officers.
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- 26 In recent years the recruitment age has been raised from 51 to 56 and standards have been relaxed for individuals with a prior record of illicit drug use and 'petty' crime, or who are overweight, have visible tattoos, or poor eyesight. Mark Dodd and Patrick Walters, 'Empty Vessels', in *Australian*, 8 May 2007, p. 15 and Gerard McManus, 'Nelson seeks Dad's Army', *Herald Sun*, 26 March 2007, p. 3.
- 27 Sid Marris and Mark Dodd, 'Defence losing the war of attrition', *Australian*, 25 April 2007, p. 1.
- 28 See Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, quoted in Patrick Walters, 'Recruitment, retention vital', *Australian*, Special Defence Report, 26–27 May 2007, pp. 1–2; and Patrick Walters, 'Agility key for future defence force', *Australian*, 17 May 2007, p. 4.
- 29 Charles C. Krulak, 'The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War', *Marines Magazine*, January 1999, available at http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm, accessed 31 May 2007; see also Max Boot, 'Beyond the 3-block war', *Armed Forces Journal*, March 2006, available at http://www.cfr.org/publication/10204/beyond_the_3block_war.html, accessed 31 May 2007; General John Abizaid, 'Combined Civil/Military Responses to National and International Events', in *The Future Australian Defence Force: Learning from the Past, Planning for the Future*, Australian Defence College and Royal United Services Institute Seminar 2007, Canberra, 16 May 2007; and Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, 'Lessons Learned from Contemporary Operations', in *The Future Australian Defence Force: Learning from the Past, Planning for the Future*, Australian Defence College and Royal United Services Institute Seminar 2007, Canberra, 16 May 2007.
- 30 Robert O'Neill, 'Restoring Utility to Armed Force in the 21st Century', a paper prepared for the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre 40th Anniversary Seminar Series, Australian National University, Canberra, 15 August 2006.
- 31 See pp. 10–11 above.
- 32 Department of Defence, Careers, Personnel, available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/careers.cfm>, accessed 3 May 2007.
- 33 O'Neill, 'Restoring Utility to Armed Force in the 21st Century'.
- 34 Douglas MacGregor, 'Casey Needs Fresh Thinking To Salvage Iraq', *DefenseNews*, 12 March 2007, p. 45.
- 35 James Hilder, 'Stop building walls, Maliki tells US', *Australian*, 24 April 2007, p. 10; Robert Fisk, 'Divide and rule: America's plan for Baghdad', *Canberra Times*, 12 April 2007, p. 15.
- 36 Iraq's Muslims comprise 60 percent Shi'ite and 32 percent Sunni. Saddam Hussein's savage nepotism in favour of the minority Sunnis fuelled the rivalry between the sects.
- 37 Nick Grono, 'How to beat the Taliban', *Australian*, 9 April 2007, p. 8.
- 38 'Bombs blasting Afghan hearts, minds', *Australian*, 14 May 2007, p. 11.
- 39 Riad Kahwaji, 'Local Realities Clash with U.S. Policy in Tribal Belt', *DefenseNews*, 23 April 2007, pp. 1 and 8. See also veteran journalist Paul McGeough, who describes the 'searing contempt' of senior Pakistani intelligence and military officials for Washington's policies, in 'The One that Got Away', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Good Weekend*, 2 June 2007, p. 19.
- 40 O'Neill, 'Restoring Utility to Armed Force in the 21st Century'.
- 41 The People's Liberation Army was not universally successful during the incursion; on the contrary, considerable deficiencies were exposed by their battle-hardened Vietnamese opponents. Nevertheless, it

- was the PLA who took the initiative and who caused a great deal of damage with their scorched earth tactics at the end of the brief campaign.
- 42 Robert L. Scales, 'Checkmate by Operational Maneuver', *Armed Forces Journal International*, October 2001, pp. 38–42.
- 43 General Richard Myers, quoted in 'US Push to Base Forces on our Soil', *Weekend Australian*, 17 January 2004, p. 1.
- 44 Department of Defence, *Defence of Australia 1987*, Policy Information Paper, Canberra, Australian Government Printing Service, 1987. For the latest policy guidance, see Department of Defence, *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2005*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2005, available at http://www.defence.gov.au/update2005/defence_update_2005.pdf, accessed 31 May 2007.
- 45 The former deputy chief of army and land commander Australia, Major General John Hartley, has spoken of Army's 'unease' with the defence of Australia strategy: see 'Seminar Opening Address', in *The Future Australian Defence Force: Learning from the Past, Planning for the Future*, Australian Defence College and Royal United Services Institute Seminar 2007, Canberra, 16 May 2007.
- 46 The Soviet Union suffered much the same experience during its disastrous invasion of Afghanistan from 1979–88, when Soviet troops were manifestly incapable of conducting war amongst the people.
- 47 Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2006. See also Henry Kissinger, quoted in Hans Greimel, 'Iraq worse than Vietnam, win impossible: Kissinger', *Canberra Times*, 2 April 2007, p. W7.
- 48 US Department of Defense, *DoD News Briefing with Assistant Secretary Casscells from the Pentagon*, 4 May 2007, available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3958>, accessed 29 May 2007.
- 49 See for example Greg Sheridan, 'Shadow Boxing', *Australian Literary Review*, 2 May 2007, pp. 16–17. Sheridan was commenting on the book *Beyond the Defence of Australia*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney, 2007, written by one of the key advocates of the defensive strategy, Hugh White.
- 50 Between 1991 and 2003 the number of armed conflicts around the world decreased by more than 40 percent, international crises declined by 70 percent, and expenditure on international arms transfers fell by 33 percent. 'War and Peace in the 21st Century', in *Human Security Report 2005*, Vancouver, The University of British Columbia, 2005, pp. 1–2, available at <http://www.humansecurityreport.info/content/view/28/63/>, accessed 31 May 2007. For comment on threat assessment practices see the interview with Norwegian defence minister Anne-Grete Strom-Erichsen in *DefenseNews*, 30 April 2007, p. 30.
- 51 From what is an extremely large choice see the following selection: Michael Evans, *The Tyranny of Dissonance*, LWSC Study Paper No. 306, Land Warfare Studies Centre, Canberra, February 2005, available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/Army/lwsc/>, accessed 31 May 2007; Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, 'The Medium-Weight Force: Lessons Learned and Future Contributions to Coalition Operations', *Australian Army Journal*, Vol. III, No. 2, Winter 2006, pp. 1–8, available at http://www.defence.gov.au/Army/lwsc/Publications/journal/AAJ_Winter06/Leahy_Medium_Weight_Force_revised.pdf, accessed 31 May 2007; and Australia Defence Association, 'Well off the ball and far from the mark', *Defence Brief*, No. 126, March 2007, available at [http://www.ada.asn.au/defence_brief/Brief%20126%20\(Mar%2007\).pdf](http://www.ada.asn.au/defence_brief/Brief%20126%20(Mar%2007).pdf), accessed 31 May 2007.
- 52 However, for a succinct analysis of the effect on force structure planning of the push for an expeditionary strategy, see Paul Dibb, 'Planning process needs a reality check', *Australian*, Defence Special Report, 26–27 May 2007, p. 2.
- 53 It is probably necessary at this point to mention the UN-sanctioned intervention into East Timor in 1999. Strictly speaking the example should not be included, because the intervention came at the request of the Indonesian government. Indeed, the single most important factor in the campaign's early success was the Indonesian decision not to oppose the Australian-led landing. None of that is to diminish the ADF's performance, which was exemplary. But the subsequent show of triumphalism from much of the Australian media and general public suggests that the nature of the operation was misrepresented and misunderstood. Nor is it yet clear that the intervention will ultimately succeed, with the possibility remaining that Australia will have created a failed state in its backyard where none existed before: see Cavan Hogue, 'No escaping the burden of good intentions: The 'liberation' of East Timor is coming back to haunt us', *Australian*, 12 March 2007, p. 8; and Nicholas Stuart, 'Botched battle brings home mission's failings', *Canberra Times*, 6 March 2007.
- 54 O'Neill, 'Restoring Utility to Armed Force in the 21st Century'.