

Whitewashing Down Under: The Vietnam War Fifty Years On

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The Vietnam War tormented and tore the societies who saw fit to participate in it. It defined a generation culturally and politically in terms creative and fractious. And it showed up the rulers to be ignorant rather than bright; blundering fools rather than sages secure in their preaching. Five decades on, the political classes in the United States and Australia are still seeking to find reasons for intervening in a country they scant understood, with a fanatic's persuasion, and ideologue's conviction, a moralist's certainty. Old errors die hard.

Leaders are left the legacy of having to re-scent the candle, hoping that no one notices the malodorous stench left by history. Errors can be ignored in the aromatic haze. Broadcasters and producers of celluloid scutter about to provide softening programs explaining why soldiers who had no valid reason fighting a conflict, could find themselves in it. The ABC in Australia, for instance, released their series called [Our Vietnam War](#), narrated by Kate Mulvany, whose bridge to the war was via her father. The very title is personal, exclusive, and seemingly excludes the Vietnamese who found themselves pawns, rebels, collaborators and insurgents.

The production also received [the approval](#) of the Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs. "The series provides a unique opportunity for viewers to gain insights into the personal stories of veterans and the broader impact of conflict on Australia's history and identity."

The Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, has made 2023 a calendar year for reminding Australians about the Vietnam experience, albeit in a most slanted way. On March 29, [he acknowledged](#) veterans visiting Canberra in an address to parliament. The words "courage", "sacrifice" and "bonds of camaraderie forged under fire, and cruel realities of loss", were noted. Adversaries are not mentioned, nor was, curiously enough, opposition to the war that was expressed at the time from a number of brave Labor Party stalwarts, Arthur Calwell being foremost among them.

The speech continued in a more plangent tone.

“Let us stand in this place, in this Parliament, and speak – loudly and clearly – about those who were sent to war in our name, who did their duty in our name, but whose names we did not hold up as proudly as we should have.”

On Vietnam Veterans’ Day (August 18), Albanese gave another [speech](#), this time in Ipswich, Queensland, where he again apologised to the veterans. “We should have acknowledged you better as a nation then. But the truth is, as a nation we didn’t.” The platitudes are piled up, and merely serve to blunt the nature of Australia’s involvement in a brutal, rapacious conflict. “You upheld Australia’s name. You showed the Australian character at its finest.”

This distraction serves to cover the tracks of those who erred and bungled, not merely in committing the troops, but in ignoring the consequences of that deployment. The mistreatment dished out to the returnees was as much a product of civilian protest as it was a conscious effort on the part of veterans from previous conflicts to ignore it. It was a war never formally declared, conducted in conditions of gross deception.

A half-century on, it is striking to see the apologetics gather at the podium. The New South Wales branch of the Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL), for instance, went out of its way to issue one for the way thousands of defence personnel were treated in the aftermath of the conflict. “RSL NSW acknowledges a generation of veterans who are still healing and we publicly recognise our charity’s past mistakes this Vietnam Veterans Day,” came the [statement](#) the organisation’s president Ray James.

In the making of war, those behind the policies for waging it tend to escape culpability. The Australians in this affair were, to put it politely, compliant, featherbrained creatures upset by the Yellow Peril north of Papua New Guinea and easily won over through invocations of the “Red Under the Bed”.

Canberra went out of its way to send material and aid to South Vietnam not merely to fight Asiatic atheists of a red hue, but to impress their increasingly bogged-down US allies. To aid the enterprise, the Menzies government introduced national service conscription in November 1964, a policy that became the source of [much parliamentary acrimony](#), notably from the Labor Party.

In July 1966, on an official visit to Washington, Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt emetically appropriated the Democratic Party’s own campaign slogan by declaring that Australia was “All the way with LBJ”. At the National Press Gallery that same month, Holt [declared](#) that, “When it comes to American participation and resolution to see the war in south Vietnam through, Australia is undoubtedly all the way”. Spinelessness and crawling in a military alliance became political virtues, or what Albanese might like to call “values”.

Australia’s commitment was marred by problems of strategic worth, something which officials were well aware of as early as April 1967. As a government paper titled [“Australia’s military commitment to Vietnam”](#) documents, requests for a larger Australian commitment by US military sources in Saigon and Washington were made despite the open-ended nature of the conflict. The planners lacked certitude on basic objectives, not least on the issue of victory itself. The views of US Defence Secretary Robert S. McNamara, as expressed in meetings with his Australian counterparts, are expressly mentioned in all their obliqueness. The secretary “had no doubt that America could no longer lose the war, but they still had

the problem of winning and that could be long and hard and there was no easy way which could point directly to victory.”

Add to this the fantastic delusion that the Vietnamese communist movement was a Peking-directed affair rather than an indigenous movement keen to remove foreign influence, and we have a conflict not merely futile on the part of Canberra and Washington, but wasteful and criminal. Fifty years later, and officials from both countries have the chance to make another round of potentially graver, more calamitous decisions.

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