

Hugh White on Australians and war

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Hugh White is Professor of Strategic Studies at the Australian National University and a former senior public servant in the Department of Defence. In 2005 he published in *Arena* a brief but perceptive analysis of Australian attitudes to war at that time.¹ Eight years on he addressed 'the purpose of war' in a piece in a *festschrift* for Robert Manne, published in October 2013.² Then, in November 2013 he spoke to *Honest History* about the issues raised in these two widely-spaced pieces and made some remarks about possible futures.³

While White has produced many other writings, this article considers just the key themes of these two published pieces and one interview:

- How 'soft' wars have made Australians more bellicose.
- How the perceived need to preserve the American Alliance makes most wars acceptable in Australia.
- How Australians are reluctant to focus on the purposes of war.
- How Australians celebrate the experience of war while downplaying the reasons for particular wars: the centrality of Anzac.
- How romanticising war makes future wars more likely.
- How these chickens might all come home to roost in the East China Sea in the not-too-distant future.

How 'soft' wars have made Australians more bellicose

In the 2005 article White saw a connection between Australian military engagements that were relatively low cost in terms of casualties (what we call here 'soft' wars) and Australians' attitudes to military involvement overseas. He wrote that 'there has been a marked increase over the past decade [that is, since the mid-1990s] in Australia's willingness to use military force as a tool of foreign policy...'.⁴

He pointed out

how quickly our society has moved from a deep post-Vietnam reluctance to use armed force to a surprisingly high level of comfort with it... After Vietnam, the negative predominated. But over the past fifteen years [1990-2005] we have been lucky enough to engage in a series of low-cost and generally successful military operations [for example, East Timor]. The positive images of war are starting to predominate. We are becoming more willing to resort to armed force than we have been in the recent past.⁵

Eight years later, after forty deaths in more than a decade in Afghanistan, do we still feel the same way? While forty deaths is not many compared with our past wars has the toll grown enough for us to be less bellicose and more questioning? White believes not. By contrast with our Vietnam involvement (more than 500 killed), where he believes public support dissipated not so much because of the number of casualties but the sense that lives were being wasted, he argues there has been 'careless public acquiescence' to the toll in Afghanistan and hardly any discussion about it.⁶

We have not tested White's claim about public silence about the Afghanistan commitment. The level of discussion (and questioning) may well have varied across the country (more in Canberra or Melbourne, less in garrison towns like Townsville and Darwin) or in accordance with political allegiance. Certainly there has been relevant public opinion polling: the Lowy Institute found in 2013, for example, that only 35 per cent of Australians felt the Afghanistan conflict had been 'worth fighting'.⁷

A possibility which White did not canvass in the Manne piece, but which might flow from his *Arena* analysis, is that Afghanistan has still been 'soft' enough – had few enough casualties – for the involvement not to have been a major issue for most Australians while it lasted but that the *length* of the commitment may have been crucial in forming attitudes. 'Enough's enough' rather than 'it's not worth it' may have been the colloquial summation as the commitment came to an end. Our bellicosity is not open-ended.

How the perceived need to preserve the American Alliance makes most wars acceptable in Australia

Are there then other drivers of Australians' attitudes to war? The soft war-bellicosity link is shored up for Australians by their attitudes to the American Alliance. Lowy found in 2013 that 82 per cent of Australians supported the Alliance.⁸ The Alliance is the second element underpinning our willingness to fight. The majority of Australians can live with our being in places like Afghanistan and Iraq – provided casualties are reasonably low and involvement does not go on for too long – because these commitments are down-payments on the American Alliance.

The links between our bellicosity, the softness of wars and our attitude to the Alliance are not, of course, new. They go back at least to the early days of the Vietnam conflict. White spoke at length at interview about how the American Alliance has underlain Australia's involvement in faraway places.

The simple thing about Australian strategic policy forever, back to the 1880s, is that we can't take the support of our allies for granted. Distance is critical... [W]hat would impel us to say "yes" to the United States [in the event of any US request for assistance] would be the fear that, without the United States, we'll be defenceless... That doesn't necessarily mean the right answer is to say "yes" to the United States but we should be working much harder to try to avoid that situation happening...

I think, in Howard's case, the overwhelming reason we kept on going backwards and forwards to the Gulf, since 1980 in Sinai, is that that's what we do to establish our credentials as US allies. We have not fired a shot in anger in Asia since 1972, since we came back from Vietnam. The United States ceased to regard ANZUS in a China context, even in an Asia context, after 1972, because the United States' primacy in Asia wasn't contested and we didn't have anything to do with the Soviet Union.

The Cold War was still running in 1972, or '89 or '91, whenever you want to date it, but Australia specifically said, "That's nothing to do with us". So what did we do to establish our credentials as a US ally? We turned up in the Middle East. That's not a coincidence; that was where, ever since the Carter Doctrine, the US was most likely to go to war...

The way I interpret Howard's successive choices through the war on terror was that they are as much or more influenced by that long history of Australian support for the United States in the Middle East than by the specific circumstances of the post 9/11 environment.⁹

The need to preserve the Alliance has lain beneath our involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, though successive governments have not made this explicit. The question remains whether it will always lead us into commitments in the future.

How Australians are reluctant to focus on the purposes of war

If Australians link our involvement in wars to larger causes to do with the Alliance are we simply exemplifying Clausewitz and seeing wars as the continuation of politics by other means? If that is true, our thinking runs very little deeper than that. White says we prefer to avoid considerations of why we are going to war by saying 'we have no choice'. Looking for reasons or purposes implies that there is a choice and we do not like to admit that.

Yet not considering purposes also allows us to avoid considering costs. It steers us away from asking the question, 'Is it worth it?', which is really a question about whether the costs, particularly in lives lost, are justified by whether the purpose of going to war has been achieved. It also saves governments from publicly admitting too often what might be seen as an unheroic or even tawdry reason for fighting – the US insurance policy referred to above.

Our reluctance to ask these purpose-cost questions about Afghanistan and Iraq continues an Australian tradition.

One of the most distinctive things about the way Australians construct our military history is the exclusion of strategic purpose from the story. Les Carlyon's 800-page book *The Great War* (2006) devotes just half a page to explaining why the Australian government in 1914 decided to commit forces to fight alongside Britain against Germany. Most of the recent prodigious output of military history shows even less interest in the purposes for which Australia has gone to war.¹⁰

Detaching war stories from considerations of purpose leads, White says, to an assumption that there was no *Australian* purpose (that we have always fought 'other people's wars') and unfairly portrays past leaders and rank and file soldiers as 'naïve innocents'. Indeed, it has led to our making a virtue of a distinctive 'Australian way of war' where we fight not to serve our national interests but to reaffirm a national self-image.

How Australians celebrate the experience of war while downplaying the reasons for particular wars: the centrality of Anzac

This theme follows very closely from the previous one. 'The [Australian] focus is overwhelmingly', White says, 'on the experience of the soldiers and the details of the fighting, not the reasons they were sent to fight'.¹¹ This neglect of purpose not only saves us from too closely examining individual commitments but also distorts our understanding of war in general.

By ignoring the wider political purpose which gives combat its only coherent justification and explanation, Australian military history is forced to understand and justify war in terms of the experience of combat alone. In doing that, it idealises the experience of the soldier in very distinctive ways.¹²

Anzac is the lynchpin of this attitude and the central core of 'the Australian way of war'. White believes that part of the explanation for our failure to plumb the purpose and cost of war is 'the potent idea of war in Australian society, focused on the Anzac legend'.¹³ He acknowledges the work of Marilyn Lake, Mark McKenna, Henry Reynolds and others on 'the way Australians' intense focus on military history, centred on the Gallipoli campaign, has shaped, and in some ways distorted, both our understanding of Australia's history and our image of ourselves'.¹⁴

The Anzac ethos, as it is presented in Australia today, centres on the idea that the experience of combat brings out personal qualities which are unique to those who have fought, universal among those who have fought, and essential to Australia's national character. All this implies that there is something uniquely valuable about the experience of combat, for the soldier and for society.

Without the fighting at Gallipoli, Australia would not be the country it is today – and that in itself, rather than the wider strategic purpose, becomes the reason to fight. Combat, in other words, comes to be seen as an end in itself. Indeed, the view that there was no strategic reason for Australians to be fighting at Gallipoli is seen to amplify the soldiers' virtue. The pointlessness becomes part of the point. The image of combat devoid of strategic purpose makes war a sport, nurturing virtue precisely because it is played for its own sake – as Peter Weir showed in his film *Gallipoli*. And, as with sport, we spectators believe we can somehow partake of that virtue just by looking on.¹⁵

In sum, the Anzac tradition helps us go to war without having to think too much about it.

How romanticising war makes future wars more likely

Essentially, White adds to the elements underpinning Australian bellicosity (the prevalence of soft wars, the need to preserve the American Alliance, avoiding consideration of purpose) a fourth element, Anzac, a romanticised conception of the nature of war and its importance in forming a nation's character.

While war does bring out admirable qualities

that does not mean that the opportunity to display these virtues justifies going to war. And yet this is, I think, very close to where Australia has found itself these last few years. The more we have admired the conduct of our soldiers as they faced the reality of war in Afghanistan, the less important it has seemed to ask why they have been there. Their admirable conduct has seemed reason enough. We have been content to be at war because we have welcomed what we think it has shown us about our soldiers and, through them, about ourselves.¹⁶

Afghanistan has reaffirmed Anzac and that is enough.

What are the practical implications of this attitude to war?

Now, the real point about this is, the more we romanticise war ... the easier it is to slide into a decision to go to war, the easier it is to think, "yeah, why not?". When we face these terrible, tragic decisions, we've got to face them as coolly and calmly and rationally as we can and ramp out of the calculation "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori". Just get rid of that crap, just think about this as a purely practical issue.¹⁷

White spoke about the situation in Europe in 1914, where there had not been a medium-size war for forty years and a full-scale one for a century, where the lessons of the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War about the incompatibility between the standard of armaments and infantry-based tactics had not been learnt – essentially, it was no longer possible for armies to proceed across open ground without being decimated but this fact had not yet dawned upon generals – and where there was in some quarters in Anglo-Saxon countries the feeling that young manhood needed toughening up in the cauldron of war.

White presents the poignant image of Horace's 'dulce et decorum' tag being inscribed in 1913 on the wall of a new chapel at Sandhurst, the British military academy, presumably to widespread approbation. People in 1914 had inadequate ideas of the purpose of war and of what modern war would be like. 'There was romanticism about war in 1914', White said, 'and there is, I think, today'.¹⁸

How these chickens might all come home to roost in the East China Sea in the not-too-distant future

We have seen that White links Australians' attitudes to the Afghanistan involvement with our attitude to wars in general. In the *festschrift* piece, he underlined the importance of this link 'since we may well find ourselves thinking much more about war in the next few years than we have for many decades'.¹⁹ Speaking to *Honest History*, he expanded upon this remark.

Australia has been spared serious consideration about the circumstances under which we should go to serious war for a long time and I think we should recognise that there is – it's far from a certainty, I don't want to overstate it – that we face a higher risk today of really major strategic decisions, decisions more like the ones made in 1914 and 1939, than we have faced for several generations.²⁰

What did White mean by this statement?

White has long been an observer of China and the relations of other nations, including Australia and the United States, with China. His remarks about China were a central part of the Honest History interview with him. They were driven by his consideration of current tensions in the East China Sea over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands, claimed by both Japan and China.²¹

I think that Australia has had forty remarkably good and peaceful and stable years for a very simple reason, that is, not just that America has been the dominant power in Asia but that it's primacy has been uncontested by China. That's now at an end, China is now contesting, and so the US and China are now strategic rivals again and maybe they'll manage that through – we need to try to make sure they do – but if they don't there is a chance, a much higher chance than we faced in 1972, of a major strategic confrontation or war in Asia in which the United States is engaged.

And the key question for Australia is going to be how do we respond to that; join, and all the rest of it. Now, I can envisage circumstances under which it would be a good idea for Australia to join [the United States]. If China is behaving like Imperial Japan, *circa* 1935, then I would, terribly regretfully, say we should [join]. But if China is actually a bit ambitious and a bit bolshie and if, in the end, we're going to war because America doesn't want to surrender primacy and share power with China then I'd probably say not.²²

White went on to discuss the implications for Australia.

If a clash occurs [in the East China Sea] then the chance of that escalating to a wider China-Japan conflict is very high, the chances of Japan calling on the United States is 100 per cent, the chance of the United States saying "yes" to Japan is 90 per cent, and if that happens, the chance of the United States seeking active Australian support is 100 per cent.

The step in that causal chain which has the lowest probability is the initial clash between China and Japan: 20 per cent chance of it happening over the next couple of years. But if that 20 per cent chance comes off – that's a one-in-five chance – then there's a 100 per cent chance, 90 per cent chance, 100 per cent chance, in other words, near enough to a certainty. Then Australia has to say, either we support the United States or we don't.²³

Decisions about war and peace need to be faced seriously, White believes, and with an awareness of history.

When we face [these decisions] we'd better have a more realistic understanding of what we are letting ourselves in for than they had in 1914. We'd be better off with having an idea more like the one they had in 1939 when they knew what they were getting themselves into; there was no romanticism about war in 1939.²⁴

White believes there are parallels between Europe in 1914 and the East China Sea in 2014. That does not mean that the situation will develop in the same way now as in 1914 but it will be necessary for Australians 'to decide what things are worth risking war over, and what are not' and that, in turn, will require a clear understanding of the nature and purpose of war.²⁵ As Australia enters the Anzac centenary era, where romanticism about war will become even more highly-tuned, White's remarks are well worth bearing in mind.

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- ¹ Hugh White, 'Primal fears, primal ambitions', *Arena Magazine*, 76, April-May, 2005, pp. 32-36.
- ² Hugh White, 'The purpose of war', Gwenda Tavan, ed., *State of the Nation: Essays for Robert Manne*, Black Inc, Collingwood, Vic., 2013, pp. 23-29; reproduced in large part as Hugh White, 'Lest we forget: the purpose of war is not war itself', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 October 2013.
- ³ Interview conducted by David Stephens and Richard Thwaites, 21 November 2013. This article viewed in draft form by Professor White.
- ⁴ 'Primal', p. 36.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ 'Purpose', p. 24.
- ⁷ '[The Lowy Institute poll' \(24 June 2013\)](#).
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Interview.
- ¹⁰ 'Purpose', pp. 26-27.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 27.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 28.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 27.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.. p. 28.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 28-29.
- ¹⁷ Interview. The quotation, from the Roman poet Horace, is roughly translated as 'it is sweet and right to die for your country'. Wilfred Owen's poem on the theme is [here](#).
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ 'Purpose', p. 25.
- ²⁰ Interview.
- ²¹ For other recent discussion of these and related issues, see, for example: Hugh White, 'The Australian government doesn't appreciate China's growing confidence', *Guardian Australia*, 29 November 2013.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ 'Purpose', p. 29.