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## We must admit defeat in Afghanistan, and war crimes



**Jack Waterford**

I doubt we can fashion much of a narrative of which Australians could be proud when we consider what will be happening soon with Afghanistan. What will probably be good for Afghanistan - a measure of peace - will be a result of our defeat, not our participation. It's getting harder to say that this participation did us, or Afghanistan much good; it did no great good for the Afghani people, and clearly did great harm, probably lasting, to the reputation of Australia and its military beyond any honour we must necessarily accord to those who went and did what they were told.

Peace talks are going on between the Afghani government - which is to say the loose coalition of gangsters we supported - and the Taliban. More correctly that part of the Taliban still outside the government. After a lot of stalling, real negotiation is occurring. Prisoners have been exchanged and freed on both sides (of which more later). Soon there will be little outbreaks of peace and harmony in power-sharing arrangements, at least until balances are disturbed again. This is in the manner of Afghani politics since the invasion of Alexander the Great.

There is no general truce. There will be no disarmament as such. The folk we Australians, Americans, Europeans and others called the "enemy" will soon be part of the government. They will be pointing out that they were never defeated, or even rendered low. They will renew some old depredations, including the oppression of women, just as the current government does. The best harbinger of peace will be the departure of foreign military (and probably foreign cash, whether as aid, munitions or bribe money). Each side can resume their little internecine local wars, soon, we hope without that extra ferocity that drones, aircraft and very sophisticated weaponry provide.

Alas, history, such as that of Vietnam suggests that it is rather more easy to escalate the type of violence than it is to tone it down. When the Taliban and foreign allies, such as Osama bin Laden and the mujahidin, were fighting against a Russian invasion, they were our friends. America supplied them with a lot of sophisticated weaponry. Once Americans decided they were the enemy, primarily because they sheltered Osama bin Laden, those weapons were turned on America and its allies. American tried to forge new friends from enemies of the Taliban, many of these were more ruthless and corrupt than the straight-laced and very sexist fundamentalists. The coalition took on much of the burden of the war-making. When American soldiers depart, probably early next year, a good bit of coalition treasure to be divvied up, among former friends and enemies, will be American equipment.

The soldiers we sent understood all along that military victory was never possible. The most one could hope for was a negotiated settlement; the worst abject defeat. But fans of the longest war in centuries would be deluding themselves if they thought that the fact that settlement now seems possible vindicates the intervention, or represents a sort of victory. Nor

will settlement secure democracy, or human rights, or the education of women. Or not for very long, even if the words are in the "peace" document.

A settlement is happening because America wants out. It is abandoning ship, just as it did in Vietnam in 1972. This is for American domestic political reasons only. The Afghani government has not been winning, ready to take up the struggle on its own. American war weariness comes from the futility of going on, but also fury at the treachery, corruption, and double dealing of their Afghan allies. And despondency about the half-hearted effort put in by most of its NATO allies (excepting Britain and Australia, about whose contribution most Americans are entirely ignorant).

***The Australian politicians who decided to send Australian men and women into this debacle placed such a premium on standing by America that they cared little about the military or social cost of going.***

Australia invested a good deal of blood and treasure in the war - and we will continue to pay the bill for the lasting disabilities of our soldiers for the next 70 years. Involvement was particularly hard on our special forces soldiers, who were seriously over-extended by multiple deployments and intense, if small-scale combat in dangerous zones in which the "enemy" could merge into the population, and the loyalty of Afghani troops was sometimes uncertain. It was even tougher on our soldiers because neither they nor Australia as a nation had any significant role to play in grand strategy, in setting goals, or even in choosing battlefields. There were fierce local battles, epic acts of bravery, marvellous use of new (top secret) techniques of war-making. But none of it made the slightest difference to the outcome, or, probably, even to regional "enemy" strength, whether in the short, the medium or the long term. Want to know what sort of a lasting impact the sacrifice and the bravery of Australian troops had on the character or the landscape of Afghanistan? Put your finger in a cup of warm tea, then pull it out, and see the evidence left that a finger was ever there.

#### [ADF and government stage-managing release of war crimes report](#)

Australia went into Afghanistan, and Iraq, only so as to stand beside America. We had no illusions. We wanted the US to notice (most Americans didn't). We wanted our uncritical loyalty to mean they would support us if Australian security was ever under threat. We simply made up, as propaganda for public consumption, the desire to spread democracy, or rights for women. Nothing Australians did advanced that sort of agenda: no one expected that it would. Basically, we looked for, and tried to destroy, an elusive enemy. We killed a lot of people, but not so as to change the facts on the ground. Nor did we "buy" valuable time for anything. As surely as in Vietnam, we, like America, were beaten.

The Australian politicians who decided to send Australian men and women into this debacle placed such a premium on standing by America that they cared little about the military or social cost of going. Nor did they weigh the long-term impact on Australian honour and morale, or the reputation and integrity of our military services.

Likewise with Iraq, where, mercifully at least, we avoided risks and had few casualties. I do not deprecate the service of our Navy or Air Force personnel. But it has been 70 years (since Korea) since either has been engaged in an area where the "enemy", whoever it has been, has been in a position to attack them. In that sense, we gained no experience useful in a future conflict with any enemy able to fight back, such as China.

It is not only our politicians who should be answering questions. Did senior service leaders tell our politicians what they needed to hear,? Or was what they said, as so often it has been, what the politicians wanted to hear.

And we need to know how well they looked after the men and women being put in harm's way under their command. That our services are suffering unprecedented levels of post-traumatic stress and disability suggests they fell short. We need a fair-dinkum inquiry, by properly independent experts, not only of how and why we went, but also into serious shortcomings of leadership, both at the top level and in command of troops on the ground. It might be wise that we clear this up before we go, at the behest of ASIO and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, into our next battle. Let no-one think that we should forbear in order to avoid negative impact on morale in the ranks.

Right now, the ADF is sitting on an array of material suggesting that a significant number of Australians committed war crimes in Afghanistan. A significant number but nonetheless a tiny fraction of all those who served with honour and do not deserve to have their service dishonoured. The investigation has seemed interminable, consuming more time and resources than all war crimes investigations against the Japanese after WWII.

The senior military establishment has sought to put a lid on - that is to say, to cover up - these investigations. They have used spurious claims of national security and public interest reasons to prosecute people who have blown the whistle or confided in the public. When, or if, individual soldiers are punished for their crimes - perhaps in 2027 given that the AFP is only now picking up the brief, there ought to be a wholesale clean-up of the many officers, mostly in Canberra, who were looking the other way. Denying there was a problem, conducting pretend reviews and investigations that concluded, complacently (or perhaps with deliberate dishonesty) that nothing was wrong. Even as senior officers knew otherwise.

We now know that a satellite very high in the sky monitored all SAS operations, able to provide information of a detail that could verify or disprove claims that the planting of guns on civilian victims and other allegations, such as the throwing of people off cliffs.

Previously published "official" reports complacently accepted the assertions of soldiers on the ground that all was tickety-boo. Their statements were not formally checked against records the ADF knew it had. It is not clear, even now, that the report of the Inspector General, Justice Paul Brereton, will use this information. Or that police prosecutions (which seem to occur, and succeed only when it is politically opportune) will be allowed to use it, perhaps under the best-evidence rule.

We do know that the ADF is trying to resist, to the death, the production of its records in a defamation case, aided by Australian War Memorial chairman, Kerry Stokes on behalf of Ben Roberts-Smith, VC, accused of being involved. Disclosure: *The Canberra Times* is one of the defendants in this case, but I have no inside knowledge of it.

The Brereton report will be issued only when it suits the ADF and the government. It will be only in a form that suits both. Justice Brereton is out of the loop on what, in his report, will be made public. Our military knows better what the public deserves to know, and, under current leadership starts with the assumption that the answer is nothing. Public accountability is the last consideration. One can expect that production of a probably very truncated report will be preceded by an array of ADF PR material suggesting that the ADF now appreciates, as it never did before, serious culture problems., particularly in the SAS. It will say, earnestly, the

ADF is taking far-reaching action to change. We see this sort of self-serving and generally false guff after any defence scandals, such as systemic sexual harassment complaints.

Neither this, nor the predictable selective advance briefing of tame journalists, particularly from the [news.com](http://news.com) stable, can swamp the bad news. But they hope it can be contained through claims of a right (or duty) to censor on national security grounds, or so as not to compromise a fair (secret) trial for anyone accused, or by the usual cover-up strategy of issuing the report late on a Friday afternoon. No doubt just after the pre-arranged distribution of news that Victorian Premier Dan Andrews has been deposed, or exclusive news reaching *The Australian* that someone, unspecified, might nominate Scott Morrison, for the Nobel Prize - or, as the White House calls it, the Noble prize.

An array of ADF officers with SAS backgrounds have let it be known that they, personally, had been concerned about the culture of a "certain element" in the SAS for a long time. Among those with SAS backgrounds are the CDF, General Angus Campbell, former governor general, Michael Jeffery, former defence secretary and ASIO head Duncan Lewis, and Andrew Hastie, MP, head of the parliamentary committee supervising security agencies. We can accept that they noticed and deplored a developing unhealthy culture, resistant to obedience to Australian military doctrine. But it seems astonishing that the leadership was unable to make any impact on that insubordination while in positions of command in the SAS.

Hastie was a fairly junior officer, and has been a witness of alleged misconduct. That's of course, while not providing ASIO and other bodies with the rigorous external scrutiny they need, devoting his political time to promoting ASIO's agenda, running his own foreign policy and provoking conflict with China.

It rather looks as if Afghanistan broke the army's model of itself, not least in the way that it became over-dependent on special forces models. Some of our military elite were murderers. Our special forces, when they are doing the right thing, are very good, especially at cutting throats. But all their professionalism is not much good in conventional battles. We need a different balance in our army, particularly if we are planning further adventures on the Asian mainland.

Meantime, as part of the prisoner exchange in the peace talks, Afghanistan has released a rebel who pretended to be a government soldier (i.e. comrade of the Australians) and then, having won their trust, opened fire on them, killing several soldiers. Australia, and the families concerned, are naturally distressed. But no one else (including the Americans) cares much. Indeed in the unconventional wars in which Australians have been recently involved, treachery of this ilk, carried out by us, would win a medal.

The last instalments of this sorry episode in Australian political and military history involve attempts to make our involvement seem a triumph.

Not coincidentally this requires us to praise the politicians who sent us to this disaster. These include, of course Brendan Nelson, once a minister of defence and director of the war memorial, who wants to build a big ugly edifice and theme park full of the military toys made by the arms manufacturers such as those he now serves, full rather than part-time.

Nelson seems to think that such a monument to himself will provide important mental health comfort to the soldiers who did their duty at the politicians' behest. Our soldiers deserve honour for their service, whether we won or not, and whether we were in a just cause. But, as with so many disasters in Australian military history, like Gallipoli, Fromelles, Singapore and Vietnam, we are saluting service and sacrifice, not military achievement. And we are standing alongside soldiers and families, not politicians, RSL heavies, or memorial donors. Purists, indeed, would insist that the AWM really is about mass civilian military service in all-out war, not deployment of professional soldiers.

We should be thinking now about the independence of any official history of the conflict, as well as our equally dubious involvement in Iraq and Syria. Neither our politicians nor our military leaders are keen for a fair-dinkum review. If the organisation of it has anything to do with the current, or recent leadership of the memorial, it will be false history, will distort or obscure unpleasant facts such as war crimes, be full of dubious Nelsonian anecdotes about people who like his folksy way. It will lose the big picture in small picture accounts. It will treat John Howard, Alexander Downer and Brendan Nelson as though they were a combination of John Curtin, Winston Churchill and William Morris Hughes.

Australians, and those who have lost so much, deserve something better, including an objective account of the performance of our military and political leaders. I do not think an Australian history 50 years hence will be kind to any of them. (An outside history, even an Afghan one, will, like Vietnamese history, not even record our involvement). It is difficult to see why the first drafts should reinforce the lies Australians were told. Or that they should reassure us that we played it as gentlemen, and departed honourably. We can hardly even pretend that we were better than those who vanquished us.

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[DavidStephens](#) • 2 hours ago

As he often does, Jack Waterford nails it again. Afghanistan from the Australian point of view is given an unbalanced treatment by the Memorial as it stands; the new expanded post-Nelson, post-Stokes Memorial will be even worse. More on the campaign against the War Memorial Brendan Bunker extension can be found here: <http://honesthistory.net.au..>