

The forthcoming Iraq War gallery at the Australian War Memorial promises to display differing views about this controversial conflict, but the curatorial approach seems heavily compromised. By *Lauren Carroll Harris*.

The Iraq War gallery

In a cavernous warehouse in Canberra's industrial outskirts, two irreconcilable world views are in sharp discord. A F/A-18 Classic Hornet fighter looms spookily above three everyday artefacts: a worn pair of Dunlop Volleys splattered in red; a four-litre paint tin and roller and a tourist's snow globe containing the Sydney Opera House in miniature. Its tiny sails bear the words: "No War".

On March 20, 2003, a coalition of American, British and Australian troops invaded Iraq on faulty intelligence to find and destroy weapons of mass destruction. A forthcoming gallery at the Australian War Memorial will be devoted to that turmoil – with the Hornet jet a centrepiece, along with the "No War" items and works from former official war artists Charles Green and Lyndell Brown, Lewis Miller and Megan Cope – within a larger set of exhibitions about Middle Eastern conflicts since the Gulf War in 1990. The new Iraq War gallery isn't expected to open until 2025, although the memorial managed some brilliant long-lead publicity for it in March this year, coinciding with the 20-year anniversary of the war's commencement. A blaze of news stories promised that the gallery will encompass civilian, diaspora and military views.

Demonstrators Dave Burgess and Will Saunders created an iconic moment in protest culture in 2003 when they carefully painted "No War" on the Sydney Opera House. Burgess and Saunders were sentenced to nine months of weekend detention for malicious damage, and a compensation bill of \$151,000, paid for in part by sales of their "No War" snow globe merchandise.

The new Iraq War gallery will contextualise their protest keepsakes with an oral history by Burgess. "It's about looking at the different ways that people are striving for peace, that's how I actually see both of these stories working," says Dr Kerry Neale, lead curator, of the juxtaposition of the Hornet and Burgess's protest objects. "So you've got those who serve, looking to make the world a more peaceful place through their service and protecting different areas that are in conflict, and those that are striving for peace through painting 'No War'."

The war became a discredited and protracted conflict that killed four Australians and lasted a decade. Australian troops were part of an invading force not sanctioned by the United Nations. Though the tally for civilian deaths is murky, the "Mortality in Iraq Associated with the 2003-2011 War" study estimates 500,000 Iraqis died.

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The memorial's new spotlight on peace stories is ostensibly a break from its usual approach to nationalistic memorialisation, which has skewed ever closer to both the defence lobby and government lines in recent years. Priced at \$550 million, its new building project has been criticised by a range of historians, heritage experts and museum professionals as expensive, unnecessary and proceeding without proper consultation.

Dr Peter Stanley, who worked as a historian and exhibition curator at the memorial from 1980-2007, told me it only "reluctantly grapples with peace movements". An April visit I made to the memorial seemed to bear this out. In the Vietnam War gallery, for instance, two small badges stand in for all objects from the three moratoriums in 1970-71, the largest demonstrations in Australian history at the time. Their inclusion seems cursory compared to the abundance of dioramas, multimedia re-enactments of operations and military hardware.

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It's easy to see why. The memorial tells the Australian Defence Force's history. It needs the ADF's co-operation to gain collection material such as the Hornet fighter. For the new galleries, an ADF advisory committee gives feedback. ADF members are seconded to the memorial so it remembers who it's serving. A Last Post ceremony is held daily. The ADF's three service chiefs are legally assured council roles. The council – which was described by Dr David Stephens of the Heritage Guardians group as "the governing body of a military club" – approves or asks for modifications of exhibition plans, mission statements and gallery development proposals. Eight of its 12 members are current or former ADF members; Tony Abbott is another.

The Albanese government declined a recommendation in February from its independent National Cultural Policy Advisory Group that the memorial be returned to the Arts portfolio – Bob Hawke excised it to Veterans' Affairs, part of the Defence portfolio, after intense lobbying from the RSL in the 1980s. No other body does cultural curation within such a politicised structure that serves simultaneously as an arts institution, commemorative body, tourist attraction, archive and centre of research. "If they were all part of the Arts portfolio," says Stanley, "it wouldn't be bureaucratically possible to give one institution more than all the others."

It's interesting to consider whether another major arts institution might be more even-handed, by, say, presenting documentation of the complaint made against John Howard for war crimes to the International Criminal Court, or a more substantial record of anti-war history. The National Library of Australia, for instance, holds a considerable collection of anti-war objects.

Neale told me the curatorial focus would remain in tune with the memorial's emphasis on personal storytelling of "those who've served and their experiences".

"We're looking at psychological trauma, the impact on families of those who've served, those who return and those who die."

In the existing galleries, this approach depoliticises and neutralises the militaristic messaging. The issue is whose stories are selected. "They're telling the laudable stories that you can feel proud about," says Stanley. "Rarely do they talk about challenging stories." With the recent conflicts, he continues, "we were all out there with placards calling on 'no war'. So the thing is, what proportion should [the anti-war representation] occupy [in the new gallery], what scale should it be at?"

These are appropriate considerations: at their very core, exhibitions communicate their narratives through spatial dimensions of form, shape, scale, proportion, and the selection and balance of museum artefacts.

Neale says the Hornet fighter jet will provide "a lot of visual impact and will take up a lot of space in the gallery". This seems in keeping with the Memorial's narrow focus on veterans, service people and the type of war-buff trophies historian Douglas Newton described to me as "catering to schoolboy wonderment in weaponry". In his 2019 submission to the Memorial during its consultation period, Newton proffered an alternative institutional vision, "to mount exhibitions that constantly explore the very deepest questions about our military engagements: How do we get into war? Why do wars persist? To what end are they fought? How can we limit them? This ought to involve exhibitions that go far beyond exploring our record of military endeavour."

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