

Our glorious tradition of being not very good at fighting wars



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One of the many things Australians should consider as they contemplate our nationhood on the day set aside for this purpose is our glorious tradition of being not very good at fighting wars. We boast of our military traditions, our baptisms of fire and of our long traditions of unquestioning obedience and eager anticipation of the needs of various great and powerful friends.

But our military accomplishments have not done us much good at home and abroad. Nor has our history, our past, or our massive investment in military hardware and software succeeded in making us feared by our potential enemies, or neighbours who could one day be enemies. Nor has our willingness to put it at the service of the causes of other countries led to our being much respected by our friends.

The legends and myths of our military nationalism are founded on our participation in a complete defeat at Gallipoli in 1915. But it was not one in which Australian participation was ever much significant, except to ourselves. There were seven times as many British soldiers, including Indian Army soldiers, engaged than there were Australians, and 50 per cent more French troops than Australians. The ANZACs were about 15 per cent of an invading force outnumbering the defenders by about 50 per cent. The expedition was a complete failure.

ANZAC participation at the Western Front occasionally saw Australians engaged in significant battles, but almost always without any participation in the higher councils of the war. Our high casualty rate may have been more a function of this lack of a voice, and often, the lack of an expressed political demand for one, rather than it was of our celebrated military prowess.

The great war was devastating for Australia, leaving it physically and economically broken. In our next significant engagements, leaving out the debacle of Australian participation in the Russian civil war after the Bolshevik Revolution, was our complete defeat in the Emu War in Western Australia.

Australians had a somewhat more significant WWII, though engagements in North Africa, Greece and Syria tended to get lost in British propaganda about what Empire troops were doing, and Australia again fought largely unsuccessfully for any place in the direction of the war. After the collapse of Singapore, in part as a result of such failures, Australia turned to the United States for help, and was content to let the Americans and the British set the priorities, the strategies, and to allocate the military and economic resources. "Australia" and "Australian" were mostly absent from US military press statements. American generals had no great regard for Australian prowess, and, by 1943, had largely dealt Australia out of its war, leaving to it unnecessary mopping up operations.

Our biggest handicap is believing our own bullshit about our military glory.

That set a pattern for three continuing features of our independence, our sovereignty, and our capacity for believing our own bullshit, and believing that our own interests were best secured when our military served the interests of our allies rather than our own. Australians fought and died in Korea, in Vietnam, in Iraq and Afghanistan, without ever having any significant say in what "our side" was doing. None of our battles, and most of our sacrifice, made any difference to grand-scale outcomes. Small-scale skirmishes may have caused temporary local differences, but nothing we did changed the strategic situation.

Where we were not comprehensively defeated, (as we were in Vietnam and Afghanistan) we did not prevail. Our presence did no good, and left no more lasting impression than after a finger is dipped in water. The only plus is our expensive purchase of what we hoped would be moral credit with the US.

To wonder whether that should go on the credit side is not to deride the service of Australian men and women in harm's way. It is, however, to question the wisdom and nationalism of our politicians and officials. And the calibre of our intelligence establishment and their capacity to see situations through Australian eyes. And the loyalty of our senior military officers to national interests and to the young men and women under their command.

So caught have all of these been in the thrall of an uncertain alliance, that it is doubtful whether the nation would be capable of defending itself alone against any of six or seven formidable powers in our region, were they minded to attack us.

Mercifully, none of them seem greatly minded to attack or invade us. That's because their interests and ours are not, at the moment at least, in any significant conflict. That includes China, our major trading partner, with whom we have a big trading surplus. We are constantly getting ourselves in

arguments on behalf of a great and powerful friend which has big trading deficits with China and sees matters through a different lens.

Our neighbourhood also includes rich and powerful nations such as Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and India. These are nations with which we trade, in whose prosperity we are invested, and with which we do not have any significant political differences. Deft partnership and friendship with each - falling well short of demanding that they take sides in super-power politics - could balance these nations in a way that bolstered our mutual defence. It might serve a common good rather more than an international alliance no longer centred on any moral force or pursuit of international good.

But our long ingrained fears of running too far from US policy, and our pattern of acting as a surrogate for American power, reduces both our diplomatic power in the region, and outside recognition that we have interests of our own once we come to see them. That some Australians, and some Americans, see Australia as a bastion of white western civilisation, unfortunately (for us) parked in an essentially hostile Asia, aggravates the external distrust of motives and our sincerity. It also causes contempt for our seeming incapacity to recognise our own interest, or our ambivalence about how we should face the world.

It can be assumed that all of these countries, as well as other significant players such as the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Myanmar, are constantly watching events, including the way in which the US and China are positioning themselves, with keen regard for their short-, medium- and long-term interests. It can also be assumed that most are realists, seeking a place in the game that reflects what they can reasonably hope and expect in the circumstances, rather than what they would prefer as some sort of abstraction. Most are in dialogue with all of the players, and at pains to press their view of their interests, if not always frank about their dealings and understandings of others. Our half-hearted nationalism significantly diminishes the status of our nation. The Australia we are invited to celebrate is a second-rate nation long given to subcontracting its foreign and defence policy to other countries.

Our friends and neighbours wonder why we are so blind to our own interests.

In recent times Penny Wong has been trying to open a wider front with most of our neighbours, suggesting that our vision of our place in Asia is more mature than our defence positioning suggests, and that our economic, social and cultural relationships also inform the nation's thinking. Alas, that has not stopped the continuation of eight or more years of fairly open prediction of and effective campaigning for war with China by some in the intelligence establishment. Nor continuing efforts to sabotage trade and commercial arrangements and intellectual exchanges, and the promotion of

defence equipment purchases and force configurations that work on the assumption that war is inevitable. The submarine purchase is only the most ridiculous part of this, since it commits Australia to acting on the side of the US if at some time more than a decade away China-US conflict escalates into open hostilities. We are likewise configuring our air forces, including missile systems, into acting as squadrons of US operations, and our soldiers into fitting into American formations.

Anthony Albanese's belief, or pretence, that Australia could preserve its sovereignty and independence of action in such circumstances, or that Australians, as Australians, would be closely involved in military decision making is a delusion.

Just as dangerous is the prospect that some occasion occurs when America, for some reason, is not by our side. This could be soon, if Donald Trump becomes, as he threatens, more isolationist, or if later, as US Pacific power withers, and its concern for the territorial integrity or fair treatment of old allies declines. It has happened before, as in 1963, when the US abandoned Australian interests to prefer Indonesian interests over the future of Irian Jaya - a fact that may have made Australia even more servile, rather than more cautious, in going into Vietnam. If Australia has to look first to its own resources, rather than allies, to defend its continent, it would not be looking for a small number of nuclear submarines under effective US control.

Australia Day has become greatly Americanised. For many it is no longer a public holiday marking the end of the summer holidays. Instead some civic leaders have been demanding flags, hands on hearts, and belligerent expressions of nationalism, mostly typified by clear hostilities to fresh immigrants. Opposition politicians, particularly Peter Dutton, have seized on this as a part of their expressed war on woke. They are trying to create populist communities of discontent in working-class constituencies. He has explicitly linked this with the successful campaign against the "yes" vote at the Voice referendum. His fake war on Woolworths because of its failure (on commercial grounds) to have masses of cheap Chinese tat was a reflex appeal to the yobbo vote. It was not an appeal to mob sensibility but an invitation to mob violence.

Most Australians are not into fake or enthusiastic patriotism, and are repulsed by flag-wearing displays by aggressively "Australian" (which is to say white) youths, challenging the credential of, and seeking conflict with groups seen as insufficiently nationalist, and critical of the status quo. Implicitly their enemies are recent migrants or those able to be vilified on gender, sexuality or intellectual grounds. There's always an implied violence - and licence for violence - when demagogues are seeking to turn distaste for political correctness into active mobilisation of people who think they are against it. Experience has shown that conventional political parties cannot contain, control or steer such folk; instead the parties

become controlled by them. Ask sober Republicans in the United States, who have looked upon the enemy and discovered it to be themselves. These are groups who are seeking to divide Australians, not unite them. In their short-term efforts to organise them into grievance constituencies, Peter Dutton and his colleagues are undermining any sense of decency and common purpose in the body politic. These "patriots" will not be lining up to volunteer to fight a war to defend their nation, if only because they will have annihilated most of the concepts that have kept the community together. Equally they will have completed the destruction of many of the institutions, including the educational ones, that sustain society and a sense of community. One of the paradoxes of modern Australia is that it has been political conservatives such as Scott Morrison and Peter Dutton who have done most to undermine any sense of collective responsibility or mutual protection.

That's a process in any event happening because of the failure of many on the Albanese side of politics to articulate national ideals, vision and purpose, or explain why they are doing what they do.

Robert Manne once said that the sense of Australianness said to have been born at Anzac embraced concepts of endurance, courage, ingenuity, good humour, larrikinism and mateship. Our soldiers are perceived to have been innocent and fit, stoical and laconic, irreverent in the face of authority, naturally egalitarian and disdainful of British class differences.

Essentially collectivist too. Trade union types, not rugged individualists. It's by no means clear that such virtues can be galvanised by a former policeman from Queensland, recruited and formed in his opinions in a day when almost all such instincts led to arrest, and often an informal flogging. The war on woke and the war against Woolworths may command many battalions, but I expect that, in the grand Australian (and Australia Day) tradition, they will be routed by Australian convents of nuns, colonies of fairy penguins, kangaroos and, now that they have regrouped, emus. The most effective bullets will be satire and laughter.

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