

Preface

'Victory has a thousand fathers, defeat is an orphan'. The story of how Australia embarked on political and military defeat in Vietnam, based on official files not previously accessed and making use of the latest American historiography, does not, however, lack claimants to paternity.

In June 2002 the Australian Defence College directed my attention to the continuing relevance of many of the factors associated with the Australian government entering the Vietnam war by inviting me to participate in a seminar on the approaching war in Iraq. Common features immediately apparent included the dominance of the Prime Minister, decisions made in secret by a small group of Ministers obedient to him, minds closed against area expertise, preference for party political advantage over bipartisanship, and willing subservience to and some credulity about an ally, the United States. They pointed to an Australian conservative mindset of astonishing durability.

Adlai Stevenson, for whom Australia's Richard Casey wept when he lost the 1952 American Presidential election, said during the campaign that 'we can chart our future clearly and wisely only when we know the path which has led to the present'. Comparison of the national decision-making process over Vietnam with that leading up to Australia's commitment to Iraq provides many pointers to history repeating itself. Fifty are listed at Appendix. They fall within five categories: decision-making methodology; public handling; decision-makers' assumptions; military factors' predominance, despite their not being thought through; and courses not considered or chosen.

Readers will surely wish to make their own lists and to add to them as new evidence emerges on how the decisions were made to go to war in Iraq, and new justifications are advanced. For instance, on 5 February 2004 President George W Bush compared himself with Winston Churchill standing alone against Nazism. It was necessary to

demonise Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein as a Hitler after the original justification for the war, the imminent threat from weapons of mass destruction, became invalid. In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson made a similar self-comparison. The fact that it was the British Commonwealth which stood alone in the dark days of 1940 makes the comparison an uneasy one. Yet it was Robert Menzies, Australian Prime Minister in 1940 and again in 1965, who first compared Johnson to Churchill.

The National Archives of Australia (NAA) gave me an opportunity to research decision-making on Vietnam as part of my ongoing study of the foreign policy process by awarding me the Frederick Watson Fellowship. The many files of the Department of External Affairs (DEA), now Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, raised by its individual Divisions, have to be collated and put together with those of other departments to build up a comprehensive picture of decision-making on Vietnam. Some are still being cleared for release. NAA has now digitised the major files for ready access. For foreign researchers it will overcome 'the tyranny of distance'.

At the end of 2002 Michael Sexton provided a stimulus to research by republishing, almost unchanged, his justly acclaimed 1981 book *War for the Asking: Australia's Vietnam Secrets*, using American documents, as *War for the Asking: How Australia Invited Itself to Vietnam*. Despite the impression created by the new sub-title, he had had no recourse to Australian files to throw a national light on the self-invitation. This did not seem fair to 'the new generation of readers' to which Sexton avowedly appealed, nor to NAA, where the files had been available under the thirty-year rule from 1994/5, nor to those about whom he wrote. One unchanged section titled 'The Public Service' reiterates his conclusion that the initiative for sending an Australian battalion to Vietnam came from 'the Minister or the Department of External Affairs or both'. An examination of the files does not support the reference to the department. Vietnam was not, as he and others claim, the department's war.

I appreciate that many readers will share a reservation expressed by the doyenne of official diplomatic historians, Peter Edwards, in *Australian Book Review* in May 2003, that 'as a former member of the department during this time, (I am) not a purely disinterested observer'. I ask that I not be prejudged with the famous Thatcherite dismissal 'well, he would, wouldn't he?' Former participants to whatever degree in any aspect of the Vietnam war *are* different. They write about it with a heavy heart and feelings of inadequacy. Nevertheless, I have sought to meet the historian's standards for providing the evidence, so that readers can make up their own minds about the relative performances of politicians, military commanders, and officials from three departments, Prime Minister's, External Affairs and Defence.

Decisions by countries to go to war can be viewed in a long or a short historical perspective. I have adopted the approach of recent American historians of the vital decision-making period in Vietnam by choosing to focus on a relatively short time frame. I start with 1959, when Australia made its first decision to be prepared to go to war in Indo-China with if necessary only one great ally, the US, and without Commonwealth partners.

The 1959 Laos crisis coincides with Garfield Barwick's first experience acting as Minister for External Affairs and provides immediate evidence of his generally overlooked individuality. Comparing 'the Barwick years', 1959-64, with the following twelve months May 1964-April 1965, in which his successor Paul Hasluck fulfilled his aim for Australia to go to war alongside America in Vietnam, sets the scene for my final chapter, a counter-factual. This examines a no doubt surprising scenario, but one stated forcefully to me by External Affairs' greatest servant, Arthur Tange, with whom I had many discussions in retirement, that 'Barwick would not have got us into war in Vietnam'.

As this book is another essay in rehabilitating Barwick's reputation as Foreign Minister, I should say that I was but a distant 'observer' of him in action. I attended his departmental farewell. With his successor known, some of the emotion of that occasion was akin to General Douglas MacArthur's 'old soldiers fade away' address to Congress, which left not a dry eye on the Democrats' side nor a dry seat on the Republican. But the feelings were, in my experience of such occasions, uniquely genuine. Barwick therefore is the final father of this book and this my most considered tribute to him as Minister for External Affairs.