



**The Illusion of Victory:
 True Colours of War**
Ian Bickerton
 Melbourne University Press,
 \$36.99

THIS is not just another book on the history of warfare. It's instead a clever and unusual analysis of how we have come to define "victory". It should be a very basic concept, but what does a military "victory" mean? Is it occupying an enemy nation? Or is it just bombing antagonists into submission? Scholar Ian Bickerton marshals a largely convincing argument that the costs of war ultimately outweigh the benefits. He takes evidence from four case studies - Crimea (1856), Russo-Japanese (1905), World War I (1918) and World War II (1945) - and surveys countries 25 years after hostilities ceased. After comparing peace treaties with later geo-political realities, he concludes that there are few real differences between combatant nations. That brings to mind a 1970's joke. When Germany and Japan

powered along while much of the West stagnated, it was often asked, "Who really won the war?". The book is comprehensive, but I like Bickerton's cost-benefit equation to explore ideology more thoroughly. For example, was the defeat of the fascist menace in 1945 really not worth the effort? It's easy to forget the intangible benefits, like liberal democracy, we take for granted every day. Yet Bickerton rightly reminds us that modern conflicts, from Vietnam to Afghanistan, where frontlines are blurred and enemy combatants are hidden among civilians, have made the concept of victory even more elusive. In 2003, US President George W Bush declared "mission accomplished" in Iraq, but what did that mean? There's no "heat of battle" prose in this book, but history

fans will still find it valuable.

Paul Williams

