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The Australian Government and Involvement in the Vietnam War

Peter Edwards

When I say to an American that I am working on a major history of Australia's involvement in the post-1945 southeast Asian conflicts, culminating in the Vietnam war, I usually meet one of two reactions. The first is obvious surprise that Australia was involved in Vietnam. When Americans refer to Vietnam, they generally mean "the United States in Vietnam". American histories of the war, whether intended for a popular or a scholarly readership, usually have little to say about the involvement of allies. The proverbial visitor from outer space could read books totalling hundreds, even thousands, of pages on how the United States became involved and, with only the briefest lapses in concentration, not become aware that American allies were present at all. The second reaction is usually encountered from Americans who themselves served in Vietnam. They often have no difficulty in recalling that Australians were present in Vietnam, a recollection generally accompanied by a smile and something similar to the words: "Boy, could those guys put away beer!"

The ability of Americans to recall whether Australians fought with them in Vietnam is more important than it may seem. One of the fundamental motives for Australian involvement was to produce a sense of gratitude on the part of Americans, both in official circles and in the general public. It was, to use a phrase much used at the time, an insurance policy, a premium paid in Vietnam towards an assurance of support for Australia against problems which already existed or which might arise in the future, possibly even closer to Australia's shores. But it was more than just an insurance policy. Australia had its own concerns about communism in southeast Asia, concerns that ran parallel to those of the United States. Policy-makers in Australia's capital, Canberra, supported the domino theory as vigorously as their counterparts in Washington. Indeed, the concern was probably even greater because in its more extreme versions (including President Dwight D. Eisenhower's celebrated statement of April 1954) Australia itself was seen as one of the last dominoes in the sequence that began in Indochina.

At the same time, a small to middle power located on the fringes of southeast Asia inevitably had different priorities from those of a superpower an ocean away from Indochina. There were therefore both similarities and differences between the paths taken by the United States and Australia towards involvement in Vietnam. This paper is

intended to give an overview, for an American readership, of some of those parallels and differences.¹

To set out the major steps in the development of Australian policy will indicate many of the parallels. Australia recognized the state of Vietnam, established with French sponsorship under the former emperor Bao Dai, on 8 February 1950, the day after the United Kingdom and the United States had done so. Australian officials were well aware of the fragility of the State of Vietnam, and of the strong popular support for the rival Democratic Republic of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh; but in the interests of the worldwide struggle against communism, the Australian Government felt it had no choice but to support the Bao Dai gamble. In 1953 it invited Jean Letourneau, the French minister in charge of relations with the Associated States (as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were then known), to visit Australia. Letourneau was offered arms and equipment for the French war in Indochina. The matériel that was eventually sent in 1953 and 1954 largely comprised obsolescent equipment, and was in any case a token gesture by comparison with the enormous economic and military assistance being given by the United States. Nevertheless, Australia was clearly signalling that it regarded the war in Indochina, not as merely a colonial rearguard action by France, but as a struggle between communism and democracy (or, at least, potential democracy).

In 1954 Australia had only observer status at the Geneva Conference, where its main diplomacy was sorely tested by the attempt simultaneously to maintain close and cordial relations with both the United Kingdom and the United States. Immediately after the Geneva accords, Canberra shared the widespread pessimism over the future of the non-communist regimes in Indochina, and unhesitatingly became a founder member of the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) at Manila. In the late 1950s, Australia shared the growing optimism over Ngo Dinh Diem's apparent success in sustaining the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). In 1957, soon after visiting the United States to be hailed as a "miracle man" by Eisenhower, Diem became the first foreign head of state to visit Australia, where his welcome was almost equally enthusiastic.

As the communist-led insurgency grew in the early 1960s, Australian military involvement ran parallel to that of the United States, albeit on a far smaller scale. A team of advisers, initially comprising 30 officers and non-commissioned officers, was committed in 1962, growing to 83 in 1964 and 100 in 1965. In April 1965 the first battalion of infantry was committed to Vietnam. In 1966 the commitment was increased to a two-battalion Task Force, and in 1967 the Task Force was further augmented by a third battalion. Units of the Royal Australian Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force were also committed. At the height of the war Australia had about 8000 service personnel in Vietnam at any one time. In 1971 the withdrawal of the Task Force began and by the end of

1972 virtually all Australian military personnel had been withdrawn, apart from an embassy guard. In all, about 50,000 service personnel served in Vietnam and 500 lost their lives.²

All of this will sound familiar, suggesting perhaps a microcosmic imitation of the American commitment. But there were significant differences between Australia's and America's paths to Vietnam. The first concerns the role of the Australian-American relationship itself, a topic obviously of much greater concern to Canberra than to Washington. While Australian policy-makers shared much of the American perception of a threat of communist expansionism in southeast Asia, they were as conscious of Australia's weakness as the United States was of its military might. If critics of American policy referred to "the arrogance of power", critics of Australian attitudes referred to the "frightened country", the nation that had an almost pathological fear of being "the last domino".³ Curiously, given the longstanding fears in the Australian community of threats from the north, much of the weakness was self-induced. In the early 1950s, during the Korean War, serious efforts were made to improve Australia's defence capacity but thereafter, for the remainder of the decade, defence expenditure was kept artificially low. The Government argued that its most useful contribution to the struggle against communism was to develop the country's economic base; investment was therefore directed towards "national development" rather than to defence.

This kind of thinking lay behind the frequent references by Robert Gordon (from 1963 Sir Robert) Menzies, Prime Minister from 1949 to 1966, to the importance of Australia's "great and powerful friends", by which he meant principally the United States and the United Kingdom. The Menzies Government took the view that Australia, with its vast territory and small population, could not defend itself, but relied on its alliances, principally SEATO, ANZUS (the Australian-New Zealand-United States security treaty signed in 1951) and to a lesser extent ANZAM (an Australian-New Zealand-United Kingdom defence arrangement for the Malayan area). This reliance on allies, however, led to another fear, that the great and powerful friends might withdraw from the region, leaving Australia isolated and defenceless as the dominoes fell. The United States and the United Kingdom could never leave the north Atlantic, but they could leave southeast Asia. SEATO was therefore seen from the outset as a less reliable shield than NATO. From the negotiation of the Manila treaty, Australians expressed concern over whether SEATO had sufficient "teeth", by which they meant principally whether it was a sufficiently strong guarantee of United States military support in times of need.

Much of Australia's effort in defence and foreign policy was aimed therefore at trying to ensure that the United States would retain its presence in southeast Asia. These efforts were further encouraged in the late 1950s and early 1960s by signs that the United Kingdom was likely

to withdraw its forces from east of Suez, in order to concentrate on developing its relations with the European continent. At the same time, both the United Kingdom and France were becoming increasingly reluctant to support western military intervention in Indochina, making SEATO look even more "toothless". Strange as it may now seem, the underlying concern of the Australian Government in the early 1960s was that the new Democratic administration of John F. Kennedy might not share the determination of its Republican predecessor to resist communist expansionism in southeast Asia. Despite the obvious signs that Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, were steadily raising the stakes in Vietnam, this fear persisted.

The congressional resolution secured by Johnson after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 was welcomed by Menzies in the Australian federal government's lower house, the House of Representatives, with an almost tangible sense of relief, as a sign that the United States was irrevocably committed to maintaining the security of southeast Asia.⁴ Even so, traces of the fear of American withdrawal persisted. In the diplomatic exchanges of late 1964 and early 1965 the Australian Government offered a battalion of combat troops when the United States had not even asked specifically for assistance in that form. It was as much an encouragement to the United States to stay the course as it was a response to years of pressure from Washington to show that Vietnam was a cause for the whole "free world", not just for the United States.

Indeed, one Australian historian has argued that Johnson might not have made the major American troop commitments in 1965 had he not received such strong and consistent encouragement from Australia.⁵ This seems rather unlikely. In all the thousands of words that have been written on United States intervention in Vietnam, based on incalculable amounts of research on official and private records, no-one has seriously suggested that Australia had such a crucial influence on United States policy. That is not to deny that Johnson undoubtedly welcomed the strong support he received from Australia, when so much of the rest of the world was turning against him. There was clearly a genuine personal as well as political rapport between Johnson and Menzies' successor, Harold Holt, which was made manifest in 1966 when Johnson became the first incumbent United States president to visit Australia. The visit became a triumphal procession, paving the way for Holt's huge election victory later in the year. When Holt drowned, in an apparent accident, at the end of 1967, Johnson again visited Australia, this time to attend the funeral. His personal attendance was a notable mark of respect and friendship, but there is little evidence to suggest that Australia had any significant effect on the course of American policy, other than to confirm Johnson on a course he had already chosen.

While much has been written about the cordiality of Australian-American relations in the Vietnam period, and about the degree to which either party was pushed or pulled into commitment by the other, another

aspect has been less noticed. While Australia had been afraid that the United States might withdraw from the region, it also had a recurring fear that Washington had not always thought through the implications of its policies, running the risk of precipitating a wider war. During the Indochina crisis of 1954, Australia was clearly concerned by the possibility that the "united action" which Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was encouraging might lead to a larger war, possibly including China, and also possibly leading to the use of nuclear weapons. Similarly, during the Laos crisis of 1961, Australian ministers feared that western intervention might provoke a massive response from North Vietnam and China, in turn leading to pressure by the western military commanders for the use of nuclear weapons. This fear was a recurring theme in Australian consideration of policy towards southeast Asia in the late 1950s and early 1960s, although it was generally suppressed beneath the greater fear of the spread of communism.

But the Australian fear of the expansion of communism through southeast Asia was not confined to the possible fall of the "dominoes" on the mainland, running from Vietnam through Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and Thailand to Malaya. Australians were usually at least as concerned with Indonesia as with Indochina. This highly populated country, geographically so close to Australia, was not seen as simply another domino. Australian policy-makers always recognized that the struggle between communists and anti-communists in Indonesia was largely separate from that on the mainland, and of much greater importance to Australia. Developments there took on added urgency in the late 1950s, as President Sukarno raised the pressure in his campaign to incorporate western New Guinea, which had remained in Dutch hands after the rest of the Netherlands East Indies had gained independence as the Republic of Indonesia. Success in this campaign would mean that Australia in a sense shared a land border with Indonesia, because Australia administered the eastern half of the island of New Guinea under a United Nations mandate. If the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) subsequently came to power, Australia could thus find itself cheek-by-jowl with a populous country under communist control, without the comfortable insulation of the miles of land and sea between mainland Australia and mainland southeast Asia.

The major difficulty for Australia was that, on this issue, Canberra and Washington did not see eye-to-eye. The United States did not support Dutch and Australian opposition to the Indonesian claim to western New Guinea. On the contrary, it saw acquiescence in this expansion as the best way to keep Indonesia in the non-communist camp. Particularly after the end of 1961, the United States facilitated the transfer of power in western New Guinea, nominally under the aegis of the United Nations, from the Dutch to the Indonesians. Australia could do nothing but accept the inevitable with as much grace as possible.

These events underlined the extent to which Australia, by restricting its defence expenditure in favour of economic development, had made itself dependent on the goodwill of the United States. Consequently in the early 1960s the Australian Government took every step it could to try to win that goodwill. It informed Washington that it would do everything possible to meet any American requests for base facilities on Australian soil. Several such agreements were reached, providing for co-operation between defence and civilian agencies in communications, space research and meteorology. The most important was the approval in 1962 for a Very Low Frequency (VLF) naval communications station at North-West Cape in Western Australia, to facilitate communications to United States submarines operating in the Indian Ocean. The Australian Government took a very compliant attitude to this request, determined to allow no obstacle to the creation of a facility which would further commit the United States to the defence of Australia and its region.

It was in this context that Australia considered American requests in the early 1960s for advisers and other forms of civilian and military assistance in South Vietnam. At the same time, it was receiving similar requests for support for the new nation of Malaysia, formed in 1963 by joining Malaya, Singapore and former British territories on the island of Borneo. The Indonesians had declared a policy of "Confrontation" towards Malaysia, involving diplomatic opposition and small-scale military harassment. Britain, Australia and New Zealand were supporting Malaysia, but once again the Americans were reluctant to take steps that would antagonize the Indonesians. The linkage between Vietnam and Indonesia in Australian minds was most clearly demonstrated in May 1964, when the Johnson administration made a concerted effort to have "more flags" in Vietnam. The *Chargé d'Affaires* at the Australian Embassy in Washington, Alan Renouf, reported to Canberra that United States policy on the Indonesian-Malaysian Confrontation was not as "firm" (that is, supportive of Malaysia) as Australia would wish. Vietnam, he therefore suggested, was an area where Australia could pick up credit in Washington. Australia should seek "to achieve such an habitual closeness of relations with the United States and sense of mutual alliance that in our time of need . . . the United States would have little option but to respond as we would want".⁶

The relationship between Australian policy towards Indochina, especially Vietnam, and that towards Indonesia was complex, especially in late 1964 and early 1965. Australian policy makers had to balance pressure from the United Kingdom, to give greater military support to Malaysia against Indonesia, against pressure from the United States, to support its effort in South Vietnam. The commitment of an Australian battalion of combat troops to Vietnam in April 1965 is widely remembered, having been seen at the time and ever since as a significant step in Australian defence and foreign policies. By contrast, the similar

commitment of another battalion only a few weeks earlier, to support the British and Malaysian effort in Borneo, has generally been forgotten. The crucial decisions on Vietnam by Australian policy-makers were taken in an atmosphere of conflicting pressures from two "great and powerful friends" over two different conflicts in southeast Asia. Indeed, uppermost in their minds at some crucial times was the possibility of a third conflict, which they thought might be precipitated by Indonesian subversion and infiltration into the Australian-administered territories in eastern New Guinea. We now know that this never came to pass, just as we know that the Indonesian-Malaysian Confrontation eased in late 1965 and formally ended in 1966; but that could not be foreseen by the policy-makers in late 1964 and early 1965.

Another element marks a major difference in the paths by which the United States and Australia came to be in Vietnam. Unlike the United States, Australia had been involved in the campaign against communist insurgents in Malaya in the 1950s, generally known as the Malayan Emergency. When the state of emergency was declared in 1948 the Australian Government, under Labor Prime Minister, J.B. (Ben) Chifley, had resisted pressure from London to give military support to the battle against the insurgency, but in 1950 the newly elected Liberal Government, under Prime Minister Menzies, sent bombers and transport aircraft of the Royal Australian Air Force.⁷ In 1955 the commitment was significantly increased when Australia sent troops and other elements from all three armed services to Malaya, to join British and New Zealand elements in forming the Commonwealth Far East Strategic Reserve. These forces helped the British and Malayan forces fighting the insurgents, both before and after Malaya gained its independence in 1957, and until the Emergency was declared over in 1960.

In several respects the commitment was comparable with that in Vietnam in the 1960s. Australia was responding to a request from one of its great and powerful friends to intervene in a campaign to put down a communist insurgency in the jungles of southeast Asia, in a country which was, or had been, a European colony. It saw the conflict as a theatre of the Cold War, not as the suppression of Asian nationalism. Australia had reservations about the wisdom of some of the tactics used by its major ally, but having taken the decision to intervene it remained a firm and loyal ally.

During the early years of the commitment in Malaya there were critics who argued that Australia was placing itself on the wrong side of Asian nationalism. This western military intervention, they claimed, would make Australia highly unpopular as soon as British colonial rule was replaced by an independent government. This claim was disproved when Malaya gained its independence in 1957 and its freely elected government asked the Australian and other Commonwealth forces to stay. They did so, and in 1960 the Australian Government could claim part of the credit for a success. The communist insurgency had been

defeated and Malaya had an independent, pro-western government with which Australia had excellent relations. On the basis of this experience, it was understandable that a few years later the Australian Government was inclined to believe that intervention in Vietnam need not necessarily lead to disaster; while the critics who rightly pointed to the dangers of involvement in Vietnam had had their credibility weakened, like the boy who cried "Wolf".

This is not to say that Australians saw the commitment in Vietnam as simply a repetition of the successful venture in Malaya. The ethnic, geographic, religious, political, military and other differences, which made the position in Vietnam so much more difficult for the west, were well understood before the principal Australian commitment was made.⁸ Nevertheless there is evidence that the comparison was very much in Australian minds. When considering precedents for the position in Vietnam, Americans generally thought of Korea, while Australians remembered Malaya.

This raises the question of public attitudes. This paper is concerned essentially with governmental decisions, but in a parliamentary democracy these decisions must take note of the attitudes of both the Opposition in Parliament and extra-parliamentary groups. For the Australian Labor Party (ALP) these were the years in the wilderness, as it remained out of office at the federal level from 1949 to 1972. The length of ALP exclusion was caused largely by a major split in 1955, when a section of the party broke away and subsequently formed the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). The DLP, predominantly Catholic in membership, was vehemently anti-communist in both domestic and foreign policy, accusing the ALP of being too sympathetic to communists. Although the number of seats won by the DLP in federal and state parliaments was small, their influence on the outcome of elections was considerable because of the preferential nature of Australian electoral systems. The existence of the DLP was therefore an additional reason for the government to maintain a resolutely anti-communist stance in foreign affairs.

The ALP was weakened in the late 1950s and early 1960s not only by this split, but by divisions within its own ranks. Although factions within the party were not then as institutionalized as they later became, there was a clear division between a left and a right wing, made particularly obvious by the issue of the VLF station at North-West Cape. The left was suspicious of the United States and reluctant to be associated in any way with nuclear weapons; the right emphasized its loyalty to the American alliance and was not far from holding the same views as the government in most aspects of foreign policy. As policy towards southeast Asia came towards the top of the political agenda in the 1960s, this division vitiated the ALP's criticisms of the government's policies. Not until after the government had committed the first battalion of combat troops did the ALP unite behind a firm policy of opposition to

the commitment. Its leader, Arthur A. Calwell, gave a powerful, and in some respects prescient, speech foreshadowing many of the problems that were to become evident in later years;⁹ but by this time it was much too late to have any effect on government policy.

Outside Parliament there were several groups who could together be categorized as an anti-war movement, but they remained on the margins of politics in the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1949 an Australian Peace Council was formed, effectively a branch of the World Peace Council, bringing together communists, Christians and intellectuals. In the 1950s this council organized a major congress, at which the principal guest speaker was the Dean of Canterbury, England, Dr Hewlett Johnson, widely known as "the Red Dean" for his admiration for Stalin and the Soviet Union. In a highly publicized and controversial tour of Australia, Johnson described communism as "a Christian movement that is surging upward in every part of the world" and he advised Australia not to become involved in an "imperialistic" war, "a war against the people" in Malaya.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, Menzies and other conservatives came to regard the clergymen and other non-communists in the anti-war groups as naive dupes of the communists, used to provide a respectable front for a movement which existed essentially to support Soviet policies and oppose those of the west. Thus, when a group of Anglican bishops wrote to Menzies in early 1965 to urge him to support a negotiated rather than a military solution in Vietnam, they were given little credibility.¹¹ Their arguments had decidedly more substance than those of Dr Johnson and the clergymen known as "the peace parsons" in the 1950s, but the Government and the public had become accustomed to dismissing views from this quarter as naive and ill-founded.

In fact the anti-war movement by the mid-1960s was becoming much less the exclusive property of those who adopted a basically pro-Soviet line. The Communist Party of Australia was much weaker than it had been in the years immediately after the 1939-1945 war, and middle-class liberals were beginning to draw attention to issues in and around the Pacific, such as Chinese and French nuclear tests, rather than more remote concerns like Algeria and Cuba. Congresses in 1959 and 1964 helped to give the movement a stronger administrative structure, but this was not to become evident until later. As late as October 1964, just before the introduction of conscription and six months before the principal commitment to Vietnam, an anti-war congress seemed as ineffectual and marginal as ever. It was only after the first conscripts were sent to Vietnam in 1966 that a significant protest movement emerged. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the Government could claim broad public support for its policy of close alliance with the United States and the United Kingdom in opposition, by military means if necessary, to the expansion of communist influence in southeast Asia.

Australia, therefore, came to be involved in Vietnam by a path that was similar, but by no means identical, to that of the United States.

Australian policy was not merely a clone or an echo of that of its superpower ally. Australian policy-makers had their own concerns and took their own decisions. They deserve the credit for those decisions that proved wise, and they cannot escape the blame for those that proved unwise.

¹ The evidence on which this paper is based will be found in the writer's forthcoming volume, provisionally entitled *Crises and Commitments: Australian Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1965*, which will form part of the Official History of Australia's involvement in the Malayan Emergency, the Indonesian-Malaysian Confrontation and the Vietnam War.

² The precise number of participants, and the breakdown of types of casualty figures is contained in the table given in footnote 5 in Jane Ross. "Veterans in Australia: the Search for Integration", in this volume, : 50-73..

³ Alan Renouf. *The Frightened Country*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1979; Malcolm Booker. *The Last Domino, Aspects of Australia's Foreign Relations*, Collins, Sydney, 1976.

⁴ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, vol. H[ouse]of R[epresentatives] 43, 13 August 1964, pp.184-5.

⁵ Glen St. J. Barclay. *A Very Small Insurance Policy: The Politics of Australian Involvement in Vietnam, 1954-1967*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1988.

⁶ The cable is quoted extensively in Michael Sexton. *War for the Asking: Australia's Vietnam Secrets*, Penguin, Ringwood, pp. 44-45.

⁷ See Peter Edwards. "The Australian commitment to the Malayan emergency, 1948-1950", *Historical Studies*, 22, (No.89), October 1987, pp. 604-16.

⁸ See, for example, the comments by Liberal (that is, conservative) Member of Parliament, sometime Minister of Defence, and Prime Minister from 1975-1983, Malcolm Fraser in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, vol. H of R 43, 13 August 1964, p. 194.

⁹ A.A. Calwell in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, vol. H of R 46, 4 May 1965, pp.1102-07.

¹⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17, 20, 21, 24 and 26 April 1950.

¹¹ The exchange of letters was published as *Vietnam: Exchange of Letters between the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Menzies, K.T., C.H., M.P., and the Rt. Rev. J.S. Moyes, C.M.G., and certain Archbishops and Bishops*, Prime Minister's Department, Canberra, 20 April 1965.