

# ***THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1962-1972***

## ***HOW HISTORY WORKS: AFTERTHOUGHTS***

**Peter Edwards**

The best description of history that I know is that history is a debate between the present and the past about the future. That captures something very important. History is not something static, engraved in stone; it is an ongoing debate, with new questions constantly arising from the present and new answers arising from new evidence and approaches.

We can see something of this process in the enormous number of publications on the Vietnam War that have emerged from the United States over, say, the last three decades. In the 1970s they tended to ask: How did we get into this mess? How could our leaders, the best and brightest of their generation, get it so wrong? In the 1980s, many asked if a distinction could be made between ends and means. Was President Reagan right to say that Vietnam had been 'a noble cause'? Did that mean that, if only this or that change had been made to military or political tactics, the result might have been different? By the 1990s, the Cold War was over and the Soviet Union dissolved. Some then asked if Vietnam should be seen, not as a lost war, but as a lost battle—a major strategic failure within a long war that was eventually won, a little like the fall of Singapore in the Second World War.

To say that these questions were asked, of course, does not mean that they were necessarily given positive answers. There were always those willing to give, so to speak, 1970s answers to 1980s or 1990s questions. For instance, in 2000 I attended a conference in Europe at which there was a session reviewing the history of the Cold War. The contributions were listed as 'The Cold War and the United States', 'The Cold War and Europe' and so on. The speaker on the Cold War and Europe, a distinguished professor from Florence, said, with the effortless arrogance that some Europeans have been perfecting for centuries, that the Cold War was solely a European phenomenon. It was the struggle to fill the vacuum in central Europe caused by the defeat of Nazi Germany. The Cold War, he stated, had no manifestations outside Europe. I then was asked to speak on 'The Cold War and Asia'. I suggested, with due respect to the distinguished professor, that a few million Koreans and a few million Vietnamese might perhaps take a different view.

All these questions are of continuing interest. No doubt there will be new and old, answers given to them now and for years to come. But in the world following September 11, 2001, there is a new emphasis, not least recently Vietnam has been in the news again, not as a noble cause or a phase in the Cold War, but as an example of American interventionism. That is why, when General Cosgrove recently made, in response to a question from the press, some anodyne comments to the effect that, with 20-20 hindsight, the commitment to Vietnam might not have been such a great idea, some media and 'experts' blew it into what even a journalist has described to me as a huge beat-up. Cosgrove, we were told, was giving a coded message to the Government about the dangers of intervention in Iraq. I suspect that, as the Government's principal military adviser, General Cosgrove has all the avenues he needs to give advice without resorting to coded messages at the National Press Club.

But in one sense it is right for Vietnam analogies to be raised. The current position, with the entire world debating whether the United States will and should take action in Iraq, is reminiscent of the position in 1965, when for months the whole world debated whether the United States should send massive numbers of combat forces to Vietnam or should accept that South Vietnam would have to fall. It is noteworthy that, only in the last few years but starting before 11 September 2000, Americans have been showing much more interest than ever before about the international aspects of the Vietnam War, including the diplomatic debates around 1965.

The current discussions of building coalitions, of unilateralism and multilateralism, lead me to think of alliances and allies. We have to remember that the questions and answers about the Vietnam War are not necessarily the same for America's allies as they are for the United States itself. This, in fact, has been one of the principal motivations for having an Australian official history of the war. One of the themes of our official history is precisely the similarities and differences between the Australian and American experiences of the war, in all its aspects—military, political, diplomatic, medical, the home front. What was to be the last volume of the official history, covering the Australian Army's operations after the battle of Long Tan, has been divided into two volumes. They will reaffirm some old views and say some new things about Australia's military involvement.

The question of alliances has many ramifications. Several years ago I happened to be in the United States on Memorial Day. I took the opportunity to visit the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial. This is a fairly new institution that is the nearest thing I have seen to the Australian War Memorial outside Australia. Its centrepiece is a large round room, with its walls holding an immense amount of information on the Vietnam War. It is all there—the background of Vietnamese history, the diplomatic context, the military operations and their complexity, the social context of the sixties and so forth. I was greatly impressed. Only after sometime did it occur to me that one thing seemed to be missing. Unless I missed it, there seemed to be nothing there that indicated that the United States had willing allies in Vietnam—the 'troop contributing countries' that included Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Thailand and others. Does this matter? Since our involvement was based partly on building mutual trust and support between the US and Australia, does it matter if an American memorial does not even acknowledge our presence? Or is it better if we are not associated with what is generally seen as an American disaster? I offer no answers, I just ask the questions.

These, and many others, are questions worth asking, to which new and old answers will be given. For a variety of reasons, they will often be discussed in Australia in publications or conferences sponsored by government agencies, like Army, Defence, the Australian War Memorial, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and so on. The fact that this is so places a premium on the understanding by all the relevant agencies that they must support free, unfettered discussion. For the most part, Australian governments and their official agencies have a very good record in this respect. Since the days of Charles Bean, official war historians have been given assurances that their work would be published without official or political censorship. At political and official levels, this assurance has been honoured, with few significant exceptions. I trust that this will remain the case for all historical work. At present, there are signs that one agency—which will remain unnamed—would like to impose an official line on any discussion of a particular historical episode. If this practice were to be continued—and I am not saying that it has reached this stage—it could become dangerous. I certainly think that any such effort would be inappropriate and unethical. Above all, it would be counter-productive: that is not how history works. Unlike those cynics who say that the only lesson from history is that there are no lessons from history, I respect the military inclination to draw the 'lessons learned' from any significant episode. But the lessons can only be learned if discussion of historical matters is left free, with old and new questions being asked and old and new answers being freely debated.

Much that the Army does in the historical area shows that Army usually gets this right. Indeed, Army seems to understand how history works, perhaps better than some historians. In discussions about the Australian Army and the Vietnam War, therefore, we can expect a continuation of the debate between the past and the present about the future, with new and old questions being raised, new and old answers being given. So it should be.