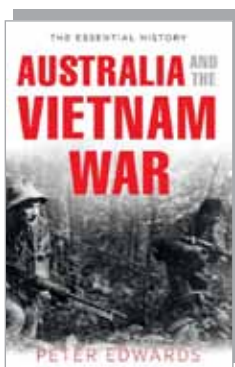


Australia and the Vietnam War: The Essential History

by Peter Edwards
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Reviewed by Trisha Jha



Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War is invariably taught in schools and universities with the assumption of slavish pro-Americanism on the part of Australian governments. This historical narrative has been encapsulated in the enduring nature of quotations like Harold Holt's 'all the way with LBJ' and Bob Askin's alleged 'run the bastards over'.

Peter Edwards effectively repurposes material previously published in the nine volume official history, for which he served as general editor, in this single, readable volume for a twenty-first century audience. It is an important undertaking, because the reality of Australian foreign policy in the immediate post-war decades is more complex than the soft-left conventional wisdom suggests.

Edwards busts many of the myths that abound about the period: that conscription was introduced specifically for Vietnam; that Whitlam ended the war; that Australian involvement in Vietnam was not in Australian interests and, relatedly, that Australia was fighting the United States' war. The last two of these, especially, represent a pernicious rewriting of history.

Insofar as the notion that involvement in Vietnam may have been in Australia's interests is even countenanced, it begins and ends with 'forward defence'. The term describes a strategy where Australia would make small military commitments in the region alongside either the UK or the US (preferably both), and the Australian government would then leverage this participation to shape the overall commitment of senior allies in a way that best reflected Australian interests. This seat at the table would also be used to ensure that should Australia come under threat from an expansionist Indonesia or a southward push of Communism, assistance from its allies would be forthcoming.

This seems more intuitively obvious when it is accepted that Vietnam was, in a very literal sense, in Australia's backyard. The 'domino theory' of Communist expansion was increasingly seen as a threat as Indonesia's Sukarno began to seem more friendly to Communism—should South Vietnam fall to the Communists, it could have implications in Indonesia as well.

Edwards mounts a persuasive case that Australia's interest was to keep the focus and the firepower of superior and better-equipped allies on its own region and within easy reach should tensions with Indonesia escalate. In this way, Australian foreign policy towards Southeast Asia, Vietnam included, was 'refined but not defined' by alliance considerations.

Linked to this is the simplistic idea that Australia was merely following the US into a war in Vietnam. In fact, Australian anxiety about the spread of Communism in Indochina prefigured that of the US in many ways.

This is exemplified in Edwards's discussion of the circumstances surrounding the first Australian infantry deployment. Johnson wrote to Menzies in 1964 requesting further Australian training personnel and instead, Australia offered an infantry battalion and an SAS squadron—though Johnson had made it quite clear that combat troops were not being requested at that time. More importantly, the US had not ultimately settled on the shape their own involvement would take.

This was obviously not a case of Australia merely falling into step behind the US; Australian strategic objectives were playing a bigger role. However, as Edwards notes, by the time both the threat from Indonesia and the threat from Communism had receded somewhat, Australia was too deeply committed to Vietnam to successfully extricate itself.

Though Australia's commitment to Vietnam was shaped by a robust and independent conception of the national interest, Edwards also clearly illustrates that the same cannot necessarily be said of how that commitment was implemented.

To do this, he draws particular distinctions between Australian involvement in Malaya alongside the British and Australian involvement in Vietnam alongside the US. Menzies, and key decision-makers more generally, were sceptical of

aspects of British policy and strategy in Malaya and during Konfrontasi; caution, prudence and scepticism were noticeably scarcer with regards to Vietnam.

Edwards writes that Australian political and military leaders, most notably Menzies, ‘accepted uncritically what the United States said and did about events in Vietnam and its policies there’. He suggests that Menzies simply assumed American military superiority and the viability of the US strategy and ensured that this was not questioned.

This is obvious in how Australian troops operated in Vietnam. Edwards establishes at length that the first battalion deployed to Vietnam was best trained in counter-insurgency tactics, and this would have represented the most effective contribution that could be made to the war effort. Army Chief Wilton had his doubts from the outset about Australian troops being subject to American ‘meat-grinder’ tactics. As the war escalated and public opposition mounted in both countries, there was more and more pressure for Australian forces to be engaged in traditional attrition strategies which required numbers and were costing so many lives. By mid-1968, the counter-insurgency tactics Australians were best placed to use were put aside in favour of escalating conventional warfare under US command. Yet, as Edwards discusses in his final chapter, 1968 also marked the point at which Australian strategic objectives had been achieved.

The key contribution of this book is that it situates Australian involvement in Vietnam against a broader backdrop of Australian security interests in Southeast Asia, as well as the management of the alliances with the UK and the US.

Edwards’s process of exploring the nature of Australia’s historical regional and alliance relationships also sheds light on how these ought to be managed into the future, particularly with the rise of the Islamic State (IS) and the return

of Australian combat forces to Iraq. Ham-fisted historical allegories and use of the word ‘quagmire’ are past their use-by date, but a few things are worth bearing in mind.

At the end of his book, Edwards reflects that the problems caused by a lack of clearly defined and achievable goals, a recognisable enemy, realistic definitions of success, and an exit strategy are all lessons learned in Vietnam that should be borne in mind in the future.

Bellicose Australian rhetoric on IS—the ‘death cult’ and ‘a war that calls to us’—is reminiscent of Australia ‘looking for a way in and not a way out’ of Vietnam, as Menzies once put it. It is indicative of an Australian prime minister signalling his country’s willingness to get involved in a manner that pre-empts the US government making a final decision. That the Australian commitment has escalated so rapidly (and with little public debate) from humanitarian assistance, to ‘non-combat’ combat advisers, to RAAF Super Hornets being involved in airstrikes against military targets (undoubtedly a military role), is not encouraging for anyone who wishes to avoid seeing Australian troops in a protracted entanglement.

Such urgency may have been appropriate in Vietnam, firmly ensconced in Australia’s region. Today it seems imprudent, even in the face of a virtual killing spree on the part of IS militants. It is not unreasonable to wonder whether, if the current strategy of advisers and airstrikes proves ineffective, the decision will be made to send in ground troops, as once happened in Vietnam.

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