

Australia always primed to fight someone else's battle

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The decision to commit Australian forces to war is not one a prime minister takes lightly. The burden of responsibility weighs heavily even though the cost is ultimately borne by the men and women of the Australian Defence Force and their families.

It is sobering to remember that Australia has waged war abroad, as part of the British empire or an ally of the US, in a dozen conflicts – from the Boer War and Boxer Rebellion to World Wars I and II, in Vietnam and Korea, in the Persian Gulf, and more recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. In less than 90 years, 1914-2003, Australia went to war no less than nine times.

The story of Australia's wartime leadership is told in an absorbing new book, *The War Game*, by distinguished historian David Horner. It examines why and how decisions were made to send troops to these nine wars, the relationships between prime ministers and military commanders, the structures in which they operated, and the lessons that have, or should have, been learnt.

The book focuses on Joseph Cook, Andrew Fisher and Billy Hughes in World War I; Robert Menzies, Arthur Fadden and John Curtin in World War II; Menzies and the Korean War, Malayan Emergency and Indonesian Confrontation; Menzies, Harold Holt, John Gorton and Billy McMahon and the Vietnam War; Bob Hawke and the Gulf War, and; John Howard and the Afghanistan and Iraq commitments.

Some prime ministers see themselves as forces in history, imbued with vision and judgment, destined to play a role on the world stage. They believe the moment called for their leadership

and they are determined to make the most of it. Their ego fuels the notion that they can make a difference. Think Hughes and Hawke.

In fact, as Horner notes, few prime ministers who have sent Australians to fight had seen active service themselves. Gorton, in this study, stands alone as having served as a fighter pilot in World War II. (Many ministers and backbenchers have served in war, especially following both world wars.) No prime minister has previously served in a position of wartime command unlike, for example, US president Dwight D. Eisenhower.

So, the relationship between politicians and commanders is critical. Politicians must maintain confidence in military leaders, whom they have a right to appoint and dismiss. Prime ministers have to decide when to go to war, the nature of the commitment, and the time to exit and how. Military leaders have to train, deploy and command forces to achieve the government's goals.

“War leadership therefore involves tension between the two parties – the civil and the military – who often come from different backgrounds,” Horner writes.

“One is based on compromise, consensus and public acceptance; the other is based on discipline, obedience and clear orders. In a democracy there is no question about who is in charge; it is the civilian political leaders. But the military leaders have the professional military expertise.”

The Pacific theatre of World War II, beginning in December 1941 when Japan bombed the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, is the only conflict where it can be justifiably claimed that Australia was directly imperilled. The decision to send forces to World War I and World War II, Cook and Menzies stated, was because Britain was at war.

The wars in Vietnam and Iraq, Horner notes, have parallels. Both did not have bipartisan support, were undertaken without carefully considering the strategic implications, or evaluating the costs and consequences. Australia's contribution to both wars, initiated by Menzies and Howard, did not affect the outcome. But they were commitments valued by the US and were seen as a down payment on the alliance.

The belief that Australia must follow the US into every conflict, as it did Britain before World War II, is seen as a homage to “great and powerful friends”. This notion that we need a mighty protector, who will come to our aid at a time of danger because we have responded to their trumpet sound of war, permeates this book. We are, it is said, always a reliable and dependable ally.

Horner chronicles the decision by the Hawke government to commit naval forces to liberate Kuwait from Iraq in 1990. Hawke was eager to contribute to George HW Bush's multinational force and saw an advantage in committing early. (In 1950, the Menzies government acted quickly to send an infantry battalion to South Korea also believing it would be advantageous.)

US records of phone conversations between Hawke and Bush show just how eager Hawke was. Although not referenced in Horner's book, they make for cringe-worthy reading. Hawke surprised Bush with his enthusiasm and asked for permission to say it was the US who invited Australia to contribute to the multinational force when it was in fact the other way round. Bush agreed.

This book draws on a wide range of archival sources, interviews, reports, journals and books to examine wartime leadership. One of the striking aspects is how little influence Australia has had over the conduct of wars once our forces have been deployed, even though our military leadership, personnel and equipment are often highly valued.

To guide future leaders, Horner concludes with a series of 10 rules for navigating "the war game". Perhaps the most important is drawn from the failure of the US in Iraq – although Vietnam and Afghanistan have echoes – and that is to be suspicious about any future US war plan given how "deeply flawed" was the process for deciding to go to that war.

With "the drums of war" beating yet again in our own region, as we have recently been told, this book serves as a useful primer for a new Prime Minister who could soon be faced with a grave decision of his own.

David Horner's The War Game: Australian War Leadership from Gallipoli to Iraq is published by Allen & Unwin. Troy Bramston's Bob Hawke: Demons and Destiny is published by Penguin Random House.

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