

# Vietnam: the other war we need to remember.

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Sending Australian troops to Vietnam in support of the US defined our politics for a generation.



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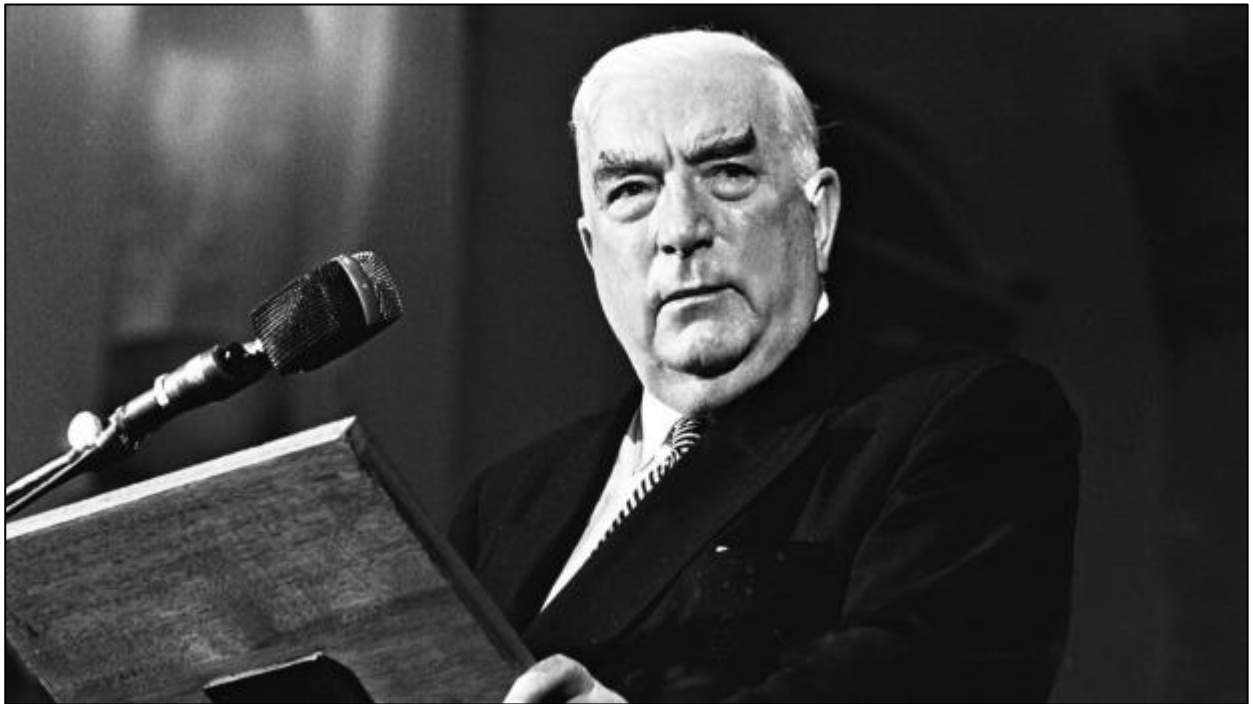
This month (April) marks not one but two pivotal anniversaries in Australian history. One of them is being celebrated with frenetic enthusiasm. The other seems likely to pass without any attention at all. It is the 50th anniversary of Sir Robert Menzies' momentous announcement, on the 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1965, that an Australian battalion was being sent to fight in Vietnam.

No doubt the Anzac centenary deserves a lot of attention, but it is a little shocking that this other anniversary is being so completely ignored. The commitment to Vietnam remains, without question, Australia's single most important strategic decision since 1945, and it largely defined our politics for an entire generation. As opposition leader Arthur Calwell said when he replied to Menzies' announcement the following week, this was "one of the most significant events in the history of this Commonwealth".

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The contrast between the ways we are approaching these two anniversaries is all the more striking because Vietnam has so much more to teach us about our future than Gallipoli. The strategic issues at stake in 1915 are entirely remote from us

today. They concerned the future of a global order based on European imperialism, Britain's place in that order, and Australia's place in the British Empire.



Sir Robert Menzies' government faced an obstructionist Labor opposition which led to a double dissolution in 1951.

By contrast, the issues that were at stake for us in Vietnam remain remarkably relevant to us today. Menzies' decision 50 years ago was all about responding to the power and ambition of China. It was about the need to support and to be seen to support, the United States against China. It was about how far we should trust Washington's judgment about when and where to fight in Asia.

It was also about our need to balance a strong alliance with the US with our place in the rising Asia. It was about our fears of Indonesia. And it was about the wisdom of intervening in other countries' civil wars. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

All these issues were explored in depth and in detail in the searing debate that lasted until our troops withdrew in 1972. Vietnam produced not just the most bitter, but also the most sustained and sophisticated discussion of Australia's strategic situation and policies in our history. As the Vietnam War was transforming Asia fundamentally, the debate about it here changed Australia fundamentally, too.

By the time it was over, we had ceased to see Britain as any kind of guarantor of our security, we had reconceived our alliance with the US and we had redefined our own identity and our relationship with Asia. Over recent months, we have paused to commemorate the achievements of the two leaders – Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser– who did most to clarify and consolidate these transformations.



Australian soldiers Private Greg Salmon (left) and Private John Dever show their South Vietnamese allies their weapons in Phouc Tuy province in 1969.

But we have paid too little attention to the issues and debates about Vietnam, and that is a serious loss, because they are becoming more and more relevant to us as Asia undergoes another momentous transformation.

After our troops withdrew in 1972, and especially after Saigon fell to the Communists in 1975, it seemed there was not much to learn from the traumas of the decade since 1965, except "never again". That is because it appeared so obvious in retrospect that the war, and Australia's part in it, was a simply a mistake. It became easy to see our commitment in Vietnam as reflecting nothing more than the naive enthusiasm of a junior ally, eager to follow the whims of a great and powerful friend.



Australian soldiers in Vietnam at the Battle of Long Tan, August 1966.

But there was much more to it than this. Peter Edwards' official history of the decision, published back in 1992, makes clear that the commitment to Vietnam reflected a serious response to Australia's difficult and dangerous strategic circumstances in the early 1960s.

Australian ministers then were rightly

worried about the adventurist, not to say aggressive, posture of Indonesia under Sukarno and about the risk of Chinese-backed communist subversion of the fragile new governments of post-colonial south-east Asia. They did fear that if Vietnam fell to the communists then the rest of south-east Asia would follow and that if the US was left unsupported in south-east Asia, we would be left facing Indonesia alone.

With the benefit of hindsight, these fears of Indonesia, China and the "Domino Theory" are easy to mock, but, at the time, the issues were real enough. Australia did face a very unstable and uncertain neighbourhood, and supporting the US to help make it safer was not self-evidently a stupid idea. On the other hand, the counter-arguments were also strong and they deserve much closer attention than they commonly receive today. Calwell's reply to Menzies' announcement on May 4, 1965 remains one of the greatest parliamentary speeches in our history and there is perhaps no better way to mark this anniversary than to Google it, and read it for yourself. (See [HERE](#))



It sets out all the issues that were to dominate the debate over the coming years, and the resonances with many of the issues we face today are extraordinary. In a remarkable reminder of the days when our political leaders used Parliament to present arguments and debate issues, Calwell set out the case against Menzies' decision with great clarity and precision. He did not contest the seriousness of Australia's strategic situation, but with extraordinary prescience he foresaw precisely why the commitment of western forces to combat operations on the ground would not save South Vietnam, and why it would humiliate the US.

But despite the power of Calwell's argument, it is not clear as we look back today that he had all the right on his side. Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, another Vietnam-era statesman who has recently passed from the scene, used to argue that the United States' and Australia's fight in Vietnam won time for the newly independent countries of south-east Asia to find their feet, and thus contributed vitally to the emergence of the stable, prosperous south-east Asia in the 1970s and 1980s.

And while the US certainly was humiliated in Vietnam, just as Calwell predicted, that was not the end of the story. In one of history's strangest switchbacks, military failure in Vietnam led Richard Nixon to Beijing in 1972, when the deal he did with Mao laid the foundation for Asia's post-Vietnam order. Far from withdrawing, the US emerged after 1972 as the uncontested leader of that order, ensuring Asia's and Australia's security ever since. No one on either side of the Vietnam debate could have predicted that.

But now that post-Vietnam order is passing, as China again challenges US power in Asia. Many of the questions they debated 50 years ago confront us again today in different forms. As we wrestle with them, there is much we can learn, both in style and in substance, from their arguments back then. Marking the anniversary of Menzies' statement, and Calwell's reply, would be a good way to start.

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