

Asian Alternatives: Australia's Vietnam Decision and Lessons on Going to War

Garry Woodard

Reviewed by Professor Peter Edwards

In recent weeks, the media has been full of commentary by pundits and politicians arguing whether Iraq will prove to be another Vietnam. Among the leading participants in this debate was Garry Woodard who asserts the validity comparison, and the Prime Minister who rejects it. Woodard's *Asian Alternatives* concludes with a list of 50 points where he considers Australian decision-making on Iraq resembles that on Vietnam. Including this passage is unfortunate, as it is the weakest part of the book. We can learn from historical comparisons, but to do so requires more thought and subtlety than a staccato list of points of similarity, ranging from the potentially significant to inconsequential. It would be regrettable if this book was seen only in terms of its contribution to the Iraq debate. It is, in fact, a detailed study of Australian decision-making—or more accurately aspects of Australian decision-making—that culminated in the decision to send a battalion of combat troops to Vietnam in 1965.

The book is the product of substantial archival research carried out by Woodard as a Frederick Watson Fellow at the National Archives of Australia. The National Archives deserve congratulations for instituting this fellowship, as does Woodard for undertaking this substantial piece of research, rather than simply relying on his memory to write on his own time in External Affairs. Not that a volume of his memoirs would be uninteresting. As he mentions in *Asian Alternatives*, he was Policy Planning Officer in that department in the 1960s. He was later ambassador in Beijing and Rangoon, and later again President of the Australian Institute of International Affairs. Woodard was one of the 43 retired diplomats and former ADF officers who publicly criticised the Iraq commitment before the 2004 election, but he is no 'doddering Daiquiri diplomat'. This is a serious and substantial piece of historical scholarship, flavoured by Woodard's quirky style.

The book covers similar ground to the volume of official history, *Crises and Commitments*, that I published in the early 1990s. Like that volume, *Asian Alternatives* discusses the extensive and complex interaction in the early and mid 1960s between Australian policy-making on Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) policy towards the new federation of Malaysia and the deepening crisis in South Vietnam. It ought to be, but unfortunately is not, impossible now to conduct any major discussion of the commitment to Vietnam without making some reference to *Konfrontasi*. That is one major contrast between Iraq and Vietnam, as far as Australian policy-making is concerned. If you can imagine the East Timor crisis of 1999 coinciding with the Iraq debate of 2002–03, you will have a better idea of the dilemmas facing Australian policy-makers in 1964–65.

One major difference between Woodard and the others who

have trodden similar ground is his attitude towards Garfield Barwick. A principal theme of *Asian Alternatives*, developed in a chapter at its conclusion, is a counter-factual argument, concerning the replacement of Barwick by Paul Hasluck as Minister for External Affairs (renamed Foreign Affairs in 1970) in April 1964. Woodard contends that, if Barwick had remained Minister in 1964–65, Australia would

not have undertaken the commitment to Vietnam, or at least would have made the commitment in a far more prudent, less open-ended manner. There is nothing wrong in engaging in counter-factual arguments, and this one is as valid and as fascinating (for Australians, at least) as the longstanding American contention that, if President Kennedy had not been assassinated in November 1963, American policy towards Vietnam would have been vastly different. But I would not go out as far as Woodard on this particular limb.

One reason is that Woodard concentrates heavily on the involvement of External Affairs, at both ministerial and departmental levels, in policy-making on Indonesia and Vietnam. He makes much of a particular Cabinet meeting in December 1964, but generally his focus is on Barwick, Hasluck and the senior officials in their department. (Apart from Barwick, the other outstanding figure in this account is the departmental secretary, Sir Arthur Tange. Readers of this journal, aware of Tange's term as Defence Department Secretary in the 1970s, may be bemused by Woodard's description of Tange as tolerant, even encouraging, of dissent, but so he was in his External Affairs days.) Woodard develops, at greater length than I did in *Crises and Commitments* but with a similar conclusion, the argument that Vietnam was not, as several writers have alleged, the war of the diplomats. But he gives much less attention to Sir Robert Menzies and the other politicians and officials (including senior military officers) involved in the story. One could offer an alternative counter-factual, in which Barwick and External Affairs put up more of a fight over the Vietnam commitment, but were still 'rolled' by Menzies and his senior Cabinet colleagues.

However contentious, Woodard's arguments have to be considered. This is a valuable and substantial contribution to our understanding of the policy decisions that led to Australia's third largest military commitment of the twentieth century. ♦

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