

The last war Australia fought that required an all-in national effort was World War II over 60 years ago. The youngest veterans who fought that war are now in their early 80s. Each year, there are fewer Australians with personal experience of a whole community at war, even as children.

Australia's subsequent wars have involved less serious strategic consequences and much smaller ADF commitments. Moreover, our last universal national service scheme ended in 1959 and our last selective scheme ceased in 1972. Since then Australia has sustained its very small defence force by voluntary enlistment alone and, up until very recently, with steeply declining resourcing as national revenues are primarily concentrated on ever-increasing social spending.

Comparatively few Australians now have any personal or even immediate or extended family experience of war in particular or defence force service generally. Two widespread effects spring from this situation: popular disengagement from our national military efforts and commonplace ignorance of why and how wars are fought and why they need to be won.

At any one time at present, just under 4000 members of the ADF are deployed overseas defending or otherwise serving the national interests of their 20 million fellow Australians. Another 4000 are preparing to replace them and a further 4000 have not long returned from such overseas tasks.

But after several generations of comparative peace, and with a booming economy and busy lifestyles, many Australians are completely disengaged from their defence force on a day-to-day basis. They give little or no thought to their 4000 fellow citizens deployed overseas – or the concerns and circumstances of the 20,000 or more Australian families intimately involved each year or so. Many simply ignore our current wars altogether, do not regard them as important, or see them as being fought by *someone else* and not by Australia or themselves in any personal, community or citizenship sense.

Other Australians are conscious that we are at war but actively deny that the *we* involved includes them.

The excessive secrecy about what our troops are doing, and why, has greatly exacerbated community disengagement and ignorance. So has the Government's seeming reluctance to properly and dispassionately explain the strategic rationales involved. Popular support for our military commitment to Iraq, in particular, continues to steadily diminish because the secrecy and official silence encourage the belief that there is something to hide or otherwise be ashamed of.

The results of popular disengagement, commonplace ignorance and governmental reticence are plainly seen in media reporting and general commentary concerning even the most minor skirmish involving our troops.

Tactical incidents are sensationalised, discussed in isolation from their current, historical or professional contexts, or judged unfairly using peacetime moral absolutes, political biases or ideological fixations. The analytical

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Our cover

Private Nathan Browne guards a community meeting in the remote Iraq village of Al Najem in Dhi Qar Province where the Australians will build a new school to replace the tent currently used.

Photo courtesy of the ADF

timeframes applied are often much too short, rather than the incident or possible trend involved being measured over realistic durations of years or half-decades into the future. Supposed strategic omens, or assumed implications for Australian party politics or leadership rivalries this week, are also commonly drawn from incidents without meaningful relevance in either regard.

Whether conflicts of choice or necessity, all wars are ultimately contests of will and end when one side gives up. Limited public identification with our military efforts and poor community understanding of warfare generally are clearly detrimental to the successful prosecution of our current wars. They also increase the risk of us being defeated without most Australians actually appreciating this or grasping the long-term consequences of what defeat would mean. Australia urgently needs a robust, informed and non-partisan public education campaign, and an informed national debate, on all our current operational commitments. ♦