

## Lost and found in Iraq

The third anniversary of the US-led collective intervention in Iraq saw a resurgence in opinionating that the war is lost. To some extent the fervour of the opinions offered seems to increase with the lack of detailed knowledge of the issues involved. It also seemed to depend, as many things do, on the personal political beliefs and prejudices of those offering the opinion.

The basic answer to the question ‘is the war in Iraq lost?’ is that it is far too early to tell whether it is lost, won or somewhere in between. Another important related question, of course, is can the Western democracies, or indeed the Iraqi people and their first ever wholly-elected government, afford to lose it?

These are difficult questions requiring considered thought rather than hasty or ill-informed discussion. They are also quite separate issues as to whether the initial Coalition intervention was ‘illegal’ as some claim, or whether, in strategic, operational or moral terms, it should not have been mounted in the first place. There is no legal doubt, of course, that the continuing assistance by Coalition forces in Iraq is legitimate as it is authorised and governed by several UN Security Council resolutions and is at the request of the democratically elected Iraqi government.

Unfortunately, such issues are often mixed together inappropriately or illogically when the situation in Iraq is discussed. Certainly the arguments of those opposing Australia’s continued involvement in Iraq run the full gamut from the emotional and the plain wrong to the calm and the considered. The spectrum of opinion of those in favour of the commitment is much narrower and has generally less diversity of factual content. ♦

## The perils of 1970s nostalgia

An underlying sub-theme to public debate on Iraq issues in Australia of late is the interesting reappearance of several discredited anti-military nostrums from a bygone age. As letter writing in *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* over recent weeks has indicated, the war in Iraq has ignited considerable nostalgia among various former Moratorium marchers circa 1969-70.

This again highlights an interesting sociological phenomenon with strategic consequences. In fortunate contrast to the experiences of their parents and grandparents, today’s Australians of comfortable middle age have reached that objective in an era largely untouched by the individual experiences and sacrifices of personal military service in our common defence or international good causes.

Youthful opposition to the Vietnam War over 35 years ago in urban Australia was usually their closest contact with such sacrifices and any personal understanding of war.

As in the USA, but not apparently to the same extent, some now harbour hindsight-enriched doubts about whether all was as black and white as they then thought.

Others, however, subconsciously suppress such unease, often in the process magnifying generally needless guilt about their easy life thus far. This can lead to them championing a view on the war in Iraq based on well-outmoded Vietnam War analogies rather than objective analysis. What is even more unfortunate is that such outmoded views can be carried over into their attempts to understand Australia’s wider strategic circumstances, both in current terms and with regard to likely and potential developments in the future.

We need informed and intelligent debate about our current foreign policy and strategic posture, and the defence capabilities needed to help execute them. Still viewing the 2006 world through the prism of 1970s anti-war movements may be psychologically comforting for some but it is a triumph of nostalgia over intellectual effort and objectivity. ♦

## Facts not just optimism or waffling

The Government has indicated that the Al Muthanna Task Group (AMTG) may be required to stay longer than previously thought, perhaps well into 2007. Their current training task (of a second Iraqi Army battalion) is largely completed in May and the Japanese engineer contingent they are protecting might be withdrawing in the second half of 2006 and perhaps before. Local Iraqi security forces are undertaking most of the security tasks required across the province, the tactical situation in Al Muthanna is comparatively benign and the AMTG has not had to fire shots in anger for some time (although a deterrent profile plays some part here). These are all welcome developments for all concerned, especially local Iraqis.

Future tasking of the AMTG has not yet been explained in much detail. As the US and British forces are increasingly stretched, one option is to reinforce the British in a less benign area of southern Iraq. This would obviously raise the risk of casualties with all its political implications in Australia. In itself, of course, this should not be a decisive factor if the strategic and moral arguments for continuing to assist in Iraq are valid and can sustain public support in Australia.

The Government’s intentions for the AMTG need to be explained in sufficient detail and soon. Any lack of detail or delay unnecessarily risks the morale and well-being of the current contingent and of those preparing to replace them in Australia. It also weakens broader public support in Australia for our continued commitment to Iraq.

While the Government declines to adequately explain its rationale for a continued ground force presence in the area it is simply adding to political suspicions, however unfounded, that it is using the deployment to wedge Labor on the Iraq commitment issue for party-political gain. This is a perception issue and it must be addressed now. No Australian soldier must ever be risked for partisan purposes and just as importantly, any perception that this might occur, no matter how unfounded, must never be allowed to arise or fester. ♦

## Sorties are the wrong form of exchange

Controversy continues as to whether the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) is the best next-generation jet to replace both our current fleets of fighter and strike aircraft. The Defence subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade has now taken up the issue with some vigour. More strength to their all-party arm.

The ADA is keeping an open mind on the arguments for and against the JSF, but it is an aircraft not yet in production and one very likely to incur large cost increases and delays in delivery. A purchase instead of at least some F-22A Raptors (a Tier-1, multi-role fighter already in production) is becoming increasingly attractive on simple cost-benefit and technical risk grounds. This depends, of course, on the US agreeing to sell them to us. They have apparently been willing to do so in the past and may be again, particularly if the UK and Japan also appear interested. This option becomes even more attractive if the USAF is prepared to consider Australia as the international launch customer.

A mix of Raptors and F/A-18E/F Super Hornets might also be an option, at least as an interim measure until sufficient JSFs (or more Raptors) are available to replace the Super Hornet. Others have suggested an apparently economic and operationally attractive mix of Raptors and evolved F-111s.

ADF professional opinion is split on the issue which is no bad thing as it indicates healthy professional debate – at least within the defence force. The original June 2002 decision to join the JSF development program is believed by many to have been a political one that bypassed Defence's then reasonably robust capability development processes but this may not be entirely correct. A final decision on a JSF purchase is due in 2007 and the manufacturer, Lockheed Martin, is applying the screws. Many see the decision as a formality.

Given that this is the single most important, and most expensive, defence capability decision to be made in a generation the lack of public debate thus far is of major concern. This has not been helped by a refusal by some in Defence to even debate critics of the JSF option, particularly as it began to look increasingly like a lockstep decision that could not be avoided. This lack of adequate public debate has also fuelled a tendency for ad hominem attacks rather than informed criticism and genuine exchanges of views.

The recent change of Minister for Defence might offer an opportunity for this situation to be rolled back somewhat. The last thing the country as a whole, the Department of Defence, and the ADF need is a decision of this magnitude being taken only to find that emerging risks link its supportability to the expenditure of increasing amounts of time and money. We also do not need perpetual political or professional arguments for decades as to whether the decision taken was the correct one and how it should be fixed. ♦

## Kit and caboodle

Recent controversy about alleged deficiencies with the equipment issued to our troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan has avoided some fundamental issues. In late February the ADA was even quoted by both sides during a matter of public importance debate on the issue in Parliament without either side mentioning the key cause.

At the end of the day, one of the reasons the Al Muthanna Task Group in Iraq is a relatively small force is because the Army's holdings of suitable modern equipment are

not sufficient to equip, deploy and protect a larger force – including being able to adequately train and prepare the rotation forces in Australia getting ready to replace the forces deployed. (Another reason is that we do not have enough soldiers). It is also worth noting that the mechanised infantry element of the Task Group (from the Army's only mechanised-infantry battalion, 5/7RAR) could not deploy to Iraq with its own M113 APC because they are no longer capable of modern battle – even in the more benign tactical environment of Al Muthanna Province.

Furthermore, wars are inherently dynamic. The threats to our forces and the counter-measures consequently adopted by them can change constantly. Sometimes time lags or compromises in implementing the equipment aspects of such measures occur for a range of tactical, technical, manufacturing, logistic availability, financial and legal reasons. Such delays or compromises are minimised and/or risk-managed but they can rarely be avoided completely.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that Australian diggers have always exhibited individual preferences about items of personal kit, especially where it involves fashion or impacts on their warmth, cooling, load-bearing ability and general comfort when living and operating in the field. This is why, for example, many soldiers adapt or buy their own sleeping bags, boots and items of personal webbing, rainwear and cold-weather gear. This proclivity for adaptation does not extend to weapons for obvious reasons, and rarely involves protective items such as helmets and body armour. Instances of soldiers buying their own personal kit do not necessarily indicate that items issued to them are defective or deficient.

While there is no doubt there were some minor equipment problems early on in both the Iraq and Afghanistan deployments, the ADA is confident the Army is doing its best to equip those of our troops committed to overseas combat zones. The Association also believes the Defence Materiel Organisation (DMO), the equipment procurement agency of the Department of Defence, is trying much harder and performing much better than its predecessor organisation in this regard. The ADA does not believe that the ADF's commanders would knowingly risk the lives of the men and women under their command by deploying them ill-equipped or otherwise unprepared for the dangerous and demanding tasks they face on the nation's behalf.

The real and much larger issue with defence equipment procurement remains the serial under-investment in defence over the last three decades. This situation has often been exacerbated by unwarranted civilian bureaucratic interference in defence force professional matters, such as how the defence force should be configured and equipped, how it should be employed in strategic and operational terms, and how its operational doctrine should be developed and tested.

The perpetually constrained funding of defence over the last thirty years or so has too often meant that the defence force has not been properly re-equipped in breadth and depth. Numerous equipment projects have been cancelled, postponed (often more than once), reduced in scope or otherwise diluted or gutted. Technological improvements and strategic change over time can mean that weapons systems do not need to always be replaced on a one-for-one basis, but far too often the numbers of modern weapons and weapon platforms procured have been much fewer than those they are replacing.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s many major and minor items of defence force equipment were also purchased fitted-for-but-not-with all the necessary items they needed for modern combat. This short-sighted policy was forced on the defence force because political expediency unrealistically limited defence budgets. The policy was predicated on the, at best, naive belief that we would have enough warning time of potential conflicts to procure the additional items needed to deter or prosecute actual combat – and that they would always be available for immediate procurement from allied stockpiles or the market generally.

In other cases, equipment was not modernised or replaced because armchair theorists in the Defence civilian bureaucracy ignored military professional advice and wrongly predicted the weapons or equipment would never be required – or that they somehow knew how they should best be used. Such unprofessional and wrong-headed notions suited governments keen to divert defence funding elsewhere to areas where votes could be bought. This is why, for example, the upgrading of the Army's Leopard tanks and M113 APC was continually postponed throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It is also why long-overdue replacement projects for both weapon systems were cancelled over the same period. While under half the mid-1960s era M113 fleet is finally being upgraded (for delivery from 2007 onwards) the vehicles will still only be APC and not Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFV) such as the US and British armies widely use. Moreover, even the New Zealand Army has now replaced its M113s and equipped both its infantry battalions with the modern LAV-3 APC.

Indeed our Army is still one of the few Western armies without a single IFV in its inventory and none are on order. Furthermore, while the Army's 105-vehicle tank force is finally being replaced from 2007, once again the number of new tanks (59) is much lower – as it was when 105 Leopards replaced 250 Centurions in the mid 1970s and the Centurions replaced several hundred World War II era tanks in the mid 1950s. As one consequence of the reduced numbers, no new tanks or APC will be employed in Army Reserve units.

The varied operational experiences of the defence force since the East Timor crisis of 1999 have thoroughly disproved the fitted-for-but-not-with notion and its attendant fallacies about warning time and civilian bureaucrats always knowing more about professional military matters than the military. The range of recent overseas operations, the force's current high operational tempo and the very short warning time of recent conflicts, have hopefully dispatched such notions into well-deserved oblivion.

Just as importantly, modernising each one of the Services should not come at the price of not modernising either or both of the other two. Defence force capability development should not be looked at through the prism of single-Service viewpoints. We must modernise the ADF by developing integrated capabilities across the whole defence force as a coherent strategic and operational package. ♦

## Conferenced out

There are now simply too many conferences on defence and wider national security matters clogging everyone's calendar. Why, for example, do we need two annual defence industry conferences in Canberra?

Many conferences and seminars are indistinguishable from each other in theme and content, and far too many

are run for commercial or institutional financial profit not professional gain or community benefit. Many conferences are not even well-run or intellectually worth the effort. It is also becoming increasingly frequent for attendees to pay high fees merely to listen to representatives from either their own department or ones that they liaise with as a matter of course anyway.

A stop should be put to this now. Ministers and officials from federal government departments should refuse to participate in conferences and seminars that are not run by other government agencies or by reputable convenors such as university think-tanks or professional institutes.

As an interim measure, at the very least, all government speakers should insist on numerous complimentary attendees from their organisation as the price for them speaking. ♦

## Nostalgia for national service ... again

Calls for the reintroduction of national service in Australia are cyclical and tend to ignore or gloss over the facts, implications and history involved. Recent calls for the reintroduction of national service, or at least for a debate about it now in case demographics force us down that path in the next decade or so, brought forth the usual torrent of pre-conceived opinions.

Arguments for military conscription may or may not be justifiable on political or social grounds, such as mixing young Australians of all classes, creeds and ethnicities, reducing chronic obesity among the young, or introducing self-discipline and goal-setting into lives often lacking it. As a non-partisan organisation the ADA has no position on this matter except to note that it should not be the defence force's job to fix society's wider perceived ills.

In a strategic and military sense, however, national service is only needed when the defence force needs to be *substantially* increased *quickly* and *equitably* in times of mortal national peril. Our current strategic situation is not one of those times although the option of national service should always be retained in case our strategic circumstances deteriorate markedly. At other times, shortfalls in defence force recruiting or retention are better met by raising ADF salaries so they can actually compete with community norms.

In early 1965, for example, selective national service for one in forty 20-year old males was introduced largely because Treasury thought this would be cheaper than raising the pay rates at a time of virtually full employment – especially for skilled and semi-skilled labour. To the contrary, the wider labour market distortions and overall costs to the national economy involved ended up far outweighing the sums supposedly saved.

An equitable universal scheme today involving, for example, the conscription of all male and female 20-year olds (instead of selectively one in forty male 20-year olds as in the 1960s), would involve the conscription of up to 250,000 young Australians annually. This would severely distort the labour market and the wider economy. National Service on this scale would also provide far more personnel than the ADF, especially the Navy and the Air Force, could conceivably need. ♦