

# Reversing our march of folly

Mark Latham

The reception to President Bush's recent visit to London was evidence of the strategic mistakes he has made in prosecuting the war on terror—and the mistake the Howard Government has made in following the Bush strategy.

Bush's visit to London was conceived two years ago, shortly after the attacks on Washington and New York. It was supposed to be an expression of solidarity between two great English-speaking nations at war. Instead, because of Bush's flawed strategy, and especially because of his decision to invade and occupy Iraq, the visit became a symbol of the divisions between Britain and America that will make the war on terror even harder to win.

This must be a war against terrorists, not the women and children of nation-states. The best way of ensuring that weapons of mass destruction are not used for terrorism is to rid the world of terrorists. This should have been America's strategy post-September 11—to target, fight and eliminate the terrorists.

But instead, President Bush has squandered much of the international goodwill for the United States by following a strategy of regime change and pre-emptive war, under the poorly conceived banner of an 'axis of evil'.

This is the wrong strategy for the international community and it is the wrong strategy for Australia. Iraq should not be the frontline in the war against terror, not while Osama Bin Laden remains at large, or while al Qa'eda continues to operate in Pakistan and throughout the Middle East, or while terrorist networks continue to grow in South-East Asia. Our first priority must be to clean out the terrorist networks, not wage war against nation-states.

In truth, the United States was unaware and unprepared for September 11, and two years later it remains ill equipped to deal with the new and different threat of terrorism. More than two years ago, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine in September 2001, former CIA officer Reuel Marc Gerecht said this about the US capacity in counter-terrorism: 'I would argue that America's counter-terrorism program in the Middle East and their environs are a myth'.

He went on to quote a former senior Near East Division operative who said: 'The CIA probably doesn't have a

single truly qualified Arabic-speaking officer of Middle Eastern background who can play a believable Muslim fundamentalist who would volunteer to spend years of his life with shitty food and no women in the mountains of Afghanistan. For Christ's sake, most case officers live in the suburbs of Virginia. We don't do that kind of thing'.

Gerecht concluded his comments by saying: 'Unless one of bin Laden's foot soldiers walks through the door of a US consulate or embassy, the odds that a CIA counterterrorist officer will ever see one are extremely poor'.

This is the unhappy truth of the US capability against terrorism. Australia cannot rely solely on the judgement of American leaders. Nor can we rely solely on the capabilities of American forces. We need to develop our own capacity and defences.

Bali should have taught us that Australia is not an observer in the war against terror. As John Curtin said in 1941: 'only the

stars are neutral now'. But the frightening reality is that there is no evidence we are winning this war. And when the Government is confronted by this fact, instead of changing strategy, it changes the subject.

In the Spring *Defender*, Tony Abbott wrote: 'The war on terrorism is not primarily a test of military technology or of social service delivery. It's a test of character'.

This is a typically suave formulation from a politician who writes much better than he thinks. In fact, Abbott's assessment is a fallacy—one that is leading our country away from victory and closer to defeat.

Of course, the war on terrorism will test our character, both at an individual and national level. But we will not win this war by being better people. We will win this war by being better warriors. War is not primarily a test of character. It is a test of our ability to seek out and engage the enemy, to kill or capture him, and to repel his attack.

It's not just that Tony Abbott has nothing to say about how to defeat terrorism as a military threat. More than that, he effectively argues that defeating terrorism as a military threat is not the point. Instead, Abbott writes in generalities: that Western leaders need more 'conviction and clarity'

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while Western populations need to be more 'dedicated to enhancing civilised life'—and perhaps what is required are 'sterner and higher virtues'.

Abbott's 'trumpets and torches' rhetoric is a substitute for a genuine engagement with the military-strategic challenge of terrorism. He even writes that Islam would respect Western civilisation 'if the contemporary version had less emotional distance from Burke's notion of society'. In other words, a more politically conservative Australia would have fewer terrorist enemies. I don't take that seriously and I don't imagine that the Anzacs would have either.

I believe there is a new nationalism in this country—the sort of nationalism that says that Australia should be part of the international community and part of international engagement, but on our terms. It is the sort of nationalism that says that we should engage with other countries but with a very clear sense of our interests. Australians are saying that we are not a baby nation anymore. We are not some little colony or junior nation.

We are a nation that takes a mature view about our interests. And we need to defend those interests, as part of a balanced defence and security relationship with the United States. If our relationship with the US means anything, it means we should be able to speak clearly and honestly to American leaders about the failings in their strategy.

Equally, John Howard and his Government should be honest enough to admit their own mistakes and be

prepared to change strategy. In her outstanding book *The March of Folly*, the American historian Barbara Tuchman looks at the reasons why nations and governments often act in a manner contrary to their self-interest. She writes that throughout human endeavour:

Government remains the paramount area of folly because it is there that men seek power over others—only to lose it over themselves'.

For Tuchman, persistence in error is the problem: the march of folly, as governments defend their mistakes and failings instead of defending the people they are supposed to protect. This is our problem in Australia today.

Tony Abbott wants to talk about character. I say listen to the words of Barbara Tuchman: 'In the search for wiser government we should look for the test of character first. And the test should be moral courage'.

The Australian Government has a responsibility to rediscover its independence of judgement and its independence of action. It should redirect our strategy in the war against terror away from regime change and pre-emptive war and back to cleaning out the terrorist networks in South-East Asia and protecting against attacks at home.

This is the only test of character that really matters for the Australian people. ♦

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ADA members and other *Defender* readers may be interested in the following public conferences scheduled over the next few months:

### Royal Australian Navy Sea Power Conference 2004

'Positioning Navies for the Future'

Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour

03–05 February 2004

Enquiries: (02) 9248-0894 or [www.tourhosts.com.au/seapower2004](http://www.tourhosts.com.au/seapower2004)

### Australian Defence Magazine Inaugural Conference

'Mapping Defence's New Business Environment'

National Convention Centre, Canberra

24–25 February 2004

Enquiries: (02) 9080-4307 or [www.ibcoz.com.au/adm2004](http://www.ibcoz.com.au/adm2004)

### Rowell Profession of Arms Seminar

'Ethics, Moral Values and the Australian Military Profession in the 21st Century'

Telstra Theatre, Australian War Memorial, Canberra

15 July 2004

Enquiries: (02) 6265-9890

### Royal Australian Air Force Conference 2004

'The Future of Air Power: Network-Enabled Air Forces'

National Convention Centre, Canberra

16–17 September 2004

Enquiries: (02) 6287-6563