

# Themistocles:

## Ancient thinking all at sea

Paul Monk

**The Defence Update, which John Howard launched last week, was a seminal document in the development of Australian strategic policy. This is all the more important to recognize given the desperate and somewhat disgraceful efforts of former defence bureaucrats Hugh White and Paul Dibb to misrepresent it as just a continuation of their fine work when in office.**

**Greg Sheridan, 'A whole new ball game, but some don't see it',  
*The Australian*, 12 July 2007, p.14.**

According to some, Hugh White still harbours hopes of being Secretary of the Department of Defence or National Security Advisor to the PM in a Labor government, should Kevin Rudd lead the Opposition to victory at the polls. This prospect makes a good few people on Russell Hill and elsewhere uneasy. That is not because White would restore common sense and sound strategic thinking to the department, as he and his supporters might contend. It is because he simply does not understand weapons, warfare or strategy; is indissolubly wed to a narrow and provincial view of Australia's strategic interests; and misunderstands the realities behind the revolution in Australia's strategic outlook and force structure that has been necessary over the past decade.

These are large claims. After all, one might think that an individual who has been Deputy Secretary of Defence for Strategic Policy, founding Director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and Head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University cannot, surely, be as deficient in his understanding of his craft as his critics allege. That is a plausible defence, on the face of it. Yet, if Hugh White was truly a master of his craft – by which I mean strategic analysis – one might expect that this mastery would be exhibited, par excellence, in the regular column he writes for the Fairfax press. It doesn't seem to me that it is. Having followed his column for some considerable time, I am puzzled at the regularity with which he writes what seem ill-considered and wrong-headed pieces.

There is an old nostrum which goes, 'Don't believe everything you read in the newspapers'. It might be

paraphrased, 'Don't react with exasperation to everything a columnist writes in the newspapers'. I have tried to adhere to this maxim for some time with regard to Hugh White's periodic remarks about strategic matters and the evolution of Australia's defence force structure; but there comes a time when at least some reaction seems warranted. There was a column, a couple of years ago, for example, in which he wrote that we might soon see the Chinese defeat the United States navy in the Taiwan Strait, in emulation of the Japanese victory of 1905 over the Russians in the Tsushima Strait – and that China might then become Australia's 'new great and powerful friend'. This called for a reaction, but I let it pass. I hoped that this two-pronged howler had simply been the result of over hasty writing on his part.

On 24 May last, however, Hugh White wrote a column, for *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, headed *Anzac, our Achilles heel?*, with the sub-title *The nation's defence strategy should be about future threats, not past glories*. This piece was, in its own way, every bit as odd as the piece about China becoming our new great and powerful friend after defeating the American navy in 2005 or 2006; but apart from the historical and strategic superficiality on display in the piece, it included gratuitous remarks about the Australian Army and those who believe in sound, conservative values. From an individual who some believe still aspires to one day being appointed Secretary of the Department of Defence neither of these things should be acceptable and, for that reason, I believe a response in some detail is warranted.

Many readers of *Defender* will not have read White's column. For that reason, I shall cite it at some length, so as

to provide the background to my own remarks and to avoid any possibility of being seen as having misrepresented or misinterpreted his observations. I took some pains, seven years ago, in an essay in *Quadrant* entitled *Twelve Questions for Paul Dibb*, to closely cite a particularly muddled essay Dibb had written, by way of trying to draw him into a debate. He never responded. I shall cite White just as closely, and would welcome a response. The piece in question, after all, was plainly representative of White's commitment to what he calls 'a maritime strategy' for Australia and it would be in the interests of all of us that he make clear exactly what he has in mind.

Let's recap on what he wrote in late May. 'Is there an 'Australian Way of War?', he asked. 'Many people think there is. John Howard is one of them'. What is that way of war? It is 'to send armed forces to support our allies in major land operations anywhere in the world in which our shared interests (often described as our 'values') are threatened'. This idea, he wrote, 'has been promoted over the past few years by some of those in the defence debate who want to move beyond the "Defence of Australia" policy of the 1970s and 1980s by going back to the policy of the 1950s and 1960s'. He quoted the Prime Minister as stating, last year, that the government's strategic policy involved a 'fundamental reassertion of the strategic importance of the army'. And he commented that this was 'the pull of the past'; a kind of 'nostalgia' for ANZAC glories.

All this is contentious enough, since our force structure planners do not see themselves as going back to the 1950s and 1960s, but as upgrading the defence force to cope with the realities of the early to mid-21st century. But White did not limit himself to asserting that current strategic doctrine is merely Forward Defence revisited; he drew an analogy with far more ancient past glories, by way of suggesting that we need a different strategic doctrine entirely. Having set the scene by asking whether the Howard government was looking rather too much to the past in casting an eye back to Australian experience between 1900 and 1972, he observed that, as it happens, 'history itself provides a neat lesson on this issue'. What history? Not Australia's relatively recent past, but the debate in Athens, 2500 years ago, about how to deal with the realities of a Persian invasion of Greece. It was striking that he should find a neat lesson so far in the past, given his cautionary words about looking to the past at all, but it is what he made of the ancient history that calls for close comment.

Let's capture in full White's 'neat lesson' from the ancient world.

*In 483 BC a fierce debate arose in Athens about defence policy. Seven years earlier, Persia had been decisively defeated by the Athenian army's phalanxes at Marathon. But Athens was a small city state, while Persia was a mighty empire. It was clear the Persians would return sooner or later, with a much bigger army. One party*



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wanted to rely on the phalanxes to defeat the Persians again. The other, led by a remarkable man called Themistocles, concluded that next time Athens could only beat the Persians if it met them at sea, so he wanted to build the navy. His opponents, the 'Men of Marathon' were immensely proud of their military traditions. To them, the Athenian army was more than a mere instrument of policy. It was the essence of Athenian nationhood. In the words of one historian: 'They came to embody every known or remembered conservative virtue: selfless public service, old-fashioned morality, hard work, thrift, respect for one's parents and the gods.' John Howard's kind of people, in other words.

Just pause at this point for a moment. Those who opposed that remarkable man Themistocles, in White's account of the matter, were the Men of Marathon. They were conservative; embodying all the traditional virtues and this made them 'John Howard's kind of people'. The smooth, implicit sneer here is unmistakable. It is one thing to criticise the Prime Minister for allegedly being mendacious or unscrupulous or even 'criminal', as many among the self-styled intelligentsia like to do, it is quite another to airily imply that both Howard and those who defend the country in its actual military campaigns (as distinct from White's imagined Persian wars) are somehow deficient because they believe in selfless public service, old-fashioned morality, hard work, thrift and so on. The sneer is all the more objectionable because the description is *accurate* as regards many of those who do, in fact, serve the country. What are White's virtues, by comparison? Who are *his* kind of people?

But such self-satisfied *obiter dicta* are the least of White's solecisms in this little column. Let's complete the refresher on what he wrote and then dissect it. He went on to remark:

*The Men of Marathon saw all this threatened by Themistocles' naval plans, and they saw no reason why the traditional Greek way of war should not keep working in the future as it had in the past. In the end, Themistocles had his way, and he was proved right when the Persians returned a few years later. The mighty Athenian fleet built by Themistocles led the Greeks to victory over the Persians at Salamis in 480 BC. Many see the victory as a foundation of modern Western civilization. The moral for us to day is quite simple. To see the Anzac tradition as fundamental to Australia's identity is one thing; to fashion our defence policy in its image is quite another.*

There are two sets of problems with the 'neat lesson' and simple 'moral' White thinks should be learned from his foray into ancient history. The first is that he does not appear to know his Greek history very well. The second is that his use of it as an analogy for the challenges facing Australia in the early 21st century is quite confused and misleading. There are good reasons to study ancient history and, as it happens, a reflection on the debates in Athens about strategic policy, throughout the fifth century BC, are among the most fruitful

periods of ancient history that Australians might usefully study. Not, however, as a direct guide to strategic policy. History does not work that way. In any case, our would-be Themistocles would appear not to have studied it very closely; with the unhappy result that his use of it is simply muddle-headed.

What, at the end of the day, is he actually trying to say? Simply that we should think carefully about the future and not be too wedded to the past in developing our force structure? If so, he did not need to make any mention of Themistocles. Yet he did. It seems reasonable, therefore, to infer that he intended us to see actual parallels between the situation of the Athenians, in the 480s and 470s BC, and that of Australia in the 2000s or 2010s. Since he did not make explicit what he may have had in mind, we are left to guess what those parallels might be. The most evident one would seem to be the notion – for it is wholly notional – that Themistocles so changed Athenian strategic policy as to render its army redundant and *replace* it with a navy. White is, after all, a proponent of what he loosely terms a 'maritime strategy' for Australia, so we are surely not far off the mark if we interpret him in this light.

He declares that Themistocles was vindicated when the new Athenian navy won the battle of Salamis and that this naval victory is seen by 'many' as a 'foundation of modern Western civilisation'. There is no question that the battle of Salamis (480 BC) was of historic importance in fending off Persian conquest of Greece and thus keeping clear the ground on which the first self-consciously

'Western' or 'European' states flourished. It was, in this respect, at least a pre-condition for classical, if not exactly *modern* Western civilisation. Indeed, Herodotus, the best known *classical* chronicler of these matters, in the seventh book of his *Histories*, went so far as to remark that, had there not been a victory at sea, 'it is easy to see what would have been the course of events on land...the Persian conquest of Greece would have been assured'. Heeding the warning of the Priestess Aristonice at Delphi that 'the wooden wall only shall not fall' and guided in their interpretation of this warning by Themistocles, the Athenians determined to reinforce a fleet they had built for another purpose, rally their allies and meet the Persians at sea.

Herodotus makes no mention of the Men of Marathon opposing this decision. Those who opposed it were the professional interpreters of the oracle, who counseled surrender to the Persians. A few dogged souls tried to defend the citadel at Athens when the Persians came, but they were overwhelmed. It was the Peloponnesians, the Spartans and Corinthians in particular, who opted to fight the Persians on land, by barricading the Isthmus of Corinth. But the Athenians, with many allies, fought and won at Salamis before such a land battle could take place. They did not win, however, simply because they had built a navy, but, as Thucydides pointed out many decades later and as modern

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historians concur, because Xerxes was foolish enough to fight them in the narrows of Salamis – a fine point of history worth bearing in mind. In any case, they followed up, the very next year, by sending 8000 hoplites (heavy infantry) as part of a coalition of the willing from across Greece, to fight the Persian forces at Plataea, not far from Athens. Plataea (479 BC) was one of the most lethal and large-scale land battles in Greek history and the Persians were routed. They then withdrew from Greece. White makes no mention of Plataea, but it is a significant problem for the argument he appears to want to make about the ‘neat lesson’ for Australia.

Moreover, in the classical history White urges us to ponder, Plataea was only the beginning. Having defeated the Persian invasion at sea and on land, the Athenians began to build an empire in the Aegean. This was the era in which Athens flourished, but by becoming an expeditionary power in a manner that Hugh White disapproves in the case of Australia. To maintain this empire, in the island archipelago and the Ionian coastlands of what is now Turkey, Athens required both a navy and an army. It did not, after all, merely sail around the islands; it sent expeditionary forces at need to support allies on land and to subdue invaders or rebels. One of the most famous instances of this, as recorded by Thucydides, was when, in 416 BC, Athens crushed the island people of Melos and then colonised the island. Its naval power did not, however, enable it, in the end, to defeat the land power of Sparta in the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC). Nor did maritime power enable the Athenians or the other Greeks to defeat the Macedonian armies in the fourth century BC. And it was with land forces that Alexander the Great invaded and conquered the Persian Empire itself, in the 330s BC.

What, therefore, is Hugh White’s ‘neat lesson’ about Themistocles, armies and navies? What pretty clearly concerns him is the idea that we might use the army for purposes of which he disapproves – expeditionary purposes. But if this is so, he chose his lesson badly; since that is exactly what the Athenians were able to do as a result of building their navy and prevailing at Salamis. Does he simply believe we need a bigger navy – and never mind what the Athenians did with theirs after Salamis? Well, we are building a bigger navy, as it happens. Is it possible he has not noticed? We are also building a slightly larger army and, with the exception of equipping it to actually fight, he has approved of this measure, at least in principle. So I ask again, what point is he trying to make in invoking the story of Themistocles? Does he fear that the Persians are coming and that we need a very much bigger fleet to meet them at our own Salamis? Which ‘Persians’? The Chinese are building a blue-water navy, but it is a very long way from threatening to invade our territorial waters and one wonders whether he would suggest we take it on if it was able to do this. Did he not prophesy that China would defeat the US navy and then become Australia’s new great and powerful friend? Who is he, then: Themistocles or one of the old professional interpreters of oracles, who counseled capitulation to Persia’s Great King?

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The history of the Persian wars is stirring stuff, but it has only the most indirect relevance to Australia’s strategic situation and force structure debate in our time. There are no Persians coming right now, but even if there were, it is not clear that we could build a usefully bigger navy and it is far from clear that we should scale back our small and mostly lightly-armed land force. If over the next ten to fifteen years China does emulate the Japan of a century ago and seek to become a maritime peer competitor of the United States, we shall need to look to our alliances and our defences with great circumspection and energy, but we are surely unlikely to engage in leading an ASEAN armada against the Chinese navy in a regional re-enactment of Salamis – let’s say in the Lombok or Sunda Straits. If the US navy does not hold sway, we are likely to be in serious trouble. For the present, what we need and what we are assembling is a capacity to be able to deploy capable, but small joint forces, generally as part of coalition or in stabilisation operations, to various parts of the archipelagoes to our north and north east, or further abroad. We are not, of course, in the business of empire building, like Athens after Salamis; but we do need a capable and sustainable land force as part of a balanced, deployable ADF capability. There is scope for debating how effectively we are assembling this capability, but in putting on the mask of Themistocles to make the case that we are getting it wrong, Hugh White is truly out to sea.

The column I have singled out here, of course, is only a little piece and attacking it may seem to be overkill. The column was significant, however, because it was symptomatic of the manner in which Hugh White continues to white-ant the revision of strategic policy and the overdue upgrading of the ADF’s force structure to increase its flexibility and versatility. He is especially antipathetic to the army having anything resembling actual combat capability and this is the subtext of his mockery of the ‘Men of Marathon’, his derision of ‘John Howard’s kind of people’ and his muddled invocation of that remarkable man, Themistocles, who took the Athenians to sea. The Themistocles piece is, in fact, part of a marathon campaign, by Paul Dibb, Hugh White and their allies, to reassert control of strategic policy, following the developments of the past decade or so. In a perverse sense, therefore, it is they who are the marathon men. Most professionals in the field, however, see them as having dropped off the pace. It is to be hoped that Kevin Rudd does not succumb to their Delphic pronouncements and help them over the line. Their time has passed. They need to settle down at the university – and perhaps study their ancient history in more depth. ♦

*Dr Paul Monk is the Managing Director of Austhink Consulting in Melbourne and a former senior analyst at DIO. His book, ‘Thunder from the Silent Zone: Rethinking China’, was reviewed in the Spring 2005 ‘Defender’. His last article in this journal was ‘Dangers every bit as great: Remodelling the paradigms of Australian strategic policy debate’ in the Autumn 2005 ‘Defender’.*