

time until the situation stabilises, governance improves, and Afghan security forces that can meet international standards for professionalism and respect for human rights are able to take over.

The Rudd Government has also consistently stated that it does not envisage increasing the size of the ADF commitment. Australia is already the largest non-NATO troop contributor, the tenth largest overall, and the sixth largest among the contributors doing the actual fighting. Again this public position is logical, especially as so many of the Western European members of NATO refuse to pull their weight in the war. Any increase in the Australian commitment at present would only allow such countries to further renege on their responsibilities as ostensible members of an alliance at war. ♦

Being a partner not a passenger

Most of our military commitment to Afghanistan is in Oruzgan Province where we are the junior ISAF partner to the Netherlands. The Dutch, along with the British, Danes, Estonians and Lithuanians, are certainly not among those Western European NATO members dragging their feet in Afghanistan.

At the end of 2010, however, the Dutch may have to scale back or withdraw their contingent from Oruzgan due to legislative and parliamentary constraints in the Netherlands – which is permanently governed by amorphous coalition administrations elected by proportional representation. The US has stated that should the Dutch withdraw, and no other NATO member be prepared to replace them, the US will do so.

Unwilling as the Australian government is to face this situation (at least publicly), it does confront us with vital strategic, operational and moral choices. That we should and will stay the course in Oruzgan is not one of them.

That we should not stop adding our voice to those NATO members with troops actually fighting in southern Afghanistan, who are insisting that the recalcitrant NATO members mend their ways and help in that region, is not one either.

But it would be in neither our operational nor our strategic interests for the USA to become the senior ISAF partner in Oruzgan. In terms of our operational cultures, it would instead be better for us, the Americans and indeed the Afghans, if we assumed the responsibility of senior ISAF partner to command and control the necessary counter-insurgency operations at the operational and tactical levels.

Similarly, at the strategic level, in terms of both the war across Afghanistan and our wider global strategic relationship with the USA, it would be better for both Australia and the US if we assumed the majority ISAF responsibility for the securing of Oruzgan. Not only has the US already borne too much of the burden in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is important we assure our major ally that we are willing and capable of more than token or 'niche' contributions to the joint military

endeavours of the Western alliance. Canada has set an excellent strategic and moral benchmark in this regard.

This would undoubtedly require us to deploy a battalion group to the province (and we can). Based on allied experiences this would need to include artillery, tanks and, if they achieve operational capability in time (which is doubtful), our new armed reconnaissance helicopters. Otherwise the US or someone else would need to provide the attack helicopter support needed. ♦

Escalating a war in order to win it

As in all wars we must also be prepared to escalate the war in order to win it. Just as we (and our allies) successfully did and threatened during Confrontation in the early to mid 1960s – and in effect achieved by deterrence in stopping the 1999 East Timor crisis from becoming open hostilities.

The suggestion that an increased troop commitment somehow indicates that you may be losing a war is just that, only a suggestion. It is also often just a mutation of the reflexive claim of 'quagmire' that is too readily tossed up in place of reasoned argument from time to time.

The increasing success of the American 'surge' in Iraq provides a good example of an operational and political circuit-breaker – in that country and the wider region strategically. It again demonstrates that increases in force size, or actual or threatened escalations in force, can lead to resolution of a problem (if not always victory in the conventional sense) – and do so sooner than continuing to accept a perhaps problematic status quo. ♦

Monash fever erupts again

In World War I the Australian Corps, of five divisions, was our major commitment to the Western Front in France and Belgian Flanders. We also had the Desert Mounted Corps comprising two Light Horse divisions and various independent formations and units in the Palestine campaign.

General Sir John Monash was an exceptionally able and talented senior commander. He commanded at brigade level from June 1913, divisional level from June 1916, and then corps level from May 1918. He remains probably the best known senior Australian military commander in popular terms, certainly so in the case of historical figures.

Monash was instrumental in significant victories on the Western Front and in the evolution of modern military staff and operational planning processes. Being an Australian, and originally of a citizen-soldier background and with Jewish antecedents, Monash also remains distinctive in the public mind even generations afterwards. Memories of him are further burnished because of popular, but not always historically accurate, folk memories of the perceived indifferent performance of many British generals in comparison.

Most forget or are unaware, however, that Monash was not the first Australian to reach command of a corps, or command of a corps predominantly comprising Australians, or the first to reach the ranks of lieutenant general and general. These achievements were won, equally on merit, by General Sir Harry Chauvel, the commander of the Desert Mounted Corps in Palestine. Chauvel was later also a distinguished Chief of the General Staff and Inspector-General of the Army throughout most of the 1920s.

Recently there have been calls for Monash to be posthumously promoted to field marshal. These calls stem from a genuine desire to further honour him and a belief that he was somehow unfairly discriminated against by not being so promoted at the time or before he died in 1931. Most of the reasons commonly cited to promote him posthumously are, however, wrong in fact or mistaken in interpretation and respect for consistency and precedent.

The discrimination argument is easily dealt with. In ascending order of formation and the rank of its commander, corps are commanded by lieutenant generals, armies by generals and army groups or major operational theatres by field marshals. Monash held the correct rank for his position at each level of command.

The consistency and precedent arguments are similarly dealt with easily. None of the others who commanded the 17 corps of the British Commonwealth forces on the Western Front were promoted directly from lieutenant general to field marshal either. Even if the argument is accepted that the Australian Corps was effectively as big as some armies, Monash was still promoted general in retirement in 1929, although this occurred so he would not be offended when Chauvel was similarly promoted (and the evidence points to this being at Chauvel's insistence).

We also need to think what Monash would have probably wanted or felt that he deserved. The evidence indicates he always acknowledged and respected Chauvel as his professional senior throughout the 1920s. On his gravestone he directed that it read only 'John Monash'. ♦

Symptoms of a deeper historical malady

The misguided push to further honour Monash posthumously is really just another manifestation of enduring and deeper problems about how we can, or should, really use historical lessons to guide our contemporary defence efforts.

Most Australians have only superficial or no knowledge of our military history. They are therefore unduly vulnerable to the misrepresentation of that history or of being attracted to emotional or political calls to rewrite or 'redress' it. Moreover, as the case of Monash demonstrates, the contemporary popularity of an issue, or the current celebrity of an historical individual, should rarely count more than

considered decisions taken at the time – or merit as it was then adjudged. If we are, for example, to start promoting people posthumously there are other, lesser known but equally meritorious figures in Australian military history with as good or better cases for such promotion. And once started where and how could you then stop?

Even where Australians do have some knowledge of our military history, the interests underlying it are often purely historical. Those concerned unfortunately tend to see no obvious correlation between what history teaches us about deterring, and winning, wars and how these lessons can be applied to our contemporary and future defence challenges. In other words, too many draw either no lessons or the wrong lessons from our military history.

This general or specific ignorance is unfortunately too often exploited. It especially underlies the frequent dearth of informed debate on strategic and defence issues in the general media and parliament for example. It also helps explain why so many subjective and even highly biased opinion articles, or radio and television programs, on strategic and defence matters are published or broadcast. These ignore historical lessons or misrepresent them because those doing it know they can usually get away with it.

The urge to misrepresent historical fact or rewrite history often appears to result from attempts to gain a real or perceived contemporary political or ideological advantage. The posthumous promotion of Monash, or implying that any Australian military effort in Europe or the Middle East in either World War was unnecessary, is too often suggested by those keen to push the idea that our current foreign and strategic policy should be essentially isolationist.

They infer, for example, that Australia had no strategic interest in preventing Germany win either World War and/or that 'foreign wars' do not ever concern us. As well as being ahistoric, this wrongly assumes Australians of those times were far more emotional or gullible than us, or that they were much less able to assess their strategic circumstances in their own time than we can now do – both in their case then and our case now. At the very least such assumptions are highly arguable.

Finally, calls to rewrite or 'redress' history can be motivated by sentiment or ideology more broadly. These usually include the belief that we can remake history, or atone for previous occurrences with which we now disapprove, by making symbolic gestures. Both ideas are usually based on the at best arguable assumptions that it is correct to do so and that we have the moral right to do it. They are certainly based on the questionable assumption that those making decisions at the time were somehow less well-informed, less capable or more prejudiced than us now second-guessing their circumstances and their actions long afterwards. We may be more informed at times (because we can know in retrospect what happened then) but the risk is that our prejudices are just different, not necessarily better ones. ♦