

## **Different battles, different response**

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Recently, someone with a long memory asked me when and why my views on foreign policy had changed so radically. In the 1960s, he reminded me, I had invested a lot of time and energy in teach-ins, conferences, television debates and articles, defending US policy on Vietnam and Australia's support for that policy.

But in the years since 9/11, I have spent almost as much effort opposing US policy in Iraq and Australia's undeviating support for it.

Why the change, he asked. Surely the two situations are very similar? A harsh local dictatorship behaves atrociously, abusing the people under its control and threatening the local balance of power. The US intervenes to stop it. While most US allies stay on the sidelines, the Australian government gives its wholehearted support (Harold Holt's "All the way with LBJ" in the '60s; John Howard's unqualified commitment on the day after 9/11, even before he knew what form the US response would take). Things do not go very well in either instance, but in both cases Australians are urged by their government to "stay the course" and not "cut and run".

Why then, I was asked, if US policy and Australia's support for it were right in the '60s, are they not right today?

The short answer consists of two words: different circumstances. The longer answer can be summarised in seven points.

First, the Vietnam War occurred in Australia's region while the Iraq war is occurring thousands of miles further away. Despite foolish claims to the contrary, geographic proximity still counts in all but the most dangerous and general of global great-power conflicts, especially for a country of quite limited security resources. Australia intervenes in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, it does not intervene in Zambia or Chile.

Second, as well as its proximity, in the '60s Southeast Asia was the most unstable and violent region in the world. The historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr, fresh from serving in the Kennedy administration, described it pretty accurately as "an underdeveloped subcontinent filled with fictitious states in vague, chaotic and unpredictable revolutionary ferment".

In these circumstances, Australia had a compelling interest in keeping the US interested in and committed to the region, which meant actively supporting its involvement there. We do not have a comparable interest in the case of Iraq. Indeed, if anything the US involvement in Iraq is causing it to neglect the part of the world of most concern to us.

Third, the Vietnam War occurred in the middle of the Cold War, a global geopolitical struggle between two superpowers. The communist government of North Vietnam was actively supported by the Soviet Union and China.

In the mid-'60s, Indonesia — the largest state in the region and Australia's nearest neighbour — had the third largest Communist Party in the world, and in 1965 it only narrowly avoided succumbing to a communist coup.

In these circumstances, and given the general disorder and weakness of the region, fear of the downward thrust of communism was based on something more substantial than paranoia. A quick and easy communist victory in Vietnam, unopposed by the US, would have altered the whole character of Australia's strategic environment. Nothing comparable in terms of Australian interests is at stake in the case of Iraq.

Fourth, although today we speak of the "war on terror", there is nothing comparable to the Cold War in existence today. Osama bin Laden in his cave is not the Soviet Union of the '60s. The use of the term "war" with respect to terror is metaphorical, as in the "war" on drugs or crime. Despite lurid and absurd comparisons with Hitler's Germany, Iraq did not, and terrorism does not, constitute an existential threat.

Fifth, US action in Vietnam was based on sound intelligence. Despite strenuous denials at the time, North Vietnam did control the Vietcong and the conflict was not a civil war in South Vietnam. In the case of Iraq, US policy was based on hopelessly flawed — or, worse, cynically faked — intelligence.

Sixth, US policy in Vietnam was essentially defensive, reactive and limited by a healthy respect for Soviet power. Its Iraq policy was preventive, pre-emptive, and couched in unlimited and messianic terms. A revolutionary foreign policy does not serve the interests of a satisfied status quo state such as Australia.

Seventh and last, while the US ultimately lost the Vietnam War, the time it bought in doing so enabled the region to convert itself from the dangerous shambles described by Schlesinger into the most prosperous and stable part of the Third World. In Iraq, on the other hand, the US (and Australian) "war on terror" has only succeeded in producing more terrorists by the day.

Those, in sum, are the reasons why I supported Australia's involvement in one war but have opposed it in the other. Circumstances alter cases, and as the great Edmund Burke observed: "He who does not take them into consideration is not erroneous but stark mad." Holt was right in giving full support to the US in the 1960s; Howard has been wrong in giving full support to the US in the very different conditions prevailing in the 2000s.

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