

Anzac, our Achilles heel?

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Is there an "Australian Way of War"? Many people think there is. John Howard is one of them. He and others see in our long national record of military achievement a pattern from which we can draw some guiding principles about the ways Australia has used armed force in the past. They see those principles as reflecting characteristically Australian attitudes and values. And they believe those principles provide a sound guide to the future. They believe that as long as our defence policy conforms to the enduring elements of the Australian way of war, all will be well.

It is not hard to see what this Australian Way of War looks like. Drawing on the experience of the Boer War, the two world wars, Korea, Vietnam and now Iraq and Afghanistan, we can see a pattern emerge. Our way of war 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. That is supposed to guarantee that threats closer to home never emerge.

This idea of an Australian Way of War 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. It is, in essence, an argument for Australia to return to forward defence. Not surprisingly, it finds a lot of adherents in the army, and those many Australians who see today's army - rather than the wider Australian Defence Force - as the true heirs of the Anzac tradition.

They have at least partly persuaded John Howard, who told a defence conference in Canberra last year that his approach to defence "reflects this Government's fundamental reassertion of the strategic importance of the army in Australia's strategic culture". Put like that, how could one disagree?

The pull of the past on current policy can be a powerful thing, especially in an area such as defence, where policy choices connect so immediately with deeper questions of national identity and shared memory. That makes it seem quite natural that Australia's future defence policy should be guided by an image of an Australian Way of War with its roots in the Anzac legend. But will the future conform to our nostalgic images?

As it happens, history itself provides a neat lesson on this issue. In 483BC 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 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.

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 480BC. Many see the victory as a foundation of modern Western civilisation.

The moral for us today 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. For the past few years the Government has been trying to recast a sensible, forward-looking strategic policy that realistically addresses Australia's strategic needs and assets in the mould of the great Australian Imperial Force of the last century. But the empire is now long gone, and the result is strategic incoherence.

Australia does have permanent, or at least enduring, strategic interests. But the way we may need to use armed force to protect those interests will have to change and adapt to meet new circumstances. The Asia of this Asian century is a very different place to the Asia of 1915, and the way of war that worked then will not necessarily work again.

All this matters because working out the kinds of forces that can best protect our interests in the Asian century is an urgent task. The Government has been generous - in the past year, including this month's federal budget, the Government has given Defence an extra \$41 billion to spend, on top of a decade of steady increases. But to spend that money wisely takes a clear sense of the future, not a nostalgic gaze at the past.

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