not so much from the exploitation of capital but from the fact that capital did not exploit them enough. Such bold claims bolster the assertion that the problems of the agrarian socialisms developed in China, Vietnam and Kampuchea are at least partly attributable to the stunted and still-born capitalism which preceded them. Such is the gravity of the debate and the importance of a reassessment of the place of Marx and Engels within it. Unfortunately, Cummins does not seem to be aware that it is even taking place.

The scholarly nature of Cummins work is not at issue. Perhaps unfairly I am criticising him for not doing what he did not set out to do. At root, the difference is between one who sees the work of Marx and Engels as a complete and interesting object of study, and another who considers marxism as alive, growing and, above all, useful—the difference between a marxologist and a marxist.

Finally, some comment must be made on the price of the book. At an outrageous $44, each page is priced at more than 21 cents. The whole book could be photocopied for less than $10.


On April 29th, 1965, Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced his Government’s decision to commit Australian combat troops to the war in Vietnam. During the following six years, thousands of young Australians were sent to fight in a war which seemed to have little relevance for Australia. When Australian troops were finally withdrawn by the end of 1971, nearly 500 had been killed and 2,500 wounded. Countless others still suffer from physical and psychological disorders attributable to their time in Vietnam.

Why did the Australian Government decide to commit Australian forces to Vietnam? Was it pressure from our great protector and ally, the United States of America? Or was it in response, as was publicly announced, to a request from the South Vietnamese Government of Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat? These are some of the questions addressed by Michael Sexton, Senior Lecturer in Law at the University of New South Wales, in his book War for the Asking. With access to much relevant correspondence between the United States and the Australian Governments, and other previously unpublished communications, particularly telegrams, between Australian politicians and diplomats in Washington, Canberra and Saigon, Sexton has provided us with a new account of how Australia really came to be involved in Vietnam, which account not only effectively puts to rest certain myths of “external” pressure but also lays the responsibility squarely on our own Government.

In December, 1964, the military position in Saigon was deteriorating and the Americans were faced with a situation of military and political chaos. In addition, international pressure was brought to bear by such countries as France and Britain for the neutralisation of Vietnam. Australia, however, alarmed at any sign of wavering from the United States “set out to use whatever influence it had to push the Americans so deeply into the morass that they would have no alternative but to press on to the end”. The strategy used by Australian politicians, evident from communications quoted by Sexton, was “to arouse concern in the Americans....that their position appeared vacillating or powerless to the rest of the world”. During January, 1965, the situation in Washington remained fluid with no firm decision to put ground troops into Vietnam; nor was any decision made until late February. However, not only did the Australian Government in the three months prior to this decision continually press the United States to bomb North Vietnam and dissuade them from any idea of negotiating with Hanoi, it also pushed for the involvement of Australian combat troops in Vietnam, despite the United States’ request only for instructors.

On 2nd March, 1965, at the direction of President Johnson, the bombing of North Vietnam commenced. On 5th March, US troops landed at Da Nang on the north coast of South Vietnam. At this stage still no formal request was made for troops from Australia, despite constant pressure by the Australian Government for such a formal request. In April, 1965, the Menzies’ Government finally secured approval from the United States for Australian troop involvement and was anxious to immediately make the announcement public; however, the Australian Government insisted that the request be seen to come from Prime Minister Quat. According to Sexton, and supported by evidence from telegram communications, “the last act of this diplomatic drama was to contain some of its most frenetic scenes”, as the South Vietnamese Government had to be “persuaded” of the need not only for additional American troops but also for non-American troops. That the letter from Prime Minister Quat made this quite clear was further evidenced by the fact that it was only finally tabled in Parliament a few months before the last Australian troops were withdrawn.
What were the reasons for Australia's push for involvement in and escalation of the Vietnam War? Has the investment of the ruined lives of many Australian people, not to mention the Vietnamese, paid off dividends for Australia? According to Michael Sexton there were two reasons for this policy — "both unstated and normally obscured by rhetoric about the downward thrust of Asian hordes" — firstly, that it would be to Australia's advantage that America be locked into the South East Asian region by their involvement in Vietnam; and secondly, that by accepting assistance from Australia, the United States Government would feel obliged to protect Australia should it be threatened by any South East Asian source. As Sexton points out, this policy has had precisely the opposite effect: "ten years after the Australian decision to send troops, the Americans had withdrawn from the Asian mainland" — with their tail between their legs, and with total casualties of 55,000 dead and 300,000 wounded (this does not include the 55,000 US veterans who since returning home from Vietnam have committed suicide.)

The decision by the Menzies' Government was taken in a political climate in Australia where the Government in such a strong position was able to effectively gag any real public debate. It is here, according to Sexton, that implications for Australia's foreign policy may be drawn, for as he points out this system of decision-making remains unaltered. "There is, therefore, a considerable risk that decisions as misconceived as that of 1965 will be made in the 1980's — with much more disastrous consequences".

_War For The Asking_ is a compelling book, both in its content and its message. Despite the many quoted texts it is easy to read with Sexton's lucid style and hard to put down once begun. Hopefully many people will read it and notch it up as one more contribution to the public debate that must become reality if the world is to successfully navigate the nuclear waters of the 1980's.


Donald Horne has followed _Death of the Lucky Country_, his 1976 essay on the end of the Whitlam Era, with another political "quickie" _Winner Take All_, his avowed aim being to write a short book on the 1980 Federal election and its meaning. In some respects, however, Horne's new book is more about "lack of meaning" than "meaning".

There are four important strands running through the book: the obfuscatory nature of the 1980 election campaign; an analysis of where the Labor Party is at of now; the government-forming process in Australia; and the power of the received wisdom or "common sense" in shaping the political values and judgement of the electorate. Each of these points is well worth discussing.

In a chapter entitled "Heroes, Villains and Fools", Donald Horne draws attention to how election campaigns often fail to come to grips with the important issues facing the community. For a variety of reasons the matters of real substance are played down — or even completely ignored. He argues that the 1980 election campaign was a stark example of this over-simplification of complex issues.

The central economic issue facing Australia last year was the imminent development "boom" and its likely consequences — economic, social, political. However, there wasn't, Horne says, real debate between the government coalition and Labor about these matters of far-reaching importance. Nor was there any real attempt to explain that large-scale unemployment was due to the end of the post-second world war boom; nor to explain why "managed" capitalism had failed.

**Money Ethos**

The coalition's lack of interest in a serious explanation is obvious enough for Horne not to pursue this point; what is more important is Labor's failure. Here he suggests that the Labor Party is inhibited by its bi-partisan acceptance of the national belief in development and economic growth, which he argues lies at the bottom of the "ruling 'pragmatism' of Australians," a pragmatism that "sees money as the measure of all things." Under the impetus of this money ethos, enthusiasm for "national development" (in the case of Queensland and Western Australia, state development) becomes "a passion for development pursued not in rational terms of cost and benefit but for _its own sake_", as something inherently good. What the Labor Party needs to do, according to Horne, is to question this philosophy on two levels: first, does it make sense; but more important, to ask who will benefit; who gains, who and what loses?

Apart from these general considerations, development should be effectively taxed and big business concessions abandoned; more of the public money now spent in helping transnational and national corporations could be spent on government prospecting, government mines and government processing-plants.