TWO WEEKS BEFORE the National Liberation Front launched its Tet offensive, this column commented:

In reality, the war is running against the Americans. The battles are still being fought in the areas declared ‘cleared’ a year ago, the most ‘secure’ US bases are still open to National Liberation Front attacks, and daring probes are made up to the very outskirts of Saigon. The NLF forces alternate guerilla and positional battles with bewildering variety and brilliance. Indeed, the NLF army is proving superior to the US in both strategy and tactics. Its forces are better equipped than ever, and they have been able to counter every new tactical weapon the Americans have thrown into the war.

Then, it seemed necessary to challenge the U.S. Administration’s propaganda line, backed to the hilt by Hasluck and Co., that the “allies” were winning, that the NLF had lost the initiative; “pacification” was succeeding; it was now only a matter of time before the war was over.

How different today! Deep gloom pervades Washington (and Canberra, too); the policy-makers thresh about trying to find a new strategy and new tactics. How many more American troops — 20,000 or 100,000, perhaps 206,000? A general mobilisation by the puppet South Vietnamese regime — or would this only increase the danger of ARVIN troops joining the NLF, as some did already in February? How to get more Australians, in face of Gorton’s “no more” statement? (This is a minor worry, since Gorton has precedents in his predecessors’ assurances that no more would go — usually just before more went.) Most dangerous of all, how to escalate with some chance of success; dare we use nuclear weapons? This is the momentous decision they mull over in their vicious circle.

THREE STRATEGIES HAVE BEEN TRIED. First, to arm and “advise” the puppet Diem regime; second, “special war,” in which Americans took the field with the Ky-Thieu puppets; third, an all-out conventional “limited war,” in which the main brunt had to be borne by the United States. All have failed, each more miserably than the one before. What new strategy is there, except more of the same, or nuclear war?

Stubbornly basing themselves upon their military power, above all technological superiority, the US imperialists refused every chance of an honorable peace offered by the Democratic Republic
of Vietnam. They do not want peace but control of South-East Asia as part of their global strategy of imperialist domination. Now, when it becomes clear that not only can the Americans never win — and this was always clear — but that they can be defeated, they are placed in a dreadful dilemma. Victory is impossible, ultimate defeat is probable, but political “face” makes withdrawal a bitter draught almost inconceivable to swallow, all the harder since the presidency is up for decision.

Until recently, even many who oppose the Vietnam war could not believe that the Vietnamese people were able to win. The Vietnamese have always thought differently. In April, 1967, General Van Tien Dung wrote an analysis of the war that explains much of what has happened in the past year, and projects the future course:

Obviously, the US imperialists’ strength is of a material and technical nature. They have a big economic and national defence potential, a numerous army with high mobility and a strong fire-power, especially that of the air force. All American schemes and strategic and tactical plans in this war of aggression against Vietnam are based on this point. That is why our people’s struggle is a very arduous one. But in our country, the strength of the United States has a limit. It cannot be brought into full play due to US political weaknesses, the terrain conditions and our people’s war combat methods. Moreover, the enemy’s weak points are fundamental, on both the political and the military planes. They spell out his doom in strategy and tactics... The prestige of the US trump cards — infantry, air force and navy — have been debunked... Ballyhoo about the United States’ unimaginable military might have gone bankrupt. ...

There are still terrible resources of destruction left in the American armoury, that can cause still greater suffering to Vietnam, but cannot avert ultimate defeat. This underlines the need for a stronger political campaign against US imperialism the world over, to demand an immediate end to the bombing, peace talks to negotiate the withdrawal of all foreign troops, and acceptance of the option always open — a return to the Geneva Agreement. This is a demand that history, conscience and international solidarity places before the peace forces and the working class movement the world over.

THE AUSTRALIAN WORKING CLASS and peace movements have a greater responsibility than most. It is no exaggeration to say that struggle against the Vietnam war is decisive for Australia’s national independence, honor, even its future peace and security. Further national development, living standards for wage and salary-earner, social services and education are threatened by involvement in this war that, if it was once described as a swamp, then as a bottomless pit, must now be regarded as a maelstrom that can consume so much in lives, living standards and moral attitudes that most Australians believe themselves committed to.
The official mythology explains Australia’s part in the war like this: “We” are in Vietnam to defend the non-communist Asian nations from Communist Aggression, to allow the Vietnam of Diem-Ky-Thieu to become an independent democratic nation. “We” want to be friends with Asia, and certainly have no feelings of superiority or condescension to Asians. “We” believe that the United States is the only nation capable of defending this right of the non-communist nations, and of course “we” know that the US has neither selfish investments and interests, nor any anti-Asian sentiments either. Somehow, this is mixed up with a feeling of fear and uncertainty, that “we” have to be defended against some vague but menacing hordes of “they” who yearn for the open spaces of this wealthy continent, against whom the United States is our shield. And the more the United States is involved in Asia, the stronger and surer this shield. Muddled and contradictory as all this may be, it is still the complex of belief upon which Australian foreign policy is based.

The contradictions are being exposed daily. On the one hand, there are the official protestations of friendship with Asia, on the other a viciously destructive war against an Asian people. “We” foreigners fight to defend them — against their own brothers; to defend them we bomb, shell and burn their homes and their cities, beat, torture and kill indiscriminately. “We” find they don’t want us, laugh behind “our” backs, won’t warn “our” Vietnamese police even when the NLF knocks on their doors and warns that the Tet offensive is about to begin, give aid and information to the NLF. . . . So our officers and gentlemen become angry, and in their anger cry out the truth behind the official stories, expressing crude racialism, bitter hatred of Asians and an ultimate reliance upon violence and brutality like the torture of an 18-year-old girl.

SUCH INCIDENTS are the inevitable, logical consequence of official Government policy. More, they are the direct result of Army training for Vietnam, that sets out to brainwash the conscript to regard Asians as the enemy, to teach bayonet drill with cries of “get the slant-eyed yellow bastards before they get you,” that trains him to “search and destroy” the villages, to regard his service in Vietnam as defending Australia by “fighting them over there so we don’t have to fight them here.” This indoctrination is debasing, racialist and incredibly dangerous, and it inevitably produces a psychology of racialism, brutality and contempt. The blame for this must be laid at the door of Government policymakers, the propagandists of the Liberal Party and those controllers of news media who try to justify an unjust war.
Only an unjust war needs such indoctrination. NLF victories, won against such odds, are understandable only in terms of a people's war, in which the odds are balanced only by the burning conviction and incredible courage that people's war has generated for thousands of years. In all the sordid story of torture of an 18-year-old girl, one fact illumines the truth. This girl, questioned with threats and torture, refused to betray her comrades and her cause. Official statements laconically add that she was "handed over to the South Vietnamese authorities" — television reports have shown us a fraction of what that means. This unnamed heroine is but one of a whole people who are fighting for a cause that has moved them for 100 years, enabling them to resist French, Japanese and American might.

The Government's moral degeneration was starkly revealed in the parliamentary debate on the torture case. It first attempted to lie its way out, then promised a full inquiry. Pinned down, Gorton and his supporters revealed an essential brutality. It was a case of torture, but only a "little one," the girl could walk; at any rate, Australian lives were involved; there was a worldwide conspiracy of the communists, the western press, the Labor Party and the churches to insidiously undermine the "free world's" cause in Vietnam. They have decided to brazen out the whole affair, relying upon the public's short memory, appeals to a spurious patriotism, a continued campaign of anti-communist propaganda drawing heavily upon concealed racialism, and their big parliamentary majority. To meet the new situation, threats of censorship and suppression are coming from those extreme Liberal Party rightwing elements who knew what they were doing in enthusiastically supporting Gorton as Prime Minister.

Plaintively, these hawks call for more publicity of alleged "Vietcong atrocities" while they screech out the demand for censorship of the undeniable brutality of the United States and its allies. They argue that American brutality is no worse than that of the NLF, that the Americans are fighting for the cause of "freedom" and one cannot be too squeamish about the means used to win.

ATROCITIES ARE NECESSARY in an unjust war against an armed people. The strength of guerilla war lies in its national character and popular support. The anti-popular forces, usually supported and controlled by foreign powers, have to terrorise the population since they cannot win their allegiance. Those who clutch at the straw of "Vietcong atrocities" ignore the terrible chain of continuity of oppression, massacre and torture that links
American occupation with the French, and the Thieu regime with that of Ngô Đình Diệm.

Diem, now acknowledged a bloody-minded dictator, was selected, installed and supported by the United States. His regime set out to terrorise the population, and began by massive violations of the Geneva Agreement. Article 14c of the convention stipulates:

Each party undertakes to refrain from any reprisals or discriminations against persons or organisations on account of their activities during the hostilities and to guarantee their democratic liberties.

During the first year of its activities, the International Control Commission investigated 40 violations of this article in the South — only a tiny fraction of all that occurred. Although Diem put all possible obstacles in its path — and in 1957 prohibited any further investigations under Article 14c — the International Control Commission Report No. 4 states:

In cases where inquiries were possible, we have verified 319 cases involving the loss of human lives... The Commission was unable to determine that, apart from the cases cited, there have not been other reprisals and discriminations.

This was 1955; the reign of terror thus begun continued and intensified until the people took up arms in 1960. Repression, murder, atrocities had raged for five years, supported and encouraged by the American Government. The shamefaced defenders of civilised barbarism weep for the “Revolutionary Development” teams who have been executed by the National Liberation Front. These “Revolutionary Development cadres” go into the villages behind the United States, Australian, South Korean and puppet troops. When a village is “pacified,” after “Vietcong” are killed, questioned, tortured, taken away, these cadres govern in the name of Saigon. They are imposed from outside, not elected; they are corrupt; they govern through terror. The people hate them, correctly regarding them as the representatives of their enemies, the Saigon regime, the landlords and the United States.

This is a civil war, and the Vietnamese patriots fight it as all national liberation wars have been fought, by attacking the government they regard as the enemy, and all its representatives. This was how the Americans fought their War of Independence, and, whatever atrocities they committed, these were more than balanced by those of his Britannic Majesty George III. So it has been through all history; so it is in Vietnam today. The US and puppet forces commit atrocities on a large scale, by indiscriminate mass bombing, napalm, herbicides and gas, and, by torture and killing of NLF fighters or suspected fighters. It is inevitable, given Australian participation in this unjust war, that the Australian Government will try to justify use of similar methods, that are an end result of their own policy.
THE GOVERNMENT’S POLITICAL STRATEGY will fail. They cannot count upon the Australian people forgetting, still less on victory covering up their responsibility. The Vietnam war is the continuing ulcer of Australian politics, spreading its poison throughout the body politic. At every level — moral, political, economic and social — the war corrupts. The economic consequences of the war are now beginning to assert themselves. The financial crisis of world capitalism, revealed in open worship of the Golden Calf in world money markets, was precipitated and worsened by the drain upon American resources to fight the war. The United States now spends over 30 thousand million dollars annually on its aggressive war, causing inflation and cutting down on national welfare. Unrevealed billions of this sum are spent in foreign countries, hastening the US balance of payments crisis and making it deeper. American capitalism, deliberately made the keystone of Australian economic policy, now faces a most disastrous crisis of confidence. Whatever means are adopted to meet this crisis, they cannot stabilise the dollar for long. And for Australia, dependent upon foreign trade and equally upon foreign investment, the inevitable shakedown will bring serious results. The tentative remedial measures, already inadequate, have already restricted US capital investment; the Japanese monopolists upon whom Australia already relies so much, are tied closely to US capitalism; British investment and trade can no longer play much part.

Mr. Bury’s notorious speech clearly spelled out the problems, and the solutions planned by the present government. Bury put this thinking very clearly with this keynote: Wages have to be pegged or at least rises severely limited; social services and education must also be restricted and taxes must rise, to pay for “defence,” secured by foreign wars (in Vietnam now and perhaps in Thailand or Laos or some other Asian country later), and by a permanent Australian military presence in Asia. McMahon’s shadow-boxing with Bury is an attempt to shift public attention from the real intent. McMahon argues that “real wages” are not stagnating as Bury said, but rising. This has a tactical aim, to reinforce from the opposite side the demand for an “incomes policy,” i.e., wage-pegging, to justify the next Budget and earlier economic measures that will be needed.

CLASS STRUGGLE WILL BECOME SHARPER, because the authorities have not dropped their plans. Indeed, these plans have now become more urgent for the capitalists, for their government and their arbitration system precisely because of the cost of Vietnam and the world financial crisis. Their plans certainly include
a new attack upon unionism and the right to strike. The savage use of penal clauses, fines and padded costs (totalling around $150,000 for metal unions alone) is used against all strikers, from industrial workers to supervisors and air pilots. Sir Henry Bolte tried to make the Essential Services Act even more draconic, in face of the struggle of State Electricity Commission workers, industrial and staff, for higher pay. Another possibility freely canvassed is a reform of arbitration through legislation giving the courts power to control over-award payments and tying arbitration still closer to government policy.

In these ways, the authorities are combining industrial and political action, making it essential for the workers and their unions to lift the level of their struggle to the political plane, including the defence of democratic rights so basically attacked by attempts to outlaw or penalise strikes. Mr Bury went further, revealing that the Communist Party and other left-wing trends have been correct all along when they said that the struggle for peace was an essential part of the fight for higher living standards. His speech was an exercise in ideological preparation of public opinion for an attack upon living standards, inevitable as war expenditure grows.

The government plans a three-pronged offensive: wage restraint, while prices rise; higher taxation; pruning of government expenditure on education, social services and those spheres of national development, like water conservation and housing, that are not immediately related to serving profit-making through extraction of mineral resources and other monopolised industries. The lesson is plain; the labor movement will have to fight on the peace front as vigorously as it does on the industrial front if living standards are to be defended and improved. There are many aspects to this struggle. They include the planned extension of militant action around wages and conditions; recognition by the movement that education, social services and national development are part of living standards and of equal concern to the trade unions. It requires also recognition that the Vietnam war is morally wrong, economically harmful and politically disastrous.

So long as the war goes on, and the imperialist policy is pursued, Australia is set on a collision course with Asia, committed to a series of wars that are doomed to military and political defeat because they run counter to the national liberation revolutions, a great historical movement of our times that is irreversible. Whilst the war and the imperialist policy is pursued, it must eat further and further into living standards and the whole economy. If the United States, wealthy as it is, cannot afford both Vietnam and the so-called Great Society, then how can Australia be developed.