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A khaki future?

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A khaki future?

Abstract

Australia is a martial and warlike nation, established on beachheads on the east coast of the continent in 1789 by the military might of Britain. Long-running conflict with the indigenous people ensued, a struggle that went on into the 1920s and is yet to be incorporated into mainstream tellings of the history of the Australian nation.

With invasion secured and indigenous dispossession well in hand, military interventions followed in the lands and affairs of others: in New Zealand during the 1860s against the Maori people, where volunteers were enticed with the promise of sharing confiscated land; the Sudan (1885–86); the Boxer Rebellion in China (1900–01); the Boer War in South Africa (1899–1902); the First World War (1914–18) and the anti-Bolshevik North Russian Relief Force (1919), where we picked up two Victoria Crosses. So on through the twentieth century: the Second World War, Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, with the Second World War (arguably) the only time the security of the nation was threatened

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Australia's enthusiastic debut as a military nation during the abattoirs of the First World War was not the unprecedented event that the myth makers eulogise. Since 1905, the nation had been coached for such an event, with systems variously in place until repealed in 1929, forcing compulsory military training on males aged 12 to 26 years of age. Well before the ill-advised and disastrous events at Gallipoli in 1915 provided the opportunity to manufacture Anzac Day, there was a yearning for a blood sacrifice in the air and joy for war as a bonding national phenomenon. As a military contingent shipped off to the Sudan in 1885, NSW politician HS Badgery noted the power war had to 'cement the people in this community of all classes and creeds in one common feeling.' During the Boer War, an Australian poet enthused:

A nation is never a nation
Worthy of pride or place
Till the mothers have sent their firstborn
To look death in the field in the face.

Battlefields aside, there were other martial outings. Between 1790 and 1810, the infant colony of New South Wales was run by a military junta, the NSW Corps, while Britain was otherwise preoccupied with conflict in Europe. As with all military juntas, the weapons monopoly was used to generate huge personal wealth, particularly in land grabbing. During the twentieth century, Australia's armed forces were variously used in domestic industrial relations; as anti-strike back-up during the 1923 Melbourne Police Strike; as strike breakers during the 1949 Coal Strike in NSW; again to break maritime trade union bans in 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954 and 1967 (and air industry bans in 1981 and 1989); and to intimidate unemployed Italian migrant workers in 1952. The extent of military involvement in the 1998 War on the Waterfront is yet to be fully understood.

Away from the limelight, in paramilitary cockroachland, serving and ex-service personnel provided the core and muscle for a proliferation of anti-democratic right-wing private armies from the 1920s onwards. These only disappeared in the early 1950s with the ascendancy of the Menzies government and the expansion and militarisation of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation.

Much of this martial history – minus the war against the Australian indigenous people; minus military involvement in industrial relations; minus secret armies; minus a significant record of mutiny, discontent and non-compliance in Australia's armed forces, and atrocities in the field; minus the long and ongoing history of bullying and sexism, and sometimes suicide, in the armed forces; minus the high rate of mental health issues (alcoholism, post-traumatic stress disorder) in defence force personnel returning from battlefields in the modern era; and minus the long history of ex-service personnel turning up in the ranks of mercenary outfits

on the global stage, beginning with the despicable crew of thugs known as the Black and Tans during the Irish War of Independence – is celebrated and commemorated in the hugely popular secular day of religiosity, Anzac Day.

Advocates and supporters like to locate the origins of Anzac Day in the latter days of the First World War, in the grief and mourning that cast its pall over the nation. Scant attention is paid to the theological roots of Anzac commemoration in 'war theology', the Christian belief powerfully present in some clergy during the Great War that the war was about protecting the British Empire, bastion and facilitator of the spread of the Gospel amongst the heathen. The first Anzac commemoration was initiated by churches in Brisbane in 1915; first proceedings in 1916 to establish the day were dominated by the churches.

Anzac Day celebration was on the nose by the 1950s, as is evident from Alan Seymour's play *The One Day of the Year* (1958). Fallout from the Vietnam War and conscription made it even less popular during the 1970s. Nonetheless, it regenerated – but not organically. After 1972, with both Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and conscription over, Australia's military industry was in a quandary. The armed forces were in various states of disarray about leadership, strategies, morale, and recruitment; there was no discernible enemy in sight; the Cold War was in its death throes; and the nation was in an anti-war mood.

Remedies? Integrate the separate armed forces under one umbrella, the Australian Defence Force (1976), and rebuild the martial spirit!

The latter was a task to which lobbyists, veterans' organisations, war-industry scholars, media-savvy defence interests and armaments manufacturers, educators, journalists, and Prime Ministers Bob Hawke, Paul Keating, John Howard, went to with gusto. The fortuitous arrival of 'terrorism' in 1978 via the mysterious and deadly Hilton bombing (possibly the result of a botched black operation by Australian security interests) gave birth to a new 'enemy' focus the dying Cold War could no longer provide, helping fuel budgets, senses of urgency and action. The Commonwealth government poured millions of dollars into educating the public, in particular targeting schools and 'educating' schoolkids about the relevance and importance of Anzac Day, and about Australia's 'proud' military history. Most recently, the commemoration of the centenary of the Gallipoli landing (1915 – 2015) and the hundredth anniversary of the First World War has been allocated some \$83.5 million.

Martial enthusiasts and promoters post-1970s have not gone unchallenged. But critical contestations in books and articles have received little in the way of media attention with the trickle of critical and counter-martial books swamped in retail outlets by a deluge of literature celebrating martial endeavours, while important scholarly work languishes in niche academic journals. Not long before his death, activist historian/journalist Tony Harris (1948–2013) recognised this problem of critical invisibility and recommended the tactic of creating dissent events. He argued the need to assert an oppositional antiwar culture of peace and internationalism. War memorials in Australia, he argued, were 'military' memorials, not about remembering the realities of war but about forgetting them. Contrarily, Harris advocated use of these sites by antiwar activists for peaceful protest: for example, antiwar poetry readings, songs, speeches, performances. Further, he posited the need for the creation of an antiwar day of commemorations that recognised the real costs of war, and remembered those Australians who have variously opposed and struggled against war. He suggested 8 May as the day of commemoration, the date of the first Vietnam antiwar Moratorium in 1970. In May 2013 he had himself filmed on video performing antiwar poetry by Siegfried Sassoon and AD Hope in front of the iconic Canberra War Memorial; these videos were posted on his antiwar Facebook page *Fed Up With Anzac Jingoism*.

But back to the future already in place. With a designated minister (Veterans' Affairs) assisting Prime Minister Tony Abbott for the Centenary of Anzac and the former Howard Defence Minister Dr Brendan Nelson assisting as Director of the National War Memorial (the fellow who, as a Howard-era Minister for Education, put flags and flag poles into schools and tried to get school kids to salute the flag) and the new Minister for Defence, Senator David Johnston, talking up battle readiness for involvement in future conflicts stretching from 'Pakistan across to Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan', you can see where the future is heading. As they used to say in those black-and-white war films of yesterday, bombs away.

Green and gold the national colours of Australia? Get real – try khaki on for size.

Rowan Cahill is a sessional teaching academic at the University of Wollongong, and blogs at <http://www.radicalsdney.blogspot.com.au>.