

Australia's Mission in Afghanistan. The Failings of "Operation Slipper"

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It was made as a special statement. The Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott wanted it known that Australian soldiers who had fought in Afghanistan in what has been the country's longest war should not be treated like those who had fought in Vietnam. "Afghanistan is a better country because Australia was there," he explained to returning soldiers on March 21. Then, a nice little contortion of language, and reality. "That war ended, not with victory and not with defeat, but with hope, hope for a better Afghanistan and a safer world." [1]

This statement of ritual stalemate on Operation Slipper – the Australian mission in Afghanistan – is suggestive. The Vietnamese War was marked by false logic, misguided ideology, and hare-brained cultural assumptions that led to a generation of Australian soldiers being ridiculed and vomited on as cultural abominations. Prime Minister Robert Menzies, on April 29, 1965, spoke of fears how "the takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South and South-East Asia. It must be seen as a part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans." Tinker with such terms as "communism" and replace with "global fundamentalism," and the raison d'être for unlimited war is revived.

A great evasion has therefore developed towards the role of Coalition forces in Afghanistan, clothed in the language of humanitarianism and the stuffing of good feeling. Notable Australian voices such as Professor Hugh White have argued that Australia's mission, and by implication those of others, was a "total failure". White, writing in 2013, was examining the withdrawal of Australian forces from Oruzgan province. Its objectives, he argued, had not been achieved. "That means that Australia's military operation in Afghanistan has failed." [2]

Every measurement of success, taken through the doctrine of counter-insurgency (COIN) suggested the converse. The Afghan government backed by foreign forces continues to be debilitating in its corruption. "Any government that is too weak to win a counterinsurgency without massive outside help is too weak to be worth supporting." The reasons for placing troops in Afghanistan to deny it to al-Qaeda "never made sense" – the terrorist franchise was out of Afghanistan and sprouting like well-fed fungi "long before we went to Oruzgan."

Others like Peter Jennings of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute engage in acts of gymnastic overstretch, hoping to grasp a rationale as to why Australia was there. He is only left with naked, circular presumptions – Australian soldiers were obviously engaged because it was necessary for Canberra to have a presence. "My view is that Australia's participation

in the war was necessary; it has produced some positive outcomes and created the basis for cautious optimism that Afghanistan will have a better future.” Jennings takes it as a given that, if the US was in Afghanistan to fight that grand nonsense of “global terrorism,” then Australia had to be as well.

Standard economic measures are wheeled out in the manner Graham Greene so significantly skewered in *The Quiet American* – the good forces of modernisation fighting nationalist primitives in the name of a civilising mission finds virtue in buildings, infrastructure, and roads. “Progress in social and economic development has been made of a type that probably looks more impressive to Afghan than Australian eyes.” Abbott’s own commemorative address noted those materialist achievements: “girls’ schools, roads and bridges where there were none.”

The mid-road here comes from such commentaries as those of Army veteran and Lowy Institute fellow James Brown. First, the deployment of Australian troops was deemed necessary to back US interests – every satrap needs his calling, and “it was entirely correct to support this mission with our military forces.”

But the mission changed. Brown, without any evidence, suggests that the deployment did reduce the threat of terrorism in Australia, another example of how empirical evidence persists in being an enemy of the good, let alone necessity. Neither side of politics could quite explain the “why” of Australian involvement as the torpor began setting in. This, Brown chewed over, had little to do with reality and everything to do with image. The ADF had “forgotten many of the lessons of the East Timor conflict. Like finding a way to tell your story and get the media on side.”[3] The right war was simply fought in a “dumb” way.

For all of that, former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, on whose behalf foreign forces were fighting and dying for, found little room for sympathy. His reflections typify how gratitude can never be possible for occupation forces, however efficient their mission or purpose. “The war on terror was not conducted where it should have been, which was in the sanctuaries and the training grounds beyond Afghanistan, rather than what the US and NATO forces were conducting operations in Afghan villages, causing harm to the Afghan people.”[4]

Importantly, the most brutal observation from Karzai lies in the failings of the mission. It is something that will, and should haunt, endeavours of such intrusion and blindness. This was a defeat of NATO and US forces, since there was never any victory to define, let alone gain.

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Notes:

[1] <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/canberra-welcomes-home-afghanistan-veterans--20150321-1m2e6m.html>

[2] <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-opinion/afghanistan-mission-a-total--failure-20130204-2duf0.html>

[3] <http://www.crikey.com.au/2013/10/29/in-afghanistan-we-fought-a-smart-war-in-dumb-ways/>

[4] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-29/was-australias-role-in-the-afghan-war-worth-it/5056376>

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