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The War to End Nothing

Australia in Afghanistan

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Rupert Murdoch's *The Australian*, that extensive rag that said it all said it again when it came to Australia's imminent withdrawal from Afghanistan. "Our Afghan war ends not with victory, nor defeat." This was the surprise occasion of Prime Minister Tony Abbot's visit to Afghanistan, characterised by few words, ghastly photography and chatter by everyone else except the Prime Minister. Since assuming office, the Prime Minister is the nation's incubated leader, occasionally allowed out to cool, but always happy to fall back into pouch padded security.

When he did speak ahead of the handing over of Australian control (the term is used advisedly) of Uruzgan back to local forces, he gave the dull stagnant terms that have been paraded since imperialism became the sexually molesting bedfellow of freedom. "Australians do not fight wars of conquest, we fight wars of freedom." Similar remarks have been made by US President George W. Bush, who was proud to term individuals like Abbott Texans in mentality and spirit. This might have insulted Texans, but gave certain Australians a tumescent thrill.

The problem with such policy makers and those who supposedly scrutinise them is a conspicuous lack of history, an inability to consult an index, read up an entry and chase up the evidence. War by public relations is the worst sort, a fantasy map of fictitious targets and false victories. It assumes that a summary is the end game. We can only hope that the reason why the NSA will fail in its blanket surveillance is largely because it is incapable of processing what it finds. This is tantamount to the burglar who may break the safe but can't read the value of its contents.

As for the Antipodean freedom lovers and their copy book, the list of freedom giving is not impressive. The Boer Wars (1880-1 and 1899-1902) involved, as the often racist yet striking publication *The Bulletin* rightly pointed out, Australians fighting their own types by imperial direction: Boer families who bore a striking resemblance to their own sturdy stock of pioneers and plunderers fighting their own indigenous populations. Fittingly, it was the Boers who termed their fight against Britain and empire as the *Vryheidsoorloë* – the freedom wars.

The invasion of Ottoman Turkey in 1915 via the Dardanelles, since heralded as a wonderful if foolhardy act of Australian heroism against Turkish forces was supplemental imperialism (Johnny Turk needed a good serve, best of the rest by Winston Churchill's instruction). The list continues: where empire, of the British or American sort, breathes, Australia condenses. Because it lacks a backbone, it needs foreign implants, alien genetic matter.

The Prime Minister did call the wind down of Australian forces in Afghanistan (the ADF does not retreat or withdraw) a "bittersweet moment". The casualty list: 40 soldiers dead; 256 wounded. Its Special Forces are exhausted. Its material is withered and worn. Spare parts are hard to come by. Wear and tear is rampant. Not that the Australian Defence Force's Public Relations department is letting on. For the years of conflict Australians have been in Afghanistan, information on what exactly has taken place from the side of those soldiers has been threadbare.

Australians, after battling in provinces they could scant name, and failing at languages they never learnt, are leaving with confused heads: Did they do good? As Australian diplomat Fred Smith was quoted on ABC Radio's PM Program (Sep 23, 2010), "People here hardly understand [Uruzgan], let alone people back home. It's a hard place to understand." Did they help these dark wonders in a darker world find a smidgen of hope? How good of them to bother, even if it might be true.

Those tally points that make the invader feel that much better are fed to a servile press corps. According to Abbott, the province had 34 schools when the Australians arrived. It now has 200. One for the Australians, nil to the Taliban, though perhaps the language ought to be translated into Rugby or Australian Rules, which would yield a different language. There are also roads: 200 km sealed, and pre-natal care for 80 percent of expectant mothers.

Much suggests that this mission, as with others run by the coalition forces, is fantasy in the making, an illusion of peace. A mid-year UN report on the protection of civilians, authored by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), noted 1,319 civilian deaths and 2,533 injuries in the first half of 2013. Violence is rising, rather than falling, increasing by 14 percent on last years figures. The Taliban are waiting to swoop in for the kill.

Nothing in the public relations dispatches from the ADF mentions the disgruntled Afghans who gave the Australian servicemen and women a full serving during their training for “civil” society. “Friendly” killings have been rampant. The forces in Afghanistan have had their fair share.

The lies of guerrilla wars are sweet and heavy with mendacity. Few ever bother about the factual record. Operations involve fanfare and feigned love from people who are sleeping with you one day and cutting your throat the next. This reality has escaped the Tony Abbott wonderland. Afghan Interior Minister Omar Daudzai was happy to help in giving the ADF the gold medal of the coalition forces. Chests duly swelled. “It’s great to know that the work we have done here is respected and admired by our peers around the world. It has been worth it.” The Labour opposition leader, Bill Shorten, was also there by Abbott’s side to bathe in the false homage. “You make us proud to be Australian.”

Guerrilla wars, tribal conflicts, are endless fractious engagements, interrupted by unintended intervals of peace. The idiotic spectacle of seeing Australian soldiers in such provinces as Uruzgan demonstrates a misguided paternalism at best, a hideous ignorant imperialism at worst. The men and women on the ground are fed the gruel and swallow it whole. “We are helping them,” after all.