

# ***THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1962-1972***

## ***CONVERSATIONS AT THE TOP***

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Peter Edwards has told the story of the strategic nexus between Australia and the United States during the Vietnam War, and I have neither the intention nor the ability to tell it better. This essay seeks to sketch out the Australian-American relationship at the highest level, in the words of the contemporary participants. The conversations at the top have recurrent themes. First, US Congressional attitudes about America's allies in Vietnam were seldom positive, and Secretary of Defense Robert S McNamara consistently found himself defending the allied contributions and sacrifices. Second, McNamara was straightforward with his Australian counterparts. Far from misrepresenting conditions in South Vietnam, he rarely spoke to Australian leaders in optimistic terms about the war. Third, human memory of events is fallible, making the original versions more valuable. A case in point is McNamara's successor as Secretary of Defense Clark M Clifford's published account of his August 1967 Asian trip to recruit more allied troops for Vietnam. This version, which has become the accepted account, varies from his original, official reports of discussions with his Australian hosts. Finally, and briefly the Australian-American connection changed after the Tet Offensive of 1968, but indications of the shift were already apparent before the Vietnamese communists' nationwide attacks. This anecdotal approach will, I think, shed light on how the Americans at least viewed the evolving nature of their ties with Australia during the first half of the Vietnam War era.

### **Questioning Australia's Commitment**

President Lyndon Johnson's desire of 'seeing more flags' in Vietnam alongside the Stars and Stripes is well known.<sup>1</sup> To Johnson's thinking, the more allies of the United States participating in Vietnam the greater the credibility of his Southeast Asia adventure—one that he was constantly wavering over, yet one he expected others to sign up for without delay. Australia did respond in late May 1964 when Canberra, anxious for American support in Southeast Asia, found it in its own best national interests to ingratiate itself to the United States by doubling the size of its training team already in Vietnam. A few months later in July, Minister of External Affairs Paul Hasluck visited the White House where he expressed his view that the conflict was of monumental significance and 'went so far as to remark that "if South Vietnam goes, that is the end in Southeast Asia"'.<sup>2</sup> Neither Johnson nor McNamara could have said it any better.

Hasluck and the Australian cabinet's commitment to the US effort in South Vietnam was little known or appreciated in the United States. As early as mid-1963 the US Congress had already established a pattern regarding Vietnam: They wanted to know who was there except Americans?<sup>3</sup> Secretary McNamara had developed a stock reply—the Australians. Congressmen hostile to McNamara, and their numbers increased over time, invariably retorted 'How many?' The lawmakers questioned Washington's inability to secure a broader commitment on the part of America's allies in this campaign against communist aggression. Their attitude was likely more a commentary on Congressional frustration over burden sharing, i.e., the notion that America's allies were not bearing their fair share of defence costs, than any anti-war sentiment, but it became a recurrent issue that bedevilled executive and legislative relations throughout the period.

Before Congressional committees, McNamara swallowed his convictions that Australia had enjoyed a free ride on defence into the 1960s to defend Prime Minister Robert G Menzies' policy of holding down defence expenditures in order to give priority to economic development. McNamara initially insisted that Menzies' slim margin in Parliament made it absolutely impossible for him to increase the defence budget. Menzies' dramatic increases in defence spending after the December 1963 elections served as a rallying cry for McNamara whose Congressional testimony for months afterwards persisted in describing Canberra's decision as if it were something that had happened only yesterday.

To be fair, McNamara recognised the serious situation Australia faced in Malaysia, and in closed executive sessions of May 1964 before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs pronounced it unwise for Canberra to send substantial forces to South Vietnam if such commitments exposed Malaysia to Indonesian aggression.<sup>4</sup> Yet McNamara found himself on the horns of a dilemma. As he said in June 1964, it was:

not wise ... for the United States to be engaged in Vietnam alone. It looks too much like the United States has colonial ambitions in the area. In truth we don't want to be there in any way, but we must stick it out in order to maintain the independence of South Vietnam. We want the help of other countries.<sup>5</sup>

So long as the fighting in Vietnam remained low key, further allied support, though desirable, was not essential. But the Gulf of Tonkin incidents of August 1964 and US reprisal airstrikes against North Vietnam significantly raised the ante. How could McNamara not ask for more Australian troops? As South Vietnam continued to wither under increasing Viet Cong (VC) pressure, McNamara sharpened his rhetoric about Australia's contributions to the war effort.

By November 1964, when Hasluck again visited Washington, the South Vietnamese government was teetering on the brink of collapse. If Hasluck was unable 'to get a sense of the direction of US policy',<sup>6</sup> it was because President Lyndon Johnson refused to make firm decisions about Vietnam. This should not be construed as American deception, unless it was self-deception. Major policy changes would not be communicated to the American people nor indeed would the sorry state of the South Vietnamese political situation. Rather than a forthright exposition of policy, Johnson cloaked himself and his emerging consensus in half truths, evasions, and selective silence. Paradoxically the administration was especially candid with visiting dignitaries from Canberra.

When McNamara met with Defence Minister Shane Paltridge in Washington in early February 1965, just two days after the punishing Viet Cong attack on US forces based at Pleiku, he did not paint a happy picture of South Vietnam. '[T]hings are going downhill both politically and militarily', he told his guest. Either the United States had to change something or 'we will probably be out in a year'. Anticipating further escalation, McNamara thought it would be a major disaster if the US were pushed out of Vietnam and stressed that the Australians and other allies would have to be 'in it with us' to ensure the support of the American people for wider military action. Paltridge repeatedly responded that Australia was ready and willing to plan for and participate in what he called 'Phase II' operations in Vietnam. Apparently exceeding his instructions from External Affairs Minister Hasluck, he further suggested Australia would make available a battalion, although noting Australia's problems of expanding its own forces vis-a-vis the Indonesia emergency.<sup>7</sup> A few weeks later McNamara, during classified testimony on 24 February, assured members of the Senate Committees on Armed Services and Appropriations that 'within the last three or four weeks', the Australian defence minister had stated without qualification that Australia would participate in Vietnam and asked for the opportunity to join with the US in joint military planning.<sup>8</sup>

With the ROLLING THUNDER air campaign underway against North Vietnam and US Marines committed to South Vietnam on 8 March 1965, Secretary McNamara told US business leaders in early May that Prime Minister Menzies finally had support in Parliament to expand his defence program and assured his audience that the Australians were 'doing everything that we could reasonably expect of them'.<sup>9</sup> These were the two impressions of Australia that McNamara wanted to convey to Congress and the American public: namely Australia was standing beside the United States in Vietnam and Australia was doing all it could in support of the war. He never really succeeded.

When McNamara met Menzies in Washington, DC, on 8 June 1965, the two talked surprisingly little about Vietnam, perhaps because the visit coincided with the lull between the major decisions of February to commit US ground troops and the July decision to escalate the war. Menzies was convinced that the other side 'will not negotiate as long as they are winning', that Australia was at a critical point of their defence expansion being short of instructors in the training base; and that the military expansion had been 'extraordinarily well

received by the Australian public'. The majority of their discussion involved issues like the F-111 program and the United Kingdom's possible withdrawal of its forces east of Suez.<sup>10</sup> Near the end of June, Hasluck visited Washington to sound out McNamara on the type and number of additional forces required for Vietnam.

McNamara foresaw at a minimum twenty manoeuvre battalions would be needed (nine US plus one Australian battalion were already in South Vietnam and six more US battalions were en route). Yet he was unsure if that number would be enough to 'prove to the Viet Cong that we can win until we see how the summer campaign shaped up'. Were these ground forces a temporary measure until the South Vietnamese army got stronger, asked Hasluck? While McNamara answered affirmatively, in the next breath he said that he did not believe the army of South Vietnam could become stronger because of high desertion and casualty rates. As for bombing of the North, McNamara explained that the administration had never felt it would lead to a settlement. That could only come if the bombing were coupled with actions in the South to convince the communists that they would not win the war.

Hasluck questioned whether this estimate foreshadowed additional requests for Australian troops, and McNamara reaffirmed the requirement did exist for more ground troops in South Vietnam, likely within two months. Australia's forces were already stretched, Hasluck explained, and sending a second battalion on short notice would increase the difficulties of rotation of forces and of maintaining sufficient reserves. With Menzies due back in Washington the week of 4 July, the external affairs minister really wanted to know if he should warn his prime minister to expect hard questions about additional forces for Vietnam. Although it was too early to make a formal request, McNamara 'reiterated that we needed troops now and we needed them badly, to which Mr Hasluck replied that the Secretary knew this was the worst period for Australia'.<sup>11</sup>

In late July, in the midst of the week of major US decisions on Vietnam, Johnson cabled Menzies a review of the current situation in South Vietnam, indicated a likely increase in US forces there, stated US determination to use diplomatic efforts to obtain a peaceful settlement, and described Washington's intent to use 'care and restraint' to ensure that the war did not expand. In reply Menzies assured Johnson of Australia's 'continuing support and readiness' to assist the United States defend Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

Congress was less impressed. On 6 August one representative called the contributions of foreign allies 'woefully inadequate when you consider the burden that we are called on to bear'. McNamara reiterated the stress on the Australian military due to its Malaysia commitment and the rapid expansion of its armed forces. Canberra had, after all, agreed to modify its training schedule and to reduce the rate at which its defence buildup would occur in order to deploy a second combat battalion to South Vietnam likely before the end of the year.<sup>13</sup> When additional Australian forces did not arrive in Vietnam quickly enough to suit some in Congress, McNamara defended Canberra's policies by explaining that the recent increases to the Australian defence budget necessitated tearing down the combat capability of existing units for use as cadre for the new units of the expanded force. It was then almost impossible for Australia to send another battalion to Vietnam while in the midst of the training upheaval created by the expansion of its ground forces.<sup>14</sup> To keep Congressional critics at bay, McNamara testified that 'within three months another Australian battalion will be sent to Southeast Asia', and reminded his inquisitors that the Australian government was financing all of their operations in Vietnam at their own expense.<sup>15</sup>

This pattern of Congressional demands that US allies do more in Vietnam seldom varied. In June 1966 Secretary of State Dean Rusk suggested to the president that 'we should help ourselves by bragging on the Australians and not subject them to the question "why don't you do more?".<sup>16</sup> But attitudes persisted. In February 1968, Senator Stuart Symington, a long-time McNamara nemesis, used Defense Department supplied figures to show that whereas 1 in 400 Americans was serving in Vietnam only 1 in 1402 Australians was serving there. Symington found this disproportion 'speaks for itself, and is sad indeed. Where is the basic premise to our foreign policy—ie, collective security?'.<sup>17</sup> As the stalemated war dragged on, President Johnson and Secretary McNamara would make similar arguments of proportionality to their Australian counterparts.

## Misunderstanding, Misperceptions, Miscommunication

On 11 January 1966, Governor Averall Harriman met with Menzies. Harriman was one of a troupe of high-level administration officials dispatched throughout the world by the president during the lengthy December 1965-January 1966 bombing pause to marshal support for the US policy on Vietnam and open negotiations for a settlement. Menzies assured Harriman that the Australian people 'are prepared for losses and fully support the government'. Canberra was also moving in the direction of increasing its forces in Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> A few weeks later Menzies left office.

While many Australians may have shared the view of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in welcoming Menzies' retirement after sixteen years in office, there was initial doubt in Washington that Harold Holt, the new Prime Minister, might not be as fully sympathetic to large military expenditures and Vietnam commitments as his predecessor. During discussions in late January 1966 with his British counterpart, McNamara had bluntly told Defence Minister Denis Healey that Holt should understand that the US would not be able to stay on in the Far Pacific unless there was a greater Anglo-Australian effort in the region. Should Holt fail to understand that fact, he might have to face Indonesia all by himself.<sup>19</sup> On 4 March 1966, Holt eased such misgivings when he wrote President Johnson that 'we understood that an additional battalion would have special value', and proposed a substantially enlarged Australian contribution of some 4500 men under Australian command. Such a deployment represented the 'upper limit of our army capacity, having regard for our existing military commitments in Malaysia'. The prime minister informed the president that he planned to announce the decision in Parliament on the evening of 8 March and until then was 'taking steps to ensure that the decision is held in absolute security'.<sup>20</sup> Johnson's return cable thanked Holt for the commitment and praised the 'clear signal of Australian determination to combat "the threat of Communist aggression against the peoples of Southeast Asia"'.<sup>21</sup>

External Affairs Minister Hasluck returned to Washington in April 1966 for consultations on Vietnam with McNamara. Although the military campaign was going well, the defense secretary admitted that the political front was in danger of collapse. South Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Cao Ky might not survive the continuing Buddhist demonstrations and without him the South Vietnamese military could fragment. Moreover the anti-government demonstrations in South Vietnam confused the American public who asked, 'Why die for people who can't discipline themselves?' Nevertheless the United States had 200,000 men in South Vietnam now and a planned total of 385,000 troops there by end of the year.

McNamara matter-of-factly told Hasluck that Washington would stop the build-up 'the next day and reverse the flow of the pipeline' if Australia reversed its commitment. Hasluck reassured him that Canberra was committed to go ahead, but cautioned that it would be 'politically calamitous if Australia appeared more hawklike and the US more dovelike'. McNamara promised that the US would consult with Australia if there was a change in US policy. Prior consultation and close coordination, in Hasluck's view, were 'extremely important' since Vietnam would be an issue in the December 1966 general election.<sup>22</sup> The failure of consultation and coordination soon embarrassed Washington and Canberra.

The bombing of the POL (petroleum-oil-lubricants) storage depots near Haiphong in late June 1966 coincided with Prime Minister Holt's visit to Washington. A 22 June 1966 National Security Council meeting authorised the attacks for 24 June, and Holt had been informed in Canberra on 23 June of the impending raids.<sup>23</sup> Bad weather and news leaks of the imminent raids appearing in the 24 June edition of the *Wall Street Journal* caused the administration to postpone the mission.<sup>24</sup> With the attacks on hold and agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation searching for the source of the security breach, Under Secretary of State George Ball remarked on a national television news program aired 26 June that 'no decision had been reached to bomb the oil storage depots'.<sup>25</sup> On 29 June, the day Holt landed in Washington, US warplanes struck the Haiphong targets.

Holt, alluding to British 'blockbuster' tactics in Berlin and VC tactics against civilians, saw no need to apologise over the civilian casualties because the attacks were matters of military judgment. The more delicate issue between the allies, as far as he was concerned, was one of prior consultation and coordination. Assistant Secretary of State for International Security Affairs John McNaughton, who was McNamara's right-hand man, explained to Holt that Ball's statement was made after the administration had cancelled its earlier decision to bomb on the 24th and before it made the new one to go ahead with the attacks.

Holt was quite understanding and expressed more concern over the behaviour of the press in the whole affair, evidently referring to their irresponsibility in leaking the information about the forthcoming raids in the first place, than with the administration's bungled handling of the follow-up notification. He asked McNamara's advice on how to respond to reporters' questions about 'prior notice' regarding the strikes. McNamara suggested Holt state categorically that he was 'aware' of the raids, but to avoid details or answers to specific questions about the timing of such notice.<sup>26</sup> Holt honoured McNamara's request by refusing to tell inquisitive journalists in Washington exactly when he had been consulted about the bombing decision.<sup>27</sup> Yet like Macbeth's tangled web of deception, American periphrasis ensnared the Australian prime minister as henceforth the 'adequacy of American consultation', to use Peter Edwards' phrase, became an increasingly sensitive issue with the Australian media, public, and government.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout 1966, Hasluck and Holt offered above all else the allied support that President Johnson so desperately needed. The prime minister, for example, related how he had 'jumped all over Healey in Canberra' about the lack of British backing for the allied effort in Vietnam. McNamara re-emphasised that the US public and Congressional criticism of administration policy in Vietnam stemmed considerably from the need for more and wider international assistance. Americans, the defense secretary explained, see the attitudes of the English, Japanese, and Indians and 'they wonder if we are not wrong. If not wrong, are we foolish?'<sup>29</sup>

In September 1966 Hasluck informed Rusk that he hoped there would be more patience on the part of those pushing for negotiations, 'which he thought might still be premature and without adequate basis'. The Australian minister opposed any bombing halt, and although by no means considering himself a 'hawk', believed it would be a 'serious mistake to let up on efforts to defend South Vietnam'.<sup>30</sup> Likewise at the third session of the Manila Conference about a month later, Holt carried the message that Vietnam was a larger battleground where a war was being fought over issues that affected all the free countries of Asia and the Pacific. The 'shell of security' provided by the United States enabled other free countries in the region to 'go about our own affairs, building our economies, strengthening our own defenses'.<sup>31</sup> The encomium was appropriate for a conference designed to help Johnson drum up support for his Vietnam policies.<sup>32</sup>

Holt followed up his words with a commitment to put an additional 1700 or so men in Vietnam, an announcement that McNamara publicised during his March 1967 congressional testimony.<sup>33</sup> Nine hundred and forty of the 1700 servicemen were soldiers sent as individual fillers while the larger question of dispatching a third combat battalion remained under review. It was in these circumstances that Hasluck again visited the Pentagon in April 1967 to hear McNamara's views on the situation in Vietnam. McNamara allowed that the buildup of allied forces in the South precluded the VC or North Vietnamese Army from taking over South Vietnam. Still the enemy gave no indication of a willingness to negotiate an end to the war, and Hanoi continued to send men and supplies south to match the allied reinforcement. Hasluck volunteered that the Australian government had not been formally asked to provide a third battalion (although certain quarters in Canberra felt it would be more efficient to have three rather than two battalions in South Vietnam) but that it might be willing to entertain such a request. Yet again McNamara offered no optimistic solution to Vietnam. Yet again the Australian government proposed to send more troops to Vietnam.

McNamara also sought Hasluck's opinions about increasing the pressure on the North by expanding the bombing campaign. This was no idle chatter. Since mid-March 1967, the president had approved an expanded target list to include thermal power plants around Haiphong, and with each passing day McNamara felt that 'rational control of targeting was getting out of his hands'.<sup>34</sup> Mindful of Australian sensibilities Hasluck sent a mixed message. On the one hand, he hoped the Americans would fully consult with Australia if they contemplated expanding the bombing because Canberra might not be prepared to support a widening of the air campaign against the North that targeted civilians. McNamara assured him this was not the case. On the other hand, Hasluck expressed opposition to any temporary cease-fire arrangements for negotiations unless there was clear agreement beforehand that the fighting would not be resumed.<sup>35</sup>

These were likely not the responses McNamara wanted to hear. He was hopeful of ending the bombing as a prelude to talks, not expanding it to force Hanoi to negotiate. He wanted to strike the newly authorised targets in the North post-haste to demonstrate that their destruction would in no way influence the fighting in the South. And most of all he wanted to get out of Vietnam as quickly as possible.<sup>36</sup> In fact during the week of 21-28 April, sixteen US warplanes were lost as the bombing of North Vietnamese airfields set off a month-long series of air battles as the North Vietnamese Air Force engaged United States aircraft or risked being destroyed on the ground.

On 1 June 1967 McNamara again met with Holt who in the meantime had learned that General William C Westmoreland, Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), was asking for more and more ground forces. In April Westmoreland had indeed requested as many as 200,000 additional troops. McNamara acknowledged that MACV had recommended substantial forces, but no decision had been made, nor was one likely pending his return from a visit to Vietnam scheduled for 18-20 June. When Holt mentioned that Commander-in-Chief Pacific, Admiral US Grant Sharp, had indicated that the bombing had been more effective in recent weeks, McNamara responded this was unquestionably true in terms of destruction, but intelligence reported no evidence of weakened enemy will. Holt professed amazement at how the North could persist in the face of the destruction and punishment.

McNamara further disclosed that the administration would soon be relooking at the issue of mining the port of Haiphong and asked for Holt's views on the subject. The prime minister let McNamara understand that while he felt other actions than mining the harbour ought to be taken first, he did not want to act as a brake on US actions. After all, the Americans were carrying the major load in Vietnam, and the Australians should not obstruct steps the US felt necessary to prosecute the war.<sup>37</sup>

In a 3 July 1967 letter to Johnson, Holt wrote that the bombing of North Vietnam should continue.<sup>38</sup> Johnson in return informed Holt that no decisions would be made until McNamara returned from Vietnam. (The originally scheduled trip of mid-June had been postponed because of the Middle East crisis of June 1967. McNamara went to Saigon on 7 July.) The likelihood, however, was that more would have to be done to offset the reinforcements dispatched from North Vietnam to fight on the southern battlefields. The President stated frankly that if additional troops were needed, 'we shall need to talk fairly urgently with you and the other troop-contributing nations on whether a substantial part of the need can be met by others'.<sup>39</sup>

This brings me to General Maxwell Taylor and Clark Clifford's August 1967 mission to Asia. The contemporaneous Clifford-Taylor report differs in tone from Clifford's account published in the July 1969 issue of *Foreign Affairs* where he recounted that when asked for more troops, Prime Minister Holt 'presented a long list of a reasons why Australia was already close to its maximum effort'. This experience, and similar encounters with other Asian leaders during his trip, led Clifford to re-evaluate his hawkish judgments about Vietnam.<sup>40</sup>

Just about two years earlier, on 5 August 1967 at a White House meeting immediately after his return, Clifford told the participants that 'it would be more difficult for the Australians to turn us down when they are in touch with the President directly'. Johnson personally believed that 'Holt wanted us to let him suggest these things to the United States rather than our dictating to him'. Relating their all-day Sunday meeting in Canberra, Clifford described the Australians as 'hard nuts' who did indeed have a long list of their contributions to Vietnam in hand to greet the Americans. Holt, for example, read from a prepared memorandum detailed facts about budget stringency, increased defence costs, foreign aid generosity and limitations on personal consumption—all designed to show that little Australia was 'doing its part' in the world. Clifford and Taylor, however, concluded that they made real progress with Holt when they spoke to him alone about the seriousness of the matter. At that time, Holt jokingly remarked that Taylor was such a good salesman that he was glad he had not brought his wife to the meeting. When asked for two more battalion combat teams (2000-2400 men), Holt was non-committal, but Clifford thought that Canberra would add at least one more manoeuvre battalion. More to the point, the Americans learned that the Australian commander in Vietnam was interested in filling out his contingent to about 9000 troops.<sup>41</sup> These additional men formed the third battalion.

Clifford and Taylor's written version of the meeting was more ambiguous. Although the Australian government saw the outcome in Vietnam deciding who would control Southeast Asia and did not want the US to withdraw from the area, 'it is clear', wrote Clifford, 'that the Government of Australia is not prepared to take any extraordinary measures to increase its participation in the war'. The cabinet was willing to go as far as possible 'without upsetting the "normal" course of Australian life (for example, they now have 68,000 men under arms; in World War II, they had 700,000 men)'. In short, Holt was pursuing the same course of 'guns and butter' policies that the Johnson administration had unsuccessfully adopted in the United States. Holt won the 1966 general election on the Vietnam issue, much as Johnson had in 1964. And like Johnson, Holt made no appeal for public support for the war effort that exceeded a 'normal pattern'.

Clifford concluded that either the Australians did not believe that their vital interests were at stake, or they believed that the United States was so deeply involved that the administration had to carry the war through to a conclusion 'satisfactory to them as well as to us'. To Holt's wish to discuss broader security arrangements before making further troop commitments to Vietnam, the American emissaries countered that the crisis in Vietnam existed now, and should receive clear priority.<sup>42</sup> The overall impression of the post-Canberra meeting and report is not quite as gloomy a picture as Clifford would later recall. Placed in its overall context, and not just the selective excerpts drawn on by Clifford, the sessions involved hard-nosed bargaining and tough negotiations, but the Americans left convinced that Canberra would deploy more troops to embattled South Vietnam.

Retired General Maxwell Taylor also questioned Clifford's public account. Summing up the mood in allied capitals, Taylor recalled, 'While none of these governments were wildly enthusiastic over the thought of increasing their troop contributions, I certainly got no impression of indifference to the outcome of the war in Vietnam—quite the contrary'. Taylor's only criticism of his hosts was their attitude that any troop contributions they made were insignificant to the outcome of military operations. Such being the case, why should they stir up trouble at home by increasing their forces in Vietnam.<sup>43</sup> Put differently, the allies understood that Washington alone determined the fate of South Vietnam and awaited the administration's decisions on escalating the conflict.

Lastly it is worth noting that by the end of 1967 South Korea had promised six additional infantry battalions; Australia a third battalion to increase its troop strength to 8000 men by June 1968; New Zealand had increased its strength to about 500; and Thailand offered a commitment for six manoeuvre battalions and 12,500 men by June 1969. Only the Philippines had not increased their forces since the previous year.<sup>44</sup> At the time of their visit to the Asian capitals, there were 54,000 allied troops serving in South Vietnam. By May 1969 that number had risen to over 70,000.<sup>45</sup> All this suggests that the Clifford-Taylor mission was more productive than Clifford later recollected.

Shortly after the Clifford-Taylor mission, Holt informed Johnson, as the president had forecast, that he would review Australia's position on more troops for Vietnam. National and international considerations such as rising defence costs, requirements for domestic development, high foreign aid outlays, and Britain's planned withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore still limited Australia's ability to do more.<sup>46</sup> Johnson replied that he appreciated the 'various factors' and still hoped Holt's cabinet could make an early decision to send a two-battalion combat team. For added leverage, he wrote that he 'could not exaggerate the favorable effect on Congress a prompt decision would have'.<sup>47</sup>

In early October 1967 Walt Rostow suggested Johnson offer Australian Treasurer William McMahon, 'known for favoring considerably stronger measures in Vietnam, including escalation of bombing', an upbeat assessment of the Vietnam situation emphasizing that the efforts of the allies might soon prove successful.<sup>48</sup> Johnson gave McMahon the 'treatment', that unique Johnsonian combination of emotional self-pity, forceful persuasion, and incessant pressure to convince him that Australia must do more in Vietnam. Following the 'treatment' and force of Johnson's formidable Texas personality, McMahon urged Holt by cable to inform Washington confidentially and soon of Canberra's decision to send a third battalion to Vietnam.<sup>49</sup> Later, during his visit with McNamara, McMahon found himself subjected to similar pressure. The defense secretary was less interested in hearing about Australia's financial woes,<sup>50</sup> many traceable to a swollen defence budget, than he was in a greater commitment of Australian forces to Vietnam. Congressional and public criticism of the administration over Vietnam, McNamara declared, was in large part because 'none of America's allies were bearing their fair share of the load'.<sup>51</sup>

Between McMahon's 2 October meeting with the president and Minister of External Affairs Hasluck's arrival in Washington on 10 October, Holt secretly informed Johnson of Australia's intention to deploy a third battalion to South Vietnam. The change in atmosphere was palpable. McNamara greeted Hasluck with delight at Canberra's decision and asked when Holt would make the public announcement. Euphoria did not extend to Vietnam where, McNamara admitted, the outlook was much the same as the previous year, although there was 'good progress on the military side'. The bombing campaign was hurting the North, but it did not appear able to compel Hanoi to negotiate an end to the fighting. Neither could the administration unilaterally end the bombing. If there was a bombing pause and North Vietnam did not respond positively, the United States would find it very difficult in the face of world opinion to resume the air attacks. In other words, bombing had become a self-sustaining end in itself regardless of the adverse public perception of the air campaign. Indeed the war, according to McNamara, was becoming increasingly unpopular with the US public, even though there was no need to call up the reserves and the US could afford to underwrite the war 'without significant strains on its economy'. As McNamara saw it, 'the big question' was whether there was 'sufficient patience and firmness at home to see the situation through'.<sup>52</sup>

A few hours later Hasluck met with Johnson who observed that the US was three times as far from Vietnam as was Australia and was only fifteen times its size. If the US effort was proportional to Australia's then there would be only 100,000 Americans in Vietnam. As a consequence, the president found himself under strong pressure from the Senate and elsewhere to demand that America's allies in the region do more in their own defence.<sup>53</sup> It seemed that no matter what Australia did in Vietnam, it was never quite enough to satisfy its American ally.

Vietnam, of course, was not Canberra's only foreign policy concern. Hasluck had probed McNamara about US support for Australia should Canberra decide to keep troops in Malaysia and Singapore after the British departed.<sup>54</sup> The Office of International Security Affairs (the policy arm of the Secretary of Defense) passed the request on a 'close-hold' basis to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for their views on the strategic/military implications of the Australian proposal.<sup>55</sup> On 8 November 1967 the Chiefs responded that the strategic importance of the Malacca Strait was critical and that US strategic/ military interests would be 'adversely affected' if, following the British departure, Australia also pulled out of the area. Nevertheless, the Chiefs neither wished to assume UK treaty commitments nor station US troops in the region. In short, the JCS wanted a regional security arrangement anchored by forces from Australia and New Zealand.<sup>56</sup>

The unexpected and untimely death of Prime Minister Holt brought President Johnson to Canberra for the funeral and a separate meeting with the Australian Cabinet on 21 December 1967. Australian leaders assured Johnson that their nation would stand with the US in Vietnam 'right through to the end'. Johnson in turn promised that the United States would honour its ANZUS commitments and expressed his appreciation 'to find someone to stand up beside you'.<sup>57</sup> Addressing the Australian cabinet, he cautioned his audience, 'We may face dark days ahead' for the 'enemy was building his forces in the South', and two more divisions from the North were moving south.<sup>58</sup> These remarks, as Edwards notes, hardly square with Johnson's dramatic account in his memoirs of North Vietnamese 'kamikaze' tactics in a planned operation that implies foreknowledge of what came to be known as the Tet Offensive.<sup>59</sup>

Shock waves from the ferocity of the Tet Offensive launched on 30-31 January 1968 reverberated throughout allied capitals. In Canberra at a 2 February press conference Prime Minister John Gorton unilaterally and publicly ruled out any further increases in Australian forces in Vietnam.<sup>60</sup> One week later, at a White House meeting, Johnson asked if Gorton was 'singing a different tune from Holt'? Secretary Rusk replied that while Gorton announced that he would send no more troops, his speeches still supported US policy.<sup>61</sup> Gorton's shifting attitudes and Johnson's closely held decision, announced publicly on 31 March 1968, to restrict the bombing of North Vietnam and to withdraw as a candidate in the 1968 presidential election further strained relations between the allies. Caught unawares by the dramatic announcements, Gorton sent a 'vigorous protest' to the White House insisting there be no repetition of this breakdown in consultation.<sup>62</sup>

Rusk claimed to have 'smoothed out any ruffled feathers' Gorton may have had about timely consultation when the two met in Canberra in April. As the Secretary of State explained matters to the president, Gorton's unfamiliarity with Johnson's ways, something other world leaders had gotten used to, was one of several factors behind the Australian leader's pique. As if somehow the fault was Gorton's, Rusk reminded Johnson 'this was his first experience with a change in bombing patterns while it was at least your ninth'.<sup>63</sup> Oblivious to Gorton's irritation, Rusk also raised the issue of more Australian troops for Vietnam. Gorton replied, 'I have heard what you said', but made no commitment. Rusk still was optimistic, feeling the less said publicly about asking Australia for more troops the better chance Washington had of getting them.<sup>64</sup>

Gorton arrived in Washington in late May 1968 for talks with the president and other senior officials who pressured him for still more troops. On 29 May he met with Clark Clifford, the new Secretary of Defense, who restated the familiar refrain that allied support was essential in order for the president to show Congress and the American public that the US was not alone in sending additional forces to Vietnam. At a time when the United States intended to phase down its military activities gradually as the South Vietnamese increased their own role in the war, any wavering of US allies would, Clifford argued, have an 'exceedingly important' impact in the United States. In such circumstances, the American people would not support 'broadening our responsibility' in Southeast Asia to accommodate Australia's wishes for US guarantees for Canberra's policy toward Malaysia and Singapore 'They would ask: If Southeast Asia is not important to our allies, why should it be to us?'<sup>65</sup> One might fairly reverse Clifford's reasoning to ask if the United States was drawing back in Vietnam, why shouldn't its allies do the same?

During October 1968 first-hand reports reached Clifford of Australian concern that the United States might pull out of Vietnam 'before the job is done' and of large numbers of Australian students demonstrating against the war. He exploded. The Australian attitude was typical of the region where 'all are perfectly willing for Uncle Sam to do it all. Australia is not making anything like the contribution she should be making'.<sup>66</sup> If Clifford's frustration was boiling over, then I suggest that some of this steam ended up in his later *Foreign Affairs* essay.

Throughout 1968 the contradiction between phasing down US military involvement in Vietnam and asking America's allies to remain resolute became increasingly evident. After all, it now appeared that the United States was no longer vitally interested in South Vietnam. Why then should anyone else be?

### **Conclusions**

Short of massive deployments equivalent in percentage terms to those of the United States demanding full-scale mobilisation, nothing Australia could do militarily in South Vietnam would fully satisfy Congress, the American public, or the Johnson administration. Washington demanded more and more of its allies as the war escalated and insisted they sustain their commitments when the US began to de-escalate its involvement in Vietnam. Statements and conversations of top level Australian and American leaders repeatedly turn on these issues.

Conversely Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara never tried to get additional troops by misrepresenting the seriousness of conditions in Vietnam to the Australians. His discussions and exchanges with his Australian counterparts were candid, and for that matter so too were the talks among other US and Australian senior leaders. Washington repeatedly told Canberra that Vietnam was a perilous and uncertain enterprise, and Australia responded by sending more and more troops to fight there. At the time, of course, it was inconceivable that the United States might lose the war, and Canberra had to stand beside its larger ally to ensure future American support against Indonesian aggression. Both nations were together in South Vietnam, but for different, largely unrelated, strategic reasons. In truth Vietnam was not the war for either Australia or the United States to fight, although Canberra, at least until the Indonesian counterrevolution, had more at stake than Washington in the stability of Southeast Asia.

Attitudes shifted as the war degenerated into stalemate. Escalation had not produced a war winning strategy. By 1967 it was plain that North Vietnam was not going to quit, so there was no end game, just more of the same. Only the Americans had the power to bring the Vietnam War to an end and their inability to do so left the administration frustrated and the nation more and more divided. As a result, miscommunication between the allies increased, consultation became thinly veiled demands for more troops, and coordination involving major policy changes suffered. More and more the United States appeared to be acting arbitrarily, less and less consulting its allies, except for the steady drumbeat for additional troops. The deterioration of the underpinnings of any coalition—communication, coordination, and consultation—convinced many Americans that the nation's allies were not doing their fair share in South Vietnam. Such an attitude coupled with an unpopular and divisive war relegated Australian military efforts in Vietnam to the background where they were little known or appreciated by Congress, the administration, or the general American public.

## Endnotes

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3. Secretary of Defense (SecDef) Testimony regarding FY 1964 Budget before Senate Committee on Appropriations (Excerpts), 24 April 1963, Office Secretary of Defense Historical Office (hereinafter cited as OSD Hist).
4. SecDef Testimony on Foreign Affairs Assistance Act Amendments before House Committee on Foreign Affairs (Excerpts—Executive Session, Not Subsequently Published), 19 May 64, OSD Hist.
5. Memo of Conversation (Excerpts) McNamara with Franz Joseph Strauss, 8 June 1964, OSD Hist.
6. Edwards, *Crisis*, 336.
7. Memo of Conversation, McNamara and Paltridge, 9 February 1965, OSD Hist.; Edwards, *Crisis*, 344.
8. SecDef Testimony on the Authorization Bill and the Budget for FY 1966 before the Senate Committees on Armed Services and Appropriations (Excerpts), 24 February 1965, OSD Hist.
9. SecDef Background Briefing for Industry, 10 May 1965, OSD Hist.
10. Memo, SecDef Conversation with Australian PM Menzies, et al.. 8 June 1965, OSD Hist.
11. Memo, SecDef Conversation with Australian Minister of External Affairs Hasluck, 29 June 1965, OSD Hist.
12. Memo, Bundy for the President, 26 July 1965, and Tel, Menzies to Johnson, 27 July 1965, *FRUS, 1964- 68*, XXVII, 13-14.
13. SecDef Testimony before House Committee on Armed Services (Executive Session) (Not Subsequently Published), 6 August 1965, OSD Hist.
14. Curiously the same argument did not apply to US Army or Marine Corps units who were undergoing similar strain.
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16. Telegram, Secretary of State to Department of State, *FRUS, 1964-68*, XXVII, 31.
17. SecDef Testimony regarding Authorization Bill and Appropriations for FY 1969 before the Senate Committees on Armed Services and Appropriations (Excerpts), 1, 2 and 5 February 1968, OSD Hist.
18. Telegram, Harriman to Johnson, 12 January 1966, *FRUS 1964-68*, XXVII, 17.
19. Memo, Conversation McNamara and Healey, 28 January 1966, OSD Hist.
20. Letter, Holt to Johnson, 4 March 1966, *FRUS 1964-1968*, XXXVII, 20-21.
21. *Ibid.*, n 2, 19.
22. Memo, Conversation McNamara and Hasluck, 12 April 1966, OSD Hist.
23. Peter Edwards, *A Nation at War: Australian Politics, Society and Diplomacy during the Vietnam War 1965-1975* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1997), 113-14.
24. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968* vol IV,. Vietnam 1966, n 4, 452: Memo For Record Deputy Director for Operations, National Military Command Center, 'News Item by John Scali', 24 June 1966, and Philip Geyelin, 'Johnson to Expand North Vietnam Bombing to Include Haiphong', *Wall Street Journal*, 24 June 1966: both folder 110 POL, box OSD/PA. SE/Asia Records-Weapons, Equipment POL, OSD Hist; Tel con, McNamara and Ball, 25 June 1966 12:10 pm, folder June 1966, box 16, Gibbons June 1966, Lyndon B Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereinafter cited as LBJL).
25. *Baltimore Sun*, 27 June 1966, 2.
26. Memo, SecDef Conversation with Holt et al. (excerpts from Memo of Conversation), 29 June 1966. OSD Hist.
27. Edwards, *Nation at War*, 113.
28. *Ibid.*, 114. As Edwards points out, since late December 1965 the Australian press was complaining that Australia was not being adequately consulted or informed about developments in American policy.
29. Memo of Conversation McNamara and Holt et al, 29 June 1966, *FRUS, 1964-68*, XXVII, 35.
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31. MFR Prime Minister Holt Speech at 3rd Session, Manila Conference, 24 October 1966 (excerpts) in *ibid.*
32. George C Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), 139.
33. SecDef Testimony regarding appropriations for FY 1968 before House Committee on Armed Services (Excerpts), 6, 7, 8 March 1967, OSD Hist.
34. Mem , Rostow for the President, 9 May 1967, folder Walt Rostow—May 1-15, 1967, 1 of 2 (vol. 27), box 16, item #79, NSF Memos to the President, Walt Rostow, LBJL.
35. Memo of Conversation, Hasluck and McNamara et al, 17 April 1967, OSD Hist.

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38. Letter, Holt to Johnson, 3 July 1967 (excerpts) in Williams, Notebook, OSD Hist.
39. Letter, Johnson to Holt, 11 July 1967, *FRUS, 1964-68*, XXVII, 65.
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48. Memo, W Rostow for the President, 2 October 1967, folder Daily Backup, box 78, 2 October 1967, LBJL.
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51. Cited in Edwards, *Nation at War*, 155.
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53. Memo of Conversation, Hasluck and the President, 10 October 1967, *FRUS, 1964-68*, XXVII, 77.
54. Memo of Conversation, McNamara-Hasluck, 10 October 1968, *FRUS, 1964-68*, XXVII, 73.
55. Memo, Assistant Director ISA for Chairman, JCS, 13 October 1967, *FRUS, 1964-68*, XXVII, 79.
56. Memo, CJCS for SecDef, JCSM-614-67, 8 November 1967, *FRUS, 1964-68*, XXVII, 84.
57. Memo of Conversation, The President and the Australian Cabinet, 21 December 1967, *FRUS, 1964-68*, XXVII, 88.
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60. Edwards, *Nation at War*, 196.
61. Notes of Meeting 9 February 1968, folder Meetings with the President January thru April 1968 (2) box 1 & 2, #60a, Files of Walt W Rostow, LBJL.
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63. Telegram, Rusk to Department of State, 6 April 1968, *FRUS, 1964-68*, XXVII, 90-91.
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