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The Vietnam War and Youthful Protest during the 1960s – Challenging the Myth

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In the years since the ending of the Vietnam War, the public has generally accepted the view that during the 1960s, the protest movement was a source of generational conflict, with older Australians supporting engagement, in disagreement with their teenage and young-adult children. However, evidence to the contrary abounds. When President Johnson visited Australia in October 1966, massive crowds of young and old welcomed him, while in a Federal election soon afterwards, the pro-war Liberal-Country Party Coalition achieved a massive victory, with Prime Minister Holt attributing his success to his Party's attraction for younger voters. Furthermore, a poll taken at the University of New South Wales in March 1969, at the height of the anti-war protests, revealed that 50% of students favoured the Liberal Party. The findings of a survey in a *Walkabout* issue devoted to Young Australians, also in 1969, similarly challenged the myth of youthful radicalism in Australia in the 1960s. With involvement in the War now thoroughly discredited and the baby boomer generation receiving accolades for their steadfast opposition, E.H. Carr's belief that history is a story usually told by or about winners for their own benefit gives cause for reflection when evaluating young Australians' opposition to the Vietnam War during the 1960s.

Keywords: Vietnam, Australia, demonstrators, anti-war, student rebellion, 1960s,

Popular mythology has created the false impression that the Vietnam War was a source of generational conflict on the streets of Australia's capital cities, with older Australians supporting involvement, and large numbers of highly principled, focused teenagers and young-adults opposing it. The myth supports the view that gradually more and more people became convinced that the Americans could not win the war; believing that it was immoral and that de-escalation was desirable. Some even link the Liberal Party's loss of support in the 1969 Federal elections with voter disenchantment over the Vietnam War. Like numerous myths, these assumptions are erroneous. Most Australians between 1966 and 1969 supported involvement in the War and, furthermore, only small numbers saw the war as a decisive electoral issue. Notwithstanding the attention-seeking behaviour of the anti-war demonstrators, and the prominent coverage the press gave to the suffering of the Vietnamese civilians and the loss of life amongst Australian troops, only a low percentage of Australians, including young Australians, considered involvement in Vietnam a decisive issue when voting in the two post-Menzies Federal elections.

From the outset, Australia's conservative politicians based involvement in Vietnam on the premise that communism was an 'alien and illegitimate force' in that country (Murphy, 1993: xxii). They rejected the view that the Communist Party represented patriotic and Nationalistic sentiments amongst the Vietnamese people. However, to the Vietnamese, the war was a continuance of their anti-colonial war against the French. Not only was the country partitioned following the defeat of the French in mid-1954, but the new President of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, failed to hold elections, aware that the Vietnamese Communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, would probably win (1993: 33, 36-37).

Some Australian politicians, including the Minister for External Affairs, Richard Casey, feared American adventurism in South East Asia (Murphy, 1993: 65). However, the view of Percy Spender, Australia's Ambassador in Washington, that Australia should support America in almost all circumstances, ultimately prevailed (1993: 65).

By the early 1960s, Australia's defence strategists were primarily concerned about Indonesia. President, Sukarno heightened this concern with a \$1000 million arms agreement with the Soviet Union in 1961 and through absorbing West Irian in 1962 (Bolton, 1990: 156). Sukarno's aggressive tendencies caused further concern when Australian troops 'went into action' against Indonesian infiltrators in the newly created country of Malaya in October 1964. 'Substantial' reports of Indonesia endeavouring to acquire its own atomic bomb, further motivated Australia to seek American military protection (1990: 157).

In November 1964, concerned about the uncertainty of the Indonesian situation, Menzies introduced military conscription with liability to serve overseas (Bolton, 1990: 157). All young men upon reaching the age of twenty were compelled to register. However, the country could not afford to conscript all registrants. Not only was the cost of training all young men prohibitive, but in an era of full employment, removing all 20-year-old men from the workforce would cause immense damage to the country economically. Consequently, the government devised a lottery system based on birth dates to determine those chosen to become army personnel for two years (1990: 158).

In November 1963, the Diem Government was overthrown, and his successors were unstable (Burstall, 1993: 10). In February 1965, American aircraft began bombing North Vietnam with conventional weaponry, but also defoliants and napalm, to assist the South Vietnamese Government. Accepting the 'domino' theory of Communist advancement, fearing Indonesia, and believing that South Vietnam was a victim of 'unprovoked aggression', Australia encouraged a stronger US commitment. It also offered to assist militarily (Bolton, 1990: 159, 160) In April 1965, Menzies announced that an infantry battalion of soldiers, including draftees, would be sent to Vietnam,

'unless the Vietnam War collapse[d] before the end of the year' (*Australian*, 30 April 1965; Bell, 1988: 76). The Australian press, with the exception of the *Australian*, welcomed the news. It was 'a reckless decision ... which this nation may live to regret', Murdoch warned (Bolton, 1990: 160).

Menzies' troop commitment generated opposition to the war. In Sydney in October 1965, 400 protestors, consisting primarily of students and unionists, sat in the middle of the road disrupting peak hour traffic. (*Age*, 23 October 1965) They clashed violently with DLP supporters, who were handing out pamphlets. Some of the eighty demonstrators who police arrested spat, punched and kicked, as they were bundled into waiting vans (23 October 1965).

In mid-1966, Holt visited America. Following a nineteen-gun salute at the White House, the President welcomed the Prime Minister as a 'staunch' ally (*Australian*, 1 July 1966). Holt then told the President that Australia was 'an admiring friend ... that will be all the way with LBJ'. He was probably unaware that outside the railings of the White House, a dozen students were demonstrating, with one holding a sign proclaiming 'Every Day in Vietnam 300 people die for nothing' (1 July 1966: 1). The Australian Prime Minister was probably also unaware, that many Australians would consider his comment sycophantic and unworthy of a leader of an independent country, especially because Australia had sent an additional 350 men to assist the Battalion of 1000 in Vietnam in August 1965, followed by a further increase in March 1966 (Bell, 1988: 76; *Age*, 19 August 1965).

In October 1966, President Johnson visited Australia. In Canberra, 'he shook hands by the hundreds, kissed babies', made numerous unscheduled stops and roadside speeches and 'talked until he lost his voice' ('Going Part of the Way with LBJ is riotous', *Sun*, 21 October 1966). 'I feel like I have returned ... to my second home', Johnson said. ('It's like Returning Home', *Sun*, 21 October 1966: 4) Later, in Melbourne, half a million people welcomed his motorcade. It was like a 'Broadway parade' ('500,000 swarm to see LBJ', *Sun*, 22 October 1966) In twenty years of covering arrivals, I have never seen another day like this ... it was VP Day, a Royal visit, Moomba, and the Beatles — all rolled into one', Journalist, Keith Dunstan commented. ('That was the Day that Really Was ...' *Sun*, 22 October 1966: 2).

On the route in Melbourne, two paint bombs splattered red paint across the windscreen of the President's car. ('Paint Bombs Splatter Car', *Sun*, 22 October 1966) Those involved included 18-year-old university student, David Langley. Later, in the Victorian Legislative Assembly, Education Minister Bloomfield denounced university students as 'uncouth, unwashed, undesirable, unkempt, uncultured and unprofitable' (*Sun*, 6 December 1966: 1). University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor, Sir George Paton, defended the behaviour of his students. 'I don't think they deserve this at all', he stated adding that 'they are better than the students of the 1920s' (6 December 1966: 1). 'Students are too serious today. They work seven days a week', he asserted. He also reminded the Education Minister that Australia was 'a democracy and people not in favour of going into Vietnam [were] entitled to express their point of view'. (*Sun*, 6 December 1966: 1) However, student demonstrations were newsworthy. As the Vice-Chancellor of Monash University, Dr Louis Matheson, later explained, the inordinate degree of press interest in student demonstrations exaggerated the disruptive influence of student activism (*Sun*, 29 June 1968). 'These days the press is on to everything. I can hardly blow my nose without reporters and television teams coming around', he said. (29 June 1968: 3)

During the Sydney leg of Johnson's Australian visit, protesters had attempted to hamper the progress of the Presidential limousine by lying on the road (Frame, 2005:164). The following day at an American Chamber of Commerce luncheon, according to at least one account, New South Wales Premier Robin Askin, travelling with the President, had said that it was 'a pity that we couldn't run over them'.

Considering anti-war demonstrators as 'the great unwashed' and believing that his contempt for them was politically beneficial, Askin did little to dispel a widely circulating press misrepresentation that he had told police on the previous day to 'ride over the bastards' (2005:164).

In August 1966, the *Australian* published an Australian Sales Research Bureau survey of young Australians aged 16-25 living in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane (*Australian*, 3 August, 1966). Half were men, half were from 'blue-collar' homes (and half from white), 24% were full-time students, 8% were apprentices (or had undertaken training eg nurses), 7% had completed University or Teachers' College and 11% had completed technical college courses. To the question: 'In regard to Australia's policy in South-East Asia, do you think that we should help US military activities, 74%, including 63% who intended to vote Labor, agreed. Only 24% suggested that Australia should 'avoid involvement in US military activities in South East Asia'. Perhaps because some of their age cohort were eligible to receive draft notices, 25% of those aged 16-20 wished to see Australia avoid involvement, compared to 21% of those aged 21-25 (3 August 1966). The same poll also found that 71% of 'young' voters 'regard the ALP leaders as neither impressive nor efficient'. Fifty-two percent of those old enough to vote stated that they intended to vote for the pro-war Liberal/Country party coalition, with a further 8% supporting the Democratic Labor Party that was even more stridently pro-war. Only 27% of respondents stated that they intended to support the anti-war Australian Labor Party, thus exposing the widely publicised belief that most young Australians embraced the anti-war policies of the Labor Party (*Australian*, 2 August 1966).

In October 1966, journalist Alan Ramsey suggested that Labor Party Leader Arthur Calwell was unpopular (*Australian*, 3 October 1966). While considering the Vietnam War Harold Holt's 'Achilles heel', Ramsey, also believed that the electorate would 'not have ... Calwell at any price'. The Labor leader lacked charisma, the journalist argued, adding that Chifley had 'it', and so did Menzies, Eisenhower and Kennedy. 'Whatever this undefinable electoral magic is, ... Calwell undoubtedly doesn't have it', he unequivocally stated (3 October, 1966). As Tom Frame (2005) related almost forty years later; at Labor's campaign launch, Calwell 'reiterated his promise to end conscription, discharge all National Servicemen and withdraw troops from South Vietnam'. This was not to be a vote winner, especially with the Deputy Leader, Gough Whitlam, later contradicting Calwell by stating that regular troops would remain in Vietnam. The Liberals depicted Calwell who had recently turned 70 as 'a tired old man'. The *Bulletin* 'spoke for many when it said that Calwell would lose the election for Labor more than Holt would win it for the Coalition' (Frame, 2005: 168). Journalist Patrick Nilon (21 November 1966) commented five days before Australians were due to go to the polls that 'one can't help feeling that [Calwell] should have stepped down from the leadership to give a younger man the chance to topple Harold Holt' (*Australian*, 21 November 1966: 7).

In November 1966, Australians swept Holt back to power (*Australian*, 28 November 1966). A huge anti-Labor vote in Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales was responsible the *Australian's* front page headlines announced – with a photograph of the Prime Minister playing golf emphasising Holt's self-assurance and confidence and perhaps his youthful vigour (28 November 1966). Achieving a majority of 61 seats, 'just two short of an absolute majority', voters had rejected the ageing Arthur Calwell decisively in favour of a younger Prime Minister, and, as the opinion polls revealed, young voters were instrumental in contributing to this groundswell of support for the coalition. (Frame, 2005: 170) Calwell had stated during the campaign that his 'first act' would be to end conscription', and that if troops were necessary, they would be part of a UN peace-keeping force (*Australian*, 11 November 1966). Many voters had considered Whitlam's promise that volunteer (or regular) troops would remain in

Vietnam following a Labor victory as contradictory and equivocal (*Australian*, 22 November 1966).

Don Aitken (1982) explains that although the Vietnam War had dominated press and television debate in Australia during 1966, and the two parties had distinctively different policies on the troop involvement, 'the issue was manifestly of small *moment* to most of the electorate' (1982: 223). Other issues were more important, Aitken believed. Shortly before the election, an 'Australian Public Opinion Poll' had discovered that only eight percent of interviewees anticipated that the issue would be an 'important' determinant of their vote. Furthermore, this low level of concern about Australia's involvement in the war continued into 1967 (and beyond). A 1967 questionnaire, cited by Aitken, revealed that 28% of respondents believed that Australia should have conscripts fighting in Vietnam, and a further 43% believed that only volunteer troops should be involved. On the other hand, a mere 24% of respondents believed that the Australian Government should not send troops to Vietnam (with 5% undecided about the issue) (1982: 223).

Determined that support for involvement in the war should not dissipate, conservative politicians seized upon and publicised the deeds of Vietnam War heroes. In December 1966, Holt's announcement that Warrant Officer Kevin 'Dasher' Wheatley, was to receive a posthumous Victoria Cross award received front-page newspaper coverage (*Sun*, 15 December 1966). Holt explained that the dead soldier had displayed 'heroism and magnificent courage' in refusing to leave a wounded comrade, despite heavy machine gun fire (15 December 1966: 1). With a company of Viet-cong 200 yards away, he pulled the pins from two hand-grenades and with one in each hand 'calmly waited' for the enemy. His comrades heard two grenade explosions and machine gun fire, and later recovered the men's bullet-riddled bodies (15 December 1966). Holt sought to link support for the war with courage, mateship and a sense of obligation to our fallen soldiers on many such occasions.

In June 1968, Holt's successor, John Gorton visited America (*Sun*, 3 June 1968). He received an assurance from Johnson that 'as far as he was concerned, America's interest in Asia would be maintained'. However, as Gorton acknowledged, this assurance was only valid until January 1969, as the President had announced that he would not be contesting the next election. (3 June 1968).

By 1968, student rebellion was challenging authority, and demanding a serious response, in many parts of the world (*Sun*, 11 June 1968). In contrast, in Australia, the student rebellion was rather pitiful, notwithstanding intense press interest. Despite this interest, the press dismissed the sincerity of most demonstrators. University of Melbourne, psychologist, T.H. Esson, (11 June 1968) suggested that many of the rebelling students were rejecting the protestant work ethic and middle-class morality. Most of the students were merely rejecting authority, he asserted. University of Melbourne Political Scientist A.A. Staley (11 June 1968) agreed. The students were not 'rebelling against their parents' politics so much as against their parents', he believed. Perhaps surprisingly, the editor of *Farrago*, the University's newspaper, Peter Steedman (11 June 1968), also agreed. 'Most students have no time for the Communist Party in Australia — it's an archaic left-over from the 30s', he explained. But as journalist David Griffiths (11 June 1968) commented, 'if the students are non-communist, ... they are also non-ALP, non-Liberal, non-DLP, non-Country Party and non-any-other-party'. He believed that their beliefs as a group were unclear (11 June 1968: 8).

Some members of the public felt that student demonstrators were rabble who deserved jail (or conscription) but others were more sympathetic. Dr Ainslie Meares, a Melbourne psychiatrist and author explained that protests were 'simply the natural and inevitable biological urge of the adolescent to assert himself; to be a man in his own right; to be

free of constricting authority' (*Sun*, 2 June 1969: 8). This was 'a natural, healthy and potentially creative urge to self-assertion', Meares believed (2 June 1969: 8).

Conscientious objectors also received little support from most Australians, although the press frequently wrote about their encounters with the authorities. In mid-1966, William White received his call up notification (Langley, 1992: 66). A schoolteacher, he was removed from his New South Wales teaching position. He unsuccessfully appealed to the High Court against joining the army, and later pleaded guilty to non-compliance over his call-up notice. A Military Court sent him to the Holsworthy Military Prison for 21 days confinement (1992: 66-67). Following his release, the New South Wales Central Court granted White a total exemption from National Service on the basis that his beliefs 'precluded him from 'performing combatant or non-combatant service' (*Sun*, 24 December 1966: 2). On receiving his formal discharge, and following substantial publicity about his case, a mere 100 people were present to cheer White as he left the Court building (24 December 1966).

The press reported Australian encounters with Vietnamese Communists almost on a daily basis. In January 1969, Viet Cong killed six Australians and wounded six in a series of incidents involving rockets and machine gun fire about 20 miles from Nui Dat (*Sun*, 21 January 1969). Six months later, readers learnt that Australian troops had 'fought fiercely' with North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers near Binh Ba, five miles from Nui Dat (*Sun*, 9 June 1969). The press reported that the Australians did not suffer any losses, but had killed twenty-seven and had captured two. However, with the addition of villagers who had delayed leaving their houses, double that number had died; with many of the bodies 'dumped in front of the bullet and shell-holed village school' (9 June 1969). Elections in Australia later in the year would reveal that most Australians were insufficiently concerned about the plight of the Vietnamese civilians or the Australian soldiers to transfer their support from the pro-involvement Liberal Government to the Labor opposition.

Gorton called an election for October 1969. He welcomed the interference of hecklers at his campaign meetings, as their presence invariably attracted prominent coverage in the Australian press and most accounts portrayed the protestors as uncouth and uninformed (*Sun* 24 October 1969). In Adelaide, throughout one of Gorton's campaign speeches, demonstrators shouted 'rubbish, liar, ... Seig Heil [and] Gorton's got to go' (*Sun*, 15 October 1969). Some stood up, prompting supporters to seize them by their shoulders and forcing them to sit (15 October 1969). At an election meeting in the Melbourne suburb of Essendon, demonstrators waved a poster depicting Gorton with a Nazi swastika across his face, while other posters called for him to bring the troops home. Front-page press reports commented that Gorton 'spoke against a constant background of interjections with occasional slow hand-clapping', but acknowledged that the Prime Minister 'clearly enjoyed the exchanges with hecklers' (24 October 1969: 1). He had received overwhelming applause when he explained that Australian troops were fighting in Vietnam 'to enable the people of that country to have the kind of political meeting we are having here, to enable them to choose their own Government', the newspaper account related (24 October 1969). At the Adelaide meeting, Gorton explained that a withdrawal would encourage North Vietnam to refuse to enter peace negotiations (15 October 1969).

Meanwhile, in October, across the United States, 'millions of Americans' were demonstrating for peace, with 50,000 marching in a candlelit procession at the Whitehouse (Ralph Broom, 'It's a Revolution for Peace', *Sun*, 17 October 1969). As *Sun News Pictorial* writer Ralph Broom explained, 'They wanted peace at all costs. They weren't concerned with face saving or defeating the enemy' (17 October 1969: 5).

In acknowledging the difference between the attitudes of Americans and Australians in his election campaigning, Opposition Leader Gough Whitlam accused Gorton of failing

to 'interpret, measure or respond to the depth of American hatred' of the war ('Govt. used to prolong Viet War – Whitlam', *Sun*, 17 October 1969: 4). He stated that in 1967 and 1968, US military personnel had used the Australian Government's support for the war to prolong the bombing of the North, delay recognition of the National Liberation Front and defer de-escalation, which were all policies that the US government later adopted (17 October 1969).

Only a small number of students demonstrated against Australia's involvement in the War, despite the impression that the percentage was substantial. Most were more interested in pursuing their studies and enjoying an active social life, no doubt thankful that they were not in the army. A poll taken at the University of New South Wales in March 1969, at the height of the anti-war protests, revealed that 50% of students favoured the Liberal Party. (Gerster, Bassett, 1991: 44) The findings of a survey in a *Walkabout* issue devoted to Young Australians, also in 1969, similarly challenged the myth of youthful radicalism in Australia at that time. It stated:

Our youth is not concerned with ideas; it is concerned with possessions and a good time. ... They don't take much interest in politics, but [are] inclined to favour the Liberal Party. They consider Asian communism a threat to Australian security, but put education before defence in priority (*Walkabout*, Dec 1969).

During the 1969 election campaign, Gorton promoted Vietnam as an issue, but Whitlam tended to concentrate on other policy areas. As journalist Douglas Wilke (16 October 1969) commented, the public considered education, health, social welfare and especially the quality of Australia's political leaders as crucial (*Sun*, 16 October 1969). There was 'widespread cynicism' about the Vietnam War in Australia, which was in marked contrast to the situation of widespread concern in America. The 'crisis of conscience' in the US was made possible 'through the idealism and puritan ethic which gave America its strength', Wilke declared (16 October 1969: 22). 'In no other nation, least of all Australia, are moral issues of foreign policy so widely debated and felt', the journalist explained (16 October 1969: 22).

Gorton was re-elected, with Labor's charismatic, confident and relatively youthful Gough Whitlam, who had strongly campaigned on domestic policies and was clearly the favourite, receiving an 7% swing which was insufficient for victory (Hancock, 2002: 241). Although largely won on domestic issues, Gorton had correctly perceived that Australia's continuing involvement in the Vietnam War would not harm his party significantly while Whitlam was aware that opposition to the War was not a sizeable electoral plus for his party. Don Aitken (1982) confirms Gorton's and Whitlam's assumptions. In an 'Australian Public Opinion Poll' in 1969, 24% of respondents believed that conscripted Australian soldiers should be fighting in Vietnam. This was a mere 4% less than in 1967. Furthermore, forty-three percent of respondents believed that we should only have volunteer troops fighting; a figure that was identical to the situation in 1967. Twelve percent believed that we should only have advisors in Vietnam, an increase of 4% over the 1967 figure, and 18% explained that Australia 'should stay out of Vietnam altogether', which represented only a slight increase of 2% over the 1967 situation. In summary, in 1969, 30% of respondents opposed Australia's military involvement in the Vietnam war, only 6% more than in 1967, and 67% supported participation by conscripted and/or volunteer soldiers, only 4% less than two years previously (Aitken, 1982: 113).

The belief that involvement in the Vietnam War was unpopular amongst most Australians by 1969 is clearly erroneous, just as it was in 1966. Furthermore, the view that most young people opposed the war during the latter half of the 1960s is similarly incorrect. However, these myths resonate throughout Australian society with, if anything, increasing stridency. In 1991, Gerster and Bassett suggested that 'centrally the sixties meant the Vietnam War and the international protest movement', but they

clarify this statement in elaborating that 'in Australia, as in America, the anti-war protests were centred in the campuses. ... Rebellion was always the province of a highly vocal, highly visible student minority' (Gerster, Bassett, 1991: 21, 44). Today, most historians, social commentators, and politicians with the exception of John Howard, have condemned Australia's involvement in the War, with the baby boomer generation demanding, and frequently receiving, uninformed accolades for their steadfast opposition to it (*Australian*, 25 November 2006). E.H. Carr's comment that history is a story usually told by or about winners for their own benefit is apposite (Carr, 2001). Young Australians today should be cautious when considering the views and recollections of ageing baby boomers towards Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. As Frank Devine comments:

Many participants in the 60s cling to romantic fantasies of conservatism renounced and convention denied, perhaps inspired as much by what have heard or read about the 60s than what they actually experienced. It is a strenuously self-promoting decade (*The Weekend Australian — 10,000 Days Supplement*, 16 November, 1996: 2).

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