
Nationalism, politics, history and war

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The commemoration and/or remembrance of war is one aspect of modern society that can be traced back to antiquity. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, the West has seemingly had a strong desire to make known to future generations the sacrifices and conquests made through various acts of warfare. For example Herodotus, considered by many rightly or wrongly as the 'father of Western history', wrote his pivotal investigation of *The Persian Wars*.

That the past not be forgotten by men over time that deeds, both great and wondrous some manifested by Hellenes [Greeks] and others by *barbaroi* [Barbarians] not become without fame — especially the cause for which they warred against one another. ¹

While written well after the events it describes, Herodotus's history explores numerous aspects of both the pretext for the great conflict and the battles themselves, and also the gossip and scandal surrounding the Greek campaigns. While his method relies heavily on hearsay (oral history recounted many years after the event) and moralising (a tendency that has also earned him the nickname 'father of history and lies'), it is a seminal classical text that has been studied ever since, bringing about the memorialisation of the victory of the smaller Greek city-states over the larger Persian Empire.

In modern Western societies, close examinations of nationalism and warfare have often been uncomfortable since the Pandora's box of twentieth-century fascism and communism was opened. This was the era that illustrated that religion had long passed from being a pre-eminent cause of conflict, and that nationalistic and secular ideologies coupled with technology would bring death and destruction on a previously unparalleled scale. Western nations are often afraid to confront even the smallest similarities

between themselves and less enlightened ideologies; similarities contained in our own liberal democratic cultures and histories that often focus on a virtuous martial character with which to embody the

nationalist spirit. However, it is a fact that war is a central cultural event in the history of many nations, irrespective of ideology and governance, and commemoration becomes part of cultural heritage and can impact on *how* we choose to remember.

The act of war commemoration itself has been, until recent years, a largely forgotten area of academic study, but 'scholars in many countries have turned to the subject of war commemoration in recent years and have wondered why it has been neglected for so long'.²

In France, where so much of the bloodshed took place during both of the world wars, a French historian mused: 'How was it possible to ignore all those monuments erected after 1918, constituting as they do the great efflorescence of public art in the nation's history?'³

Part of the reason, it was theorised, is that liberal humanist scholars developed a strong dislike 'of everything to do with war and a distaste among custodians of high culture for the products of artisanship'.⁴ Despite this lack of interest from academia, though, war commemoration has remained a strong part of the Western national consciousness through ritualised remembrance of past conflicts.

In Australia, the United Kingdom and Eire (the Republic of Ireland), the theme of death in conflict as a righteous sacrifice in securing the victory of 'liberty and freedom' against the forces of 'tyranny' works hand-in-hand with the ideal of 'duty' to the nation-state. In any fair assessment, the very same themes were often heralded by Herodotus as distinctive Greek qualities shown in the bravery and courage of the Greek armies who opposed and

defeated the Persians. Yet by focussing upon the themes of sacrifice and duty, can ritualised commemoration actually sanitise the true reality of war and its consequences and in effect act as a proxy symbol of martial validation?

The great emphasis upon certain selected themes in various types of war commemoration is often presented as a non-political secular phenomenon, i.e. remembrance of sacrifice. Theoretically one can still memorialise those who have served and fallen while commenting critically on the relative ethical merits of a particular conflict and its political dimensions, but such 'qualified remembrance' (acknowledging ethical conflicts, errors, and debates surrounding a particular conflict while remembering the fallen) is rare in the ceremonies of remembrance often enshrined as national days of significance in the Western democracies of Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland and the US. Even if it is not overtly proclaimed through patriotic rhetoric during ceremonies of remembrance, the *rightness* of the military sacrifice of those being remembered is rarely questioned.

The contrite remembrance in Germany, which condemns the fascist excesses and atrocities committed by its army in World War II (albeit with 'qualified regret' in the case of Japan) but remembers its fallen as merely fallen soldiers 'equal' to those of the Allies, is often seen as controversial by those nations that Germany tried unsuccessfully to subjugate.

The issue of war criminality is rightly at the core of this argument, and as such can be seen in the criticism of past Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, which 'is part war memorial, part place of worship [and] honours the 2.5 million Japanese people who have died for their country, including [14] convicted war criminals'.⁵

China and South Korea, both victims of Japanese aggression and hideous human rights abuses, were outraged by the visits. Critics in Japan took the issue to a Japanese court which eventually ruled that the visits violated the constitutional separation of religion and the nation-state. Koizumi, who had attempted to loosen the constraints on Japanese military activities imposed by the Japanese Constitution, called the court's verdict 'irrational'. This approach to the remembrance of Japanese history *may* reflect the Shinto philosophy of acknowledging death and rebirth, rather than the Judeo-Christian interpretation of history as a confrontation between good and evil, which is present in even so-called secular volumes. It is difficult to say what monuments such as the Yasukuni Shrine mean, as Japan is still itself coming to grips with its wartime aggression and war crimes.

Even if Japan itself is yet to fully face the truth of

its years of colonialism and aggression, the amount of scholarship and evidence available leaves little doubt as to the brutalities and war crimes committed by the Japanese Imperial Army in the name of the Emperor Hirohito. The shrine is perhaps not an appropriate place of remembrance, but could Koizumi honour the 2.5 million war dead (blackened by associations with Japan's dark deeds) without adding strict public qualifications on what it was exactly that he honoured?

The crimes committed by the Imperial Army in the 1930s and 1940s affect Japan's remembrance of war, as these repeated gross violations of human rights are perceived to 'stain' the country's honour. Given that Koizumi's visits to the shrine caused deep offence to those who were victims of Japanese militarism, it is clear that the concept of remembrance is loaded with multiples of interpretation — ethical reasoning being one such factor. In this regard, a strong ethical and moral dimension can be seen in the non-acceptance and outrage expressed by Koizumi's critics over the visits.

No Allied soldiers were tried by international courts for war crimes against the Axis powers (Germany, Italy and Japan), but can this be seen as a compelling case that, even in isolation from wider accepted norms of conduct, such crimes did not occur? While there have been a number of areas where controversy has developed in this regard (the treatment of German prisoners of war by the Russian Red Army being a good case in point), most so-called revisionists have faced accusations that they are perhaps unpatriotic or, worse, apologists for the phenomenal crimes committed by the Axis powers. In this conflictive context, controversies regarding the Allied bombing campaigns over Germany and over Japan (Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki) have raged ever since World War II.

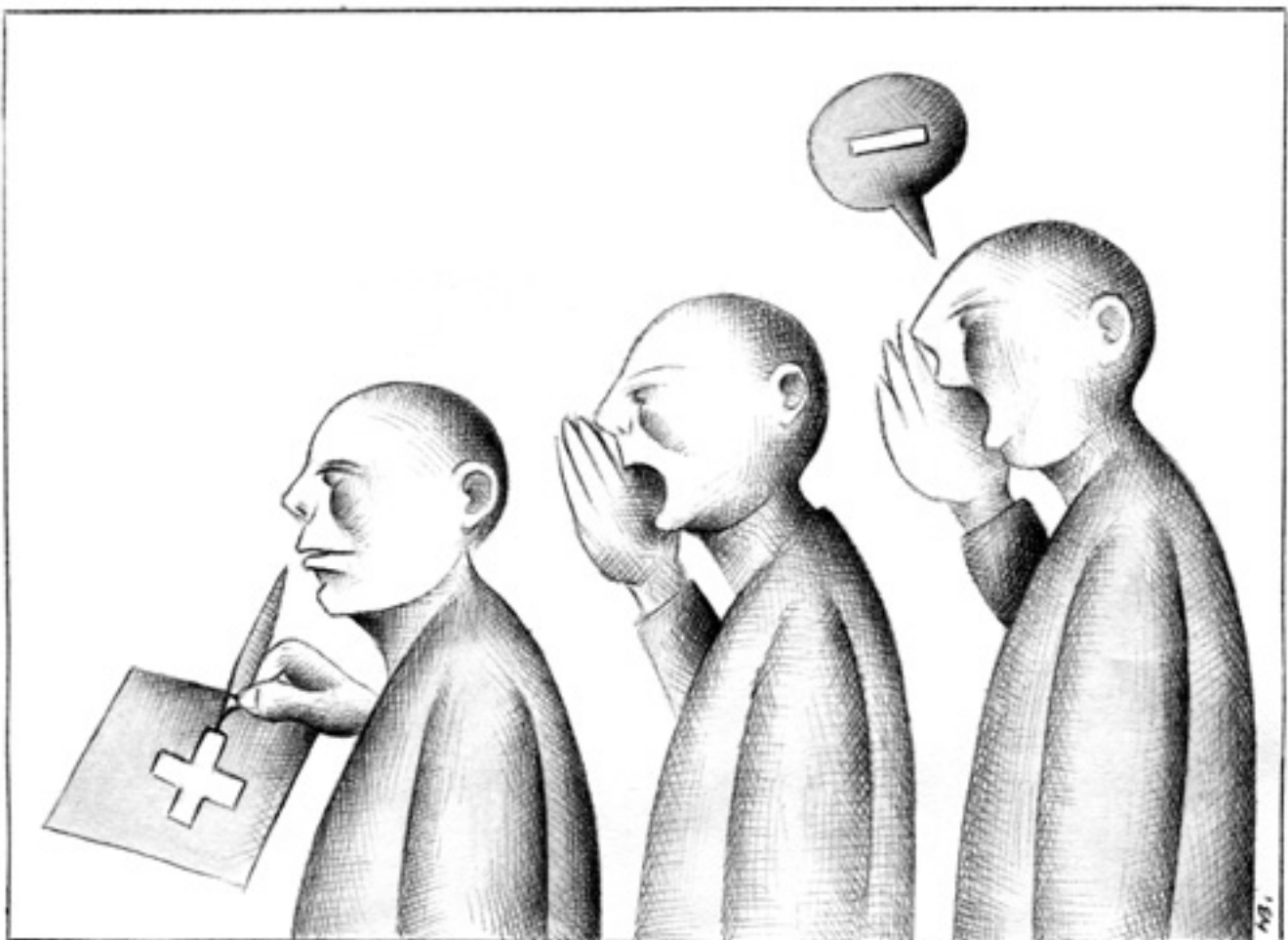
There is no doubt that the war against German fascism and Japanese militarism was a conflict that had to be won in order for the forces of liberal democracy to survive. However, both Britain and the US have honoured individuals and events that have proven controversial to their own preferred concepts of war remembrance and commemoration. At one stage, postage stamps commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of atomic bombings were to appear in the US but were later cancelled by the Clinton administration due to issues of sensitivity. The world-famous Smithsonian Institute also created an exhibition for this fiftieth anniversary that dared to examine aspects of the reasoning behind President Truman's decision. Amid howls of protest from US veterans, politicians and 'patriots' who called the exhibit unpatriotic revisionism, the exhibit was sig-

nificantly scaled back. In Great Britain, a statue to Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, the mastermind of the Allied carpet-bombing campaign of German cities, was erected on the Strand in 1992. The city of Dresden, which was destroyed in the firestorm caused by incendiary bombing at the cost of 60,000 civilian lives, protested the memorial. Yet the Bomber Command Association, which has actively defended Harris's reputation from accusations that he needlessly pursued a bombing campaign against civilians, paid the £200,000 for the statue. A spokesman, Ray Gallow, stated a plain and straightforward reasoning for this: 'When we started area bombing [carpet bombing of German cities], we were losing on all fronts. The public didn't find a thing wrong with bombing German cities then.'⁶

This is to all intents and purposes a correct statement, and it is doubtful that many British citizens at the time would have disagreed. Bomber Command had first attempted 'precision bombing' of military and industrial targets, but heavy crew losses and the desperate state of the war against Germany caused this policy to change. The fact that Hitler ordered the bombing of civilian British targets ('the Blitz') made some believe that the 'gloves' had to come off in the war against Nazism. The Blitz hardened British

opinion against Germany, and both the government's and ordinary citizens' resolve to strike a blow against Hitler and his tyrannical empire was strong. The true controversy is that even once the Germans were in retreat after D-day 1944 and the Allies, after fierce fighting, were eventually 'winning on all fronts', Harris's enthusiasm for the destruction of German cities rather than 'obvious' military and industrial targets never seemed to waver. It was said that even Churchill, not noted for much dovish sentiment, was appalled by the destruction of Dresden, which Harris had firebombed with catastrophic results.

The concept of 'total war' was established in World War II by the use of precedent and the fact that all sides would ultimately ignore established international rules. The 'Rules of War' covering military aerial bombardment were originally laid down at the 1907 Hague Peace Conference, which established through Article XXV that the attack or bombardment of any undefended civilian dwellings was illegal, and through Article XXVI that the officer in command of an attack must warn the civil authorities.⁷ The Italians ignored these rules of engagement fighting against the Turks in 1911, and the Germans ignored them by attacking London with Zeppelins during World War I. In 1938, at the insistence of the British



prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, the Assembly of the League of Nations wanted new tangible laws regarding aerial attacks on civilian targets. The league adopted the view that:

a) the intentional bombing of civilian populations is illegal, b) objectives aimed at from the air must be legitimate military objectives and must be identifiable, c) any attack on legitimate military objectives must be carried out in such a way that civilian populations in the neighborhood are not bombed through negligence.⁸

Hitler of course ignored such rules of engagement during the Blitz. (He would also ignore the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war, and the Eastern Front was awash with Russian blood throughout his war against Stalin.) In retaliation, Bomber Command 'took off the gloves'. Harris was a man who seemed, more than most, a fanatical advocate of attacking German cities even after the German army was in retreat. The most troubling argument against Harris is that it is highly likely such bombing campaigns did not achieve their objectives of hastening the end of the war, depleting industrial production, and zapping German morale.

Germany lost 560,000 killed and 675,000 injured from the Allied bomber offensive, most of them women and children, [and the country's] war production until the final months was cut as little as 1.2 per cent.⁹

Harris's memorial was opened by the late Queen Mother amid shouts from German protesters who called Harris a war criminal. Even the deplorably self-serving Nazi, Albert Speer, singled out the fact that US 'precision bombing' was more devastating and more militarily effective than Harris's 'carpet bombing', which he felt did not undermine morale in the way envisaged by Bomber Harris.¹⁰ Resentment and resolve for some kind of retribution (as had been the case in Britain) may in fact be the main result of such attacks on civilians. The United States, in contrast, used 'precision bombing' of military targets in Europe, but in the Asia-Pacific theatre chose to undertake the firebombing of Tokyo (100,000 dead) and, finally, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima (140,000 dead) and Nagasaki (70,000 dead).

In the US, World War II has been called the 'good war', and is seen as having been fought against clearly demonstrable evil. Yet the bombings of Japan have created conflict and debate about this claim, and this conflict has impacted on how best to remember and memorialise a very significant historical moment. Most Americans apparently still believe that the bombings were justified, while a significant minority does not. Yet any examination of why Truman decided to use the atomic bomb has been contro-

versial, even though the destruction of Tokyo clearly demonstrated that so-called conventional bombing could be equally devastating.

Certainly, most historians who addressed the question agreed that the factors shaping Truman's actions in the war's climactic days were too complex to be summed up in a single, easily recited formula ('The atomic bomb saved American lives, ended the war, and repaid Japan for Pearl Harbor') — a formula that, if not demonstrably false, was demonstrably inadequate. But beyond this, one would be hard put, despite accusations to the contrary, to identify a monolithic 'revisionist' position on the A-bomb decision.¹¹

US patriot remembrance and commemoration of World War II in 1994, the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombings, clashed with historical debate when the Smithsonian Institute exhibition on the bombings gained great media attention from 'patriots' as revisionist and anti-American. Eventually the Smithsonian Institute decided to scale back this exhibition. This controversy added to existing sensitivity of the Japanese government evoked when US postage stamps commemorating the atomic bombings of Japan were proposed. The stamps, much to the dismay of some who protested against the Smithsonian exhibition, were cancelled by the Clinton administration after concern was expressed by Japan. The anti-Smithsonian 'patriots' argued that any critical examination of the decision to bomb was in fact an attack on core American values. The ethical dimension of the debate against the Smithsonian exhibition was justified by the 'patriots' on the grounds that the bombing ended the war and saved American lives, and therefore such events were 'beyond' academics, whom, they claimed, were glossing over the Japanese wartime record in order to tarnish the innate motives of the Allies during the 'good war'.¹²

Those who articulate such responses are not interested in debate; for them, unquestioning support for Truman's atomic bomb decision becomes a litmus test of patriotism. Indeed, they reject the legitimacy of the historical enterprise itself. What right have you, a mere academic, such critics are really asking, to publish dissenting views on matters about which true patriots cannot possibly hold differing opinions?¹³

Despite considerable arguments showing there were many highly contentious aspects to the atomic bomb decision, most of those who oppose historical examination of the moral or ethical dimensions to this event still assert as 'fact' that 'no one can doubt this horrible weapon saved American lives', and it is this assertion that colours their remembrance and commemoration of the bombings.

That precisely this assertion is, in fact, a matter of considerable doubt, and certainly open to historical inquiry and discussion, was a position whose legitimacy he [the man who asserted that the bombings saved US lives] simply could not acknowledge. He was left, therefore, with no alternative but to impugn the character and integrity of those who do hold it. The confrontation between popular memory and patriotic affirmation on the one hand, and the norms of historical research and argument on the other, could hardly be more starkly revealed.¹⁴

Therefore how we choose to remember and commemorate does have an influence on perceptions of the event in question, and impacts on our sense of 'righteous nationalism'. This process, as Koizumi's shrine visit demonstrates, is already sociologically complex, and can be intruded on by political and establishment elites. Using high office, they can assume public ownership of most aspects of institutionalised remembrance such as Anzac Day in Australia or Veterans' Day in the US. They can invoke the symbolic legacy of past wars to rouse nationalist spirits for a myriad of possible reasons.

For example, in 2005, just prior to the climax of a day-long commemoration marking the end of the Pacific War (World War II) on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra, Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, was shown on all the large video screens speaking to Air Commodore Greg Evans, Commander of the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) in Iraq. This reference to the current political decision to send the ADF to Iraq on such a day was, of course, deliberate. In the rather scripted conversation, the prime minister, while avoiding all references to any controversial aspects of the Iraq invasion such as the use of dubious British, American and Australian intelligence to justify the war, was unwavering in his own praise of the professionalism, conduct and mission of the ADF in Iraq. The professionalism of the ADF is noted by observers and Allies and is held in high regard. That such views are held by the prime minister is not a surprise, but it is of course the context of the conversation taking place — a video-screen presentation of a conversation between

Howard and Evans on a day of 'war commemoration' for World War II, that is notable. This links the controversial Iraq War with the established moral credibility of Australia's military effort in World War II.

That the prime minister supports the war in Iraq is of course beyond doubt. Without formal consultation with his Cabinet, the day after the September 11 World Trade Center attacks John Howard signalled his support for subsequent US actions by invoking the ANZUS Treaty.¹⁵ In reality, our strong membership of the subsequent US anti-Iraq coalition required



the ADF (Australian 'Defence' Force) to be sent on active service against the backdrop of enormous international protest to participate for the first time in Australian history in the starting of a war.¹⁶ Given the continuing controversies of the Iraq War, the link being made by airing this conversation prior to the conclusion of such a large war commemoration — a link between the 'noble' Pacific campaigns that opposed Japanese tyranny and the campaign in Iraq — could have been nothing but intentional.

The Australian military legend is at its very essence ambiguous (wars of imperial linkages with Britain, and wars of strategic alliance with the US), and can be manipulated to have multiple meanings. In 1992, Paul Keating, then prime minister of Australia and a strong republican, accused Great Britain of 'betraying Australia during the Second World War by sacrificing the so-called Far East to concentrate on Europe'.¹⁷ Only a few months later, documents were released by the British government suggesting that when Singapore fell in February 1942, 'Australian troops resorted to rape, drunkenness and desertion'.¹⁸



According to the so-called 'Wavell Report', based on unsubstantiated British hearsay, the desertion of Australian troops caused the Fall of Singapore. The release of this report by the British government shows how history is so easily manipulated for political ends.

As Lynette Silver points out in *Scapegoats for the Bloody Empire*, General Archibald Wavell held Australians in Singapore in high regard. Indeed, one in ten Australians died fighting against the Japanese, as opposed to one in twenty Britons or Indians. Australian supply stores in Singapore were robbed at one stage by British troops desperate for supplies; with only their boots differing, many British soldiers wore the same uniform as the diggers. There must be very serious doubt over the endless reports of bad 'Australian' behaviour in Singapore. To some, the very fact that the British had released these documents, perhaps in response to Keating's allegations, illustrated their contempt for Australia.

Keating had discovered the historical debate regarding Singapore, but he did not examine its lessons closely. Instead, he saw in the Fall of Singa-

pore an historical event that could be manipulated to support his own republicanism. As a latecomer to the power of military history, Keating was not concerned with conducting a serious historical debate, but rather with using history as a potent political weapon. Keating trumpeted over the British failure to secure Singapore by properly defending the Malayan Peninsula. The Fall of Singapore is a serious academic and military issue, and despite Keating's nationalistic bombast it is perfectly valid to point out that Churchill was not completely forthright with the Australians or New Zealanders about his strategies. British and Australian historians have also come to this conclusion, but Keating went further than this by using the word 'betrayal'. It is difficult to imagine that any historical interpretations other than that of deliberate British deception and betrayal would have interested him.

While Churchill referred to Singapore as a 'fortress', there can be little in the way of 'equipment' to suggest that its defence was a high priority. The defence of Singapore required first-rate planes, trained soldiers, tanks and ships, but despite warnings that if equipment 'did not materialise...the army in Malaya [would be] fatally exposed...Britain refused to admit this, while Australia looked the other way'.¹⁹ The largely untrained and untried Australian soldiers fought hard in adverse conditions against the battle-hardened Japanese troops, as did the British, without tanks, sea power or planes — the later proving decisive. The Japanese had complete control of the air and 180 modern tanks, 'while the British had none'.²⁰ Peter Elphick has argued that: 'during 1940 and 1941 Churchill downgraded the importance of Singapore to 2nd 11 status in Imperial defence. A decision he cloaked from the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand by outright deceit'.²¹

Churchill was, of course, unrepentant about these decisions, arguing: 'If the Malay Peninsula has been starved for the sake of Libya and Russia, no one is more responsible than I, and I would do exactly the same again'.²²

Against the advice of his service chiefs, Churchill sent a battleship, *Prince of Wales*, and a battle cruiser, *Repulse*, to Singapore against terrible odds. By this stage the Japanese controlled both air and sea, and both ships were lost. Yet opportunities to avoid this disaster were arguably available before the onset of the Japanese land attack. Had half of the tanks and planes sent to the Russians been diverted to lieutenant-general Percival, who described Singapore as being as 'useful as a chocolate teapot', the defence of the island would have markedly stiffened.

Rather than show true knowledge of the event, Keating merely latched onto these credible strands of the debate to put forward the conspiracy view of deliberate British betrayal. While Churchill did hold Australians in low regard due to 'convict and Irish stock', his decisions largely reflected the British war priorities. The British badly underestimated the capabilities of the Japanese military, as did the Americans in Hawaii and the Philippines. The tragic loss of Singapore reflected this grave miscalculation. The British, and the Australians, had hoped that the mere military prestige of the British Empire would be enough to discourage the Japanese from a serious attack. The Japanese called this bluff, and tens of thousands of Allied soldiers, not just Australians, paid the price for Churchill's strategic priorities and Singapore's air and sea defence shortcomings by becoming prisoners of war. The irony of Keating's attack was that he chose to impugn 'British honour' rather than the man most responsible, Churchill himself. Keating has in fact stated that Churchill is a leader that he admires.

Successive Australian governments had supported the British strategies of controlling the Mediterranean, support for the USSR against Germany, and US involvement against Japan. This can be seen in the deployment of Australian troops to the Middle East, but it must be said that while Churchill did not explicitly share the fullness of his strategies with Canberra or Wellington, were both governments too trusting and/or complacent in relation to the viability of their own defences? What happened in Singapore shows the naive trust of the lesser power (Australia) in alliance with a great power (the UK). Parallels to Australia's modern alliance with the US might have been made, but once finished with Singapore (and ignoring the critical reports on Australian troops), Keating chose to elevate the Battle of Kokoda to a confrontation of national deliverance, e.g. failed by Britain, Australians saved themselves from Japanese invasion.

Heavily reliant on nationalistic martial folklore (the Japanese invasion), Keating praised the Battle of Kokoda by suggesting that it should be celebrated more so than the Gallipoli legend. As had been the case in the argument over Singapore, Keating was more interested in using military history to support his politics. When he visited Papua New Guinea to

attend a memorial service in honour of World War II, Keating was without a wreath and, as an impromptu gesture, knelt down and kissed the Kokoda memorial plaque.²³ Although this was no doubt a heartfelt expression of gratitude, it merely served to highlight Keating's own nationalistic politics more than the Battle of Kokoda itself. By interpreting history in such parochial terms and attacking the war record of Great Britain, Keating used commemoration and war remembrance to support his own modern Australian nationalism and to promote republicanism.

Via John Howard, the conservative side of Australian politics expressed outrage at Keating's use in this way of historical arguments and Australian military symbolism. However, it can be argued very strongly that Howard is in fact guilty of what he condemned his predecessor for; namely, the manipulation of military history and traditions for mere political motives.

At the 1996 Sir Thomas Playford Memorial Lecture on 5 July 1996, Howard stated:

'According to the so-called 'Wavell Report', based on unsubstantiated British hearsay, the desertion of Australian troops caused the Fall of Singapore.'

One of the more insidious developments in Australian political life over the last decade or so has been the attempt to re-write Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause. No one should be in any doubt that this process has been a systematic and deliberate one. My predecessor as Prime Minister regarded the partisan re-interpretation of Australia's past as central to much of the agenda for the future that he sought to implement.²⁴

Such thoughts can also be applied to Howard — in the context of the video link between himself and Evans just prior to the grand finale of the sixtieth anniversary commemorations on Lake Burley Griffin — and to Howard's friend US President George Bush. The president took the opportunity at this year's Veterans' Day speech to not just 'remember America's 25 million veterans', but also to outline his justifications for US involvement in the now increasingly unpopular occupation of Iraq.²⁵ In fact, given the nature of the speech, it is clear that the very occasion of Veterans' Day was seized on in order to put forward the presidential view of the war in Iraq.

Of the 5,764 words contained in the presidential speech, 4,991 words were devoted to outlining the merits and justifications of the 'War on Terror', and the speech was delivered from a stage lectern sur-

rounded by US service personnel, with banners behind the president that read 'Strategy For Victory'. Such behaviour is standard practice in the United States. In fact, the speech was openly given a dual purpose — a speech for veterans and a speech outlining 'War on Terror' strategy. The linkages between servicemen, Veterans' Day, US patriotism and Iraq were being made both in words and through symbolic associations.

The association of political causes and martial



history has been a well-worn pathway of manipulation by politicians. For example, during the 2004 television election debate, John Howard called the INTERFET operation led by Australian troops in East Timor in 1999 a 'liberation'²⁶, presumably in the face of Indonesian human rights abuses. There is no doubt that INTERFET did an excellent job in East Timor, yet political spin can, through association with martial endeavours in the form of parades, also elevate the stature of politicians.

In reality, strong pressure was put on Australia by the Clinton administration, which after the Santa Cruz massacre and repeated concerns regarding human rights violations in Indonesia throughout the 1990s was, by 1999, in the process of debating the continuing merits of America's twenty-five-year policy of neutrality on East Timor.²⁷ Throughout the time leading to the fateful decision to send troops as part of a UN-sponsored peacekeeping mission, John

Howard and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, consistently rejected the very concept of Timorese independence (favoured by the majority of East Timorese) by openly favouring instead the 'special autonomy' package put forward by President Habibe.²⁸ Both men also publicly saw fit to insist that the Indonesian army (TNI), despite its human rights record in Timor, was perfectly placed to act as a 'neutral' security force between warring 'local factions'.²⁹

Even a Defence Intelligence Organisation brief dated 6 January 1999 stated unequivocally that the so-called 'pro integrationist militias' were nothing but 'proxies for the ABRI'³⁰ (Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia — now the TNI), which had also armed the militias. Embarrassingly for both Howard and Downer, despite official assurances from the Indonesians that they were not arming paramilitaries and that TNI troops were in fact deploying from the island, clear evidence came to light to contest these assurances and the Indonesian military openly admitted to the practice for 'protection reasons'.³¹ Defence Signals Directorate intercepted incriminating phone messages from militia figureheads to Indonesian Special Forces on 9 February 1999, and confirmed via records smuggled out of East Timor that despite claims by Indonesian officials of troop reductions, the TNI had in fact secretly landed troops into the province, 'including five battalions in the north of Los Palos'.³² Six days after Alexander Downer spoke during the question-and-answer session at the National Press Club on 31 March 1999 to defend the integrity of the Indonesian denials and to state that there may be rogue elements at play³³, the Liquiçá Church massacre occurred and sixty-one (or, according to local sources, up to 200) men, women and children were killed by pro-Indonesian militias with the assistance of TNI soldiers.³⁴

The success of the INTERFET operation bolstered the very false view that the Australian government had in fact liberated East Timor. As a consequence, INTERFET established Howard's international reputation. Considering that during World War II, 'between 40,000 and 70,000 Timorese died as a direct result of [assisting the Australian-led] Allied guerrilla operations in Timor [Operation Sparrow, 1942–1943] against the Japanese'³⁵, Howard's post-INTERFET statements of 'liberation' rest on very insensitive ground. Despite adhering to and defending policies that would, if allowed to run their course, have avoided any peacekeeping involvement in Timor, the prime minister chose to associate himself with the success of INTERFET and Australian military symbolism. The INTERFET welcome-home parade was held before 55,000 Sydney citizens. The prime min-

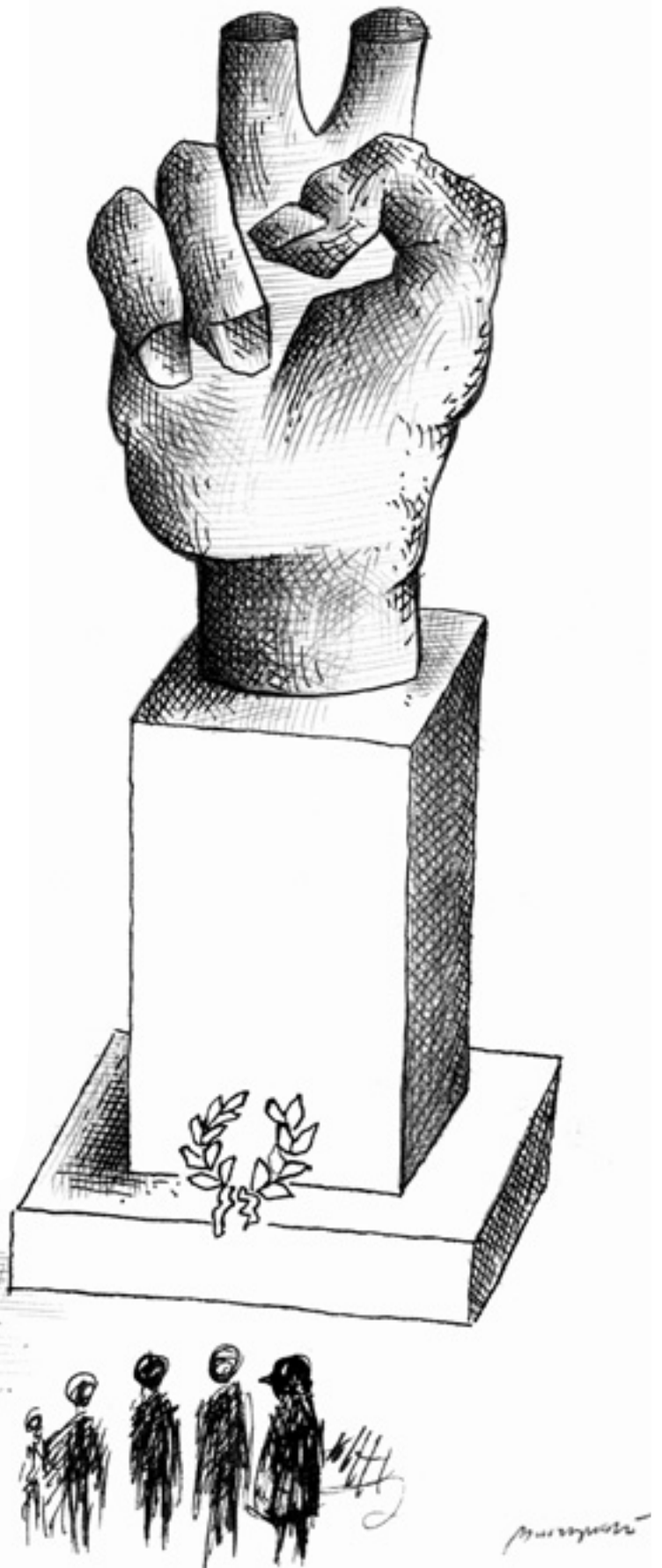
ister, along with the Sydney Lord Mayor, who handed General Peter Cosgrove the keys to the city, took centre stage. In his speech, Howard called on the mythical linkages of Australia's noble military past when he stated:

Today in a very public fashion, Australians got to show their thanks and great respect to the men and women of INTERFET and the Australian Federal Police...They followed in a great Australian military tradition...to defend what is right, the right to live in freedom and peace.³⁶

That Cosgrove had achieved a great success under great pressure cannot be doubted. The operation itself was planned quickly, and reflected the fact that original Australian military planning begun in May 1999 was not designed, as revisionists claim, with peace-keeping operations in mind: Operation Spitfire was 'designed to evacuate personnel, not keep the peace'.³⁷

The atrocities committed by the Indonesians following the successful independence vote gained 'well publicised attention in the US media'³⁸, which prompted two responses from the Clinton administration: after initially upholding the twenty-five-year-old policy of US support for Indonesian sovereignty in East Timor, only a few days later Clinton reversed the policy and informed the Indonesian military that the US would no longer directly support Jakarta. In response to this US policy shift, Jakarta then allowed the Australian-led UN peacekeeping force to enter the province unopposed.³⁹ Considering this role played in East Timor by the US, it is difficult to sustain the 'liberation' argument raised by the prime minister.⁴⁰

Howard's assumption of public ownership of the decision to send troops to Timor (seen in his prominent role in the INTERFET welcome-home parade), and of the successful outcome (the liberation comments), illustrates the perceived value to politicians of associating themselves with sacrosanct military traditions, nationalism and patriotism. To criticise the prime minister on this issue is to 'tarnish' the valour of the troops who served such a 'noble' cause, by reducing them to the status of being mere instruments of political manoeuvrings and/or expediency. At core, though, the use of military forces in any context is strongly connected to politics and ideology. As British historian John Preeble once pointed out, it is the army that has the right to 'translate diplomacy into death'. The INTERFET



parade, which echoed the traditional Anzac Day commemoration march, is therefore associated with the nationalistic pride of such celebrations.

The strong mix of myth and fact is an essential aspect of nationalistic commemoration. It is this mix that can bind the citizens of any nation into what Anderson called the 'imagined community'⁴¹. In fact in 1916, when the British government wished to conduct an enquiry into the debacle of Gallipoli, the 'Australian newspapers and politicians opposed [such an enquiry as] there was a fear that the facts would damage the legend'⁴², and only after the war, in 1919, was such an enquiry undertaken. It is interesting also to note that revisionist histories of the Gallipoli campaign that have painted a fuller picture of the chaos and suffering endured by those who fought there have failed to dent its allure as the nation's birthplace.

In Australian school textbooks, children are taught of the 'national significance' of Gallipoli without exploring the fullest context of the battle. It would be very doubtful that many students, or teachers, would be aware of the Turkish name for the invasion of 1915 — the Battle of Canakkale. Passing sentences or paragraphs are given to the British, French, New Zealand or Indian presence, even though their losses, like those of the Australians, were high; this can give the false impression that Gallipoli was an Australian battle. Although 'ANZAC' includes New Zealand, it would be a fair assessment to say that Australian nationalism has claimed an almost exclusive ownership of the Gallipoli event — so much so that Australians, despite being part of an invasion force in 1915, feel strongly enough to actually criticise *Turkish* authorities for recent roadworks near Anzac Cove.

Secondary students using the 'NSW Retroactive History' textbooks are taught of the British failure to land the Anzacs on the correct beach; of the heroic image of Simpson and his donkey; and that the Dardanelles strait could not have been taken by naval attack due to Turkish sea-mines and batteries. The

battles of The Nek and Lone Pine are also studied, but with little reference to other major battles fought by the non-Anzac members of the Allies. While Anzac Cove was hardly an ideal location to land troops, it was not nearly as well-defended as the beach originally chosen. It has been suggested that the lighter Turkish defences at Anzac Cove were due to its natural defences (its rugged cliffs, steep hills and barren landscape) and that the Turkish thought it an unlikely invasion site. The original intended landing site (1.5 kilometres north of Anzac Cove) was heavily defended by Turkish machine guns and razor wire. Had the Anzacs landed there, against such entrenched defences, as the British had experienced at Cape Helles, the Australians would have recorded significantly more loss of life on those first days of the invasion.⁴³ The Anzacs at the time, while respecting him, did not idolise 'the man with the Donkey', as they did not understand why Simpson was given such special media significance over others amid the carnage and destruction that was taking place all around them. That there was no alternative to a land-based invasion is clearly also an area of debate, as naval attempts to breach the straits might just have succeeded, had they tried again after ships struck mines.⁴⁴

It is said that on the morning of March 19th, the Turkish gunners [of the straits] had only thirty shells left for their big guns. The British would probably have broken through, if they had tried. But the naval commanders weren't used to losing ships. They conjured excuses not to attack again.⁴⁵

Such troubling claims are not often, if at all, given official remonstrations on Anzac Day itself — the day of Australia's supreme 'national remembrance'. Had the naval attacks succeeded, the Anzac landings would never have taken place. One also wonders whether enthusiasm for the conflict might have been diminished had the Australian public of the time been more aware of the awful conditions at Gallipoli, the chaos created by inadequate planning and commu-



nication, and the true extent of losses incurred in the first weeks of fighting by the Allies.

War commemorations and memorials such as plaques and statues can be treated like gravestones. However such monuments also evoke a potent sense of symbolism and nationalism. They are as much a means to mourn the loss of fallen countrymen as they are a point of cultural recognition of the fallen men's supreme sacrifice and service. Yet the shrine-like respect given to memorials, and the ritualistic aspects of commemoration, have always held both an attractive and repellent quality to various groups within society. For those who obviously supported the values inherent within a monument, its very existence is testimony to the significance of these values. In times of war, such symbols can work as rallying or recruitment points. For example:

In the Sydney inner suburb of Balmain the council commissioned a board honouring local men in the AIF (Australian Imperial Force) even before the invasion of Turkey; on Empire Day, 24 May 1915, railway workers at Honeysuckle near Newcastle unveiled a board honouring workmates known to have died in the first days of ANZAC.⁴⁶

Memorials can have multiple meanings and can be used to serve a number of causes. For instance, they can be used to serve aggressive militarism. As with the Boer War, Australian involvement in World War I rode on a wave of pro-British Australian nationalism. Even the monuments erected to the Boer War of 1899–1902 became rallying points at which to call for strong support for the British and Australian war effort.

[Memorials to the AIF in the form of honour boards] became huge scoreboards of commitment, intended to encourage other men to follow those named. In New South Wales, the Department of Public Instruction suggested that 'in order to stimulate recruiting' each school in the state should erect an honour board.⁴⁷

To the religious clergy, pacifists, dissenters and conscientious objectors, certain underlying aspects of early Anzac remembrances were troubling. The concept of actively encouraging young men of fighting age to follow the example of 'our glorious dead' and serve the empire through enlistment started almost as soon as the fighting began. This would later

manifest itself into the conscription debate, with the 'Pros' or 'Win the War Group' movement led by 'the little digger', prime minister Billy Hughes, and the 'Antis' comprising trade unionists, the Catholic Church, pacifists etc. Two bitterly fought conscription referendums consequently divided Australian society along sectarian lines: loyal Protestants v. working-class Catholics.

The effects of this sectarian divide were heightened by the Irish Easter Uprising of 1916, and by the prominence of Irish-born, ardently anti-conscription Archbishop Mannix, who pointed out that if Germany was to be condemned for its actions in Belgium, the British acted with at least a comparable degree of impunity in Ireland by executing most of the Irish rebel leaders by military firing squad.

While conscription failed to win the required support, this debate revealed just how perception can impact on the very concept of patriotism, war remembrance and nationalism. Had conscription succeeded,

how many more Australian lives would have been lost pursuing the cause of Australian honour through loyalty to the now non-existent British Empire? Even without conscription the AIF, which fought with such courage and distinction on the Western Front, served the strategic interests of the British Empire.

The idea of sacrifice is taken to its logical conclusion in the concept of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Visiting this tomb at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra is a moving experience. The remains of an Australian soldier — one of a staggering 23,000 unidentified AIF soldiers who fell fighting in France — are intended to personify the sacrifice, courage and endurance of the nation.

We do not know this Australian's name and we never will. We do not know his rank or battalion. We do not know where he was born, nor precisely how he died...We will never know who this Australian was...he was one of the 45,000 Australians who died on the Western Front...one of the 60,000 Australians who died on foreign soil. One of the 100,000 Australians who died in wars this century. He is all of them. And he is one of us.⁴⁸

As prime minister Paul Keating spoke Don Watson's eloquent words to salute the Unknown Soldier, he brought home the message that he was 'one of us'.

'To the religious clergy, pacifists, dissenters and conscientious objectors, certain underlying aspects of early Anzac remembrances were troubling.'

In London, similarly, the Cenotaph is located near Downing Street, Whitehall; in Dublin, it is the Garden of Remembrance on O'Connell Street. Central to this aspect of remembrance is the fact that these shrines are places of pilgrimage and have primacy over all other such memorials. It is at these focal points of nationwide war remembrance that the approved themes in the national discourses of sacrifice, honour, liberty and patriotism can be espoused. Irrespective of one's views on these themes, it cannot be overlooked that they are nonetheless highly selective and carefully scripted.



That these themes are indeed selective says much about the society that espouses such romantic ideals on significant occasions of national importance. The ideals that are expressed through war commemoration are usually a patriotic interpretation of common threads and cultural values of the society. This can be an issue of contention, as it does ignore other possible and, perhaps, equally valid interpretations. Secondly, memorials also fill an almost ritualistic role of pilgrimage and ceremony, making alternative readings of commemoration controversial if carried out on a day of remembrance. For example, an anti-war protest on Anzac Day would be largely perceived as showing disrespect to those who had died. Such a mischievous 'act of defiance' held on this day would strongly challenge the core values of Australian nationalism inherent within the commemoration. To challenge the accepted selective themes is to risk being seen as unpatriotic.

As in Australia, Great Britain or the United States, selectivity is also easily seen in Eire, where most southern towns, if not all, have memorials to various individuals associated with Ireland's independence from Great Britain. Many towns have memorials to those who fought and died in the ill-fated 1916 Easter Uprising, an event that, despite its current significance, was not at all popular with ordinary Irish people at the time. At that time, tens of thousands of Irishmen, both Catholic and Protestant, were fighting against Germany on the Western Front in various British army units. Initially, the 1916 rebels were seen as troublemakers and had little support. It was only *after* most were ruthlessly shot by British army firing squads that nationalist indignation grew.

Sean O'Callaghan, a former highly ranked Irish Republican Army (IRA) terrorist turned informer, recalls his school-boy days as such:

Every Easter he [O'Callaghan's schoolteacher] helped to organise an Easter Sunday concert in the Ashe Memorial Hall to commemorate the Rising of 1916. It was a matter of some local pride and the whole town seemed to be there, even some local priests and *garda* [police]. The concerts followed a set pattern: Irish dancers and traditional *ceilidh* groups would be followed by melodramatic and sentimental

re-enactments of the Rising. Mournful and evocative republican ballads like 'Kevin Barry' — about a young medical student hanged by the British in the War of Independence — and 'The Ballad of James Connolly' would be followed by rousing tunes like 'A Nation Once Again'. Melodramatic tableaux from the Rising, which were designed to pluck a tear from your eye, would be acknowledged by rapturous applause and a standing ovation.⁴⁹

O'Callaghan recalled how he had very much enjoyed this type of commemoration until he reached his teen years and started to dislike the overt sentimentality of the gathering. He also looked back upon commemorations that were held in the Republican plot of the local cemetery in Tralee, remembering the music and the marching of the old IRA men. Yet it would seem that the pilgrimage to Bodenstown, in County Kildare, struck a chord in his youth, and caused deep reflection once he turned against terrorist

violence and the IRA. Bodenstown is perceived as the home of Irish republicanism as it is the birthplace of Theobald Wolfe Tone. O'Callaghan went there for the first time in June 1966:

The annual pilgrimage to Bodenstown, in County Kildare, where Theobald Wolfe Tone, the father of Irish republicanism, is buried is, together with the Easter Commemoration, one of the key events in the IRA calendar. A Protestant, Tone was born in 1763 and became one of founding members of a group called the 'Society of United Irishmen', which was heavily influenced by the French revolution, and sought aid from France to free Ireland from British rule. He and the united Irishmen proclaimed that they would substitute the common name of Irishman for Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter, but in reality set off a squalid round of sectarian slaughter in 1798. Tone slit his throat in gaol rather than be hanged by the British. As kids we were taught that he had not committed suicide — to do so would have been both cowardly and a sin — but had been murdered by the British. It was indicative of much of the rubbish we learned as history, particularly concerning the relationship between Britain and Ireland.⁵⁰

The irony of this was that to question the sacrifice of Irish republicans who had fought and died was, and still is, virtually sacrilegious. There is no doubt that many good men wholeheartedly believed in a home-ruled or republican Ireland, but across the Republic the victors have sought to rewrite the very act of commemoration itself. Sean O'Callaghan rightly points out the fact that so many more Irishmen, both Catholic and Protestant, had fought and died in the uniform of the British army over two centuries. Without monuments or commemoration, these men are now largely considered beyond the pale of nationalistic memory. These monuments, like the many Norman castles and Georgian houses that have been systematically knocked down over the last fifty years in order to eradicate the visual reminders of hated British rule, are often conspicuously absent in Eire. The contribution of Irishmen who volunteered for service in the British army, irrespective of the many social issues that may have caused enlistment, is still a long and proud one. In fact, given the failures of British rule in Ireland, enlistment in the British army is a significant window into Irish social history. It has been estimated that at the time of the Battle of Water-

loo, possibly as many as between one-quarter and one-third of the British army was of Irish birth, including the Iron Duke himself.

If there are elements within Irish republican commemoration and nationalistic remembrance that seem illogical and uncomfortable to the outsider, one must never forget that the phenomenon of facts obscured in favour of preferred interpretations is not confined to Eire. The very same such issues can also be seen in Great Britain, the US and Australia. In Australia, should we not still formally acknowledge the contextual reality of our then pro-British politics in order to show why so many Australians chose to serve on the battlefields of Gallipoli and the Western Front and



wash away 'the convict stain' in loyal service to the empire? Despite what some school textbooks suggest, the 'spirit of adventure' and the chance of an 'over-seas trip' can only go so far in explaining the relatively sustained enthusiasm of young Australian men to fight in a war mostly fought (excepting the attack on German New Guinea) so far away from home. The public epitaph, 'for King and Empire', is imprinted on countless World War I memorials. The imperial context is now mostly ignored as irrelevant except in scholarship, or as a passing paragraph in a high school textbook that speaks of a 'Mother England' from a long-lost age. It has been replaced by the 'unique' Anzac qualities of mateship and courage 'against the odds', and the claim that these staggering sacrifices for Australia were made defending the abstract notion of freedom.

Nationalism requires, at its core, an act of faith and trust in core values and ideas. This jingoism can be seen in the criticism expressed by self-appointed custodians of nationalist culture (politicians and patriots) when serious military and political academics

expand and/or challenge the cherished myths. Only in 2005 was there any serious attempt to translate into English the 'Official Japanese War Records' by Australian academics.⁵¹ The idea that the Japanese intended to invade Australia has pervaded the symbolic meanings associated with the Kokoda campaign since World War II. At a recent history conference on events in 1942, a view was presented, based on the available evidence and intelligence reports of the time, that 'Japan never seriously intended to invade Australia, a fact known to the Australian Government by mid-1942'.⁵²

by the historian⁵⁴, but given that neither could have read the 'Official Japanese History', or seem interested in the available intelligence reports, on what grounds they did so seem unclear. How is the bravery shown in Papua New Guinea actually diminished by the fact that Japan had no obvious plans to invade Australia? The horrendous conditions under which Australian troops fought, their courage and their achievements are not lessened by a lack of an obvious Japanese invasion plan at the time. The only thing lessened is cherished nationalistic *folklore*.

My reflection on how we choose to remember was stirred after a trip to Northern Ireland, where I found myself in Derry. This famous fort is the only completely walled city in the British Isles. Derry, or Londonderry, is a grim, gritty and fascinating city. Throughout the Catholic area of the town, known as the Bogside, murals and memorials abound. Plaques commemorating IRA prisoners who endured the dreaded H-Blocks and a stark memorial to civil rights marchers shot dead by British paratroopers during a Catholic civil rights march in 1972 are full of potent nationalist symbolism and loss. The legendary graphic murals that are emblazoned across numerous walls depict violent riot scenes, political messages, and hopes for peace. The various messages from these murals — messages of peace, death, hostility and propaganda — reflect interpretations of historical events, sacrifice and resistance. The same heady mixture is

reflected in the Loyalist (Protestant) areas, where murals make use of the same themes only from the opposite point on the ideological compass.

Within the city walls of Derry there is a World War II memorial for those Irishmen from the north who served in the British army. It is an extraordinary statue, as it depicts a soldier bayoneting an invisible enemy beneath his boots as he moves forward upon the enemy position. The gritty determination upon his face is unforgettable, as is the portrait of such an intimate infliction of death. The statue was originally built for the city of Sheffield in England. My guide informed me that the war statue was rejected by the City of Sheffield due to the belief that it was 'too violent'. Derry, apparently without much of a qualm, took the statue as its own. Courage and sacrifice are the most common themes seen in war remembrance statues both here and in the British Isles, yet I cannot recall ever seeing one that depicted a soldier in the



According to Japanese records, while there was some talk of an Australian invasion, the idea was scuttled due to its logistical problems in favour of isolating Australia from the wider Pacific conflict.

In early 1942, in the euphoria of Asia-Pacific victories, some middle-ranking naval officers in Tokyo proposed that Australia should be invaded to forestall it being used as a base for an Allied counter-offensive...The plans got no further than some acrimonious discussions [said the historian]. The army dismissed the idea as 'gibberish', knowing that troops sent further south would weaken Japan in China and in Manchuria against a Soviet threat. Not only did the Japanese army condemn the plan, but the navy general staff also deprecated it, unable to spare the million tonnes of shipping the invasion would have consumed.⁵³

Both John Howard and Opposition leader Kim Beazley thought it proper to criticise the claims made

act of killing. At first Sheffield's rejection seemed to make sense, as such a focal point to remembrance and ritualistic ceremony would not be very attractive. This is an aesthetic choice, not a logical one, as it is the duality of death and killing that are actually at the epicentre of the soldier's experience of war.

The act of killing is not central to nationalistic remembrance of war, yet it would seem to be the forgotten aspect of nationalism, war commemoration and remembrance. To use the experiences of soldiers who have endured what most of us have not is often part and parcel of some form of established discourse of Australian nationalism. Nearing his death, Les Kehoe, my great-uncle, cried in anguish over memories of North Africa, Syria and the Kokoda Trail. He spoke not of glory, but of those who did not return, and he seemed to grimace with horror at all the death and violence that must have been flashing across his mind at that stressful time. The memories of all the fear, death and killing obviously remained hauntingly vivid for Les for all those years, and yet apart from a few words I had never heard anything from him about the war.

'The Germans, the Japanese, the English, the Aussies, we were all the same,' he cried. 'What was it all for?'

His haunted eyes betrayed that, just as it was all those years ago, Leslie Kehoe still could not understand the horror and sheer inhumanity we inflict on each other through war, as in the end 'we are all the same'. To remember war without acknowledging the fullest context of the decisions to go to war, and the lifetime of nightmares inflicted on those who were asked to 'endure' the battlefield for the sake of the nation-state, is to allow our sacred myths to become the tools of politics and nationalistic manipulations and sit above serious examination. If this is the case then the preferred themes that are espoused through war remembrance and days of ritualised ceremony, while moving and sometimes poignant, can never paint the entire story and can only serve those who would obscure the sheer horror that is war.

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Saibaba man Tharoor out of race for UN top post

This article first appeared in the *Rationalist International Bulletin* on 3 October 2006.

The Indian Rationalist Association expressed relief as Shashi Tharoor, the controversial Indian candidate for the post of secretary-general of the United Nations, pulled out of the race after South Korea's Ban Ki-Moon won the latest straw poll. Mr Tharoor received three negative votes, one of which was from a permanent Security Council member. The formal election for the secretary-general is due on 9 November.

The rationalists in India reacted strongly against the hasty decision of the Indian government to nominate Tharoor, as he is a Saibaba man [a follower of the guru Sai Baba] and a hardcore propagandist of obscurantism, miracle-belief and all kinds of superstitions. During his career as the UN undersecretary-general for public information, Tharoor raised his voice in the international media in favour of paranormal claims and in praise of god-men and miracle mongers.