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Our Afghan war dead have not died in vain

Tom Lewis³

Critics are responding to the announcement that our troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan, by saying we should never have gone in there, or we have failed in what we have tried to do. Their argument will cause anguish to the relatives of our 40 war dead and to our 257 wounded to date. But these critics are wrong – our struggle has not been in vain, and it has far-reaching effects for the freedom of the many nations who have committed troops.

Consider what would be the case if we had not gone into Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda would still be a choice brand for jihadist-loving terrorists. There would still be homicidal maniacs seeking to fly airliners into the skyscrapers of the West. Others of their kind would be busy planning backpack bombing attacks on trains, exploding their underwear and doing anything else they calculated could maim or kill undefended civilians. Osama bin Laden would still be preaching his perverted brand of Islam. No doubt others would be denouncing the West as evil advocates of free speech and brazen fashions.

Instead, the al-Qaeda brand is a shadow of its former self. When I was serving in Baghdad in 2006 as an Australian Defence Force officer, al-Qaeda was a force to be reckoned with. Along with militant Shia and Sunni extremists, they were busy planting improvised explosive devices, attacking convoys, kidnapping and shooting medical staff from hospitals, dumping bodies in the Tigris, and sewing rumours amongst pressure groups about how it was the fellows down the road who had blown up the mosque rather than al-Qaeda. No chaos was too much, and it took Iraq years to stand up against them. Further, the country now is no longer ruled by a vicious dictator with sociopathic sons.

In Afghanistan, our killed-in-action numbers are down compared with the years of 2009-2011. When we eventually downsize our role and hand security to the Afghan government, that government might not meet Western standards of governance, but at least it would be unlikely to provide a safe haven for fanatics eager to train with rocket launchers and explosives.

Some critics of Australia's defence policies are pacifists. Some are moral cowards who are happy enough to sit back and enjoy the benefits others have brought them through feats of arms. Some love criticising anything the United States does, conveniently forgetting that the freedom to make such criticisms was brought about, in the main, by America's participation in World War II. You rarely hear praise for the thousands of operations United States hospital ships perform, free of charge, in third world countries every year. Critics emerge at the beginning of any conflict demanding that we have an 'exit strategy' before involvement. If they had had their way in World War II, the D-Day landings might never have taken place: "victory by Christmas, or we leave" might well have prevented it. Similar thinking kept us from fighting the emerging militaristic nation of Germany until the inevitable conflict cost the world around 60 million dead – which might well have been less than one-sixth of that if we had gone to war in the mid-1930s rather than 1939.

We had to destroy jihadists' training bases following 9/11. Those of our soldiers who died and who have been wounded are saviours of their country. Our war dead and wounded have most capably served their country's welfare, and we must always show our gratitude for that.

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