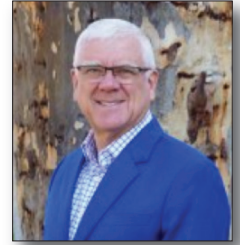


Command relationships: Australian war leadership from Gallipoli to Iraq

A paper based on a presentation to the Institute in Sydney on 28 March 2023 by

Emeritus Professor David Horner AM FASSA

Military historian, Australian National University¹



Against a synopsis of the role of Western political leaders and their top military advisers in the ‘war game’, Horner reviews the actions and decisions of Australia’s political leaders and their top advisers who took Australia into nine wars – from the First World War to Afghanistan and Iraq. From this analysis, he derives ten rules of war leadership and concludes that war leadership continues to be the crucial factor in considering Australia’s experience of war.

Key words: Australia; war leadership; political leaders; military advisers.

Last year, I published a book on Australian war leadership (Horner 2022). War leadership still has continuing relevance, with a major war currently taking place in Ukraine, and strategic uncertainty and mounting threats in the Asia-Pacific region.

War is a deadly serious business – so serious that during the First World War French prime minister and war minister, Georges Clemenceau, famously declared that it was too important to be left to the generals. It might seem quixotic then, perhaps even disrespectful of the human suffering caused by war, for me to give my book about Australian war leadership the title of *The War Game*. In ordinary public discourse, a game is more likely to be associated with an amusing pastime, often played by children, or a sport. But warfare certainly has elements of a game: there are two, sometimes several opponents; there are rules, although these are sometimes broken; there are winners and losers; and it becomes addictive.

Other writers have also recognised the paradox of comparing war to a game. The 18th century satirist, Jonathan Swift, declared, “War! That mad game that the world loves to play” (Heinl 1966: 343). In his books *The Battle of the Books* and *Gulliver’s Travels*, the latter published in 1725, Swift revealed his disdain for the then traditional correlation between war games, military success and political leadership. And writing in 1788, the English politician, Horace Walpole, avowed that: “War is a game, but unfortunately, the cards, counters and fishes [that is, the pieces] suffer by an ill run more than the gamesters” (Heinl 1966: 344).

Australia’s Century of Wars since 1914

If war is so serious, it is startling to note the frequency with which Australia has gone to war. In a span of just under ninety years – from August 1914 to

March 2003 – Australia went to war nine times. Further, in the century between 1914 and 2013, Australian military personnel were on active service during 47 of those years. This from a nation that is largely remote from countries that might pose a major threat. Why then did Australia go to war on these nine occasions? And why have Australian military personnel been on operations for almost half of that time? And what was the government mechanism for deciding to go to war and to manage the wars once they were joined?

In a broad sense, the answers to these questions might be found in Australia’s history as a British colony, in the nation’s insecurity as a thinly-populated country in a vast continent on the edge of Asia, and in the desire of a small country to seek security as part of a protective alliance. But to understand why Australia became involved in specific wars we need to focus on the decisions of the political leaders, and in particular the prime ministers.

The gravest decision the government can make is to commit the nation to war. Other crucial decisions then follow, including determining what forces should be committed, where they should be committed, and whether they should be withdrawn. This paper, therefore, focuses on the key players; but to a lesser extent, it is also about the command and organisational structures that support the players.

So, who were these war leaders? This paper explores the relationships between some of the most dominant political leaders in Australian history – Billy Hughes, Robert Menzies, John Curtin, Harold Holt, John Gorton, Bob Hawke and John Howard – and their top military commanders, including William Birdwood, John Monash, Brudenell White, Thomas Blamey, Vernon Sturdee, Douglas MacArthur, Sydney Rowell, Frederick Scherger, John Wilton, Peter Gration and Peter Cosgrove.

In calling my book *The War Game*, I wanted to draw attention not just to the frequency of Australia’s wars,

¹Email: david.horner@anu.edu.au

but to the constant features of how Australia has gone to war. In each war the players have been the same – the prime ministers, their senior ministers, their military (and sometimes civilian) advisers and, because Australia has always fought as part of an allied coalition, the political and military leaders of Great Britain and the United States. The issues have also been constant, primarily the need to respond to the imperatives of being a member of an alliance, whether it be the British Empire or the United States alliance. Further, all Australia's wars have involved commitments far from home, except in the case of the Pacific War, which began at some distance from Australia but was soon on the nation's doorstep.

Political Leaders and their Top Military Advisers

In a democracy, war leadership involves the interaction between the political leaders and their top military advisers. Despite the arguments presented by others such as in Huntington (1957), there is no perfect model for the civil-military relationship.

During the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln famously wrote to the Union Army's General Ulysses Grant: "The particulars of your plans I neither know nor seek to know. You are vigilant and self-reliant; and, pleased with this, I wish not to obtrude any constraints or restraints upon you ... If there is anything wanting which is within my power to give, do not fail to let me know it." (Catton 1970: 177)

Similarly, in the Second World War, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, often praised as an outstanding war leader, drove his military advisers to distraction, but in the end he was loath to over-rule them. As an activist, hands-on leader, he was keen to visit his troops on the battlefield.

Much insight into war leadership is provided by the biographies of the famous leaders. By one count, there are more than 60 biographies of Churchill, and at least 15 books on Australia's Second World War Prime Minister, John Curtin.

Another insight into war leadership is found in the memoirs of key players, one example being the memoirs of Maurice Hankey, Secretary of the British War Cabinet in the First World War (Hankey 1961).

There are, however, few general histories of war leadership, with most books instead taking a case study approach. The British historian Andrew Roberts examines the cases of Napoleon Bonaparte, Horatio Nelson, Churchill, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, General George Marshall, Charles de Gaulle, General Dwight Eisenhower and Margaret Thatcher (Roberts 2019).

The American historian Eliot Cohen focuses on Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Churchill, and Israeli prime minister David Ben Gurion (Cohen 2002). He also discusses the relationship between President Lyndon Johnson and his chiefs of staff during the Vietnam War, and comes to some instructive conclusions about the nature of war leadership.

In a book called *The Challenges of High Command: The British Experience*, Professor Sheffield explains that high command, is "characterised by interaction between military commanders and their political superiors", noting that while "A divisional commander on the Somme in 1916 was not a high commander; his equivalent in Bosnia in 1997 most definitely would be" (Sheffield and Till 2003). The book is about senior military commanders, not political leaders. Indeed, there are quite a large number of books about the challenges of military high command, and numerous biographies of such commanders. Considering the problems at the civil-military interface, Sheffield wrote that "Politicians and military commanders often have different agendas", a fact that Winston Churchill observed, commenting in 1916 that: "You cannot combine [parliamentary] politics and war. Politics requires popularity, and the direction of war means inevitable unpopularity." (Sheffield and Till 2003: 2)

Australia's War Leaders

The leaders I have mentioned were principal players in their country's wars. Often, they were 'larger-than-life' figures – people with big egos – or at least a strong belief in their own judgement and destiny. They were required to make momentous decisions that might decide the survival of their country.

By contrast, Australia's war leaders have been on a different level to these historical examples. Australia has always gone to war as a junior partner in an allied coalition. Its leaders had little scope to influence allied strategy and their decisions were not likely to affect the outcome of the war. The main decisions of Australia's war leaders have been to decide whether Australia should go to war, and the level of commitment to the war. But in the cases of both the major world figures and Australia's less-Olympian war leaders, the issues of civil-military relations remain the same. One of them is the imperative for political leaders to select military commanders in whom they have confidence, and to dismiss commanders if they feel it necessary.

The prime ministers discussed in this paper were all civilians, and indeed only one of them, John Gorton, had even seen active service, in his case as fighter pilot in the Second World War. Prime ministers do not naturally have any great expertise in military matters. Only one of the prime ministers had previously been a defence minister when first taking up their office.

Joseph Cook, prime minister on the outbreak of the First World War, had been defence minister in 1909-1910, but is "best remembered for his opposition to the purchase of the River Class destroyers – so-called because the ships bore the names of inland waterways – because he mistakenly thought they could be used only in rivers" (Connor *et al.* 2015: 117). Gorton was the first to admit that he was "no trained strategist nor a trained tactician". The First World War prime minister, William Morris (Billy) Hughes, a lawyer,

declared that he was “an Attorney-General not a Major-General”.

The prime ministers and their defence ministers therefore needed to rely on the chiefs of the armed forces for advice about the availability and capabilities of military forces. Service chiefs fulfil two roles: they are the government’s principal military advisers; and they have an executive role to implement the government’s decisions. It falls to them to deploy the forces efficiently, to ensure they are trained to the best possible level, and to make sure that they are employed properly to achieve the government’s goals. The military chiefs achieve their second role through the command structure. When forces are deployed overseas they generally have a commander who reports back to the Australian Government and ensures that the government’s policies are followed. Hence, political leaders have a critical role in selecting their principal military advisers and commanders.

War leadership therefore involves tension between the two parties, the civil and the military, who often come from different backgrounds. One is based on compromise, consensus and public acceptance; the other is based on discipline, obedience and clear orders. In a democracy there is no question about who is in charge: it is the civilian political leaders. But the military leaders have the professional military expertise. At times, military leaders might find themselves being ordered to carry out directions that they believe to be against the national interest. It is often argued that in those circumstances military leaders are left with two alternatives: either to obey the government or to resign.

However, there is a contrary argument: so long as the government’s direction is lawful, a military chief should not resign, because in doing so they would enter the political sphere, which the military is not permitted to do.

Lieutenant General Sir Sydney Rowell, Australian chief of the general staff from 1950 to 1954, wrote in his memoirs that when faced with an unpalatable decision, a chief might consider threatening to resign. But he concluded that “loose talk of threatening to resign is twaddle; to take the issue to the point of no return merely leads to the protester being replaced by someone more pliable” (Rowell 1974: 196).

First World War

Let me now quickly run through my nine wars. In the First World War, Australia had three war leaders. Joseph Cook was prime minister for the first six weeks of the war – a crucial time. He did not commit Australia to the war – it was assumed that because Britain was at war the dominions of the empire were at war also. But Cook and his government decided to raise and send the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) overseas to fight with Britain, and he appointed the AIF’s first commander, Major General William Bridges.

The next prime minister, Andrew Fisher, agreed to expand Australia’s war commitment but it was a measure of the limitations on his capacity to manage the war that the Australian government did not find out that its troops had landed at Gallipoli until a few days after the landing. His defence minister, George Pearce, would hold the position for the remainder of the war and beyond.

After about a year as prime minister, Fisher handed over to Billy Hughes, who was Australia’s war leader for the next three years. By this time, Bridges had been killed and an officer of the British Indian Army, Sir William Birdwood, had taken over as commander of the AIF. Hughes dealt with three crucial issues. He sought to gain an input into imperial decision making through the Imperial War Cabinet. He conducted two unsuccessful referenda to introduce conscription, and in so doing split the Labor Party. And he confirmed General Monash as the commander of the Australian Corps to succeed General Birdwood.

Second World War

Robert Menzies was the prime minister on the outbreak of the Second World War. He set up the War Cabinet and later the Advisory War Council to help manage the war effort. The influential civil servant, Frederick Shedden, was secretary of both bodies and became the government’s principal adviser on strategic and defence issues. Menzies and his government made numerous critical decisions – to place Royal Australian Navy ships under British Admiralty control, to raise a second AIF for service overseas, to appoint the commander of the AIF, General Thomas Blamey, to take part in the Empire Air Training Scheme, to send the 7th Division to the Middle East, to send two brigades of the 8th Division to Malaya, and to commit Australian forces to the Greek campaign.

Arthur Fadden succeeded Menzies as prime minister, but before then, as acting prime minister, he made several important decisions about the defence of Australia. As prime minister, he confirmed the Menzies government’s decision to insist on the withdrawal of Australian troops from Tobruk.

The government was advised by the chiefs of staff of the three services. During 1940 and 1941, the chief of the air staff was a British officer, and a British officer was chief of naval staff for the entire war. The chief of the general staff, Lieutenant General Vernon Sturdee, was an Australian and carried a special responsibility.

For the purposes of understanding Australian war leadership, the Second World War can be seen as two wars – the European War, which began in 1939, and the Pacific War, which began in December 1941. John Curtin was prime minister when Japan attacked in December 1941. With Australia under threat of invasion, he faced most challenging tasks as war leader. His war leadership was shared with General

Douglas MacArthur, the American commander-in-chief of the Southwest Pacific Area. This was an abrogation of Australian sovereignty, but in the emergency, there was little alternative. General Blamey, commander-in-chief of the Australian Army sought to ensure that the government received advice from an Australian officer.

Under Curtin, in October 1943, Australia re-structured its war effort. Gradually Australia's military commitment was wound back, but troops were committed to fighting in New Guinea, Bougainville and Borneo to ensure Australia had a seat at the peace table.

Korean War, Malayan Emergency, Confrontasi and Vietnam War

Menzies was back as prime minister when Australia committed forces to the Korean War in 1950 and also aircraft to the Malayan Emergency the same year. War leadership now had a new dynamic. Australia was no longer involved in an existential war, but military forces were still serving on operations. Unlike the First and Second World Wars, the government now had some discretion as to whether Australia should be involved in the wars of the 1950s and 1960s.

The whole issue of Australia's involvement became one of careful calibration. Australia supported Britain in dealing with Indonesia's confrontation with Malaysia. But the commitment to the Vietnam War was highly contentious. Of the nine wars discussed herein, Menzies took Australia into five of them. Prime Minister Harold Holt, who succeeded Menzies in 1966, increased Australia's commitment, but his successor, John Gorton (after the short prime ministership of John McEwen) had to deal with the problem of how to withdraw from Vietnam. This was eventually achieved under the prime ministership of William McMahon.

The Vietnam War had many lessons for the process of war leadership. In the Second World War, Menzies established a War Cabinet. For the Vietnam War and the Indonesian Confrontation he followed a similar practice and established a Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee of Cabinet.

The Menzies government was not keen to hear from its foreign policy advisers about whether it was wise to contribute to the war. At the same time, its senior military advisers, Air Chief Marshal Sir Frederick Scherger and General Sir John Wilton, were keen for Australia to make the commitment. Whereas in the past military advice had been provided by the chiefs of staff of the services, now there was a separate chairman of the chiefs of staff committee. But the service chiefs still had a major role in providing advice.

The Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq Wars

The next war leader was Prime Minister Bob Hawke in the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Hawke did not establish a formal cabinet committee, but a small group of ministers approved the commitment to the maritime

interception force in August 1990 and the commitment to the Gulf War in February 1991. This was the first war for the Australian Defence Force. Military advice was now provided by the chief of the defence force, in this case General Peter Gration.

John Howard was prime minister for the commitment to the war in Afghanistan in 2001 and to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Howard had a finely developed mechanism for managing these two commitments. He had a National Security Committee of Cabinet and received his advice from the chief of the defence force, General Peter Cosgrove. The Australian Defence Force had a new command structure whereby military operations were under the direct control of a commander of joint operations. In my view, the management of Australia's commitment to the invasion of Iraq was handled quite brilliantly. However, Howard never sought contrary advice from anywhere in the bureaucracy, and this leaves open the important question whether the Australian commitment was wise and could be justified, even though it might have been managed well.

Political Leaders and Conduct of Operations

An interesting issue is the extent to which political leaders should become involved in the conduct of operations. They need to appoint commanders in whom they have confidence, but ultimately the political leaders are responsible to ensure that the operations achieve what the government intended. Many political leaders believed they needed to visit the troops in the field, both to gain an understanding of the conditions in which the troops were operating, and to demonstrate their personal responsibility. Hence, Billy Hughes visited the Western Front in 1916 and 1918, emphasising to Monash in September 1918 that the troops needed to be given a break from operations.

Menzies visited the troops in Libya in February 1941 towards the end of their successful campaign. But Curtin never visited soldiers in the field, not even in Australia, let alone on operations. Menzies failed to visit South Korea but senior ministers did. Menzies briefly visited units in Malaya towards the end of the Malayan Emergency. Harold Holt, and John Gorton made a visit to the troops in South Vietnam a high priority early in their prime ministership. Holt also visited the troops on operations in Borneo. Considering the nature of Australia's commitment to the 1991 Gulf War it was not easy for Hawke to visit the ships, but defence minister Robert Ray did. John Howard visited the troops in the Gulf region as soon as the invasion of Iraq was completed.

Rules of War Leadership

For a century, then, Australia's leaders have been engaged in the war game. And just as a game has rules, there are fundamental rules for effective war leadership.

First Rule

The first rule is that the war leader's most important decision is whether to commit the nation to war. In his book about decision-making during the 1991 Gulf War, the decorated American journalist, Bob Woodward, wrote: "The decision to go to war is one that defines a nation, both to the world and, perhaps more importantly, to itself. There is no more serious business for a national government, no more accurate measure of national leadership" (Woodward 1991: 34). In the First World War and to a certain extent in the Second World War this decision was taken out of the hands of the Australian government.

In the midst of the Second World War, the Menzies government had to decide whether to approve the campaign in Greece. But the decisions to commit forces to the subsequent wars, from Korea to Iraq, became increasingly controversial, raising questions about the process, and whether legislation should be introduced to ensure that these decisions are taken by the parliament, rather than the executive government. What is clear is that the outcome is likely to lead to unintended consequences.

Second Rule

The second rule for war leaders is to determine the level and nature of the commitment. In the First World War this decision was actually taken before the formal outbreak of the war. The Menzies government was more cautious about this in 1939. The decisions in the Vietnam War were made incrementally. But during all the wars from Korea to Iraq, the Australian government tried to keep the commitment as small as possible while reaping the benefits of being seen to support the alliances with Britain and the United States.

Third Rule

The third rule is that war leaders are not the source of all wisdom. Obviously, expert military advice is important, but so too is the advice of senior ministers, with their specific responsibilities. In the First World War, the cabinet was relatively small, and the Australian prime minister did not establish a war cabinet. By contrast, at the beginning of the Second World War, Menzies established a war cabinet to which the service chiefs were regularly invited. The Advisory War Council, formed for political reasons, became a source of further advice. Curtin's Prime Minister's War Conference was formed because of the special position of General Douglas MacArthur.

When Menzies formed the National Security Resources Board in 1950, he was building on the Second World War experience. More importantly, in 1963, he established the Foreign Affairs and Defence (FAD) Committee of Cabinet in the lead-up to the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, Gorton disregarded the FAD Committee, to the detriment of good policy-making. Hawke did not have a formal committee, but

used an informal group of ministers. The Howard government had a National Security Committee of Cabinet.

Governments have always established formal structures for the provision of military advice. In the First World War these structures included the Defence Council, which was rarely used, and the Naval and Military Boards. In the Second World War through to the Vietnam War, advice was provided by the Defence Committee (generally the service chiefs and senior public servants) and the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

By the time of the Gulf War, military advice had been focused more closely in the person of the chief of the defence force (CDF), although he was advised by the Augmented Chiefs of Staff Committee. This arrangement continued to evolve, and by 2001, the National Security Committee was advised by the Secretaries Committee on National Security, although the CDF still had the prime role as military adviser.

Fourth Rule

The important role of advisers leads to the fourth rule for war leaders, namely the imperative to select military commanders in whom the government has confidence. These include not only the service chiefs, who become the government's principal military advisers, but also the commanders of the forces deployed overseas, who are responsible for ensuring that the forces are employed in accordance with the government's policy. In the First World War, General Birdwood, an officer of the British Indian Army, selected himself to command the AIF, although Prime Minister Hughes was involved in the later decision to retain Monash as commander of the Australian Corps.

In the Second World War, the government selected several British officers as service chiefs, but made a major decision in appointing Blamey to command the 2nd AIF. From 1942 to 1945, the government's principal military adviser was an American general, Douglas MacArthur.

In the Vietnam War, the government gave much consideration to the appointment of the chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, but was not closely involved in selecting the successive commanders of the Australian Force Vietnam. In later wars, the commanders in the field were largely selected by the service chiefs and approved by the defence ministers. In the Gulf War, Admiral Doolan commanded the naval force by virtue of his role as maritime commander.

Fifth Rule

The fifth rule is to ensure that the operations are conducted in accordance with the government's policy. There is one view that the government should give the military its orders and allow them to carry them out. But there is another view that the political leaders need to take a more 'hands-on' approach. In 1918, Prime Minister Billy Hughes intervened to ensure that troops

were given leave or rest from operations. In 1945, the acting minister for the army, Senator James Fraser, visited the operational areas in New Guinea and Bougainville to check on possible equipment shortages. In Vietnam, the government largely left the conduct of operations in the hands of the military commanders until Malcolm Fraser, as defence minister, took a more active approach.

It is, of course, the field commander's prime responsibility to ensure that operations are in accordance with Australia's best interests. For that reason, Blamey fought, with the government's support, to withdraw his troops from Tobruk, and on Blamey's advice, the Curtin Government stopped the 6th Division taking part in the invasion of Java. Wilton was keenly aware of this responsibility during the Vietnam War.

In the invasion of Iraq, Brigadier McNarn prevented the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Hornets from conducting certain missions that were not in accordance with government policy. A fundamental of effective war leadership is ensuring that the government's wishes are followed on the battlefield.

Sixth Rule

The sixth rule is the importance of trying to gain access to allied strategic decision-making. It took until 1918 before Hughes fully appreciated this requirement. Menzies and Curtin struggled with this issue in the Second World War, and it persisted in the later wars. In the invasion of Iraq, the Australians detected that the plans for the subsequent post-invasion phase were deficient, but were unable to change them. The lesson for Australia is to remain constantly vigilant, and a prime task for war leaders is to manage Australia's role in the alliance.

Seventh Rule

The seventh rule is the need to deal with the political arena. An effective war leader must manage the politics successfully. Hughes split his own party over conscription, believing that it was necessary to achieve the government's war aims. With the assistance of John Curtin, Menzies introduced the Advisory War Council which largely nullified the threat from the Opposition, but nonetheless failed to manage the politics of his own party in 1941. It is just as important to deal with the politics within the party as to deal with the Opposition. Hawke understood this as he sought to deal with his party critics in the Gulf War. Howard managed the Coalition's politicians superbly and gave the Opposition little capacity to manoeuvre in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq.

Eighth Rule

The eighth rule is to ensure that the country has its own intelligence-gathering capacity. A fundamental requirement for good decision-making is information and intelligence. In the First World War, Australia had

little ability to make its own judgements about the world situation. In the Second World War, Australia started to develop its own diplomatic services and appointed representatives to several countries, including Japan and the United States. Australia also started to establish its own strategic intelligence gathering capabilities, but these were limited. In the Vietnam War, the government was not made aware of, or ignored, United States reports indicating that the allies were unlikely to prevent a Communist victory. Before the Iraq War, Australia's intelligence agencies made assessments that appeared at variance with those of their allies.

So, the lesson is not just the need to have effective diplomatic and intelligence agencies, but also for the government to listen to them. The Australian Defence official, Rod Barton, who was at the coalface of intelligence collection in Iraq, wrote: "One thing my intelligence career has taught me is that, with a few exceptions, politicians only take professional advice when it supports their policies, and even then, only pick the bits that suit them" (Barton 2021: 285).

Ninth Rule

The ninth rule is the need to manage the media. Hughes did this through the ruthless use of regulations to ban newspapers. Menzies appointed a director-general of information, Sir Keith Murdoch, father of Rupert; but Curtin ran up against the restrictions General MacArthur imposed on the release of information. Hawke and Howard gave much attention to the management of media during the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq.

Tenth Rule

The tenth rule is that war leadership will always take place in an environment of uncertainty. Intelligence assessments can usually determine an enemy's or potential enemy's capabilities, but they are less certain about actual intentions. The Australian government spent much effort from September 1939 to late 1941 trying to discern Japan's intentions. Many of the government's decisions about force deployment in the 1950s and the first half of 1960s were made against the uncertainty of how the strategic situation was going to develop in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

It is all very well to develop lists of rules. It is another thing to ensure that prime ministers even think about these issues until they are presented with the situation.

Field Marshal Sir William Robertson, the chief of the Imperial General Staff from 1916 until he was forced to resign after a dispute with Prime Minister Lloyd George in February 1918, commented that in "all trades and professions the man who aims at taking the lead knows that he must first learn the business he purposes to follow ... Only in the business of war – the most difficult

of all – is no special training or study demanded from those charged, and paid for, its management” (Tsouras 1992: 77).

If a National Security Committee of Cabinet exists in peacetime and, with the military advisers present, deals frequently with security and defence issues, its members are likely to develop some understanding of problems likely to be faced in a deteriorating strategic situation. It would be even better if the political leaders had some understanding of how their predecessors handled these issues in the past. Australia’s experience of war leadership over more than a century provides a resource and a guide for developing an understanding of how the nation and its leaders might face future challenges.

Many of the lessons drawn from the past century are still relevant today. The failure of the United States (US) in Iraq, brought out in Thomas Ricks’ book *Fiasco* (Ricks 2006), should lead to at least two vital conclusions: that the US process for going to war was deeply flawed and Australia would be wise to treat any US plan for war with deep suspicion; and Australia should not smugly assume that it might not display the same faulty process in the future.

Few countries celebrate their military history with as much enthusiasm as Australia. Most Australians possess at least a vague knowledge of the landing at Gallipoli in 1915 and the fighting on the Kokoda Trail in 1942. The personal experience of war continues to hold a fascination. But the big challenge is to understand why Australia was involved in its wars, and how the Australian government went about managing them. Ultimately these decisions are about war strategy. This might seem to be an esoteric matter, but if governments get the strategy wrong, the cost is borne by soldiers on the battlefield, their families, the nation’s treasury and its reputation.

War leadership continues to be the crucial factor in considering Australia’s experience of war. As Horace Walpole reminds us, in the game of war the lives of the nation’s sailors, soldiers and air men and women are in the hands of ‘the gamesters’ – that is, the political leaders and their advisers.

The Author: Emeritus Professor David Horner, a graduate of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, served for 25 years in the Australian Regular Army, including active service in South Vietnam. He joined the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, Canberra, in 1990 where his research interests focus on Australian defence history. He edited the Army History Series from 1994 to 2012. He also led the Australian Army’s Land Warfare Studies Centre from 1998 to 2002. In 2015, he was elected a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (FASSA), was awarded the United Kingdom Intelligence Book of the Year Prize, and was the joint winner of the Prime Minister’s Literary

Award for Australian History for his book *The Spy Catchers: The Official History of ASIO, 1949-1963* (Horner 2014). He was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2009. [Photo of Professor Horner: Australian National University]

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