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VIETNAM : COMMITMENT OF AUSTRALIAN TROOPS

First reaction to the announcement of the commitment of the Australian battalion in Vietnam was tentative, but generally supported the government's action. Exceptions were The Australian, which carried an emotional and not very accurate editorial (written by Douglas Brass) characterising it as "a reckless decision...which this nation may live to regret" and the Brisbane Courier Mail which, while acknowledging a duty to support the government in such a grave decision, was unhappy about most aspects of the war in Vietnam and Australia's commitment in it. Support for the decision grew during the week but there was little concern at some of the implications. Supporters frequently described the decision in terms such as "inevitable" (S.M.H. and Sun Herald) "an inescapable obligation" (Age), as "a commitment which cannot and must not be avoided" (Mercury), "logical and consistent outcome of our vocal support of the U.S." (Adelaide News), "shows that Australia recognises its obligations as a Pacific Power" (Bulletin). But there were references to the challenge that the commitment made to our defence capabilities (S.M.H., Age, Canberra Times) and the fact that we might be involved in a long and unpleasant war. The Daily Mirror finally came out in opposition to the decision.

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE

The parliamentary debate stimulated further comment. The S.M.H., Canberra Times and Age, while paying generous tribute to Mr. Calwell's eloquent speech, felt that he had not struck down the Government's case. They stressed that Mr. Calwell had neglected the need to demonstrate loyalty to the United States, and the fact that the other side is not prepared to negotiate. The Canberra Times felt that the weakness in the Government's case was a failure to answer the charge that it was dangerously dispersing Australia's meagre military resources. The Melbourne Herald felt that while few could have any enthusiasm for this war, the need to stop communist expansion was paramount.

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC REVOLUTION

There was little enthusiasm for the U.S. intervention in the revolution in the Dominican Republic. The S.M.H. observed that it would take more than the intervention of U.S. marines to create order out of the social chaos in the Republic. The Australian described the U.S. action as "ham-fisted" and probably counter-productive. The Canberra Times understood U.S. desires to avoid the appearance of another Cuba in Latin America, but was apprehensive about the precedent created by such intervention. The Advertiser thought that it might have adverse effects on U.S. relations with the rest of Latin America. The Mercury felt that the U.S. would have to learn to live with leftist governments in this region.

THE RANN OF KUTCH DISPUTE

Concern was expressed over the deterioration in relations between India and Pakistan of which the Rann of Kutch dispute was seen as a symptom. The Advertiser and Australian were inclined to place more of the blame for the dispute on Pakistan. The S.M.H. welcomed news of talks to arrange a ceasefire. The Australian felt that Mr. Hasluck should call at New Delhi and Karachi on his way home from London and implied that Australia should "make a positive contribution" to a solution of this dispute.

PAPUA/NEW GUINEA : THE U.N. VISITING MISSION

The West Australian and Adelaide Advertiser welcomed the sensible attitude of the latest visiting mission on independence for Papua/New Guinea.

INDONESIAN CONFRONTATION

The Age was not surprised by Indonesia's rejection of Japan's attempts to arrange a meeting between the Tunku and Sukarno and, while it did concede that the Indonesian excuse might have a little substance, thought it more likely that it was preparing to make a bid for greater Afro-Asian support.

REFUSAL OF VISAS FOR SOVIET DELEGATION

The S.M.H. strongly criticised government policy which refuses visas to nationals of communist countries whose visit is sponsored by communist organisations.
Australian Archives
A1838/280
3014/10/15/3 PART 1
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The Sydney Morning Herald (30th April) The decision announced by the Prime Minister last night to send Australian troops to fight in Vietnam is a grave and heavy one. It commits Australia, in a much more positive way than the presence of a few Army instructors and a handful of planes, to a hard and bitter struggle which could easily develop into a wider war. Yet no Australian who is conscious of the dangerous position in which his country stands, and the crucial importance to it of the war in Vietnam, can doubt that this is a right and indeed inevitable decision. The dispatch of an Australian infantry battalion has greater importance than the numbers actually involved would suggest. Its real importance lies in the ranging of Australia beside the United States in a demonstration that resistance to Communist aggression is not the concern of any one country but of all free countries. The Australian Government has frequently stressed the significance of the struggle for South Vietnam and has given military and economic aid to the Saigon Government. The dispatch of an infantry battalion therefore does not represent a new Australian attitude to the Vietnamese situation; it follows logically on the help already given. But it must open up a new consideration of Australia's defence capabilities.

The Melbourne Age (30th April) The decision by the Australian Government to send a battalion to South Vietnam is a grave one and commits Australia to a more direct role in this cockpit of war where the conflict for power between Communist China and the West in South-East Asia has been joined. It also extends our military commitments on more fronts in South-East Asia than any other Commonwealth country. We are supporting the British in Malaysia, the Americans in Vietnam, the ruling house in Thailand and we have our own perimeter defences in New Guinea. These are inescapable obligations which fall on us because of our geographical position, our treaty commitments and our friendships. They cannot be sidestepped if we are to give any meaning to our place in ANZUS, SEATO and the Commonwealth of Nations. What remains now is a continuing challenge to increase our defence capacity as rapidly as possible because the front line grows longer and the pressures increase.

The Hobart Mercury (30th April) A battalion of Australian troops is to be sent to South Vietnam for combat duty. Nobody in Australia will welcome this new turn in the war in Asia, but it is a commitment which cannot and must not be evaded. Although the confrontation in Borneo is closer, the fight against Communism in Asia is of far greater importance strategically. If the dam against Communism is broken in Vietnam the whole of the land mass of South and South-East Asia will be exposed to threat. The battle for the long-term security of Australia will be decided on the Asian mainland. While the people will not welcome involvement in Asia and the probability of Australian casualties the obligation must be accepted soberly and firmly. The struggle in Vietnam seems certain to be long and hard, and the longer it takes the heavier Australia's responsibility is likely to become.

The Australian (30th April) The Menzies Government has made a reckless decision on Vietnam which this nation may live to regret. It has decided to send Australian soldiers into a savage, revolutionary war in which the Americans are grievously involved - so that America may shuffle a tiny part of her embarrassment. The decision is wrong, at this time, whichever way we look at it. It is wrong because Australia's contribution has only insignificant military value, because it will be purely a political pawn in a situation for which Australia has no responsibility whatsoever. It is wrong because until now the Australian people have been told - and rightly - that this country's military commitment to the defence of Malaysia against looming Indonesian aggression is as much as, if not more than, the nation can support. It is wrong because it deliberately and coldly runs counter to the mounting wave of international anxiety about the shape of the Vietnam war and the justification and peril of America's military escalation. Australia has lined up her generations against the hatred and contempt of resurgent
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Asian peoples—without adding one iota of confidence or strength to the tragically embroiled American nation. It could be that our historians will recall this day with tears.

The Adelaide Advertiser (30th April) The Prime Minister will undoubtedly carry the country with him in his deeply considered announcement that an Australian battalion is to be sent to Vietnam. It is the strongest possible reminder that the alliances contracted by this country impose demands as well as affording security...if we needed finally to convince ourselves that our own security is involved in this war, we have now done it. We have made the necessary commitment. But the reason for the Government’s decision obviously goes beyond that. The Prime Minister’s assertion that we, too, regard the war in Vietnam as part of a Communist Chinese threat against the whole region of South-East Asia may be an over-simplification. But essentially is is true that this is the greater danger that we face, and Sir Robert Menzies is once more intent on making it quite clear that we accept the United States’ interpretation of what is at stake, support her policies and are prepared to give further proof of it.

The Brisbane Courier Mail (1st May) "...Our Government has made the decision in our name, and that is its duty. The nation now has to support that. Don’t be under any illusion that this is a war for a cause which has world-wide, popular support. It’s not. We are in a war which at this stage is supported with arms only by the United States and Australia. British opinion is mixed...We must realise that in our Vietnam stand we may not get any Commonwealth support. Some Afro-Asian members may even condemn us. For us, the cost will not be light. Brave men will die in jungles without even seeing the other side’s soldiers; many others will be wounded. At home we will have to commit a great deal of our manpower and our economy to the fight...We are also entitled to ask: Just which of South Vietnam’s repeatedly changing governments are we aiding? What will also disturb many Australians is that the Prime Minister did not even inform the Opposition of Cabinet’s decision. Surely this was a matter for a national outlook."

The Sydney Sun Herald (2nd May) The Australian decision to commit a battalion to South Vietnam is likely profoundly to affect our relations with Asia and our standing in the world. Like most fateful decisions, it is bound to be controversial. It will be disliked even by those who approve. It cannot be enjoyed for two reasons. One is that in the Vietnam war the issues are clouded by atrocities on both sides and by the unattractive nature of the Government of each side. Few in Australia can admire the undemocratic Government of South Vietnam or pretend that any of its cliques command full support. The second reason is that the dispatch of even one battalion seriously reduces our own defences...Since America is our ally, our increased contribution to the deteriorating Vietnam struggle is not merely needed but is inevitable. The second complaint, that we are stripping our own defences, is unanswerable except in terms of self-help. With one battalion in Borneo, another in Vietnam, two more needed to reinforce these, and the remaining two still being trained or formed, New Guinea— an obvious diversionary target for Indonesia— is more vulnerable than ever. This does not invalidate our decision. It does mean we need urgently to expand our defence forces.

The Melbourne Herald (4th May) The terms on which an Australian infantry battalion is to serve in South Vietnam will be partly determined by the military role our men are to fill, and to that extent they will probably not be fully disclosed. But it is important that there should be a clear and open directive on who is to give operational orders to our troops. Policy decisions on their employment and welfare must remain under Australian control...With their experience of working together in the South-West Pacific and in Korea, Americans and Australians can co-operate smoothly in Vietnam. The Federal Government should set out the basic terms in a clear and early statement.
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The Australian (5th May) Critics of the Government’s decision to send a combat unit into the Vietnam war can be divided into two broad classes: Those who sympathise with the communist cause, wherever it is manifested, and who love to sow dissension between Australia and her allies; and those who genuinely believe that this latest military venture runs against the policy of enlightened nationalism this country must embrace. The Australian lines itself up with this second group. It believes our long-term interests have been badly served by a politico-military gambit of the Vietnam type at this time. We have already made out our case against the Government’s decision actively to intervene. We hold that it will have only insignificant military value, that it deploys our small forces beyond our clear Malaysian commitment, and that it tends to widen the war at a time when many of our friends are seeking to bring it to negotiation.

The Sydney Daily Mirror (5th May) "...Many Australians will agree with the leader of the Opposition, Mr. Calwell, that our role should have been to support pleas for negotiation. "By its decision," Mr. Calwell said in the House of Representatives yesterday, "the Australian Government has withdrawn from the ranks of negotiators. We have reduced ourselves to impotence in the field of diplomacy." Mr. Calwell said that the US should not be humiliated or forced to withdraw. But he was convinced, and we agree with him, that the dispute in Vietnam must be settled through the United Nations and not by a deepening military commitment."

The Bulletin (4th May) The decision to send the first Royal Australian Regiment to Vietnam has been welcomed throughout Australia, although enthusiasm will be tempered by a heavy heart since Australian casualties in that dirty war are inevitable. But it has been plain to the whole world that South Vietnam is Australia’s front line and that the South Vietnamese have been fighting and dying for many years for what are Australia’s interests as much as their own. Since the loss of that country to the Communists would inevitably be followed by the Communisation of the rest of South-East Asia, Australia has no alternative but to contribute in some significant way to its defence...The commitment of 800 Australians will obviously not turn the tide of the war. It will help South Vietnam, it will help the Americans, but above all it shows that Australia recognises its obligations as a Pacific Power.

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE

The Sydney Morning Herald (5th May) "...Most thinking Australians, will be as disconcerted as the Prime Minister expressed himself by Mr. Calwell’s apparent inability to comprehend that, in the given circumstances, Australia has no practical option. His speech was an excellent debating speech, delivered with force, clarity and emotion, but it was a speech which altogether ignored the situation in which Australia stands to-day. Sir Robert Menzies was able to demolish Mr. Calwell’s whole argument with one succinct phrase - that it was in Australia’s continuing interest to remain a valued ally of the United States...What claim would we have on American help when our hour of need struck if we stood aside from the United States now? That is the crux of the matter in terms of the plainest national self-interest. The outcome of the war in Vietnam will affect Australia far more directly and immediately than the United States and it is therefore logical and proper that Australia should play as full a part as it can in ensuring that the war is not lost and the last practical defence against Communist expansionism breached."

The Melbourne Age (5th May) "...Mr. Calwell wants to negotiate with an enemy which will not negotiate, just as he persistently wants a direct military alliance with Malaysia when Malaysia does not want it. On both fronts, Vietnam and Malaysia, the Labor party seems to want "all care but no responsibility." The Prime Minister spelled out why this new commitment has been made and whether we like it or not we cannot have it both ways. We are committed to the American policy in South Vietnam - and have been for a long time - and cannot withdraw from the first real encounter or side-step the first political test of our integrity as an ally. It may be drawing a long bow to project the idea that Australia
is directly menaced by the Communist pressures in Vietnam. But Vietnam is the point of collision for those who seek the balance of power in South-East Asia and Australia cannot stand aside while others fight the battle. It has been asked why Australia should be first to range itself – in a modest way – alongside the United States in the front line. It could also be asked why Australia should be the last. It would not be to our credit if we were.

The Canberra Times (5th May) "...The Opposition speakers, Mr. Calwell and Dr. Cairns, were most effective when they cast doubt on the whole idea of opposing the revolution in South-East Asia by military action in Vietnam. It would be silly to deny that one result of American policy may simply be to force North Vietnam into the arms of China. The revolution in Vietnam owed very little to Chinese help and, left to himself, Ho Chi-minh would no doubt prefer to maintain his country's independence. But critics who use this argument should in fairness admit that there is no guarantee that the Vietnamese could do this or that they would not themselves become an aggressive force against their neighbours. The parallel with Yugoslavia is very misleading. On the whole the Government made out a good case. The Prime Minister's greatest weakness was a complete failure to answer the charge that by sending one of our five battalions to Vietnam while we are already engaged in the defence of Malaysia we are dangerously scattering our meagre resources. Politically the decision may make good sense; militarily it is a nonsense. The result of trying to meet too many commitments is that Australia is now more than ever dependent on our allies for the defence of our own territory."

The Melbourne Herald (5th May) The Opposition Leader, Mr. Calwell, expressed a deep and widely-shared anxiety about the trend of events in Asia...Nobody has any flag-waving enthusiasm for this war. The Prime Minister's references to Communist breaches of international law, and to the request by the South Vietnam Government for our aid, were not impressive arguments for Australian policy. Agreements have been ignored and cruelty is used by both sides in Vietnam. The succession of shaky juntas that have held office in Saigon can hardly claim to be agents of democracy with a strong direct claim to our support. But when all this has been said, the case for trying to halt Communism's drive into South-East Asia must come uppermost...Australia has made a grave choice in Vietnam. But she stands with a pledged ally with whom our whole future is tied up.

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: REVOLUTION

The Sydney Morning Herald (4th May) "...To enforce a cease-fire – even with the substantial US forces now in the Dominican Republic – and to procure negotiations between the combatants, under the auspices of the Organisation of American States, is not proving easy. But it is likely to be child's play compared with the task of persuading the Dominican society, with its extremes of wealth and poverty, to rally behind the strong Government needed to clear up the social and economic mess inherited from the 32-year-old dictatorial regime of Trujillo...Here is the kind of chaotic situation in which the Castroist takeover which President Johnson fears is easiest. It will take more than the intervention of US Marines to remove it."

The Australian (4th May) "...The Americans are now fighting to stop the return of the deposed president, Dr. Bosch, who only two years ago was warmly received in Washington by the late President Kennedy. Statements at the time of his election unequivocally showed Dr. Bosch's commitment to the West. Now, however, he is attempting a comeback with the help of communist supporters, and the US has changed its attitude. By sending in marines without first consulting the Organisation of American States, President Johnson is feeding Latin-America's ever present fear of the United States' heavy-handed, big power diplomacy, and this could lead to the very situation the US is seeking to prevent. This ham-fisted action could neutralise the massive diplomatic effort the US has poured into Latin-America to keep Castro and communism cooped up in Cuba."