



ARTICLE / POLITICS

The atrocity exhibition

By Jeff Sparrow
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(0 Comments)

A US INFANTRY COMPANY JUST CAME THROUGH HERE.

IF YOU HAD BEEN VIETNAMESE—

We might have burned your house

We might have shot your dog

We might have shot you ...

We might have raped your wife and daughter

We might have turned you over to your government for torture

We might have taken souvenirs from your property

We might have shot things up a bit ...

We might have done ALL these things to you and your whole

TOWN

If it doesn't bother you that American soldiers do these things every day to the Vietnamese simply because they are 'gooks', then picture yourself as one of the silent VICTIMS.

Members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War handed out a leaflet with these words while marching through American communities wearing their old army uniforms, as described in *Kill Anything that Moves*, Nick Turse's book about atrocities in the Vietnam War.

The Australian war crimes detailed in the *Brereton report* differ from those that Turse describes in important ways, not least because they involve a smaller, elite group of soldiers.

Nevertheless, consider the following ghastly passage:

Dr Crompvoets was told that, after squirts [ie people thought to be Taliban observers] were 'dealt' with, Special Forces would then cordon off a whole village, taking men and boys to guesthouses, which are typically on the edge of a village. There they would be tied up and tortured by Special Forces, sometimes for days. When the Special Forces left, the men and boys would be found dead: shot in the head or blindfolded and with throats slit.

The VVAW leaflet offers a demonstration of how we should frame such atrocities – crimes committed against the Afghan people in their own homes and villages by foreign soldiers occupying their country since 2001.

If it's difficult for Australians to see the war in those terms, that might be because this nation joined the invasion with an extraordinary bout of national self-congratulation.

'Some people are running around the country saying they don't know why

Australians are going to war,' wrote Piers Akerman in the *Telegraph*, 'so let me make a few things clear. Australian military forces are joining a long-overdue fight against evil. Is that too difficult to understand?'

It wasn't just conservatives who presented the invasion as evidence of Australia's innate goodness. Back in 2001, a certain type of liberal feminist – exemplified by the late Pamela Bone – lauded the war as bringing freedom to the women of Afghanistan. Australians, she said, were too nice: they struggled to grasp that the people we were bombing deserved what they got. 'Can we,' she asked, 'in our niceness, stop telling ourselves they are justified in their hatred of us?'

We could and we did. Now the Brereton Report documents the results.

Mind you, the war's backers abandoned the patently risible rhetoric of liberation fairly quickly. Instead, as the years passed, they shifted a version of the sunk cost fallacy, most commonly expressed in terms of 'staying the course' – a phrase that had entered the political lexicon via the US General Westmoreland, who deployed it to insist on the necessity of an American presence in Vietnam.

The implications of that provenance don't seem to have bothered Australian politicians. As I've documented elsewhere, John Howard starts arguing to 'stay the course' in Afghanistan in 2005 – and thereafter the phrase gets used by [Alexander Downer in 2006](#), [Joel Fitzgibbon in 2007](#), by both [Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott](#), by [Julia Gillard](#), [Air Chief Marshal Houston](#) and scores of other commentators, a list too tedious to document.

In the First World War, soldiers repurposed 'Auld Lang Syne' to sing 'we're here because we're here because we're here because we're here.' The lyric provides a fitting riposte to the 'stay the course' mantra, too.

None of this should imply that the Australian invasion served no purpose. All serious commentators knew perfectly well what the war was about. 'Australia will stay in Afghanistan as long as the Americans want us to,' wrote [Michelle Grattan, a decade or so ago](#). 'Which means as long as the US is there. It is one of those commitments to the alliance. We do it even though the prospects of "victory" are probably bleak.'

The US did not drag Australia into the war. Australian politicians wanted to make a commitment – because they saw that as reinforcing the relationship with Washington central to foreign policy since the Second World War.

As defence analyst Clive Williams put it, around the same time:

The real reason [for Australian participation] is maintaining the close alliance with the US ... Given our real reason for being there, we are more likely to score points with the US if we accept a prominent role, rather than hiding behind someone else's possibly less competent leadership.

You can see in these comments something of the circumstances from which atrocities arose. For the Australian leaders, the war was never about the people of Afghanistan. Rather, the people of Afghanistan were treated as a tablet on which a message to America could be carved.

In his book, Turse describes what the American soldiers in Vietnam adhered to what they called the 'mere-gook rule' – often abbreviated as the 'MGR'. He explains:

This held that all Vietnamese – northern and southern, adults and children, armed enemy and innocent civilians – were little more than animals, who could be killed or abused at will.

The Brereton report documents a similar disregard for Afghan life – not surprisingly, given the normalisation of Islamophobia that accompanied the war on terror. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine an imperial invasion that didn't foster a homicidal racism. You need to feel contempt for locals in order to occupy them – and that occupation then fosters renewed contempt.

Just as the Western nations fighting in Vietnam relied on brutal, blood-soaked allies, the Australian operations in Oruzgan depended on [close co-operation with a notorious warlord](#) infamous for human rights violations.

They also entailed what *The Australian*, no less, labelled 'targeted assassination': [in a piece from 2009](#), the paper described how 'Special Air

Service operatives [had been] authorised to hunt and kill Taliban leaders in an Afghan variation on the Vietnam-era Phoenix Program'.

Back then, I wrote for [New Matilda](#) on how the Phoenix Program had been developed in the 1960s by the CIA with the purpose of organising Vietnamese troops to capture or kill cadre backing the Vietcong's alternative government in South Vietnam. Testimony at the US House Operations Subcommittee in 1974 heard that Phoenix resulted in the deaths of 20,587 Vietnamese civilians – though the *New York Times* independently placed the figure at more like 60,000.

By 1970, as Paul Ham says in *Vietnam: The Australian War*, [Phoenix had degenerated](#) into 'squads of wild-eyed, often drugged, Vietnamese killers roam[ing] the countryside and indiscriminately round[ing] up and tortur[ing] suspects or civilian sympathisers.'

One participant [explained how the program worked](#):

The normal procedure would be to go into a village and just grab someone and say, "Where's Nguyen so-and-so?" Half the time the people were so afraid they would say anything. Then a Phoenix team would take the informant, put a sandbag over his head, poke out two holes so he could see, put commo wire around his neck like a long leash, and walk him through the village and say, 'When we go by Nguyen's house scratch your head.'

Then that night Phoenix would come back, knock on the door, and say, 'April Fool, motherfucker.' Whoever answered the door would get wasted. As far as they were concerned whoever answered was a Communist, including family members.

In the wake of Vietnam, Phoenix became a byword for atrocity, yet the War on Terror revived American interest in the program.

As Mark Moyar from the US Marine Corps University explained in *Joint Force Quarterly*:

In the mid-1990s, the Phoenix program was considered an artifact of historical interest but with little relevance to the contemporary world. [...] A decade later, Iraq and Afghanistan have brought the study of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism back into fashion.

In 2004, the Australian soldier and academic Lieutenant Colonel David Kilcullen [published a paper for the *Small Wars Journal*](#) explaining Phoenix had been 'unfairly maligned'. It was, he argued, essentially a 'civilian aid and development program', backed by largely successful operations intended to destroy the Vietcong's infrastructure in rural areas of South Vietnam. The War on Terror required, he said, a 'global Phoenix Program'.

The echoes of Vietnam in the Brereton report are not, then, coincidental.

In a radio interview in 2010, the Vietnam-era journalist Neil Sheehan discussed what Phoenix meant in the seventies and why its revival in Afghanistan terrified him:

The program got totally out of hand, they never had good intelligence on who was a Viet Cong official. They ended up killing an awful lot of innocent people. ... These assassination programs ... it sounds like a wonderful idea but when you try to apply it in a foreign land when you don't know who is whom and your intelligence is bad it can get out of hand and become a very messy business.

We know now that this lack of intelligence contributed repeatedly to civilian deaths in Afghanistan.

In 2009, for instance, [the *Age* reported](#) on an alleged cover up after Special Forces shot civilians near Tarin Kowt, seemingly after mistaking them for Taliban.

'Australian forces attacked my family they started shootinn them' Afghan

Australian forces attacked my family as they started shooting them, Afghan parliamentarian Haji Abdul Khaliq said.

We asked the governor and police chief who made the investigation. They said that they were Australians (who had fired at the car). They did not give any sign to stop. And my car's windows were not dark. Inside the car was visible ... They didn't even give them a bottle of water and they didn't even take them to hospital.

That same year, the Special Operations Task Group raided a village in southern Uruzgan and killed thirty-year-old Amrullah Khan, his teenage sister, his ten-year-old son, his eleven-year-old and one-year-old nephews, and a two-year-old niece.

We know about that case because the SBS 'Dateline' program interviewed survivors – prompting an investigation which culminated in the director of military prosecutions, Brigadier Lyn McDade, [laying charges](#).

In light of the atrocities revealed in the Brereton report, it's worth remembering the pushback McDade faced. 'She may well be the most dangerous woman in Australia,' [wrote Alan Howe in the Herald-Sun](#). 'Don't dismiss lightly the suggestion that her actions could lead to Australian deaths.'

That piece was entitled 'Hanging out our heroes.'

'If any of these soldiers is convicted of manslaughter,' Howe argued, 'they will have been sacrificed to the political correctness that sees us signatories to deeply flawed international conventions like the Rome Statute on war crimes.'

The charges [were eventually dropped](#), on the extraordinary basis that the accused soldiers possessed no legal duty of care to civilians.

Throughout the war, the ADF and the Australian government deliberately sought to limit media coverage of the conflict. As [the academic Kevin Foster argued](#),

where politicians reacted by micromanaging the release of information and damming the flow of news from Afghanistan, the ADF's response – for the greater part of the war – was to bring as much of the nomination, gathering and production of news about the war in-house, to control the media by taking over its role and functions.

The few reporters able to uncover stories about what was really happening in the country did so at great risk to themselves. Let's not forget [the AFP's pursuit of the ABC journalists responsible for the 'Afghan files' – a series about suspected atrocities](#). For that matter, let's not forget Julian Assange, who in 2010 released the [Afghan War Diary](#) and now faces a lifetime in jail.

But let's also not forget the writers like Howe, who did their utmost to promote the old lie about the inerrant nobility of Australian soldiers, irrespective of what those soldiers might be doing.

Indeed, the crimes detailed in the Brereton Report should focus renewed attention on the role played by the Anzac mythos in facilitating Australian militarism. Ever-intensifying Anzackery has culminated in a bipartisan pledge to spend [a mind-boggling half billion dollars](#) in extending the Australian War Memorial – and now we learn that its chairman, Kerry Stokes, plans to fund the [legal defence of those SAS members accused of war crimes](#).

Interestingly, the report, in its discussion of precedent, touches upon the case of Lieutenant Harry 'Breaker' Morant, executed for shooting civilians during the Boer War. Campaigners are still pushing for a pardon for Morant, [despite his undoubted participation in atrocities](#) – a reflection of just how deeply ingrained Australian militarism has become.

In the weeks to come, we should expect a concerted campaign to minimise, excuse or justify the crimes the Brereton Report exposes. It's critical to push back against it, to ensure that some sort of legal accountability takes place. If we don't, we'll be laying the grounds for future atrocities. But it's even more important to insist on the connection between these atrocities and the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

The war itself was a monstrous crime, a wrong that necessarily gave rise to a myriad of other wrongs.

Right now, the incoming Biden administration is seeking to forestall the troop withdrawal promised by Donald Trump. Trump, of course, cares nothing about the Afghans but the maintenance of the American military occupation will mean

only more tragedy and brutality.

That's not to say that the US and its allies can simply wash their hands of Afghanistan. The crimes now uncovered demand recompense – and not just token payments to the relatives of the dead. The United States has spent more than \$2 trillion on war in Afghanistan; Australia has spent more than \$10 billion. Justice demands a program of reparations on a similar scale.

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