

The Legitimacy of the Australian Military

Martin Luther King Jnr said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter". Yet it is so easy to stay quiet, to retreat from sticking our necks out for fear of being marginalised or ostracised.

But it is not only the big moral imperatives that scare us into silence; more often, we feel too hopeless to speak-up, victims of the world's apathy and indifference, hushed by a profound ethical fatigue from swimming against the tide of what society wilfully accepts, condones and supports. And while Bertrand Russell was spot on when he said:

"the fact that an opinion has been widely held is no evidence whatsoever that it is not utterly absurd" the reality is that we have lost the will to say, "This is not right, this is madness." In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act, but the humbling reality is, that in today's Trump-truth-relativism, many of us are not up for the fight, not up for revolution ... the world can only stomach so much truth.

The institution of the military, of state-sponsored armed services, is one such madness which we wilfully accept and condone; a madness that passes as legitimate and even necessary. In Australia, this institution is known as the 'Australian Defence Force' and anyone who questions it, is reduced to the pejorative of 'Un-Australian'.

While I accept that most people will disagree with my characterisation of the Australian military, I am buoyed by the philosopher Michael Sandal, who asks, "What's Become of Truth?" Sandal challenges us to debate, to disagree and to explore ideas in a civil and open way as an antidote to the accepted opinions that dominate our public discourse. The trouble is, of course, that in a world without ethical signposts, we have lost touch with the truth, the common good and are instead, morally cast adrift and ready to swallow what governments and the powerful shove at us.

The philosopher, Bentham, argued that our social benchmark ought to be the greatest happiness of the greatest number. In my mind, the institution of the military is antithetical to this standard. In fact, the military, at least in Australia, has never even existed to make our nation stronger or safer. Thomas Paine, philosopher and a key inspiration of the American Revolution, argued that our thinking and beliefs are corrupted by governments and those in power to accept the savage idea that our species is our enemy "because the accident of birth gave individuals existence in countries distinguished by different names." In Paine's construct, building military capability is not about security. He's right: **A military does not keep us safe. There is no greater lie perpetrated on humankind. "It is putting the means of destruction for the means of protection" Paine writes. We've been hoodwinked.**

As the philosopher Bertrand Russell writes, "A world whose institutions are based upon hatred and injustice is not one most likely to produce happiness."

In 2017-18, the Australian Defence Force budget was some \$35billion, increasing to \$42billion in 2020-21 and projected to climb to nearly \$60billion in 2020–25. Already our spending, as a share of GDP, is more than most developed economies and inside the top 15 nations on earth, in absolute terms. What's more, the value of projects over the period to 2025–26 is some \$162 billion. **Quite simply, we are not preparing for peace but rather, we are getting ready for war.**

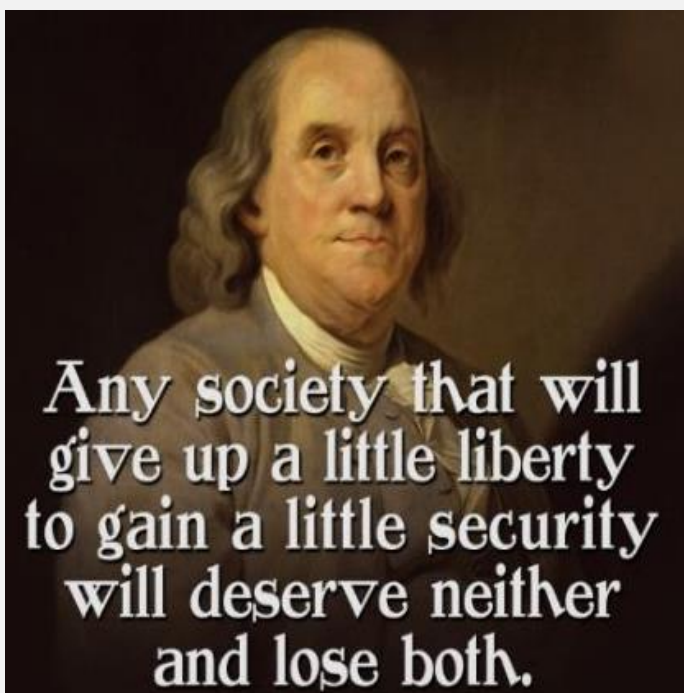
Instead of an inexorable increase in military spending we should be looking for ways to reduce spending. More importantly, we must look for more evolved and progressive ways to ensure our safety and resolve conflicts, rather than settle for the precedent of violence.

In Oliver Stone's film, *JFK*, the character based on Colonel Leroy Prouty, no less than the former Chief of Special Operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President John F. Kennedy, pronounces that the organising principle of any society is for war, that **the authority of the Government over its people resides in its war powers.**

The fact that humans have throughout history spent so much time at war ought to be a warning rather than a paragon to follow. Instead of our military's *raison d'être* being about protecting us, it is more correctly a pretence for power and control. This should be obvious. Paine says, "A bystander not blinded by prejudice nor warped by [self] interest would declare that taxes were not raised to carry on wars, but that wars were raised to carry on taxes." Surely, it is time for a better way, that wars can no longer be allowed to be a "harvest to Governments" (Paine) whilst ruinous to nations.

Benjamin Franklin said that a nation that is willing to sacrifice a little liberty to gain a little security will deserve neither and lose both. While Franklin is often misquoted, his meaning is clear and unequivocal: those who would trade liberty for some ostensible security, deserve neither liberty, nor security.

This applies as strongly today as during the nascent unfolding of the independent American nation - **action in the name of additional security only makes us less safe.** In fact, despite the rhetoric, most Americans believe the action of the US Government makes them less safe and prominent American experts, giving evidence under oath, testified that President Trump's attempts to deliver more security (travel bans, for example), have made Americans less safe on the whole.



Not too long ago, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on an *Ipsos* poll that Australians are more fearful about security threats than most other countries. In the *Herald* piece, Hugh Mackay blames deliberate political tactics for heightening fears in this country. I would go much further and say that government actions are not only deliberate but *intentional*, designed to allow the government authority over its people in a way that increases our willingness to sacrifice our liberty.

We have fallen so far down the rabbit hole that we don't even question the logic of a military anymore. But many people will know that it was no less than US President Eisenhower who warned we should never allow the industrial military complex to gain power: "We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex ... the potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist ... we must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes."

We didn't heed Eisenhower's warning. Chris Hellman, in *The Nation* reported that the United States invests its security dollars mainly in making war rather than security or preventative diplomacy. In Obama's 2012 budget, for example, 85 per cent of 'security' spending went to the military, only 7 per cent went to homeland security and only 8 per cent to what might, generously speaking, be termed non-military international engagement.

It is ironic that to speak out against the madness of the military is today itself regarded as madness. But we must change this narrative. It is no accident that at the start of *JFK*, Oliver Stone quotes Ella Wheeler Wilcox:

"To sin by silence when we should protest makes cowards out of men."

Simply calling for 'cuts' to military spending is painted as the bleeding-heart cries of a tree-hugger, as if one should not try to make the case for additional money to be directed towards education or health or public housing or any other liberal-progressive cause. The problem is, Bertrand Russell wrote, "Those who profit by injustice are in a position to administer rewards and punishments ... the rewards go to those who invent ingenious justifications for inequality, the punishments to those who try to remedy it."

Does it not seem absurd when the Australian government reports that we purchased over \$10billion on weapons and weapon systems from the USA alone? Such news is always trumpeted and accompanied with rhetoric about keeping the world safe - as if peace could somehow be built on the tools of death and destruction and a narrative that sows the seeds of hate. But what a state of affairs when our Prime Minister wants to see the Australian arms industry become one of the world's top ten defence exporters, seeking to boost exports to countries including "the rapidly growing markets in Asia and the Middle East", in particular the United Arab Emirates, a country accused of war crimes. Einstein said you cannot simultaneously prepare for peace and war. But the military has never been about peace. How could it be? Peace is not something you win; peace is not an outcome of violence. Peace is something you 'do', something you choose to practise in each moment; it's a process, not an outcome of war. In fact, as Dr. King said:

"Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars ... hate cannot drive out hate ... hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction."

Simply because the 'defence' industry provides jobs and generates revenue does not make it legitimate; in the same way that we should not legitimise tobacco companies simply because they provide jobs while siphoning off huge revenues and profiting from the suffering of others. Tobacco or war - is there really any moral difference? Let's be clear, I am not criticising the people employed in the armed services, nor is my position that there is some moral failure on their behalf. Rather, this is another leadership failure of successive Australian governments.

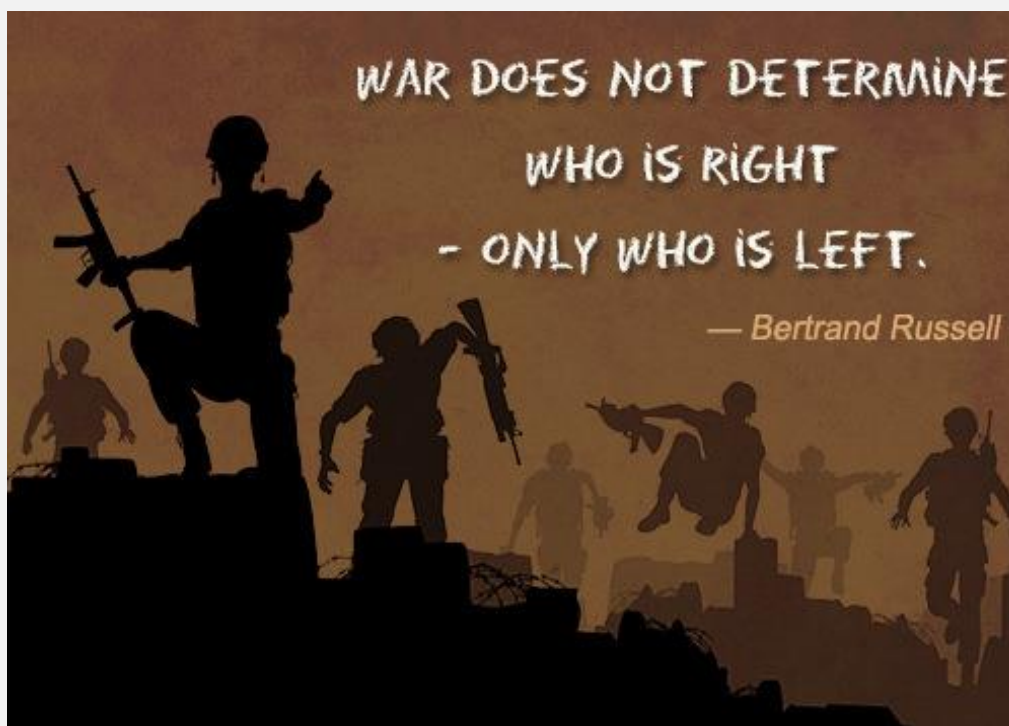
The fact that Prime Ministers Turnbull and Morrison never congratulated the Australians who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 is a disgrace. The wonderful, world-class Australians from the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) are doing extraordinary work and their achievement is something we should all be proud of; daring to imagine a better, safer and more peaceful future. These Australian Prime Ministers, destitute of principle and imagination, robbed our nation of a collective moment of joy.

Dr Stephan Fruhling, (Associate Dean at the Australian National University) has suggested that a nuclear-armed Australia is more likely than ever before:

What the hell are we doing?

- ✚ Trump pulls the US from nuclear treaties and nuclear arsenals expand
- ✚ India is in a nuclear tit-for-tat with Pakistan
- ✚ China now has weapons capable of reaching anywhere in the US
- ✚ The Middle East is a hair-trigger away from all-out conflict

“War is an instrument entirely inefficient toward redressing wrongs; and it multiplies, instead of indemnifying losses.” Thomas Jefferson knew it – it ought to be self-evident - we are in an arms race we cannot win. It’s MAD - Mutually Assured Destruction, indeed!



We all self-censor for fear that we will pay a great price, but this does not diminish our responsibility to speak up. For this reason, I end this piece as I started it, with a challenge from Martin Luther King Jnr: “Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.” So, if this piece resonates with you then share it. If it doesn’t, if you think I am naïve, then tell me, debate and challenge my position, but do it peacefully.

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