

Marching with the war drums

By Bob Gould

Australian intervention in East Timor

Since the crisis in East Timor erupted I have marched in a number of demonstrations, supporting the demand that there should be immediate United Nations military intervention in Timor, led by Australian troops. I have frequently found myself marching alongside an energetic and forceful group of female drummers, some of them called I believe, the *Feral Fingers* and a number of my fellow protesters have laughed at the picture of an old Vietnam antiwar agitator like myself marching to the war drums.

Quite a bit of public controversy has erupted in the past 10 days over Australian military intervention. There is a fairly large and influential “peace camp”, if you can judge by the letter columns of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and some phone in programs on the ABC.

Herald columnist P.P. McGuinness appears to be opposed to the intervention and he ruthlessly ridicules the generation of objectors to the Australian military intervention in Vietnam, people like myself, who he attacks for our support of military intervention in Timor.

I’m a bit conscious of a certain incongruousness myself. Here I am, an overweight middle-aged man, advocating that young regular soldiers should be committed to a dangerous war zone. Nevertheless, while I have certain misgivings about the danger to the lives of those involved in any war, I’ve come to my point of view because of the lack of any immediate practical alternative.

The real alternative to immediate military intervention is the extermination of the East Timorese as a national group, and the physical extermination of many thousands of them. I have never been a pacifist. Members of my family have fought as volunteers in several wars, and my father lost one arm in the First World War. (This experience contributed to a life long hostility to the forces that had thrown him and his fellow volunteers into the First World War. Later in life the thing that my father most celebrated about the First World War was the defeat of conscription in the referendums, in which he claimed that the majority of front line soldiers like himself voted against conscription.)

I spent the most useful part of my adult life, nearly 10 years of it, in the 1960s and 1970s campaigning against Australia’s participation in the war of imperialist intervention in Vietnam, and for the withdrawal of Australian troops from that war.

We who campaigned against the war had no animosity at all to the conscripts and regulars sent by our political masters into that war. We believed that we were campaigning in their interests to get them withdrawn from that war. We were obviously right, and I take none of our opposition to that war back.

One of the paradoxes of life is that, as a bookseller, I have always carried the biggest secondhand collection of books on military matters in Sydney. Many of the people who buy those books are veterans of different wars.

I have been quizzing them recently about what are the real military circumstances that the Australian troops will face in Timor, and what are the prospects of success. While I've been beating the war drum, it's been on the basis that there is some real prospect of success and that it is not a hopeless task, militarily speaking.

I don't have the slightest doubt that both John Howard and Kim Beazley have been getting the best advice they can on these matters. I think we can rely on brutal electoral realpolitik, on the part of Beazley and Howard, that they would not have both energetically pursued the military intervention unless their best professional military intelligence is that it is likely to succeed with minimum casualties amongst Australians.

I dearly hope their intelligence is right. I'm painfully conscious that any war zone is an extremely dangerous place and I advocate sending young regulars into a war zone with the greatest trepidation.

I'm pretty proud of the people of our cynical, sceptical Sydney town. With a minimum amount of organisation, we managed to mobilise about 30,000 people a week ago in support of the East Timorese, as they have also succeeded in doing in Melbourne on several occasions, and likewise all over Australia.

I haven't the slightest doubt that the massive nature of the demonstrations, organised at very short notice, had a certain influence on the decision of the government to proceed with the military intervention.

At these demonstrations I made a point of moving around meeting many old friends, and making a point of my personal support for the military intervention, despite the possible incongruity of this. I was struck by the almost universal way just about everybody of my generation of opponents of the Vietnam War has come very rapidly to the same conclusion as I have.

The young Australian regular soldiers who are going to Timor are going there with the goodwill, gratitude and concern of the overwhelming majority of Australians, including the overwhelming majority of my generation of Vietnam protestors. They represent us and we are pretty concerned about their welfare.

A situation like this is fraught with immense pain and danger for all concerned: the East Timorese people who have been so brutally dispossessed, the Australian and other international peacekeeping soldiers and also the courageous aid workers who will no doubt be going in soon.

We civilians who sit at home can't really appreciate just how difficult it must be but, nevertheless, it seems to me that we must maintain our rage and anger and continue to demonstrate publicly our full support for the East Timorese people and this necessary military intervention, even allowing for our concern about the obvious dangers involved. For myself, I sincerely hope that the Indonesian military and their militia instruments speedily recognise international reality and get out of East Timor pronto, and that the Australian and other soldiers can get down to the equally necessary task of assisting the East Timorese people to rebuild their lives and establish their small independent state, which is one of our closest neighbours.

Despite all the dangers involved, I really make no apology for marching now with the drums of war, and I hope the loudness of these drums and the serious military force involved ensures a speedy, successful outcome to this quite risky venture.

The fact that it now looks as if this operation may succeed without the most catastrophic results is obviously a result of the balance of international forces, in which the energetic Australian initiative has been a bit of a catalyst. Another anomaly that an old anti-imperialist like myself can't escape is the obvious fact that the backdown by the brutal right-wing Indonesian military machine is in part a result of pressure from such reactionary global institutions as the IMF, the World Bank, and the American military in the Pentagon.

They have obviously exerted this pressure because, from their point of view, the failure of the Indonesians to withdraw from East Timor would cause enormous instability in the region and therefore be a threat to their interests.

From my point of view, the IMF, the World Bank and the Pentagon are very dangerous allies indeed, but nevertheless I am relieved that in this instance their pressure has been sufficient to allow a window of opportunity in which, if we mobilise public opinion in Australia sufficiently, the Australian Army can be one of the midwives of a new, small, independent nation of East Timor.

All of these circumstances are very unusual in terms of world politics, but nevertheless, no other course is possible unless we are prepared to sit back and witness the obliteration of East Timor.

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