

In War There is No Substitute for Victory
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Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, thank you for inviting me tonight. It is great to revisit the United Service Club here in Brisbane, and I would like to thank my friend Professor Charles Sampford for his initial invitation, and Colonel Dennis Scanlan for his exceptional organisation. It is nice to be back on Meanjin country, much warmer than Ngunnawal country in Canberra, and I pay my respects to our traditional custodians of the lands, seas and waterways which we co-habit, and I acknowledge their elders, past, present and emerging. I also pay my respects to any, and all, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with us tonight.

To be honest, I am a poor substitute for our Foreign Minister Penny Wong who was your intended speaker this evening.

We gather to honour and reflect briefly on a man whose name is synonymous with military prowess and quotable wisdom – 5-star General Douglas MacArthur. Much has been spoken and written about this American Caesar and, of course, with “greatness” also comes “controversy”. But no one can seriously question MacArthur’s exemplary results as an officer cadet at West Point; or his proven courage on the battlefield in World War 1; or many of his leadership qualities; or his strategic perspectives over many years and many conflicts; or his unwavering commitment to liberate the Philippines and then to rebuild Japan; or his statesmanship in the international arena; or his adroit and pathfinding use of the media; or the sheer brilliance of his Inchon campaign in the Korean War; or, above all, his status as a true hero for so many of his fellow Americans. Legend has it that even his corn cob pipe smoked with an air of authority.

It is particularly appropriate that Australia honours General MacArthur through the MacArthur Museum, which I so enjoyed visiting today. My sincere thanks to the Museum’s voluntary Managing Director, John Wright, who sacrificed his time to provide me with an excellent tour. Please pass on my congratulations to your team of volunteers, John, who do such an outstanding job. What a gem the MMB is! It is noteworthy that as Supreme Commander of the Southwest Pacific area in World War 2, MacArthur established his General Headquarters right here in Brisbane where planning to defeat the Japanese largely occurred. My congratulations to the Board and the Trustees of the Museum, and my sincere thanks to all the donors.

Tonight, I thought it might be useful to briefly unpack MacArthur's famous quote: *"In war, there is no substitute for victory."* But given current deteriorating geopolitical circumstances, it is even more important to consider the contemporary relevance of MacArthur's statement – and particularly useful for we Australians to assess its utility for our future national security.

In my opinion we are in the preparatory phase of World War 3 between the two great powers the United States and China and their respective allies. In the absence of robust community awareness we are sleepwalking to war and not holding our Government to account. The prospects of such a war are almost too horrible to contemplate, particularly with the threshold of nuclear weapons likely to be reached. I am not at all confident that this war can be averted, and very concerned that we will become unnecessarily committed. Perhaps ironically, the inability of the United States to fully pivot militarily to the Indo-Pacific – because it is bogged-down in Ukraine and the Middle East – provides Australia with more time to either prepare as an armed participant in World War 3 or to devise an alternative strategy. I would prefer the latter. In either case, however, AUKUS will not assist and it significantly distorts prospects to assure Australia's future security. The opportunity cost of AUKUS is both enormous and wasteful. Those who preach our current military gospel of deterrence and denial seem oblivious to the apoplectic history of previous arms races. History may not repeat, but it certainly rhymes. We need to chart a different course.

I think very highly of Penny Wong, but my message to you tonight is very different from the Government's position and where they are taking us in concert with the conservative Coalition. But as Mary Mead reminds us: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*

Since I will, at best, probably retain your already meandering attention for only a few moments longer, here are my three 'bottom-liners-up-front':

1. MacArthur's inspiring quote, unfortunately, has only limited utility. This is because 'total victory' is usually unachievable, and because adherence to it can sometimes lead to unintended and undesirable consequences. In summary, it is dangerous and misleading to conflate 'war' and 'victory', because the latter has many shades and always requires compromise.
2. Second, Australians need to stand-up and insist that our Government seriously recalibrates our alliance with the United States. Current rhetoric resembles our reliance on Great Britain before World War 2, but the consequences will be even worse. We need to recast our alliance to reflect Australia's key sovereign interests, assert our independence and

use our ‘special relationship’ with our major ally to influence their approach in the Indo-Pacific. And we need to take-on specific alliance responsibilities to maintain the Southwest Pacific as a zone of peace.

3. And third, Australia urgently requires a comprehensive national security strategy. This is our Government’s highest responsibility, but we have not had a national security strategy since 2013. Moreover, this strategy must be determined transparently through honest public consultation. One of its requirements will be to have an affordable and fit-for-purpose Australian Defence Force, but military strategy is only one of the core pillars – but certainly not the most important – that determine our national security.

I will briefly address each of these three points, and hopefully promote some discussion should time permit. While I talk, however, I would encourage you to reflect on the opening paragraph of Allan Behm’s recent book, launched fittingly on the 4th July and titled “The Odd Couple: the Australian-American relationship”. Behm commences with these prophetic words:

The most strategic risk facing Australia is the political and social collapse of the United States of America. America’s strategic collapse would follow.

Behm’s assessment suggests that all Australians, not just our Government, should seriously consider the options for Australia to assure our future sovereignty, security and independence. The other day, for some strange reason, I looked at the coat of arms of our great Commonwealth and each of our States and Territories. As dangerous as it may be for me to say whilst visiting Queensland, I think the Victorians got it right. Emblazed on their coat of arms are the simple but powerful words *Peace and Prosperity*. And these are exactly the words that should focus our attention and guide our national security.

Now, returning to MacArthur’s masterly quote — *in war, there is no substitute for victory*. It’s 19th April 1951, and General MacArthur stands before a joint session of Congress, looking every bit the distinguished military leader he was, and declares these stirring words. Eight days earlier, on 11th April, President Truman had relieved MacArthur from all command positions because of his criticism of Truman’s policy not to strike China and resolve the Korean War. MacArthur wasn’t just fond of catchy phrases; he had strategic vision and understood the harsh realities of war. He knew that in the crucible of conflict, half-measures and compromises could mean the difference between triumph and tragedy. Victory, in MacArthur’s eyes, wasn’t just a goal—it was the only

goal worth pursuing. I suspect that if he was a contemporary financial leader he would probably be saying to his corporate boards something like: *"Teamwork is key. There is no substitute for profit!"*

But how relevant is MacArthur's quote today? In an era of complex geopolitical landscapes and asymmetric warfare, MacArthur's words are appealing to military campaigners, but politically unachievable. Victory proved illusory in Vietnam. In Iraq, the 'shock and awe' military victory to overthrow Saddam Hussein heralded terrible and ongoing consequences. In Afghanistan, the Taliban was overthrown only to regain control after 20 years of bloodshed—and tarnishing the reputation of our Special Forces in the process. In Ukraine, we face at best a frozen war: Russia will not be defeated and a negotiated peace settlement is the only feasible option. And how can 'victory' possibly be described in the terrible ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians — victory for who and under what conditions?

So what about Australia's future security?

Returning to the second of my three key points, why do we need to recalibrate the current direction of our alliance with the United States? In a nutshell, to avoid going to war with China unless our direct security is threatened. And this is not appeasement, a fallacious argument sometimes used by the anti-China lobby. We are a proud US ally and partner, and it is true that we share many common values, interests and security challenges from resolving regional tensions to addressing freedom of navigation, climate disruption and cybersecurity threats. A strong alliance, however, should never be based on subservience, but on pursuing actions that benefit the self-interest of each partner. Clearly, Australia's support to the United States in Vietnam, and more recently in the unwinnable 'war on terror' in Afghanistan and Iraq, failed to enhance Australia's security in any way. The same would be true, but on steroids, in providing military support to the United States to contain their peer competitor and our major trading partner, China. The consequences of this military contest, should it occur, would be disastrous for Australia. As Air Vice Marshal John Blackburn AO (Ret'd) has explained:

In the years since John Howard committed Australia to the United States, the relationship has been turbocharged to the point where the 'dependency' (rather than interdependence) could impact Australia's independence and sovereignty.

We now know that the AUKUS agreement was boastfully contrived in secret by our former Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and agreed by our current Prime Minister Anthony Albanese without meaningful interrogation. This smacks of

subservience to the United States, and a sop to Great Britain, a nation that no longer has relevance in the Indo-Pacific. I fully agree with Professor Hugh White’s argument that AUKUS must “surely count as the most disastrous defence-policy mistake in our history.”

There are far more positive ways for Australia to contribute to our alliance with the United States, on which I would be happy to elaborate should time permit. The bottom line is that Australia needs to have the courage and confidence to confront and shelve what Allan Gyngell termed our “fear of abandonment”. China is not a direct existential threat to Australia unless and until we go to war with China, in which case we will almost certainly be targeted and pay an enormous price. We certainly won’t have to worry about curfews for the 26,000 inhabitants of Alice Springs because that beautiful city will no longer exist. And what a devastating ‘home goal’ that would be! So much for deterrence and denial!

In reality, more urgent threats than China need to be addressed as part of our comprehensive national security strategy. These include but are not limited to:

- avoiding and surviving nuclear war;
- mitigating the impact of climate disruption and biodiversity loss;
- assuring our food and water security;
- significantly reinvesting in our diplomacy which has been deplorably reduced over the past 20 years;
- safeguarding our cyber security;
- strengthening relations with New Zealand and with our Pacific and Southeast Asian neighbours;
- regulating the development of artificial intelligence, and particularly lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS);
- reversing our growing economic and social inequality, including for home ownership, employment, aged and healthcare;
- building national resilience and developing mobilisation plans;
- reconciling with our First Nations people; and
- probably most importantly, strengthening our political security by restoring trust and confidence in our governments—State/Territory and Federal—and our democratic institutions.

In addition to the defence security pillar and the need for a more purposeful Australian Defence Force, these matters need to be addressed in a national security strategy for Australia—and this is the last of my three key points.

Increasingly since commencement of the ‘war on terror’ in 2001, the term ‘national security’ has been used to justify numerous Government policies,

some of which have been derived in secret and without any or unsatisfactory parliamentary or public consultation. AUKUS is but one example. Yet, despite increased insecurity at home and abroad, successive Australian Governments since 2013 have failed to produce a national security strategy against which these policies could be justified, and there seems little appetite to do so from any of our major political parties. Nor as yet has the National Security College at the Australian National University, or similar institutes in our other quality universities, strongly advocated for, or proposed the content for, an Australian National Security Strategy. Among our closest allies we are the only country that does not have a National Security Strategy. And yes, New Zealand has one.

The need for a comprehensive national security strategy for Australia is finally gaining momentum. In late 2023 a group of concerned citizens decided to establish a non-political Association called the Australian Peace and Security Forum (APSF), of which I am a member. Our aim is to help educate and involve the Australian public on national security issues and to encourage and assist the Government to develop a national security policy and implementing strategy. In April this year the APSF provided a Discussion Paper for a national security conference in Canberra. This paper is titled *Towards Comprehensive National Security for Australia: defining the ends, considering the ways, providing the means*. The paper is available should you wish to read it.

So, in conclusion, General Douglas MacArthur's memorable quote, "*In war, there is no substitute for victory,*" is extremely instructive. It has particular relevance at the tactical level to help motivate troops in training and on the battlefield, and to provide politicians with noble things to say. But strategically, it's a timeless reminder that the gravity of conflict and war at best has shades of victory coloured by compromise. Total victory in war is seldom achievable, and when it seems apparent it normally fuels the fire for future wars and conflicts—as the Treaty of Versailles after World War 1 so readily testifies.

As we navigate the complexities of our world today and look to Australia's future, let's remember the lessons of leaders like MacArthur, with a nod to his wit and his wisdom. I would suggest, however, that a more appropriate mantra for Australia might be: *Avoid war unless directly threatened. In war there is no substitute for peace*. And to quote Allan Behm again, "Peace must always be the cause of policy, not just its consequence." And I think that General Douglas MacArthur might agree with this.

Thank you all for your attention. Here's to 'victory', in whatever challenges we face, and may our dinners always be as satisfying as tonight's.