

Former Australian military chiefs challenge government over Iraq war

Richard Phillips
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In another sign of growing political tensions within Australia's ruling elite, eight former senior military chiefs have spoken out against the US-led occupation of Iraq, describing it as a "failure".

The military officers, whose comments were published last weekend in the Melbourne-based *Age* newspaper, also challenged the Howard government, arguing that its slavish backing for the Bush administration in Iraq conflicts with the "national interest" and is undermining public confidence in the military itself.

While some of these officers have previously denounced the invasion, the inability of the US-led occupation to defeat the insurgency has led increasing numbers of the local military hierarchy to speak out. Their comments are part of growing criticism by US and British military leaders, including former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, and follows the recent release of the Iraq Study Group report, which denounced the Bush administration's military tactics in Iraq.

Last weekend's *Age* article, which was headlined, "Iraq is a disaster: old warriors have their say", pointed to some of the concerns gripping key sections of the military and highlight its deepening anger with the government.

While the former military chiefs said nothing about the neo-colonial character of the invasion and its key aims—to seize and exploit Iraq's oil fields, some of the largest in the world—or called for the immediate withdrawal of Australian troops, their comments are a major political embarrassment for Canberra.

The officers directly attacked US occupation planning and tactics, warned that the US could not defeat the insurgency, and urged the Howard government to scale down Australian involvement.

Vice-Admiral Ian MacDougall, who was Australian navy chief from 1991 to 1994, told the newspaper that the coalition "can't win the counter-insurgency war". It was "time the Australian government came clean," he said,

"and acknowledged that this is unwinnable. We have to get out before we get hurt and get our tail kicked."

Vice Admiral David Leach (navy chief from 1982 to 1985) said Iraq was "a confused and hearty mess". In a pointed criticism of Canberra's unwavering backing for the White House, he said: "We are a loyal and great friend of America. That is fine but we have to look at it and say is it working and do we want to be a party to something that is flawed? They are talking 2008 and 2010 (for withdrawal). I don't think we can go on for that long. OK, you [the US] sort yourself out and do what you want to do or blow yourself up but don't drag us into it thousands of miles away."

Former Royal Australian Air Force head, Air Marshall Ray Funnell, said those denying the existence of a civil war in Iraq were "not facing up to reality" and attacked claims that any Australian troop reduction Iraq would produce a disaster.

"I am not at all happy with the statement our prime minister made 6-8 weeks ago that we will remain until such time as the Americans and the British decide to go," he told the newspaper. "I thought that was just totally giving up our national responsibility."

Funnell's position was echoed by Major-General Bill Crews, president of the veterans' organisation, the Returned Services League. Crews said the US "should not make assumptions that we will be there because they want us there. We need to make our own mind up. But we need to do it in a way that demonstrates why our national interest might diverge from theirs and why we aren't simply going to be doing what they tell us or what they ask us."

General Peter Gration (defence head from 1987 to 1993), who opposed the Iraq invasion in 2003, called for a phased withdrawal of Australian troops beginning next year. Terms like "cut and run," he said, were about "concealing reality". Declarations of "staying the course"

ignored key external factors, including political changes in the US. “The coalition has clearly failed, the strategy has failed and I don’t see any prospect in a realistic time frame of turning that around,” he said.

These comments, which reflect concerns not just in the military but within significant layers of the Australian ruling elite, have been echoed in highly-qualified calls over the past few months from the Labor Party leadership for a reduction in Australian troop numbers in Iraq.

Labor, which has no fundamental differences with the bloody and illegal occupation of Iraq, insists that any reduction must involve the closest collaboration with Washington.

There are also rumblings from sections of Prime Minister Howard’s coalition partners, the rural-based National Party, whose supporters were assured that participation in the war would guarantee that Australian wheat exporters would maintain their lucrative market. Australian wheat exports to the country, however, have been drastically cut following the exposure of Australian Wheat Board kickbacks to the Saddam Hussein regime. The US has taken the lion’s share.

While the Howard government has argued that participation in the Iraq war ensures that Australia will continue to have US backing for its own operations in Asia and the South Pacific, for example, in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, military officials are concerned that the Australian defence forces are being overstretched.

This was spelt out last month by Peter Tinley, a recently retired senior SAS officer who spent 17 years in the SAS and was a principal planner for Australian operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Tinley was involved in the Afghanistan invasion and deputy commander of the 550-strong joint special forces group that took over western Iraq in March 2003.

The former SAS commander, who defends the invasion and ongoing bloody occupation of Afghanistan, told ABC-TV’s “Lateline” that Australian involvement in Iraq was weakening the country’s “span of command” and that the defence force’s “regional engagement program” had been left to “wither on the vine”.

“These are the sorts of things that build rapport and give us information to allow us to make strategic decisions that are appropriate to our region,” he said. In other words, the Howard government was undermining the military’s ability to aggressively defend Australian domination of the South Pacific.

Tinley said Canberra had “to take good, hard, courageous decisions now to get out [of Iraq] and get out

whilst we can”. “This war will drag us in further and further. It’s a civil war and the power vacuum that was created as a result of this invasion is clearly at the feet of this government,” he said.

He rejected claims that withdrawal from Iraq would lead to an increase in terrorist attacks: “[W]e created the honey pot, if you like, from which the terrorist organisations from all around that particular region ... get their training. We’ve provided them with a live training range”.

Tinley, who has been pre-selected as a Labor Party candidate in next year’s federal election, also pointed to another factor animating the concerns of Australian military chiefs—the debilitating impact that the war is having on morale in the lower ranks.

The Howard government’s actions, he said, were “immoral” because it had “cynically duped the Australian Defence Force and the Australian people in terms of thinking it [the war] was in some way legitimate”.

This has had a serious impact on rank and file soldiers, he said. He had had several discussions with SAS combat soldiers concerned about their participation in the invasion. “It wasn’t just the normal fear that grips young men going into harm’s way,” he said. “Their concerns were, ‘What’s this all for?’”

Tinley, like the other military chiefs interviewed in the *Age*, is not arguing for an end to imperialist military interventions. Under conditions of widespread anti-war sentiment among broad layers of the population, deepening social inequality and increasing hostility to the official political superstructure, he is deeply concerned about the dangers posed to the existing social order when the internal discipline and morale of the military, a crucial component of the capitalist state, is weakened and undermined.



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