

ABC promotes US military-build up as “cross-cultural exchange” with indigenous Australians

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In an extraordinarily crude and obvious piece of war propaganda, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) on Tuesday published an article hailing the deployment of US marines to the Northern Territory (NT), and a broader Australian military build-up there, as the basis of a “cross-cultural” exchange with indigenous people.

Despite its poverty, the article was notable from several standpoints. It highlighted the ever more open role of the ABC, despite being a nominally independent public broadcaster, as a mouthpiece for militarism and the state. The fuzzy and warm depiction of military activities that are obviously aimed at preparing for war with China is of a piece with the broadcaster’s aggressive support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The article also underscored the role of identity politics, including of the “multicultural” and Aboriginal nationalist variants, as a form of official, capitalist ideology that can easily be adapted to the most reactionary ends, including the promotion of war. And it revealed the involvement of a narrow layer of the indigenous elite in the military build-up.

To arrive at those broader points of political significance, though, one must wade through the mud. The article is execrable, reading it a painful experience to anyone who has ever had a critical or oppositional thought in their head. It could have been written by a public relations firm, though one would hope, not for too great a fee.

A couple of examples will suffice.

The article begins: “At the foothills of an ancient red escarpment in a remote pocket of the Northern Territory, United States Marines, US Navy sailors, and Australian Army soldiers are knee-deep in a billabong. They’re learning survival skills from traditional owners, including how and where to hunt bush food. The young marines and soldiers seem in awe of the traditional hunting skills and cultural lessons they are being shown.”

One is informed that this scene is “part of a genuine friendship built on mutual respect and admiration between the Australian military and Ngaliwurru, Nungali and Jaminjung people.” This is presented not as an opinion, or an impression,

but as a matter of fact. The Department of Defence would approve.

Later, the reader is introduced to Camille Modjeski, who works for the US Navy as a hospital corpsman. It hardly seems accidental that the only rank-and-file American military operative interviewed is a young female working in the medical field.

A grizzled veteran of American imperialism’s criminal wars of the past thirty years might not be suitable for the upbeat, “good news story” vibe. Nor would comments voicing the macho and hyper-nationalist environment that undoubtedly exists within the US military have tallied with the “respectful cultural exchange” angle.

Modjeski, fortunately, is a free spirit, open to new ideas and experiences. She told the ABC, “Learning natural medicine is a huge deal to me. I believe in both eastern and western medicine—traditional and modern.” The author recounts a bizarre scene in which Modjeski has “tears falling as traditional owners painted healing oils and embraced her.” This was a “poignant cross-cultural exchange.”

All of which is transparent nonsense.

The article skirts around the reason the American military personnel are in the NT, aside from their attraction to alternative medicine and love of indigenous culture, but cannot avoid it entirely.

“[A]s tensions rise north of Darwin, in the Asia-Pacific region, the area is deemed critical in preparing for conflict,” it states. Bradshaw Field Training Area, on remote indigenous land 600 kilometres south of Darwin, is “now one of the biggest live-fire training facilities in the world.” An initial US marine deployment or “annual rotation” has grown from 200 marines in 2011 to more than 2,500 today.

The “tensions,” so discreetly referenced, are a consequence of US preparations for war with China, which is viewed as the chief threat to American imperialist dominance.

2011 was a key turning point. In that year, then US President Barack Obama announced the “pivot to Asia,” a vast American military build-up targeting China, from the floor of the Australian parliament. The Labor government of Prime

Minister Julia Gillard endorsed the plans for conflict and signed a secret military agreement, one component of which was the establishment of a semi-permanent US marine presence in Darwin.

Since then, the military build-up has advanced greatly, with northern Australia being transformed into a hub of war. The number of marines have skyrocketed, the current Labor government has given every branch of the American military carte blanche access to bases in the NT, and is increasing its own troop deployment in the region.

Key US military assets are being stationed in the NT, including nuclear-capable B-52 bombers. Their deployment effectively marks the end of Australia's non-nuclear weapons status without a shred of public discussion or debate.

There is no threat of anybody invading the NT. But, as in World War II, it would serve as a launching point for aggressive military operations by the US, this time directed against China.

That would unquestionably make the NT a potential target for airstrikes in the event of a war. It was the reason for the Japanese airforce bombing of Darwin in February 1942 which is still the largest single attack ever mounted by a foreign power on Australia leading to hundreds of deaths.

Unsurprisingly, the ABC did not ask any indigenous people how they felt about being placed in the crosshairs. Nor did it examine the compatibility of a massive live-fire training site with traditional indigenous cultural practices.

The marines, moreover, have not engaged only in healing oil ceremonies and nature walks. There have been periodic reports of the nuisance and even serious criminal menace they have caused to members of the public. In 2018, the head of the entire deployment was charged with drink driving.

Desperate to highlight the purported benefits of the deployment, the ABC cites the "economic opportunities" that have been made available. The only example given is a contracting company involved in such things as rubbish disposal and fencing. "Twenty-four of the company's 25 workers are Indigenous, bringing \$1,000,000 in wages to Timber Creek," the ABC states. Divided by 24, that million dollars could not be much more than the minimum wage.

The company is owned by Daniel Jones, an indigenous man who is also on the Bradshaw Liaison Committee, as are a number of his relatives, including his sister, Lorraine Jones, who heads it. The committee, composed of indigenous leaders, has signed agreements with the Australian military accepting the Bradshaw Field Training Area and other military operations in the region. It is tied in with the Northern Land Council.

Comments by Lorraine Jones indicate that the committee has also been hard at work suppressing opposition to the deployments. She stated: "People were uncomfortable talking with people in uniform. They were thinking, 'Oh yeah, they're going to drop bombs on the site, and our sacred site's going to be damaged.' But that wasn't the case."

Under the framework of "land rights," acknowledging indigenous ownership of some traditional lands, deals have been struck over decades between Aboriginal leaders and major corporations, particularly in mining. A small indigenous layer has been enriched, while the vast majority have remained in abject poverty.

The collaboration between the Bradshaw Liaison Committee and the military, in preparations for war, underscores the utterly reactionary character of this indigenous elite. It has its own material interests and privileges, distinct from those of ordinary indigenous people, and is increasingly integrated into the corridors of political, corporate and military power.

Deepening that integration was a central purpose of the Labor government's failed referendum last October to create an indigenous "Voice" or advisory body to the parliament. It was also aimed at putting a "progressive" gloss on militarism. Since the defeat of the referendum, some of its key architects, such as indigenous academic Marcia Langton have openly backed Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza, while denouncing supporters of the Palestinians.

All of that demonstrates that the fundamental division in society is class, not race. The fight against the oppression of indigenous people, along with opposition to war, can only go forward through a unified movement of the entire working class, against the governments and the capitalist profit-system which they serve.

A final point should be made about the author of the ABC's article, Kristy O'Brien. As a long-term NT correspondent, she has largely focused on fairly bland "human interest" stories, though has also authored other promotions of the military.

In 2017, O'Brien married then NT Labor Chief Minister Michael Gunner. Perhaps that would generally be of limited public interest.

But in this story, there is a specific issue. As chief minister, Gunner directly oversaw the increasing marine deployment in the NT, while depicting it as a boon to the territory and necessary to "defence." One is left with a reporter aggressively promoting a troop deployment permitted by her husband.

This fairly glaring conflict of interest was not disclosed in O'Brien's article.



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