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## A Strategic Career<sup>1</sup>

Desmond Ball

Bob O'Neill rose to the pinnacle of his chosen profession — the academic study of arguably the most critical subject of public policy, that of war and peace, strategy and defence policy. His route took him to be Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London from 1982–1987, Chairman of the Council of IISS from 1986–2001, and the Chichele Professor of the History of War at All Souls College at Oxford University from 1987 until his retirement in 2001. These posts were fiercely competitive and required navigating the complex shoals at the confluence of the academic and policy worlds. He needed to be internationally recognised for his scholarship, but he also needed to demonstrate extraordinary project management and fund-raising propensities, to have a dedication to institution-building and a steadfast commitment to the strategic studies profession, and ultimately to be comfortable in the corridors of power to which he enjoyed access in many places around the world. But he did it in his stride — as purposefully as he strides out in front in his walks with family and friends in the Australian bush or the English countryside.

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I worked most closely with Bob from 1974, when I joined the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) at The Australian National University as a research fellow, to 1982, when he moved to London, eventually becoming his deputy head and often serving during his absences as acting head of the centre. We continued to consult frequently after he moved to the IISS and I became Head of SDSC, and we worked together when he was Chairman of the Council of the IISS, of which I was then a member. I saw him functioning at close quarters in his many different capacities.

I first met Bob around 1970. He had come to ANU as a Senior Fellow in the Department of International Relations, where I was a PhD student, in 1969. He became Head of SDSC in 1971, although he remained in International Relations. The centre had been set up by Dr T. B. Millar, another former army officer, in 1966, when he was also a Senior Fellow in International Relations, to 'advance the study of Australian, regional, and global strategic and defence issues'. It was initially funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation, and was organisationally an independent offshoot of International Relations. Bob presided over the centre's expansion and rise to international recognition through the 1970s and early 1980s.

He was a former Australian Army officer who had served in Vietnam as an infantry captain from 1966–1967 and had been mentioned in dispatches; he had been a lecturer in military history at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, from 1967–1969; and he was already the author of three books. His first was *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933–1939*,<sup>2</sup> the classic text on civil–military relations in Nazi Germany, based on the thesis he wrote as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford in the early 1960s. It had an introduction by Sir Basil Liddell Hart, who had befriended the young Australian soldier-scholar, and who had the greatest intellectual influence on Bob's approach to military history and strategic thinking. His second book, *Vietnam Task*,<sup>3</sup> was based on his experiences in Vietnam. His third book was *General Giap: Politician and Strategist*,<sup>4</sup> a biography of the North Vietnamese military leader, the architect of the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien

2 O'Neill, Robert (1966) *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933–1939*, London: Cassell.

3 O'Neill, Robert J. (1968) *Vietnam Task: The 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, 1966–67*, Sydney: Cassell

4 O'Neill, Robert J. (1969) *General Giap: Politician and Strategist*, London: Cassell.

Phu in 1954 and, two decades later, of the defeat of the US in South Vietnam. He was, by 1971, regarded as Australia's leading soldier-historian and one of its best military historians ever.

Bob's major research project during his 11 years at SDSC was his two-volume, 1,300-page official history of *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53 — Volume I: Strategy and Diplomacy* was published by the Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service in 1981, and *Volume II: Combat Operations* followed in 1985.<sup>5</sup> Reviewers said that the twin works 'will always be the indispensable reference' on Australia's role in the Korean War, that they had 'enhanced existing standards of research, authenticity and unremitting attention to detail', and that they revealed 'enormous energy'. The basic politico-strategic assessment that underlay the history, that Australia's deployment of troops to Korea was 'primarily in the interests of Australian-American diplomacy', an exercise in alliance politics, was more telling than might have been expected from other official historians.

By 1974, Bob's talents were already turning to institution-building and project leadership. His first task was to build a critical mass of research posts in SDSC, based on a core staff of longer-term appointments. He promoted the centre through regular public conferences and by developing contacts with the media. The conferences were usually products of extensive research projects, and usually addressed the subjects for the first time in Australia.

Through the mid-1970s he obtained financial support for several core posts. In 1974, when Lance Barnard was Defence Minister in the Labor Government, he secured funding from the Department of Defence for two academic posts, and was later able to obtain two to three University-funded posts. He also forged a strong relationship with the Ford Foundation and, later, the McArthur Foundation.

He recognised that viable institutions require continuous regeneration. He encouraged promising honours and masters graduates from around the country to undertake PhDs in international relations at ANU, and

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5 O'Neill, Robert J. (1981) *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53, Volume I: Strategy and Diplomacy*, Canberra: Australian War Memorial and Australian Government Publishing Service; O'Neill, Robert J. (1985) *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53, Volume II: Combat Operations*, Canberra: Australian War Memorial and Australian Government Publishing Service.

he closely attended their subsequent progress. His former students invariably recall the prompt and meticulous comments they received on their drafts. Some of them, including David Horner, Ross Babbage, and later Ron Huiskens, took up senior positions in SDSC after Bob's departure. Tim Huxley is the Senior Fellow in charge of Asia-Pacific security matters at IISS.

Bob was the editor or co-editor of seven books from 1975–1982. The first of these was *The Strategic Nuclear Balance: An Australian Perspective*,<sup>6</sup> consisting of papers prepared for a conference held in July 1974. It was the first serious examination of US, Soviet, and Chinese strategic nuclear policies and capabilities, nuclear arms control and non-proliferation, in this country. Later volumes covered *The Strategic Environment in the 1980s*,<sup>7</sup> weapons proliferation in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific regions, and *New Directions in Strategic Thinking*<sup>8</sup> (1981), as well as aspects of Australian defence policy.

The edited books were products of his collegiate style of leadership, whereby small and fairly loose teams worked on large issues with himself as the team leader and resource diviner. The largest proportion of the centre's work under Bob's tenure concerned the defence of Australia. The centre was at the forefront of the conceptual revolution in Australian defence policy, from 'dependence on great and powerful friends' to 'greater self-reliance', and from 'forward defence' to 'defence of Australia', which occurred during this period. The core people involved in this work on Australian defence were Bob, myself, Ross Babbage, then a PhD student, and J. O. Langtry, who was the SDSC Executive Officer from August 1976 to December 1988. Langtry was a former army officer who had worked in the Joint Intelligence Organisation and army combat development areas, and whose ability to think of novel strategic and operational concepts was inspirational.

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6 O'Neill, Robert J. (ed.) (1975) *The Strategic Nuclear Balance: An Australian Perspective*, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University.

7 O'Neill, Robert J. (ed.) (1980) *The Strategic Environment in the 1980s*, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University.

8 O'Neill, Robert J. and D. M. Horner (eds) (1981) *New Directions in Strategic Thinking*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Bob's second edited book was on *The Defence of Australia: Fundamental New Aspects*.<sup>9</sup> It consisted of papers from a conference in October 1976, and was designed to assist policy-makers struggling with the transformation of Australia's defence posture. It included papers by leading overseas experts on the concept of 'total defence', and on the strategic and tactical implications of new conventional weapons technologies, by a recent defence minister (Bill Morrison) on the role of the minister in policy-making since the reorganisation of the Defence Department from 1973–1975, on force structure and equipment acquisition matters, and Bob's own paper on the development of operational doctrine for the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

Bob produced the formative studies of the requisite command and control structure for a joint ADF in defence of Australia contingencies, including the establishment of functional command arrangements. His Dyason House Paper on 'Structural Changes for a More Self-Reliant National Defence',<sup>10</sup> was the first coherent statement of the need for functional commands, adopted a decade later. He also contributed to the development of new ideas concerning the reorganisation of the defence portfolio; greater utilisation of the civilian infrastructure, especially in defence of Australia contingencies; greater appreciation of the challenges of lower-level contingencies in northern Australia; regular officer education and training; and particular force structure issues. Members of the centre were credited with an influential role in the government's decision in 1981 to acquire the F/A-18 as RAAF's tactical fighter aircraft. Costing \$4 billion, this was the largest capital program in Australia's history.

The second large area of work in the centre under Bob's tenure, which brought it to international attention, concerned the strategic nuclear balance between the United States and the Soviet Union, and related issues of nuclear proliferation. This had been the subject of the first centre conference he had organised in 1974, and he returned to it frequently over the next couple of decades. From 1995–1996 he served as a member of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination

9 O'Neill, Robert J. (ed.) (1977) *The Defence of Australia: Fundamental New Aspects*, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University.

10 O'Neill, Robert J. (1976) 'Structural Changes for a More Self-reliant National Defence', Dyason House Working Paper 3, Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University.

of Nuclear Weapons, which recommended the complete elimination of these weapons. He was a very active player in the commission, and worked energetically on the final drafts of the report.

The third broad area of centre research during this period concerned security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. Bob organised a succession of two- to three-year appointments on various aspects of regional security, funded variously by the Department of Defence, ANU, and the Ford Foundation. The appointments included Peter Hastings, the pungent, waggish and quarrelsome journalist, who worked on political and security issues concerning Indonesia and Papua New Guinea; Lee Ngok and Don McMillan who worked on China; Paul Keal on Japan; and R. Subramanian, S. D. Muni, Sreedhara Rao, and Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema on South Asia. Their names are associated with standard reference works in their respective areas.

I saw Bob display not only superb diplomatic skills, but also an immense personal integrity and a commitment to academic values. Some of the centre's work was intensely controversial, as befitting path-breaking scholarship on major national and international issues. Some senior defence and intelligence officials regarded my own work on US installations in Australia, such as Pine Gap, with great suspicion. While I argued that in a democracy it was necessary for the public to know the purposes and implications of these facilities, a proposition now taken for granted, Sir Arthur Tange complained that I was dangerous and irresponsible, opening up matters which 'successive American and Australian governments have deemed it a national interest' to keep secret. He was especially upset since my post was then funded by the Department of Defence. Bob defended the right of academics to pursue unfettered research. Only when I later became Head of SDSC and inherited the files of correspondence between Bob and Sir Arthur did I fully appreciate the extent of his discourse and the solidity of his refusal to countenance any hint of infringement on the principle of academic independence.

When Bob moved to London to head the IISS in 1982, he took his leadership qualities and adeptness at collegiate and foundation politics to a higher plane. He initiated the planning for the fund-raising campaign to acquire new and much larger premises for the institute, consummated by John Chipman, his successor as director and by then his closest working colleague, with the purchase of Arundel House in

1997. He greatly expanded the number of young research associates in the institute. He broadened the work of the institute to cover Asia as well as Africa and Latin America, making it a really international institute rather than an Atlanticist organisation with some regional appendages. His magisterial summings-up of IISS conferences on such broad, complex, and different themes as 'The Conduct of East–West Relations in the 1980s' in Ottawa in 1983, 'New Technology and Western Security Policy' in Avignon in 1984, and 'East Asia and International Security' in Kyoto in 1986, evinced his complete intellectual mastery of the ever-changing strategic landscape.

The Chichele Professorship at Oxford allowed him to return to thinking as much about military history, always his first love, as about current strategic developments. But he did not resile from a myriad of boards and councils which allowed him continued oversight of his domain. In addition to the demanding position of Chairman of the Council of the IISS, he was Chairman of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum in London from 1998–2001; Chairman of the Council of the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College, London, from 1991–1996; Chairman of the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies in the University of London from 1990–1996; and a Governor of the International Peace Academy in New York and of the Ditchley Foundation in Oxfordshire. He also served as the Armed Services Editor of the Australian Dictionary of Biography until his retirement in 2001.

At the same time, he relished fostering and encouraging good, young PhD students at Oxford. Many of his stable are already widely recognised, including Daniel Marston, the war historian of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and strategic analyst of counter-insurgency today; Carter Malkasian, who has published on the strategy of attrition, and after spending several years on the ground in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, has published *War Comes to Garmser*;<sup>11</sup> John Hillen, the author of a critically acclaimed book on UN military operations and former Assistant Secretary of State for Political Military Affairs, Washington DC; the late Paul Collier, who has published on the North African and Mediterranean theatres during the Second World War; Elsin Wainwright, known for her

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11 Malkasian, Carter (2013) *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

work on post-conflict governance issues and, more specifically, for her Australian Strategic Policy Institute paper on 'Our Failing Neighbour',<sup>12</sup> commonly regarded as the blueprint for the multinational intervention in Solomon Islands soon after; and John Nagl, a retired US Army officer who served in the First Gulf War and the Iraq conflict, who has published a comparative study on the Vietnam War and the Malayan Insurgency, and *Knife Fights*,<sup>13</sup> on the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

*As Bob has supervised over 50 doctoral students, I shall not go on further through the list. It is sufficient to say that he has developed a multinational group of critical thinkers on strategy who are now hard at work on the world's current security problems. They share an unabashed loyalty to him. They effectively comprise a personal regiment, deployed around the globe, committed by profession to the promotion of the intellectual institution he valued most, the independent and rigorous study of military history, strategy, and security policy.*

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12 Wainwright, Elsin (2003) *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

13 Nagl, John A. (2014) *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice*, New York: Penguin.



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