

POINT BLANK



WHAT IS THE BATTLE FOR AUSTRALIA?*

PETER STANLEY

ABSTRACT

This article, based on the 2006 Australian War Memorial Anniversary Oration, examines a recent issue in the Australian military history debate, the idea of the Battle for Australia. The author challenges the reality of the Battle for Australia and locates how and why such a grand narrative emerges into a nation's consciousness.

For Australia, 1942 was the year of greatest losses, a year of crises confronted and overcome. It was a year in which war briefly touched Australia's shores. What does this mean for the way we remember 1942? It suggests that we should at least question whether there was a 'Battle for Australia', and if there was, what did it involve?¹

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There was an ‘in vogue’ phrase in museum circles a few years ago, that museums are ‘safe places for unsafe ideas’. My scepticism about the reality of the Battle for Australia would certainly be regarded as unsafe. When I have spoken or written in this vein—several times over the past few years—I have been abused as unpatriotic or even ‘un-Australian’, whatever that means. My citizenship (dating from 1971) has been called into question—one persistent critic habitually refers to me as ‘English-born’—and the Memorial’s Director has been urged to sack me. If criticising the Battle for Australia is an unsafe idea, I am glad that the Memorial offers an opportunity to discuss it in a rational manner. I welcome your reactions to my offerings about 1942 and the ‘Battle for Australia’.

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I offer reflections on this phrase that, over the past decade, has assumed a growing significance in the ways Australians remember the Second World War. Indeed, I would argue that the new idea of the ‘Battle for Australia’ is the most significant single development in Australia’s understanding of that war since the publication of the official histories between the 1950s and the 1970s. The idea that there was a Battle for Australia has perhaps captured the popular imagination. It is an idea that few historians have endorsed but which thousands of Australians have embraced. For that reason, I take the idea of a ‘Battle for Australia’ seriously as a basis for thinking about our past. I would like to use this forum to consider its validity for Australia’s remembrance of the Second World War. It has a place in our thinking about this war, but not, perhaps, as an all-embracing event that can be justified historically.

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Those who advance this idea argue that, from the outbreak of war with Japan, Australia was the objective of the Japanese advance and that 1942 saw a series of crucial campaigns that resulted in the defeat of this thrust. In some versions of the battle it is seen as continuing up to the Japanese surrender. The point of the Pacific War, they imply, was that Australia was in danger of attack or conquest and that the significance of the campaigns in the South-West Pacific was that they prevented such a calamity.

This idea of a Battle for Australia is both attractive and superficially plausible. It is dramatic. It seems to explain a series of campaigns to Australia’s north. It seems to give purpose to the bombing of Darwin, the submarine raid on Sydney and the submarine offensives off the east coast; even the Papuan campaign can be stretched to fit the rubric of the ‘battle that saved Australia’. The growing awareness of the

importance of the mobilisation of Australian civilians—men, women and children—their motivation to work for the war effort and their contributions as individuals and in communities, all fits easily into a view that places Australia at the centre of events. Above all, a Battle for Australia nourishes Australians' pride in surmounting what *was* truly the greatest crisis the nation has faced. These are all reasons to subscribe to this interpretation. I do not. First, I want to look at where this new idea has come from and suggest why it has arisen in the form it has.

The idea of organising the events of 1942 around the idea of a 'Battle for Australia' is quite a new one, though the phrase itself was used in wartime propaganda. In turn, it seems to have come from a speech delivered by Prime Minister John Curtin on 16 February 1942. In an echo of Churchill's speech of June 1940 foreseeing that the fall of France would open a 'Battle of Britain', Curtin said that '[t]he fall of Singapore opens the battle for Australia.'² The phrase was used in a few booklets produced by the Department of Information, but soon fell out of use. It did not appear even in the booklet *While You Were Away*, produced in 1945 to inform liberated prisoners of war what had occurred at home during their captivity.³

Curtin's phrase did not resonate with those first charged with documenting Australia's part in the Second World War. It appears just once in Paul Hasluck's official history *The Government and the People*, but not at all in Gavin Long's *Six Years War* or indeed in any general history of Australia published until the mid-1990s. There is no battle honour 'Battle for Australia' on any regimental colour, ship's crest or unit plaque. The phrase—even the idea—disappeared. The first time it appeared in print in a work of significance was in the late John Robertson's *Australia at War 1939–1945*, published in 1981.⁴ Yet he used it as a striking opening line to his chapter on the collapse of the so-called Malay Barrier. He did not endorse the idea of such a battle having happened.

Then, in the mid-1990s, the idea was resurrected, though the exact origins of what I will call the Battle for Australia movement are, for the moment, obscure. Recently, Andrew McKay and Ryoko Adachi offered an account of its origins in their exploration of Australia and Japan's wartime memories, *Shadows of War*. They suggest that it was conceived in 1996 by the Victorian President of the Air Force Association,

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Wing Commander Reginald Yardley, and was fostered in schools by a former Chief Executive Officer of the History Teachers' Association of Victoria, Dr Jacqueline Hollingworth. Over the years Reg Yardley had laid many wreaths on Battle of Britain Day when in 1996—significantly, the year after the great year of 'Australia Remembers'—he realised that no one seemed to remember what he called a Battle for Australia. 'And there was a Battle for Australia,' he emphasised in an interview, 'we damned near lost it and yet nobody knows anything about it ...'⁵ He thought of the 'battle' as spanning the period from the invasion of New Britain in January 1942 to the battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943.

James Bowen's unofficial Battle for Australia website describes his own role in persuading the Returned and Services League to commemorate a Battle for Australia. He credits the then-national and Victorian state presidents of the RSL, 'Digger' James and Bruce Ruxton, with recognising the value of his idea in 1997.⁶

Either way, by 1998 a national Battle for Australia Council existed. Its aim was to 'enhance community knowledge and understanding of Australian and Allied actions in the war against Japan from 1941 to 1945'.⁷ It is interesting to note the expansion of the date range, to encompass the entire Pacific War. The Council lobbied to establish the first Wednesday in September as Battle for Australia Day, and now ceremonies are held in several states, marking the anniversary of the Battle of Milne Bay, the symbolic first Allied victory against the Japanese in 1942.

The Council's lobbying has since been joined by several private efforts, notably James Bowen's website, which engages in energetic advocacy of the Battle of Australia Day and robustly critiques those who offer a contrary view. Mr Bowen has since parted company with the Council. The Memorial's Director and I have been singled out for criticism because we disagreed with Bowen's interpretation of this period. We have been accused of being 'revisionists', used as a term of abuse, no less than thirty-five times in the course of his website's denunciation. You can judge my views on their merits; to call Steve Gower a 'revisionist' is simply ludicrous. Mr Bowen's website offers an aggressively positive view of the events of 1942, a simple and colourful saga of threat, crisis and salvation. The essence of his case seems to be that by offering a different version of 1942 I must be demeaning those who died, that by disagreeing with political leaders (on both sides of politics) I am disrespectful, and by differing with Mr Bowen I must be wrong.

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Though notably more moderate, the Battle for Australia Council's view of 1942 connects several episodes into a single narrative. It presents the defence of Singapore, the conquest of the Netherlands Indies, the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway, the Papuan and Solomons campaigns, and the campaigns that secured Allied victory, into a single epic story. We might regard this saga as forming a 'collective story', a story valued or heeded by an entity, such as a nation. The term 'collective story' is used by the clear-thinking and plain-speaking historian Inga Clendinnen in her recent *Quarterly Essay*, 'The history question: who owns the past?'⁸

Clendinnen reminds us why these 'collective stories' are important to us. But as the stories become more collective—and this is a national story—they acquire 'de facto custodians' (like Mr Bowen, perhaps). These guardians, she says, 'find they have to invent crimes like blasphemy, heresy, treason or "being un-Australian" to see off any incubating counter-stories'. The 'counter-story' here, in the context of the Battle for Australia debate, is actually the older, established version, because it challenges what is becoming the new orthodoxy.

Clendinnen also sees a risk in historians feeling a 'primary responsibility to the present and the future of the nation and not to the past'. She disagrees with the proposal that 'the true purpose of "Australian history" [... should be] patriotic and integrative'. She thinks—and I agree—that 'historians need to resist participating in the concoction of large, inspiriting narratives, because any [such] narrative requires significant narrowing of vision and manipulations of the truth', or, I would rather say, of the evidence.

But an oration such as this, particularly one delivered on the eve of Remembrance Day, is perhaps not the occasion for astringent analysis that may alienate and offend at a time when our thoughts ought to be in accord on the value of remembering war's cost. However strong my conviction may be, I acknowledge that there is little point, and less dignity, in trying, Canute-like, to turn back the waves. Or, to switch metaphors, no amount of argument can now drive the genie of the Battle for Australia back into its bottle. Indeed, especially on an occasion such as this, we need to acknowledge that a purely intellectual argument about the evidence will not carry the day.

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History is not just about the evidence of what happened in the past, important though that is. It is also about how we shape an understanding of that past to satisfy our present needs. So rather than simply laying into the idea of the Battle for Australia on the basis of chronology and evidence, we need to examine its meaning for today. That is why this lecture is called ‘What is the Battle for Australia?’ I suggest that the idea arises from profound emotional roots, a desire to connect with the Second World War and to incorporate it more securely into Australian remembrance. On that note, I am in complete accord with proponents of the Battle for Australia.

I, like them, am determined that the sacrifices and the achievements of the Second World War, and especially those of this country, should never be forgotten. I have devoted a good part of my professional life at the Memorial to that end. I want to find ways in which we can do so without skewing the evidence of history.

This struggle over the meaning of our history is itself part of a historical process. For ninety years Gallipoli has been a part of Australia’s discovery of itself as a nation, and its exploration and assertion of its national identity. That process entailed creating an Anzac legend, one which has focussed not just on the Great War, but specifically on Gallipoli.

Yet, for at least a decade, at least since the ‘Australia Remembers’ anniversary, there has been a move, if not to supplant Gallipoli’s centrality, at least to assert the significance of the Second World War as part of the story of an emerging Australian national identity. This process arguably began with the fiftieth anniversary of 1942, when Prime Minister Paul Keating gave his celebrated speech at Kokoda the day after Anzac Day in 1992. This was the occasion on which he revered ‘the blood that was spilled on this very knoll ... in defence of the liberty of Australia.’⁹ Perhaps the entire Battle for Australia movement can be traced from that moment. This is at one level highly laudable: how could we not wish to remember the Second World War and recognise its significance in Australia’s national story? This new emphasis stresses not the Second World War as a whole, not Australia’s contribution to Allied victory against Nazism and fascism in the Mediterranean and Europe, but only Australia’s defence of itself.

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It would seem that the Battle for Australia movement is an example of historical nationalism, an interpretation, as Inga Clendinnen would say, being shaped to fit the needs of the future, not the evidence of the past. It is the product of the emergence of a school of history—and especially military history—that justifies the name ‘nationalist’. It promotes relatively unimportant events close to Australia over important events far away, purely on a rather simplistic calculus of proximity. It has become the new orthodoxy in Australian military history. The polar opposite is a view that sees Australia’s contribution in the context of a global war and an international coalition against intercontinental enemies, in an alliance in which Australia played its part as much as any and for longer than most. We might call this the ‘internationalist’ school of Second World War history. It has many proponents overseas though very few in this country.

In essence, the nationalist tendency is a matter of the heart, the internationalist approach a matter of the head. The Battle for Australia movement arises directly out of a desire to find meaning in the losses of 1942—let us all remember the terrible litany of Malaya, Rabaul, Singapore, Ambon, Timor, Java and all the massacres and misery that followed. There is an understandable desire to make those sacrifices directly relevant to Australia. That explains the need to find a satisfying national drama in the approach and defeat of a deadly Japanese thrust. A global war fought for abstract democratic principles, as a small part of a great Allied coalition, in which the most significant battles occurred far away, satisfies only a part of the need felt by many Australians to find meaning in this war.

I suggest that this focus on 1942 is a result of the Australian concentration on a war essentially fought in and close to Australian territories in Papua New Guinea. Australia’s withdrawal from the broader war, especially in Europe, deprives us of a sense of having contributed directly or substantially to the defeat of Nazi Germany—notwithstanding the decisive contribution Australia made to the war in the Mediterranean in 1941 and 1942 and its efforts in the air war over Europe. The Battle for Australia bequeaths us a partial memory of the most important war in which Australia has ever been involved, a war that truly did save the world as we know it.

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Our national memory of 1942 is suffused by emotion. That ‘memory’, though, is not simply a matter of pitting veterans who ‘remember’ a battle for Australia against younger ‘historians’ who challenge that belief. The Battle for Australia movement has garnered a coalition of old and young, veterans and descendants, journalists and writers, and sponsors from across the political spectrum. They have been animated by the highest motives—a desire to acknowledge those who served and suffered and a need to acknowledge that deaths and sufferings mattered in a war too often marked by futile losses, defeat and disaster. Historically I think they’re wrong; emotionally I share their desire to make sacrifice meaningful.

It needs to be said that this is not the first epic of threat and salvation that Australia has seen. Professor Joan Beaumont of Deakin University has been comparing Australia’s memories of the World Wars and promises to illuminate a phenomenon we all-too-often take for granted. She has shown, for example, how for about forty years it was accepted that the Battle of the Coral Sea ‘saved Australia from invasion.’¹⁰ The decisive Coral Sea battle (in May 1942) has now been subsumed into the Battle for Australia. Now we are told that the struggle for national survival continued into 1943, and even until the war’s end. Professor Beaumont reminds us that history is malleable, not static; our feelings guide our understanding as much as does the evidence we consult.

The new Battle for Australia movement proposes what is, in fact, a ‘revisionist view’. Of course all history is revisionist; fresh questions and new evidence will always revise accepted understanding. But the term is widely used, sadly, as a term of abuse for uncongenial ideas—unsafe ideas, perhaps. Some of its proponents, who assume that we have always believed that there was a Battle for Australia, might be surprised at that. Yet the fact remains that the Battle for Australia is a new way of looking at this period. Despite its brief appearance as a propaganda term in wartime, the idea of a Battle for Australia is of recent date. Only two books use the term as a title, both published in the past two years.¹¹ The National Library’s catalogue lists a further eight books under the keyword term, but they are all part of the ‘Battle for Australia’ series written and published privately by

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W.H.J. (Bill) Phillips of Coffs Harbour. Still, despite its absence from authoritative histories, it is clear that the idea has appeal, and we need to explore rather than merely dismiss it.

So the Battle for Australia movement seeks to supplant an accepted view with a more recent interpretation. In this case, I am not, as some of my critics have alleged, a ‘revisionist’. I am, if anything, a reactionary—at least intellectually. I am trying to resurrect or salvage an older interpretation, the one put by official historians who did not endorse the idea of a ‘Battle for Australia’.

You can see my problem. Except for a few wartime propaganda booklets, this idea fell out of use for fifty years; it simply does not figure in general histories of Australia or in specialist studies of the Pacific War. Then it becomes current again over the past decade. But why? Is there a basis in history for the revival of this concept?

Let me remind you of the context of John Curtin’s 1942 speech in which the phrase ‘Battle for Australia’ first appeared. He gave this speech the day after the fall of Singapore and three days before the bombing of Darwin. It was not a judgment upon what had occurred, it anticipated what he thought would occur. It was almost a prediction. Curtin, a man passionately devoted to his people, for justifiable and understandable reasons feared that the fall of Singapore—believed to have been the keystone of imperial defence in Asia and Australasia—would open a struggle for the possession of his homeland. Or so it very reasonably seemed at the time.

What followed was the Pacific War’s greatest crisis, for both sides. The Japanese conquered South-East Asia, occupied half of the Pacific Ocean and advanced to India’s borders and to within a few miles of Port Moresby. After a series of epic battles—in the Coral Sea, in Papua and the Solomons, and in the Central Pacific around Midway—the Allies at last wrenched the initiative from the Japanese. From late 1943, Allied forces finally began a series of counter-offensives that, beginning in New Guinea and extending to the Central Pacific and Burma, took Allied forces to within striking distance of Japan itself. Its armies isolated and starving, its merchant marine destroyed and its home islands devastated, Japan finally surrendered when the Soviet invasion of Manchuria and the detonation of two atomic bombs finally persuaded its hitherto intractable leaders that defeat was inevitable.

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Australia, a nation feeling justifiably threatened with invasion, mobilised its military, industrial and civilian resources, accepted American aid and MacArthur's command and confronted the Japanese in the South-West Pacific. Alarmed by the crisis, Australia largely withdrew from the broader struggle, concentrating on the liberation of its territories and on operations on adjacent islands.

So while Australians played a substantial part in the battles of 1942, there was no 'Battle for Australia', as such. As it turned out, Curtin was wrong. There was to be no such battle, not as he envisaged it. Thank goodness.

How dare I say this, some of you may ask. I can assure you, I am not the first. I take my cue from official historians Gavin Long, Dudley McCarthy, Lionel Wigmore and Paul Hasluck. If *they* did not endorse the idea of a 'Battle for Australia', then we need to be convinced before we do.

The way in which proponents of this view have constructed a revisionist 'Battle for Australia' suggests that the real battle for Australia is a contest for an important part of the national historical imagination. The extent to which the Battle for Australia is now becoming accepted and fostered means that we cannot simply dismiss it as untenable. We need to take the Battle for Australia interpretation seriously, to consider why some want to endorse it. Further, we need to consider how we can live with this emotion and ask what purpose it might serve.

In doing so, we need to be wary of the myths and misunderstandings which have accumulated around this event. The first Darwin raids, for example, were undertaken to support the Japanese conquest of Timor. They did not prompt Curtin's celebrated turn to the United States. They did not herald invasion. They did not result in a thousand Australian deaths, as is now claimed. Of the 250 victims of those first two raids, very few were in fact Australian. The largest single group were the 188 American sailors killed aboard the destroyer USS *Peary*, while most of the rest were British Empire merchant seamen. Most of the Australians killed were civilians—merchant sailors, the oft-abused wharfies, the PMG telegraph girls killed in the Post Office, and Daisy Martin, the Administrator's Aboriginal servant girl. Of the 250 dead, only eighteen were uniformed members of the Australian services; the only Darwin dead to be commemorated in this memorial. I mention this because too often Australians have become impassioned about the '250 [or more] Australians killed in Darwin'.

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My aim is not to diminish the individual tragedy of these people's deaths, but we do need to understand them in perspective. Darwin's significance is largely symbolic rather than strategic. The damage at Darwin, though widespread, did not materially hinder Allied attempts to halt the Japanese conquest of the Netherlands East Indies, which was a lost cause anyway. Yet looking at it from a specifically Australian stance tends to inflate its significance, especially symbolically. The problem is that proponents of the Battle for Australia tend not to distinguish between the reality and the representation—they confuse history as what happened with history as it is popularly remembered.

There are several problems with the idea of an actual Battle for Australia.

One is that the idea conflates several different Japanese initiatives into a grand plan aimed at Australia. Japanese air commanders in the East Indies fought an air war over northern Australia as part of the occupation of Timor and the Netherlands Indies. Naval commanders in Rabaul or Truk embarked on submarine campaigns to support operations in the South-West or even central Pacific. Meanwhile, operations in Papua proceeded unrelated to either. All of these operations are represented (and, it has to be said, exaggerated) to imply a direct, actual and significant Japanese threat. In fact the Japanese war effort was chronically fractured. Its defeat stemmed partly from its commanders' inherent inability to co-ordinate plans or services.

The concentration on a defensive 'Battle for Australia'—as if the Japanese were actively trying to take Australia—diminishes the emphasis that informed commentators place on the Allied counter-offensives that dominated the second half of 1942 and beyond. David Horner, who quotes Curtin's 16 February speech to show how seriously Singapore's fall worried him, strongly makes this point. In his chapter in the Memorial's 1988 'Bicentennial' book, Horner makes clear how in early 1942 the Curtin Government's intention was 'to carry the fight to the Japanese just as soon as forces became available'.¹² In the event, almost all Australia's fighting from mid-1942 arose from Allied counter-offensives rather than from defending Australia directly.

There is also the problem that, at its most extreme, this 'Battle for Australia' is virtually a synonym for the entire Pacific War. Some versions of the Battle for Australia narrative end with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. The atomic bombs were not dropped in

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defence of Australia. Here, Australian particularism runs riot. Even if we take the Battle for Australia to have occurred as portrayed, surely it can only be justified as running between, say, the Japanese invasion of Australian New Britain in January 1942 to MacArthur's assurance that the danger had passed in June 1942. Curtin's belated public acknowledgement that an invasion threat had passed, in June 1943, comes a year too late to be tenable.

One of the curiosities of the Battle for Australia movement is that it represents the campaigns in the South-West Pacific as being neglected in favour of the war in the Mediterranean. This is clearly unsupportable. Think of the flood of books on the Papuan campaign—Professor Hank Nelson reckons that about 3000 pages have been published on Papua since 2002 alone—and compare it to the handful published about, say, Alamein, a battle fought at exactly the same time.¹³ The South-West Pacific campaigns of 1942 are obviously not neglected—indeed, they represent a staple of Australian military publishing.

Then there is the problem that only Australians recognise the Battle for Australia. The Japanese, it must be said, do not use the term; whatever they thought the campaigns of 1942 were about, they were not for Australia. Nor do British and American historians see the war, even in our part of the world, in such narrow terms. For example, Hedley Willmott, the author of a magisterial sequence of books minutely examining Japanese and Allied strategy in 1942, simply does not recognise any such view of the war. Allied strategy in a global war cannot be constrained within a national perspective.¹⁴

Then there is the problem that it is based on one of the most tenacious myths of 1942, the idea that the Japanese planned to invade Australia. There is no doubt that the Japanese could not have invaded and decided not to; when we focus on more than Australia we realise how the scale of Japan's war of conquest in China made an opportunist advance in the south impossible. The evidence for the 'invasion' claim is weak. Assertions made on the basis of this evidence are highly tendentious and circumstantial, heavily reliant on hearsay and supposition. Acting under the residual effects of wartime propaganda, many Australians assume that a threat which was said to have existed in 1942 was real. Many accept spurious evidence—notably the supposed existence of 'invasion money'—to support their belief.

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However, we need to be careful in de-bunking this myth. I acknowledge that 1942 looks different in, say, Caloundra than it does in an archive in Canberra. In 1942 it was entirely understandable to suppose that, having conquered South-East Asia so swiftly, the Japanese would keep going. Indeed, the Government (which knew no better) fostered this belief. Not to have faced the real threat would have been irresponsible. In 1942 it was reasonable to believe that invasion was imminent. In 2006 that belief is untenable—the evidence shows without doubt that while the Japanese High Command considered an invasion, it decided against one. It decided that invasion was impossible and never had the opportunity to change its mind. We need to be careful not to imply that Australians in 1942 were wrong to hold this belief—they clearly weren't—but in 2006 we cannot continue to talk about Japanese plans or intentions to invade Australia in 1942 when there is no evidence for such plans, and much evidence to show that none was planned.

Again, this is not Johnny-come-lately 'revisionism'. Read the official histories of several nations. My colleague, Dr Steve Bullard, has just translated the relevant Japanese histories and they corroborate British, Australian and American accounts. Read Hedley Willmott's 1983 study of Japanese strategy early in 1942, *The Barrier and the Javelin*. He documents the divisions plaguing Japanese Army and Navy planning staffs, and how the attack-on-Australia option was dead by the end of January 1942—before the fall of Singapore. In over forty years no one has shown this view to be unwarranted. Indeed, if you read the authoritative studies that followed the official histories, such as David Horner's *High Command* (published in 1982), you find that those in charge knew that the danger of invasion ended not in mid-1943, when Curtin admitted it publicly, but in June 1942, when the Advisory War Cabinet accepted that invasion was unlikely and when MacArthur told Curtin that Australia's security was 'assured'.¹⁵

That is not to say that had events gone differently Australia would never have faced an actual threat. Had the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway been lost, had Australian and American forces failed to regain the initiative in the Solomons and Papua, then things might have gone differently. But history deals with what happened, not what might have happened. The

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fact is that there was a potential Japanese threat in 1942, a decision was made not to invade and no further opportunity presented itself. We can only remember what actually happened.

It needs to be said very clearly and explicitly that in criticising the idea of a Battle for Australia I am in no way diminishing the sacrifice or achievements of those Australians who served, suffered and especially those who died in the war years. As I have said repeatedly, those who risked and gave their lives for the Allied cause in 1942 deserve the highest honour—the respect that they are accorded here at the Memorial.

We need to be wary, however, of engaging in an unseemly bidding war in which those who claim the moral heights of alleged national survival trump those who concede that deaths in war are not always justified by victory. It is doing no honour to the dead to represent that they all died ‘defending Australia’ directly, or to imply that those who died directly in defence of Australia (in Darwin, for example) somehow acquire an additional lustre. Those who died over Berlin, or at Alamein or in the Mediterranean—in actions intimately connected with Allied victory but not remotely connected to the direct defence of Australia—are equally worthy of our regard. We also need to be mature enough to acknowledge that in the South-West Pacific many died in support of flawed plans (such as the defence of the Malay Barrier), in actions unrelated to the defence of Australia or from causes unrelated to battle. Yet the fact of their deaths in support of the great cause for which Australia fought makes their deaths equally worthy of remembrance.

So if we are not to re-cast our remembrance around a Battle for Australia, what should we remember?

I would argue that the Second World War should of course be remembered on the same plane as the Great War. I am not arguing that Gallipoli should be accorded a primacy—tomorrow [11 November 2006] we remember all Australians in all wars. Let us remember the Second World War, but let us not unduly accord privilege to one theatre of war over another. We share a desire to honour those who served and died, but let us not misrepresent the significance of that service and sacrifice.

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By all means let us choose a day to remember the dead of the Second World War. Various anniversaries are proposed—recently the RSL's National Congress resolved to mark a Kokoda Day in November. The anniversary that most Battle for Australia protagonists seek to mark, in the first week of September, is in my view a fitting *date*. But they conceive of the event and the reason too narrowly. The present Battle for Australia commemoration is the first Wednesday in September: the anniversary of the end of the fight at Milne Bay. That was indeed a significant action, when a small force of Australian Militia and AIF troops, supported by Australian air and naval forces, and some Americans, defeated a Japanese attempt to establish a base in support of their designs on Port Moresby.

Coincidentally, though, this is also more-or-less the anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War for Australia, as well as the anniversary of its end. On 3 September 1939 Robert Menzies announced Australia's entry to the war, and on 2 September 1945 Australia's representative signed the surrender document aboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay.

I would argue that Australians *ought* to pause, to reflect and remember on 3 September each year. Let us do so in memory of all of those Australians who helped to fight Nazism and fascism in Europe and militarist aggression in Asia. Let us remember those who gave their lives for the freedom of the millions who actually were occupied and oppressed by Germany and Japan, and not in memory of a 'battle' that did not actually occur in the way it is said by some to have done. The sacrifices of all Australians in the Second World War helped to ensure that Australians inherited the society we cherish today. That seems to be a legacy of much greater significance and one worth remembering. Let me remind you of the reasons Robert Menzies gave for Australia's decision to go to war in 1939.

A week before the war's outbreak, as the European crisis deepened, Menzies had told the nation, 'in plain English', that 'the destruction or defeat of Britain would be the destruction or defeat of the British Empire'—he gave it a capital E—'and would leave us with a precarious tenure of our own independence'. In his 3 September broadcast—the one from which everyone remembers the phrase about 'melancholy duty', but little else—he

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again detailed the reasons why the Australian Cabinet had decided to act. The aggression of Hitler's Germany had made it plain—'brutally plain', he said—that if it went unchecked 'there could be no security in Europe and no just peace for the world.'

Menzies appealed to principles that his listeners shared: 'honest dealing, the peaceful adjustment of differences, the rights of independent peoples to live their own lives, the honouring of international obligations and promises.' He affirmed that 'where Great Britain stands there stand the people of the entire British world'—a world that Australians then felt they belonged to. Yet his appeal was not simply to imperial loyalty: it was also an appeal to democratic principles. It was, as the official historian Paul Hasluck wrote, 'more than anything else an Australian decision.' These principles remind us that the Second World War began as, and remained, a crusade for the values at the centre of Western political culture: political liberty and tolerance—freedom as we understand it.

This link between Australia and what the Allies fought for has increasingly been lost in early twenty-first century Australia.

As we approach the seventieth anniversary of the war's outbreak, the Second World War against Nazi Germany and fascist Italy is increasingly being seen as a distant imperial war, one largely fought in (and only concerning) Europe, remote from Australian interests or involvement: the usual phrase is 'somebody else's war'.¹⁶ The war with Japan is increasingly being seen as the most important part of the war. Not because it entailed the oppression and then the liberation of millions of Asians, but because the war touched Australia's shores. This re-interpretation of the war, which has been shaped to the point where it has now been given a new name, is unjustified. It emphasises an exaggerated interpretation. It separates us from the broader war rather than connects us with it, in a sort of historical isolationism.

So, was there a Battle for Australia? No: not in the literal meaning of the term.

I would argue that we should indeed always remember that between 1939 and 1945 Australians mobilised to fight for values that we still hold dear today. In both Asia and in Europe, Australians made a clear contribution to Allied victory, to the defeat of oppression and to the restoration

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of the international rule of law. Just as the conflict was a global war, so Australia's response was global. That gives a longer-lasting and more secure claim than to a concentration on a perceived threat to Australia itself.

In preparing this address I waited eagerly for the latest book to appear on Australia and the Second World War, Michael McKernan's *The Strength of a People*. Michael's book is not, I would have to say, the book I would write. It is written in his inimitable style, letting vignettes of individuals carry the story, often people he knew, met or admired: Beryl Beaurepaire (née Bedgood, whom we recall warmly as our former Chairman of Council), Ralph Honner and John Curtin. *The Strength of a People* tells an unashamedly Australian story, though reining in its nationalism, rarely adopting the strident tone of an historical barracker. Reading it, I was interested to note two things. First, Michael also does not adopt, does not even quote, Curtin's 'Battle for Australia' speech. Second, he ends with a strong endorsement of the argument I have just put. Recalling an exhibition at the Memorial of drawings by children who mostly died in Auschwitz, Michael mused that:

... 'and they did, indeed, fight for a better world' ...

To liberate people in captivity everywhere and to prevent the domination of the world by evil men and evil ideologies: that was why Australian men and women gave themselves to the war, and were prepared to give their lives. This was the noble cause for which Australians fought ...

He writes, in conclusion, 'and they did, indeed, fight for a better world'.¹⁷

I would argue then, that the Battle for Australia is a commemorative phenomenon that exists in our hearts, reminding us of Australia's contribution to freedom's war long ago. But it is Australia's part in the wider war that counts, not the undue concentration on a battle that did not actually occur.

Inga Clendinnen describes historians in two ways. They are, she says, 'the custodians of memory, the retrievers and preservers of the stories by which people have imagined their ... lives'. At the same time they are 'the devoted critics of those stories'. This address reflects that two-fold task, especially in this place. What I have presented has been, I hope you will agree, rooted in a devotion to the idea of the Memorial as a place of scholarship inspired by remembrance and as a place of remembrance informed by scholarship.

ENDNOTES

- 1 I am grateful to those who've commented on drafts of this address, particularly the Director, Steve Gower, Dr Mark Johnston, and members of the Military History Section.

- 2 Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942–1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ACT, 1970, p. 70.
- 3 Argus, *While You Were Away: A digest of happenings in Australia 1940–1945*, Melbourne, VIC, 1945.
- 4 John Robertson, *Australia at War 1939–1945*, Heinemann, Melbourne, VIC, 1981, p. 93.
- 5 Andrew McKay and Ryoko Adachi, *Shadows of War*, Indra Publishing, Melbourne, VIC, 2005, p. 226.
- 6 <http://www.users.bigpond.com/battleforAustralia/commemoration.html>, consulted 16 October 2006.
- 7 <http://www.battleforaustralia.org.au/council.html>, consulted 16 October 2006.
- 8 Inga Clendinnen, *The Quarterly Essay*, 'The history question: who owns the past?', Black Inc., Melbourne, 2006.
- 9 James Curran, *The Power of Speech: Australian Prime Ministers Defining the National Image*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2004, p. 220.
- 10 Joan Beaumont, 'Australian Memory and the US Wartime Alliance: The Australian-American Memorial and the Battle of the Coral Sea', *War & Society*, 2004, Vol. 22, No. 1.
- 11 They are: Rex Ruwoldt's 2005 *Darwin's battle for Australia*, Darwin Defenders 1942-45 Incorporated, Clifton Springs, Vic, and Tim Gurry and Robert Lewis's 2002 'electronic resource' *Battle for Australia*.
- 12 David Horner, 'Australia under threat of invasion', in Margaret Browne and Michael McKernan (eds), *Australia Two Centuries of War and Peace*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1988, p. 258.
- 13 Hank Nelson, 'Kokoda: on the Track again', Joint Seminar: Pacific and Asian History, State Society and Governance in Melanesia, ANU, 26 October 2006, footnote 19.
- 14 H.P. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies to April 1942*, Orbis, London, 1982; *The Barrier and the Javelin: Japanese and Allied Strategies February to June 1942*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1983; *The war with Japan : the period of balance, May 1942-October 1943*, SR Books, Wilmington, 2002.
- 15 David Horner, *High Command*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982, pp. 194-95.
- 16 John Pilger, *A Secret Country*, Vintage, London, 1992, p. 151.
- 17 Michael McKernan, *The strength of a nation: six years of Australians fighting for the nation and defending the homefront in WWII*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2006, p. 409.

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