

This is a personal statement that I am making to the IPAN Inquiry that is exploring the case for an independent and peaceful Australia. I have been opposed to war and warlike preparations for most of my life and although my parents, as Christians, were influential in laying the moral foundations for this position, the more influential and persuasive reason is the lessons taught in history at the state schools I attended. Let me repeat that. History lessons taught in secondary schools convinced me that war was a catastrophic failure of relations between states; and while WWI involved a tragic loss of life of combatants, WWII swept away whole civilian populations in what had become total war.

#### Family Background

My great uncle's name, Harvey James Cook is engraved on the Memorial wall in Canberra. His death in a machine gun unit at a young age on the battlefields in Europe in the Great War ("the war to end wars") has reverberated through the generations in my family. My father was born the year after war's end and was named after Harvey. My younger brother, Harvey, also took his name. We have a small wood and glass display case that has been kept in the living rooms of my family since 1918. It contains some objects from the trenches – a small mirror encased in metal, some fragments of stained glass from a destroyed church, a metal German match box, a post card or two – odds and ends that were returned to his grief stricken parents. We grew up in the shadow of this tragic loss.

My father enlisted in the Australian navy in WWII and served in the Pacific with the American fleet. Afterwards he became a peacemaker for the rest of his life. The war altered the course of his life. He abandoned his qualifications in commerce and law and studied divinity and was ordained in the Methodist Church. His work with inter church aid and refugees took him to engage in humanitarian work in Vietnam. He became a trenchant critic of the war and an activist in the Moratorium. I questioned my Dad about his enlistment (years later in his old age) and he said he felt he had no alternative but to fight because there was some real chance that Australia was directly threatened by the Japanese military.

#### Lived Experience

My parents agreed to take me to an anti war rally and march in 1965. I was 10 years old. We assembled in Hyde Park in Sydney and then marched down to Kings Cross. There were only a few hundred of us. I was frightened by angry drunks who yelled abuse at us from a pub as we walked peacefully with our placards. I kept my sign for many years after in my bedroom.

When I was 15 I went with my father and church group to a Moratorium march in Sydney on 18 September 1970. Many thousands assembled for speeches in Wynyard Park and then moved onto York Street to march to Town Hall. The very large crowd of peaceful marchers was attacked by "flying wedges" of police. They pushed and shoved their way through the crowd. A young woman fell to the ground screaming. A very old man in a suit and wearing war medals was seized with both arms and punched by a policeman. I shouted "let him go you fucking bastards". I was grabbed by a policeman and my arm twisted up behind my back as I was marched to a paddy van and thrust inside. My mind was in turmoil. I had been arrested because I had sworn and could not comprehend how I was going to confess to my parents. We were taken to the old Phillip Street lockup, finger printed and placed in a smelly sandstone cell with a thick iron door. It was my first experience of a physical restraint and came as a shock that you could be locked in. I was bailed by my father hours later. Next day I read the newspaper account of the events I had experienced personally. It presented a most unsatisfactory and uncritical account of what had been police violence carried out against a

peaceful march. I have ever since been a “media junkie” and followed the news and current affairs with a critical eye ever since. Much was made at school of the need to develop “critical thinking” (along with the “scientific method”) but there could have been no greater lesson than that I learned at the hands of police more than 50 years ago.

It is trite to say, but true, that the Vietnam War was viewed and assessed on TV in our lounge rooms. There were the horrific images of burning villages and people, of devastated landscapes and ruined cities. We were there, not because there was a threat to Australia on any realistic assessment but because it was part of our commitment to the military alliance with the United States. The popular slogan of the war party was “All the way with LBJ”. Then there were the atrocities like Mai Lai, the carpet bombing of cities, the widespread and unspeakable use of napalm (even on children) and defoliants on forests.

The US and its allies waged war with the most advanced military technology against a largely peasant society on the pretext that we were halting the downwards thrust of “communism” (the “domino theory”) when in fact, as my Dad explained, it was the continuation of a anti imperial and civil war and that the Vietnamese had fought for their independence from China and would never concede their national sovereignty.

What did I learn at school?

I was very fortunate to enjoy the study of history and had the benefit of several great teachers. In the 1960’ies the state school system was much underfunded and while the buildings were dilapidated, the teaching was first rate. Then there was the curriculum itself. It was impossible to study effectively without drawing lessons from that study. That was what we were supposed to do. In the early years of high school we studied the industrial revolution, the age of European exploration, social revolutions and imperialism. As I have stated above, we were encouraged to think critically, to question and probe for the evidence to back up assertions or belief. There was no official, state sanctioned, version of history (except for the blind spot covering the conquest and settlement of Australia itself) and the values underpinning the courses were humanitarian and democratic in tenor.

The most significant curriculum, that made an enduring impression on my thinking, was the Level 1 Modern History course on the establishment and fall of the Weimar Republic. How did a great and civilised nation like Germany slide into fascist barbarism in a few short years after their catastrophic loss in WWI? How did the world find itself at war again after the lessons learned in WWI? Why did the League of Nations fail so abysmally to secure peaceful means to resolve disputes? I did not realise it then, but the curriculum was selected and structured by men who had been directly engaged as soldiers in WWII and that it was their clear intention to pass on to us the lessons so that they were not ever again repeated. It was a case of old men, teaching the young about the past, so that we might survive as a society and civilisation by not repeating the mistakes of the past.

We examined the origins and causes of WWI (conflict over trade, resources, territory, nationalistic ambition, ethnic tension and interlocking military alliances) and what was effectively its resumption a generation later in 1939. We examined the reasons for triumph of fascist forces over liberals and socialists in Germany. We examined the role of class in the unravelling of German democracy.

At the same time we were examining the great failures of civilisation in the twentieth century, in the Level 1 Ancient History course we were studying the history of the Peloponnesian War

two and a half thousand years earlier between Athens and Sparta and their alliances written by Thucydides, (one of the earliest historians who claimed to be writing as an astute and impartial observer). It was difficult not to draw parallels at the time between the ongoing Cold War between the United States and its allies and the USSR and its allies. As the long Greek war dragged on, desperation and hatred festered and atrocities against non combatants multiplied. Whole cities were put to the sword or enslaved. War breeds hatred and atrocities.

### Cold War/MAD

I cannot recall when I first came to know about the ever present threat of nuclear annihilation and the theory of MAD (“mutual assured destruction”)/ balance of terror. I do remember seeing the film Dr Strangelove in my teens and being shocked at the concept of MAD. Nor do I remember when I learnt of the destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima but I vividly recall seeing the photographs of devastation and terrible burns on people’s bodies. With the passage of time it seems unbelievable that any nation would drop atomic bombs on a city of civilians. I think the attitude of Westerners towards the Japanese was informed by extreme racism and hatred. Even my mother, whose father died as a result of war service in WWII, held strong feelings of animosity towards the Japanese for many years after the conflict ended and she was a loving and peace-loving person. I see a similar type of feeling directed towards Muslims, and more recently the Chinese, on internet social media sites. I have seen memes on line calling for the nuking of Mecca.

There is simply no sane justification for the continued existence of weapons of mass destruction that have the capacity to destroy most life on earth.

Just as the League of Nations failed to keep us from catastrophic war, so the post WWII United Nations appears to have failed to keep the peace. and Australia remains locked into a military alliance with the United States.

Iraq: the latest down payment of our premium

I marched in the biggest peace march in our history that took place in the lead up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The passionate desire for peace was totally ignored by the Australian government even though there was no basis for war and it was clear to all those except the “war party” that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction. Australia contributed to the “coalition of the willing” to keep the faith with the US. Iraq was wrecked in the long war that followed and hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed. In many respects we were like a tributary ally from ancient Greece that contributed warriors and war equipment at the behest of the overlord.

British Empire gives way to US Hegemony

The US has exercised hegemonic power over much of the “free world” since the end of WWII when it effectively replaced the British Empire as our principal ally. It has thousands of military bases and troops stationed in its allies lands, including in Australia. It is difficult to understand since the collapse of the USSR why the warlike preparations have continued in an effort to “contain” Russia. It has become increasingly evident that as China’s economic power grows the US intends to “contain” it through military means. It was not that long ago in historical terms that Australia was backing Britain in its hostile maneuvers aimed to “keep China British” (as Monty Python would have it).

Both Russia and China have very real security fears having been invaded and dismembered by foreign armies in relatively recent times – a horrifying national experience that has left millions of lives lost and deep scars on their national psyche. A premium is placed by their governments on peace, security and prosperity. Georges Clemenceau is quoted as say that “War is too important to be left to the generals”. I might add that it is also too important to be left to politicians. Where are the fierce advocates for peace, who have the wit and the will, to arrest to slide to catastrophe?

We took the land

I understand the elemental flaw in the Australian character that inclines us to the role of dependent and subservient ally. We see ourselves as a small, weak and underpopulated country occupying a large and indefensible continent. We came into existence as a colony – a component of the British Empire that the white man ruled. Our act of invasion and dispossession of the original inhabitants is all too fresh in our collective consciousness. If we can take what is not ours, so it can be done to us. There are hordes of Asians, particularly the Chinese (“yellow peril”) to our near north that threaten to take what we claimed by imperial fiat and then force. Our dark fears drive us into the arms of evil – acceptance of the possible use of nuclear weapons as our defence by the US, and a shameful abnegation of independence and sovereignty.

The way past powerlessness and frustration

It is hard to describe the sense of utter powerlessness and frustration that I feel in the face of the certain knowledge that the pre conditions for massive warfare are all in place (conflict over trade, resources, territory, nationalistic ambition, ethnic tension, water, climate change and interlocking military alliances) and that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the use of nuclear weapons (by accident or design). Australia could play the role of peacemaker and foster constructive and amicable relations with all nations including our neighbors. Australia claims to support a “rules based” international order but acts otherwise in concert with the US. We choose to lock ourselves into a military alliance that takes us to endless foreign wars. We have effectively abandoned constructive and purposeful use of international bodies designed to foster peace and understanding. The lessons that those long gone WWII vets who developed the history curriculum have been forgotten in the (not so imperceptible) slide towards war. Albert Einstein is often quoted as having said: “I don’t know with what weapons World war III will be fought, but World war IV will be fought with sticks and stones”. In my opinion Einstein was wrong: there will be no humans inhabiting a dead planet after World War III.

I welcome the action of IPAN in making the opportunity for citizens to make submissions on the critical need to Australia to abandon its warlike preparations and its bellicose history as part of the British Empire/US hegemony, and chart a new course of independence and peace. It is both a moral and an existential necessity. It is apparent from the great peace demonstrations I have participated in over the years that the people know what the politicians and military don’t: war is unhealthy for people and other living things.