

The Australian Government needs to reassess its agreement that allows the US Marines to “rotate” through Darwin, especially in the light of the expansionist nature of this agreement. The cause is straightforward: sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape against female members of the Australian Defence Force. And these occur at a time when such offences have reached epidemic proportions in the US and the Congress has mandated radical reforms.

Recent reports by SBS News, and subsequently analysed on this site by Bevan Ramsden, have uncovered and highlighted the Australian Government’s desultory response, including a refusal to exercise its duty of care to those who are prepared to ‘defend and serve their country.’

In summary form, these sources narrate complaints relating to three recent sexual harassment and assaults on female ADF members serving in Darwin alongside the US marine rotational contingency. Under any circumstances, civil or military, these behaviours are unacceptable; when they concern the actions by personnel of a foreign military presence on Australian territory, they are a travesty of what the alliance relationship with the US is held to be. Accordingly, given that the complaints are of a serious criminal nature, it is imperative that they are investigated to the fullest extent and the offenders prosecuted if the evidence so warrants.

Given also that the ADF is one of the largest employers in Australia and few in the population have little insight into the additional pressures, obligations, and responsibilities of women in the armed services, the government has been found as wanting in these cases as it has been in matters relating to similar behaviours in the Parliament of Australia.

The damage, furthermore, is not just to the immediate victims; it extends to their families and friends who witness, at relatively close quarters, a combination of official apathy and willed injustice. Both call for expressions of outrage but so far there is only silence. So long as this reigns the social trust that needs to exist between a nation and its professional defenders will be attenuated and the human capital essential to maintain it will likewise suffer.

In this context it should be recalled that, on 4 August 2021 Maggie O’Neill wrote an article on sexual assault which, to say the least, is profoundly disturbing: *Military Sexual Trauma Affects 1 in 3 Military Women – Here’s What You Need to Know*.

Notably, the article focused on the US military. O’Neill reports figures collected by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that 1 in 3 female personnel experience multiple sexual trauma (MST) whilst serving; it is 1 in 50 for male personnel. And these figures are likely to be understated because the data was collected from only those veterans who both access the VA health care and choose to report such incidents.

Another representation is from James R. Webb where he recounts a five-month RAND Corporation study on sexual harassment and gender discrimination. The findings: women were more likely to face ‘serious’ or ‘persistent’ harassment than their male counterparts - from the active-duty participants more than half of women soldiers reported being sexually harassed.

The most prevalent forms include – sexual advances, sexual talk, questions about their own sex lives, being ignored, mistreated, insulted because of their gender.

Honesty compels the admission that the ADF is not without fault. A report on 13 May 2021 stated that there was a 1% rise from the 6,236 reported sexual assault cases in 2019. But the main point, other than that such reported behaviour needs to be eradicated from the 'workplace,' is that it is shamefully consistent with the misogynist mindset and behaviour in Parliament referred to by Julia Gillard when Prime Minister.

Unfortunately, the current narratives which point sharply to the Australian Government's dereliction of duty, also point to institutional amnesia and/or willed ignorance. What is missing is any familiarity of the historical record before Prime Minister Gillard facilitated the 'rotations' of the US Marines to Darwin. Almost certainly this was a consequence of Australia's dependency on the US in matters of defence and national security, and the exuberance of wanting to celebrate the 60th anniversary of ANZUS by demonstrating Australia's ever closer commitment to the US.

While it is undeniable that Gillard experienced sexual harassment and possibly abuse in the workplace throughout her career, it was she who paradoxically set in place the conditions for the most recent accounts of sexual trauma to occur. She did this by first seeming not to understand the first principle of foreign militaries: they are not good house guests and the US military is no exception.

A simple Google research by the foreign policy and defence bureaucracies, or her advisers, would have alerted them (as if they didn't already know) the 'black hole' of sexual trauma (along with extremism and racism) which is endemic in the US military. Furthermore, and without difficulty, they would have discovered the work of US Army Reserve Colonel (retired), Ann Wright, a former diplomat and 29-year veteran of the US Army and Army Reserves. Her work, highly regarded and meticulous in empirical detail, documents an appalling landscape of predatory and violent sexual behaviour.

And it's a form of behaviour unbounded by geography. Indeed, there is quite a voluminous historical literature authored by researchers, scholars and journalists recording sexual abuse, harassment, which US military personnel have committed when in-country. Among the many victims are females from the general population, sex workers, and their own female personnel.

Okinawa, the Philippines, Germany, Japan, Thailand are but a few examples which can be cited and the accounts are harrowing. By way of one illustrative example, In 1995 three US servicemen – two marines and a sailor - abducted and raped a 12-year-old local girl.

There was public fury which was only exacerbated by the commander of US forces in the Pacific, Admiral Richard C. Macke, who suggested it would have been cheaper for the men to have hired a prostitute. The offenders were, eventually, tried in Japan but only after much protest and an emergency meeting between the US President, Bill Clinton, and Japanese Premier Ryutaro Hashimoto. All men were jailed – two receiving sentences of seven years and the third for 6 and a half years. Their families also had to make retribution according to Japanese law/culture.

More recently, a former marine raped and murdered a 20-year-old Okinawan woman: he serves a life sentence. Overall, there appears to be a slow and slight increase in court martials and imprisonment of such US military offenders but this is countered in so many cases because of the disincentives to report sexual assaults and the like and a general unwillingness

in the military to exercise the scrutiny they deserve. This is particularly the case when the alleged perpetrator is senior to the complainant in the command structure.

The reports which prompted this post outline a situation is that untenable under any heading. If Australia's alliance with the United States is understood as requiring silence on matters, criminal and dehumanising in every respect, then it also makes the Australian Government complicit in them, an accessory before, and after the fact. And when it comes to the claim that Australia and the US are natural allies through the sharing of "core values," is this an admission of pathology and guilt?