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A New Britannia (1970)

Aborigines, Race and Racism (1974)

Social Sketches of Australia 1888-1975 (1977)

Australia's Media Monopolies

by
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Widescope

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Chapter Eight

The World the Media Made

1

Monopoly capitalism is an era of war and of revolution.

So far this century, imperialism has given rise to two world wars and a host of so-called limited wars from the Boer War in South Africa in 1899, through China, Spain, Korea and Vietnam right back to southern Africa in 1977. The death toll is well over one hundred million people. War on this scale is not a vast accident. It is part and parcel of the monopoly stage of capitalism, that is, of imperialism. The role of the media in these wars is an essential element in the ways the media serve capitalism. They have to lie in order to get people to kill each other. It is not a matter of this or that journalist being corrupt or lazy — it is a question of the needs of the capitalist system as a whole.

Yet the "other side" does sometimes get through. This is because the other feature of imperialism is revolution. From Russia in 1917, through China and onto Vietnam, revolutions led to the overthrow of capitalism. Every country has had some revolutionary experience. The capitalists of the world are united in their determination to stop further socialist victories. The media plays its part by presenting every aspect of socialist revolutions as vile and evil.

The world the media makes is distorted to uphold the interests of capitalism against socialism, as well as the interests of locally dominant capitalists against outside competition.

Horror stories about other countries are as old as war itself. Nonetheless, the Great European War, 1914-18, saw the birth of a virtual industry devoted to the deliberate invention of lies about Germany — Hun outrages of nuns and the boiling down of corpses for fat. The Australian government used a journalist,

Crichtley Parker, to make up atrocity stories for the local market. Australian newspapers were full of false reports about British victories. One writer pointed out shortly after the war started in August 1914 that:

It is a remarkable fact that the Germans have battered their way through Belgium against heroic resistance, have forced back the Allied army at the rate of nearly ten miles a day, have reached Paris, occupied Brussels, taken Liège and Namur, without, according to our cables, having won a single victory . . .¹

Wartime misreporting has been detailed in Phillip Knightley's *The First Casualty* (1975).

Writing in a 1928 issue of the *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, the New Zealand scholar, E. Beaglehole argued that the result of war propaganda had been "a loss of faith in one's fellow citizens, a poisoning of the wells of human feelings, a profound deadening of the spiritual life . . . cruelty masquerading as righteousness, cynical deception as justice." (p.107) Beaglehole's judgement could just as well describe the impact of the capitalist media, whether at peace or at war.

This chapter will not look at what is usually called war propaganda. Instead, it deals with class war propaganda. Although these are only a few examples, they give a good picture of the way in which media monopolies present the worldwide conflict between socialism and capitalism. The evidence is taken from the press because this is the most readily available surviving source. A survey of films, books, radio and television might alter the outlines, but not the substance of what follows.

2

Reporting of the Russian Revolution carried on the methods developed during the Great European War. The Bolshevik took the place of the Boche as the loser of all battles and the deer of all unspeakable frightfulnesses. Imperialist war and class war overlapped in time and space. According to the politicians and

¹ *Steads Review*, 12 September 1914, p. 795.

the press, Germany sent Lenin into Russia; the Bolsheviks then stabbed the Allies in the back by making a separate peace with Germany early in 1918, thereby forcing Allied armies to invade Russia against Germany.

When the war against Germany ended on 11 November 1918, the Allied armies in Russia not only stayed, but stepped up their attacks on the Bolsheviks. On 19 December, the British War Minister defended Allied (including Australian) intervention in Russia on the grounds of strangling Bolshevism. This reason had been there from the start. Inter-imperialist conflict in Russia did not stop with the end of the war against Germany. Each allied army tried to grab something for its own country. War and counter-revolution went hand in hand, but not to victory, although victories and atrocities were freely invented and solemnly published as gospel truth.

The most constant atrocity charge against the Bolsheviks concerned their treatment of women. It was widely reported that chastity had been abolished as a step towards class equality. Where the Germans had merely raped nuns, the Bolsheviks wanted the nationalisation of all women. The press more than fulfilled Marx's 1848 claim that because the bourgeois sees his wife as a mere instrument of production he naturally concludes that the common ownership of the means of production will set up a system of nation-wide prostitution.² In 1919, the Melbourne *Argus* reported "Forced Marriages in Petrograd" (11 January) and the "Abolition of Marriage" five weeks later. Most of the details of this all-Russian orgy run by a Bureau of Free Love came from Czarist refugees who set up in Helsinki "their own news agency to broadcast the prurient obsessions or fantasies of the dispossessed (free-love weeks, church brothels, enforced prostitution for girls of good family, lustful commissars, etc.)" just as they "quoted shares of non-existent companies on their own make-believe stock exchange".³ The market in women and property once again supported each other. Entire, if conflicting sets of Marriage Laws

were invented by anti-Bolsheviks and appeared in the Australian press as genuine decrees of the Supreme Soviet.

Anti-Bolshevik military victories were as freely distributed in Australian newspapers as women supposedly were in Russia. Local editors depended on foreign news sources such as the *New York Times* which reported at least ninety-one actual or impending collapses of Bolshevik rule in two years. The following list of headlines from the Melbourne *Argus* gives a good idea of what was told to Australians in 1919.

BOLSHEVIKS: FURTHER LOSSES —	2 July
BOLSHEVIK DEFEAT —	14 August
FURTHER BOLSHEVIK DEFEATS —	20 August
BOLSHEVIKS ADMIT LOSSES —	26 August
BOLSHEVIKS LOSE KIEFF —	5 September
BOLSHEVIKS LOSE ON ALL FRONTS —	24 September
BOLSHEVIK REVERSES —	3 October
BOLSHEVIK RULE COLLAPSING —	16 October

The strain of all these victories was too much for the anti-Bolshevik forces who themselves suddenly collapsed.

Leningrad's Kronstadt fortress saw some of the strangest events of this counter-revolutionary war. In 1919, the fortress was reportedly on fire from 19 June to 21 August, and then under attack by the British from 1 September to 18 October. Why Kronstadt did not fall every week, along with the rest of the town, remains a mystery.

The best comment on Australian press coverage of the Russian Revolution is still this spoof which appeared in the Brisbane *Truth* on 26 January 1919:

Envious of the startling newspaper "copy" the morning daylies were getting from Russia about the Bolsheviks, *Truth* cabled for despatches to Mr Hustleovitch Tellieski, the well-known Russian journalist, who, unable to see eye to eye with the bad Bolsheviks, is seeing them from afar, so to speak, and while himself residing at Stockholm, has a direct sleigh service between that city and Moscow. His couriers, who travel disguised as blocks of ice, have brought him the following items, which may appear to be a little contradictory, but are, nevertheless authentic:

Monday — Grand Duke Gotofftheroofsky has been foully murdered by a Social Revolutionary.

Tuesday — A Social Revolutionary has been killed by the Grand Duke Gotofftheroofsky.

Wednesday — All the Social Revolutionaries and all the Grand Dukes, in-

² K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 6. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976. p. 502.

³ D. Mitchell, 1919: *Red Mirage*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1970. p. 239.

cluding the famous Gotoffheroofsky, have been slaughtered by the Bolsheviks, who cut their bodies into small pieces for use as horse-feed during the winter months.

Thursday — The Bolsheviks have outraged 3,000,000 Lettish women.

Friday — It now transpires that Archbishop Rasputofski got all the women out of the Lettish province before the Bolsheviks entered, knowing that they would outrage them.

Saturday — The ex-Czar is officially stated to be dead.

Sunday — The ex-Czar is not dead, but has been elected shop delegate for the Deposed Despots' Union, now engaged in making false teeth for the Bolshevik members.

No further news has been received.

3

Australian press treatment of fascism and Nazism contrasts sharply with the treatment of Bolshevism. Mussolini was seen by the *Advertiser* as a strong man who saved Italy from "chaos and revolution" (12.11.32); Hitler "mellowed . . . from a firebrand to a peacemaker" during his first year in power. (2.2.34). According to a study of the period, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* attitude to Franco's fascist coup in Spain was "that a dictatorship was the best way to stop anarchy . . ." ⁴ In general, the Australian press supported fascism as a necessary, if unfortunate counterweight to Bolshevism. This friendly approach ended only if and when a new fascist regime upset British interests as Mussolini and Franco sometimes did in the Mediterranean. Even this critical note largely disappeared when the British pushed appeasement to its limits at Munich.

On 14 March 1938, Australia's Prime Minister, Joe Lyons, sent all Australian newspaper editors a copy of a British Foreign Affairs note. The note urged British editors to use self-control in their reporting of international events, and especially not to say unpleasant things about the leaders of certain unnamed European countries. Lyons added his own appeal to Australian editors:

⁴ E. Andrews, *Isolation and Appeasement in Australia*. Canberra: ANU Press, 1970. p. 99.

The Government is most appreciative of moderation which has been displayed generally by the Press of Australia in their comments on Eastern and European international situation . . . The government accordingly appeals to you to continue to lend your co-operation by observing strictly the spirit of request set out in telegram from Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.⁵

Only Fairfax's *Sydney Morning Herald* was going to need this reminder about responsibility and self-control because it was the only paper that moved towards a firm anti-appeasement stand. One or two others had doubts but they all fell over themselves to welcome the Munich agreement. As Eric Andrews says in his study, *Isolation and Appeasement in Australia*: "The incident reveals how little weight can be given to editorial opinion". (p. 143)

Sir Keith Murdoch certainly needed no urging from Lyons or anyone else in his endless search for a compromise with Nazism. Edgar Holt, later a Liberal Party organiser, recalled:

I was writing leaders for the *Sun-Pictorial* when Hitler invaded Austria. Shortly afterwards my editor agreed that I should write a leader suggesting that Czechoslovakia was next on the list. The piece was written when Sir Keith walked in to inquire what we were offering our expectant public. When the article was outlined to him, he said: 'No! We can't have that. Hitler has stated that Austria marks the limits of his territorial ambitions in Europe.'

Holt moved across to the *Herald* and on the day war broke out in 1939 Murdoch joyfully told an editorial conference that private sources assured him "that Polish delegates were on their way to Hitler and that peace would come dropping fast . . . At five o'clock that afternoon news of Hitler's invasion of Poland reached the office. Only Sir Keith was astonished."⁶

In his book of memoirs, *Passport*, the Australian journalist, Wilfred Burchett, says that a week or so later a Melbourne editor asked him for an article on Goering that would show him to be "The country gentleman, squishy type. Loves hunting and all that. Not one of the fanatics like Hitler . . .". Burchett refused and someone else had to present Goering as a "decent, human, un-Nazi sort of chap". (pp. 138-9) Burchett

⁵ NLA MS 2823/27.

⁶ *Southerly*, 18 (4), 1957, pp. 182-83.

does not name the paper but an article fairly close to the one he describes appeared in Murdoch's *Herald* on 10 November 1939 in which Goering was pictured as "what the British call a 'white man'" with "sporting instincts" and opposed to "the persecution of the Jews". (p.6)

Like capitalists all around the world, Australia's newspaper owners approved of fascism if they felt it was the only way to stop Bolshevism. Their attitude to the foreign policies of fascist governments followed the appeasement policies of the British and Australian governments whose main aim was to turn Hitler against Russia. The appeasors tried to do this by making Hitler feel safe in Europe so that he could attack the USSR; the anti-appeasors thought that Hitler would be forced into an anti-communist war if the rest of Europe stood up to him. The point is not that Murdoch was wrong about Hitler's war aims; the point is that Murdoch was wrong because he, like all the appeasors, wanted Hitler to do in 1939 what the Allied armies of intervention had failed to do in 1919, namely, strangle Bolshevism. This is why the *Herald* was so friendly towards Goering ten weeks after the war had started. Having failed with Hitler, the appeasors were still trying to find someone in the Nazi leadership who would make peace with Britain and France before marching into Soviet Russia.

4

"Will you tell us how many Chinese battalions go to a horde, or vice-versa?"

— Michael Davidson, of the London *Observer* to a press briefing officer in Korea.⁷

Accounts of China since 1949 provide disastrous examples of the Australian media's misreporting — disastrous to the best interests of the Australian people because this misreporting made it easier for local spokespeople of US imperialism, such as Menzies, to send troops to Vietnam.

The *West Australian* reported the proclamation of the People's Republic of China on the day after it happened which

⁷ Cited in P. Knightley, *The First Casualty*, London: Andre Deutsch: 1975. p. 342.

was 1 October 1949. The *Advertiser* and *Sydney Morning Herald* did not pick up the news till 4 October. Most of the papers were too busy reporting a Melbourne kidnapping to be bothered with side issues like the liberation of China. When they became interested, they quickly began pushing the view that China would try to conquer the rest of Asia. Denis Warner was already busy peddling the line that China would soon invade Korea and Indo-China. Editorials agreed that the "red peril" was closer than ever and that Australia should not recognise the new Communist government.⁸

Throughout the 1950s the Australian media were full of horror stories about the aggressive expansionism of People's China — from Tibet to Korea and down into South East Asia. In addition, there were constant reports about mass killings and oppressions — not to mention the death of Mao Tsetung at least once a year. By the beginning of the 1960s, the Australian media had taught many people that China was to blame for the war in Korea, for all the unrest in Asia and for the "rape of Tibet". Space will not allow the disproving of all these lies. Those who are interested can follow the issues through in Felix Greene's book on American misreporting of China, *Curtain of Ignorance*, published in 1964 but now out of print. Because the Australian media are largely dependent on foreign news services the lies detailed in Greene's book almost certainly appeared in Australian papers as well.

This section on China will deal with one central question — India's invasion of China in 1962 which was presented to the Australian people as a Chinese attack on India. Certainly by 1962, the media had convinced lots of Australians that China was warlike while India was simple-mindedly "neutralist" and peaceable. When disagreements over the China-India borders broke into open warfare, there was no doubt in the Australian media as to which country was the aggressor. If anything unpleasant happened in Asia it was always the fault of the Chinese Communists. There was no need to look into what was happening, still less into the claims made by China. "Everyone" knew

⁸ G. W. Bell, "Some Australian reactions to the Establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949". *RMC Historical Journal*, Vol. 3, 1974. pp. 47–50.

that China was always and everywhere aggressive and expansionist — weren't the media and politicians always saying so?

So successful was the complete misreporting of India's 1962 invasion of China, that Prime Minister Menzies used "Chinese aggression against India" as the basis of his defence of his government's involvement in Vietnam which he claimed was designed to stop the southward push of China between the Indian and Pacific oceans. For this reason alone it is worth showing the thoroughly misleading way in which the media reported India's China war. Of course, it will not be possible to give a full picture of the China-India borders and the disputes over them. That would need several books and an atlas of maps. Instead, the account given by the Melbourne *Herald* will be checked against itself for internal inconsistencies, and set against what actually happened for misrepresentations. The *Herald* is chosen because its central position in Australia's largest media monopoly meant that its reports were reproduced in Brisbane and Adelaide papers, as well as on television and radio.

Before turning to the *Herald's* version, it is worth looking into Alastair Lamb's scholarly book on *The China-India Border*, published by the Royal Institute of International Affairs in 1964. Lamb is an anti-communist and most unfriendly towards People's China. Yet the evidence which he built up forced him to admit that "one should, before dismissing out of hand the Chinese case, as so many western journalists now tend to do, try to see the situation through Chinese, as well as Indian spectacles". (p.3) This is what Lamb did and his conclusion was that the Chinese

have legitimate claims to a few small tracts of territory south of the McMahon Line and, perhaps (if there are such things as legitimate claims over desert country), to the northern part of Aksai Chin through which runs their road. All this amounts to about 7,000 square miles of territory out of a total Chinese claim of more than 45,000 square miles. For the remaining 38,000 or so square miles the Chinese case, on grounds of history, tradition, treaty, and administration is nowhere particularly good or worthy of the attention of a Great Power. In the Assam Himalaya, with the exception of the border tracts already noted, the Chinese claim can only be described as absurd; and there are reasons to suppose that the present Chinese Government regards it as no more than a bargaining

device. India, however, has refused to concede that China has anywhere along the disputed border any case at all. (pp.175-176)

In other words, the Chinese claim to the disputed land is partly legitimate and partly a normal negotiating tactic. The Chinese did not make up excuses for attacking India in order to steal part of India's territory. On the contrary, China's serious claims are soundly based on history, tradition, treaty and administration. The validity of these Chinese claims must be remembered when considering the *Herald's* treatment of India's China war in 1962.

The second important fact to bear in mind is that China has other southern borders all of which were settled peacefully between 1960 and 1963. As Lamb put it:

A survey of these other Chinese boundaries shows that China can make a peaceful boundary settlement with her neighbours, and can, as in the Sino-Burmese negotiations culminating in the treaty of January 1960, surrender claim to extensive tracts of territory. (pp.4-5)

Thus the border dispute with India was very unusual, a point which the *Herald* presented as proof of Chinese double-dealing. China was always in the wrong: it if fought to defend its territories this was aggressive expansionism; if it peacefully gave up disputed territories, this was a trick.

The truth about India's invasion of China was there for anyone to see in 1962. But it did not become acceptable in scholarly circles until Neville Maxwell published *India's China War* in 1970, now available as a Penguin book. Maxwell went to India in August 1959 as *The Times* correspondent and stayed until mid-1967. For the next two years, he was a senior fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London where he finished writing the book he had been researching for nearly ten years. During these years, Maxwell was shown "material from unpublished files and reports by the Government of India and the Indian Army . . . by officials and officers who believed that it was time a full account was put together . . ." (p.13) By the time his book was published Maxwell had rejected the view which he had sent back to *The Times* in 1962, namely, that the war was the result of an unprovoked attack by China.

When Maxwell's book reached Australia it was reviewed in the Melbourne *Herald* by Rohan Rivett under the heading

"How India led the world up the garden path". Rivett admitted:

It's sometimes unpleasant to find you've been led up the garden path. It's downright shaming when it's in your own field of study, work or knowledge.

I got a bloody nose — metaphorically — from this book of Neville Maxwell's.

Maxwell, a forty-four year old former Geelong Grammarian, would not gloat. He had been very wrong himself.

So had his colleagues of the foreign press corps in New Delhi.

So was Washington. So was Canberra. So was Moscow. Each of us reversed the correct roles of hero and villain, of belligerent and conciliator in 1962.

All of us were quite wrong.

In brief, Maxwell produces an overwhelming casebook of evidence that the only trouble-makers and provocateurs over the Sino-Indian border were the Indians.

After fifteen years of the Cold War, none of us who are professional observers should have swallowed all the codswallop that was spooned out to us. But we all did — almost to a man.⁹

This full and frank confession from one leading journalist was about as far as the *Herald* went in correcting the false view it had given of China which the following survey of the paper from September to December 1962 documents.

In the negotiations, which began long before the war was over, India demanded that the Chinese withdraw behind the positions that they held on 8 September 1962, thereby suggesting that the war had started on that date. In fact, the war started late in 1961 when India launched its "forward policy", that is, the movement of Indian patrols and posts into Chinese held territory.

The first report in the *Herald* was on 13 September 1962 (p.16) under the headline "China Thrust in India". There is nothing more until 26 September (p.6) when John Williams reported from Singapore (!?) that clashes on the China-India border were endangering Asia. Williams' report, while pro-India, noted that:

The Indians have established forward border posts, with mortars,

⁹ *Herald*, 9 January 1971. p. 29.

machine guns and grenades behind the Chinese posts thus threatening the Chinese supply routes.

Peking has warned that it regards the situation as serious and the Government-controlled press is running reports saying that fighting is still going on. India disagrees. It said yesterday that except for occasional exchanges of fire there had been no change in the border situation.

Not only were the Indians the ones who were moving forward, but they were trying to make out that nothing was happening in the hope that their aggression would pass unnoticed.

Nothing more appeared in the *Herald* until 4 October (p.15) when a New Delhi report repeated Williams' points about Chinese fears, Indian pretences about nothing happening and, most significantly, that "Observers said it appeared from the notes that Indian forces were trying to force the Chinese back by cutting off their lines of communications." Three more reports appeared on 6 and 15 October, all giving a pro-Indian view but nonetheless showing that it was India who was setting the pace in the conflict. These were the last hints of India's "forward policy" published by the *Herald* which promptly "forgot" what its own correspondents had been writing. Henceforth, the war was presented as a surprise attack by the aggressive Chinese.

After the lie that China was invading India, it was very easy for the *Herald* to invent war aims for China. On 3 November (p.4), Denis Warner was back with the theme he had first put in 1949 — that China's "attack" on India was only the start of its war against all of Asia. From New Delhi, Trevor Driberg also reported that the "Chinese May Try to Spread the Attack", but only to the border states of Nepal and Bhutan, not quite the conquest of Asia, but even the Chinese have to start somewhere. By 14 November (p.6) India faced a "Red flood". (How many waves to the flood?) Five days later an editorial saw the Chinese moving "into position for the future domination of India". Under headings about "Asia's Cold War is Building Up. China out to extend Influence", nothing more horrible than Chinese diplomatic activities were reported. Not quite the conquest we had been promised, but better than nothing. It was certainly an improvement on the unfortunate Reuters' correspondent who, on 18 December (p.6),

wrote that he had climbed to 16,000 feet but could see only snow-covered ridges; not a flood, a wave, a mass or a horde in sight.

During the war, the *Herald* carried several feature articles dealing with China. On 23 October there was one on the McMahon line, which falsely claimed that China had accepted the line before 1949. On the same day, there was a review of a book by the Dalai Lama headed "China Means to rule Asia". A month later, the *Herald* started to serialise the story of a British prisoner from Korea who at first chose to stay in China and was later allowed to leave. All three features were deliberately published to present People's China in an unfavourable light. The space which they took up shows that there was no shortage of room to publish background material on Indian aggression.

Five cartoons were published in the *Herald* about the war, all of them showing China as some kind of monster, either a dragon (27/10 and 1/12), a tiger (10/11) or a gross giant (10 and 28/12). This view of the Chinese as less than human was taken up in several "news" items. On 26 October (p.5) a headline announced that the "Chinese take No Prisoners". (Two months later there were brief reports of Chinese releasing prisoners.) On 1 November (p.5) a story headed "Losses No Worry to Chinese" claimed that

The Chinese are showing complete disregard for casualties . . . on one occasion the Chinese attacked a Gurka post with 10 waves of troops. The first seven were armed with automatic rifles. The last three were not armed at all. They were ordered to pick up the guns of their wounded or dying comrades.

On 19 November the Red Chinese were still advancing "in wave after wave, screaming and firing automatic weapons" — there now being apparently enough for everyone. Next day, readers learnt of "waves of Chinese troops . . . trampling on their own dead and wounded". (p.1) Denis Warner reported that "To Mao Tse-tung politics and the training of wild animals are related sciences", a point which no other student of Chinese Communism had noted — before or since. Editorially, the *Herald* began by welcoming "India's awakened sense of the Chinese Communist menace . . . [as]

. . . the important new factor in Asia". (16/10) Despite its claim that China's aims were limited and largely political (7/11) and that the war would be a long drawn-out affair (9/11), the *Herald* suggested that a nuclear attack might be the only answer. (20/11) This must have frightened the Chinese because on the very next day they announced that they would pull out. This puzzled the *Herald* editorial writer who admitted that it was "not easily explained". (21/11) Perhaps he meant that it was not easily explained away. Indeed, it took twelve days for the *Herald* to wake up to the fact that the Chinese cease-fire and withdrawal were not going to hand all of the disputed land over to the Indians. This was seen as yet another instance of Chinese double dealing and deceit.

Nowhere were Chinese intentions more misrepresented than over the withdrawal and ceasefire. Having thoroughly driven the Indians out of the positions they had taken under their "forward policy", the Chinese offered to stop fighting and withdraw. This was perfectly understandable if you accepted that India had been the aggressor. But if, like the *Herald*, you saw China as the aggressor who wanted to dominate India and conquer all of Asia, then a withdrawal after complete military victory was something of a problem. From being a "surprise" the Chinese offer quickly turned itself into a "trap". The *Herald's* man on the spot (New Delhi, not the Himalayas) was Trevor Driberg whose access to Mao's otherwise unknown "textbooks for Communist conquest of Asia" explained that the Chinese offer was "a political assault" which would be followed up by more "sledge-hammer blows". Denis Warner (1/12, p.4) solved the mystery by revealing that the "rapid withdrawal" was "intended to intimidate the Indians", who were presumably frightened by fast movement in any direction. Whereas the Chinese advance had called for front page banner headlines, the withdrawal used up no more than thirty-five centimetres of the *Herald's* valuable advertising space in the busy shopping month of December.

Yet the withdrawal was real "man bites dog" stuff. As Lord Caccia, Permanent Under-Secretary at the British Foreign Office said: "the Chinese withdrawal to their original lines after a victory in the field [was] the first time in recorded history

that a great power has not exploited military success by demanding something more." The *Herald* found a Chinese withdrawal barely worth mentioning — once it could no longer be pictured as a trap. As a trap it was front page news. As a history-making first, it was soon barely worth an inch on page five.

Some people would excuse the *Herald* and other media on the grounds that they only printed what their agencies in India sent them, and did so honestly and in good faith. If this is so, then the same criteria required at least one front page lead story, plus one lead editorial apologising for the months of false information. A book review hidden away on page 29 cannot wipe out the view that the *Herald* fostered about China's supposed attack on India and the myth of a general Chinese aggressiveness which was built around that "attack".

The media monopolies do not apologise for errors of this kind. At most, the *Age* and the *Canberra Times* have regular "we were wrong" items about the spelling of somebody's name. We are yet to see the *Age* carry even a small item saying: "From September to December 1962, the *Age* reported an unprovoked attack on India by China. We were wrong. The unprovoked attack was by India on China." While they are about it, the media might as well "correct" their reporting of the Vietnam war.

5

"The Gulf of Tonkin incident, which never occurred, was news, while My Lai, which did occur, went unreported."

Edmund Carpenter, *Oh, What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me* (p.20)

After the Pentagon Papers, Watergate, and US Congressional hearings into the CIA it might seem unnecessary to go back over the media's lies about the Vietnam war. Yet, despite the fact that almost everything which US government sources said about Vietnam have now been admitted and proven to be lies, a fair number of Australians still think that Vietnam is a

military threat to us and that the US government is trustworthy.

On Monday, 3 August 1964, the Melbourne *Herald's* front page lead told of an attack, by three small North Vietnamese wooden-hulled torpedo boats, on the USS Destroyer *Maddox* which received no damage or casualties. In an effort to make this unlikely story more believable the *Herald* published a photo of a more modern sort of patrol boat than the one mentioned in the text. Two days later, President Johnson ordered bombing raids on North Vietnam, and by the end of the week, the US Senate passed the Tonkin Gulf resolution which the US government used as a blank cheque to set about bombing all of Indo-China back to the stone-age — to quote one approving US spokesperson.

The *Herald* treated the Tonkin Gulf incident with great seriousness and had a front page editorial supporting the US action. The thing which puzzled some people from the first was why should three tiny wooden Vietnamese patrol boats attack the vastly stronger USS *Maddox*. Even in August 1964 there were questions about the reality of the whole affair. No such doubts troubled the *Herald's* editorialist who saw this attack by "puny naval forces" as a "reason for world alarm" since if the Vietnamese were reckless enough to do this they might do anything. They certainly needed to be taught a lesson in power politics.

Serious doubts were raised about the Tonkin Gulf affair in the US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee as well as in the Pentagon papers which were published in 1971.

Newspapers put lies on their front pages and corrections on back pages — if at all. In their own defence, editors might claim that a crisis like the Tonkin Gulf incident is news for several days while it unfolds, but proof that the incident never took place is news only once. The Tonkin Gulf incident might have lead to a world war whereas the evidence about its not happening is nowhere near as dangerous. To accept both of these defences is to admit to something terrible about the nature of "news". What editors would be claiming is that while lies are big news, facts are hardly news at all. Even if

editors never admit to this in so many words, they put it into practice every time they go to press.

The liberation of the rest of southern Vietnam in April 1975 provided Denis Warner with endless opportunities to excel his own records for self-contradictory reporting. After the collapse of the pro-American forces in the central highlands late in March, Warner noted that "The widely held assumption that the Viet Cong infrastructure had withered away does not appear to be correct." (*Herald*, 4 April) Widely held assumption on whose part? The only people who held such wide assumptions were dependent on Warner's *Herald* reports for their information. On the same day (5 April) another *Herald* man, Bruce Wilson, reported that for "Saigon — the end is near", Warner found evidence of "Fightback!" as "S. Viets Regain a Port". Warner's story opened bravely as "South Vietnamese Government forces today recaptured the port of Nha Trang, 446 kilometres north of Saigon". If they had pushed the 446 kilometres north from Saigon it would have been something of a fightback. Unfortunately, three paragraphs further on we find that the "Fightback!" forces "were themselves fleeing from Tuy Hoa" — more than a 100 kilometres north of Nha Trang, which was defended only by "Viet Cong sappers and escaped prisoners who had picked up abandoned government weapons". What should you call a retreating South Vietnamese force which meets "only slight opposition" when it captures a port in its retreat path? "Fightback"? Or, "Further Retreat"?

This sudden reversal of fortunes at Nha Trang so encouraged Warner that he set off in search of a general stratagem to run everything on its head. If a retreat can become a fightback, then a major military collapse can easily become a series of victories. Warner listed a run of battles early in March which were almost all won by the South Vietnamese Government troops whose victories were then carelessly thrown away — we are not told why — by the politicians when they decided to abandon Quang Tri province. The German High Command in 1918 also claimed that they were "stabbed in the back". Had Warner heard of them? His account was not without its saving "however", blessed word

"however", which means nothing and covers a multitude of sins. Warner's "however" concerned the fact that before the evacuation decisions were taken, "Ban Me Thuot had fallen in the Central Highlands and the disastrous retreat from Pleiku to the coast had begun". There was a military collapse, yet there was no military collapse.

Six days later, Warner was elated by the battle for Xuan Loc. Xuan Loc is only 40 kilometres from Saigon, whereas Nha Trang was 446 kilometres. Why he should be elated by the 400 kilometre advance of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops in six days, I cannot say. Having told us about the "Fightback" at Nha Trang, Warner next informed us that Xuan Loc is where "Thieu's men stand and fight". Forgetting his previous reports about victorious troops betrayed by politicians, Warner now claims that "This is the first time government forces have stood their ground since the swift and staggering communist offensive began a month ago". There was no military retreat, yet there was a military retreat.

Six days later, 17 April, Warner did not want to be "unnecessarily alarmist", but an attack on Saigon itself was possible within a matter of days. Twelve days earlier, the more impressive Bruce Wilson, reported to the *Herald* that the end was near for Saigon. Wilson must have been relieved that his hasty judgement was at last being confirmed by Warner with his years of experience as "an Indo-China specialist".

Still, all was not lost. On 22 April, Warner saw Thieu's resignation as "a desperate last minute bid to save South Vietnam from total military defeat". Warner reported that he had been engaged in behind-the-scenes moves to organise a new government. A strange role for a journalist. Isn't it only wicked Viet Cong sympathisers, such as Wilfred Burchett, who get caught up in politics and compromise their objectivity?

From Bangkok, Warner reflected on "The last days of Saigon" (*Herald*, 29 April) which he wisely did not stay around to see. He concluded that "Oh, yes, there were the corrupt, the evil, and the cruel, but Vietnamese society did not have a monopoly of that. The way of life was fun, even in the Hamlets." Sister Doris Betts, a nun who had spent the previous two years as head of the "Saigon Save the Children Fund" was

less well informed about both fun and Vietnamese society. She mistakenly thought that "the takeover in Vietnam was a good thing for the orphan children. They could not be any worse off than they were previously. The heads of the orphanages in Vietnam were corrupt and not all the benefits went to the children. I think the children will grow up now to be little communists, but at least they will receive better care and treatment" (*Herald*, 8 May 1975)

6

Because the misreporting of international events is so much part of the media's service to capitalism it will go on for as long as capitalism exists. This presents a real difficulty for those Australians who want and need to know what is happening in other countries. While there is no easy answer to this, there are some basic rules which anyone who is genuinely concerned to find out about world events should apply:

- no Australian daily or weekly commercial newspaper is worth bothering with;
- some overseas weeklies are worth following up on particular issues but none is so good as to deserve an airmail subscription;
- the *Guardian Weekly*, which includes sections from *Le Monde* and the *Washington Post*, is often worth chasing up in a library for an area of special interest. For example, *Le Monde* was able to give a not unreasonable coverage of the military aspects of the Indo-China war because of France's "detached involvement" as the previous imperialist overlord;
- whenever there is a crisis in a particular "enemy" country it is essential to get hold of at least one antidote to the media here. If the "crisis" involves China, read *Peking Review*, the official weekly of the People's Republic. It is well worth remembering that from September to December 1962, it was the openly propagandistic *Peking Review* that was correct and the jargon-free London *Times* that was wrong about which side was the aggressor in the India-China conflict.
- during the height of a "crisis" keep newspapers for at least

a week and then read the reports as a block to check for inconsistencies and outright lies.

These rules will not lead to "the truth", but they are the best solution open to most people who realise, as I. F. Stone put it, that "Every government is run by liars and nothing they say should be believed".