

## The Misfortunes of The Gulf War

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The USS Vincennes spent Christmas 1986 in Fremantle. I sat in front of a luminous screen at a battle control station, and watched Father Christmas approaching at indeterminate speed from somewhere near Geraldton. Trying to get a feel for the real thing I asked lots of no doubt elementary questions.

One response stuck in my mind: "It would happen awful God-damn quick." One impression was the vulnerability of the vessel to anything that actually passed its formidable defences. Another was the sense of shared values: respect for life and liberty, and for the rule of law and legitimate authority; and abhorrence of Rambo tactics.

That Vincennes's missiles should have taken 290 civilian lives is a dreadful tragedy. But when I heard the news my first feeling was relief that Vincennes had not been hit the way the USS Stark had been. We relate emotionally to those to whom we are closest, and I knew the Vincennes.

People who do not give starving Eritreans a second thought may break into tears at the sight of starving kittens. Things are made worse for the US by the fact that most people know about airliners, while not many can visualise the Vincennes.

But hand-wringing Iranians, Chinese and Soviets should be reminded of the countless people they have slaughtered intentionally. This event was not at all like the downing of the Korean airliner over Russia, if only because the Vincennes was at the crucial moment under attack by Iranian gun boats.

I am surprised who is suddenly a radar expert, but even if those who say the Vincennes should have distinguished between an Airbus and an F14 prove to be right they will have said nothing about the moral status of the United States.

The rule of law which applies inside democracies too seldom regulates international affairs, which are often no better than bar-room brawls. It is in the nature of brawls that force must be met with force and that bystanders can be hurt by people acting in self defence---even by the policemen.

Nations are no more morally equivalent than are the parties to bar room brawls. Some start brawls; others are caught up in them and yet others enter them to protect innocent parties or legitimate interests.

The plain fact is that the US is the moral superior of almost all nations, including bloodthirsty Iran and of all of the US critics so far. Australians should choose the company they keep so let us run objective tests on the United States.

First, let us look at what sort of society it is. Do American citizens get a meaningful vote? Have they any Gulags or concentration camps? Is there freedom of worship? Are there freedom of speech, association and travel? Is trial according to known laws by equitable procedures guaranteed? And the best test of all: are the refugees trying to get into the US or are they trying to leave?

Second, let us look at America's international record. Can anyone imagine the US avenging itself on any nation by killing a few hostages? The US has no subject peoples who would wish to call themselves independent nations---there simply are no US equivalents of Poland, Afghanistan, Kampuchea and the Baltic States.

The US has used its power to end the reign of despots in Granada and in Nazi Germany. It has backed flawed regimes against those that are worse---it did that in Vietnam. The best test of United States international intentions is the Rhineland army. So great was the trust that Western Europeans had for the US that far from asking it to go home they asked that it be increased. The US has made mistakes but since the Mexican war it has always got out.

What then is the US doing in the Gulf of Arabia? Most obviously it is there by right. The Gulf is international water through which US ships have right of passage. The US did not send its warships into the area until after the Iranians began sinking civilian tankers, killing the crews in the process. The Vincennes is there to uphold international law---which is usually a better policy than appeasement. Also the United States is trying to protect the world's economy.

Japan gets 60% of its oil from the Gulf, France 30% and Italy 50%. About 12% of the world's oil travels through the Straits of Hormuz. If it were to stop, and stay stopped, there would probably be a third oil shock, with profound effects on the prices of oil and other forms of energy.

This would have unfortunate direct consequences for the Australian balance of payments and living standards, but few people outside Australia would notice. One does not have to take the energy crisis nonsense seriously to believe that a reduction in the oil available would have untoward effects worldwide, and not only for Cadillac owners. A sharp slowdown in business activity would revive fears which were common only six months ago of another world-wide depression.

The big losers from depression would be the very poor. A few thousand of the poorest people in wealthy nations might die one by one of hypothermia but they would not make headlines. Hundreds of thousands in the badly run economies of Africa and Latin America might die of malnutrition and disease when international trade slowed down.

We should never underestimate the killing power of economic crises. The Straits of Hormuz are worth keeping open.

Democracy, especially in the US, means that all possible technical, tactical and political errors which might have contributed to the tragedy will be exhaustively discussed. Unless people's emotions get the better of them, this will help avoid future accidents.

And no matter what Presidents and peaceniks and the United Nations may \_\_say\_\_, absolutely no one except the looniest Iranians really \_\_believes\_\_ the Americans deliberately shot down an innocent airliner.

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