The Tyranny of Dissonance:

Karl Walling

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French imperialism and to recognize the “sacrifices” made by France’s armed forces in the Algerian War.

Sartre is biting in his psychological dissection of both torturer and victim. He maintains that torture stems from racial hatred and that only by believing an individual to be less than human can one justify torture.

We should be grateful for this timely republication of The Question, as it reminds France of a chapter in its history it has tried hard to forget. It is also evidence that fighting terrorists by sacrificing one’s humanity ensures not just a long war but an endless one.

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In this excellent monograph, Michael Evans argues that Australia has a distinctive way of war that focuses on continental defensive strategies. These strategies, for most of its history, have been abandoned by statesmen upholding Australia’s extended vital interests in a favorable regional and world order. In other words, Australian military strategists instinctively think about homeland defense, especially of the air and sea-lanes connecting Australia to the world, but their political leaders inevitably require them to adapt their strategies to intervening around the world as a member of coalitions of like-minded liberal democracies. In the United States, we call this a “policy-strategy mismatch,” but Evans calls it the “tyranny of dissonance,” with the interventionist tradition of Australian foreign policy pulling one way and the more isolationist official Australian military strategy pulling another. In that respect, Australia resembles Britain and the United States, which have also been torn between “splendid isolation” and foreign intervention in different periods of their histories.

Evans is as relentless as a fly at a picnic in the Australian outback in demonstrating his thesis, which makes his style sometimes just as annoying. He might have limited his analysis to a few archetypal case studies and so made his point with greater power in fewer words. He does prove, however, that both the geographical position and unique political culture of Australia have inclined its military leaders to treat their continent as an Anglo-Saxon island in the middle of Asia, one that needed to be isolated from the rough-and-tumble of regional and global conflicts. Time and again, however, Australia’s dependence on great powers (first Britain, then the United States), as well as the broader vision of Australian political leaders, compelled it to adopt a coalition strategy of “limited liability.” Both to avoid overextension and to demonstrate their bona fides to Australia’s allies, statesmen “down under” have consistently made limited commitments to imperial, later international, security in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Like more unilateral interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, these expeditions demonstrate that official Australian defense strategy is often out of sync with Australian foreign
policy. More precisely, these trends show that official strategy will probably have to be abandoned again, so Australians will have to develop the expeditionary means to back up their interventionist interests.

So, what are the Australians to do about this tension between their cultural instincts and their strategic necessities? Evans, who served as a major in the Zimbabwean army before emigrating to Australia, is hopeful that Australia’s gradual shift from its “white only” culture of the early twentieth century to a more pluralistic society in the twenty-first century will increase the growing tendency of Australians to see themselves as stakeholders in both the international system and the regional balance of power in the Pacific and Asia. Echoing contemporary American misgivings about poor interagency cooperation in the United States, Evans also calls for what he refers to as the “whole government approach” that matches Australian foreign policy and defense strategy, so neither is formed in a vacuum. Australians would still make limited-liability investments in foreign interventions but would have a better chance to develop strategies and force structures suited to their extended interests in a liberal world order.

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