

‘A Chain of Fortuitous Circumstances’:

The Sudden Rise of a Military
Base in Townsville

Patrick White
Postgraduate,
James Cook University

The idea of developing northern Australia generated strong public interest in Queensland during the 1960s. The incumbent Coalition government suffered heavy losses in Queensland at the 1961 federal election. This result sharpened the awareness of both the Coalition and the Australian Labor Party of the potential to obtain political currency from the politics of northern development.¹ This generated interest in, and support for, initiatives that could be classed as ‘northern development.’² Subsequently, in 1964, when national security considerations drew the Federal Government’s attention to the North’s sparsely populated expanse, one of the most enduring projects associated with northern development was undertaken: the establishment of Lavarack Barracks in Townsville. In 2007, the establishment of Lavarack Barracks was described as a local consequence of global events.³ Expanding on this theme, this paper argues that Lavarack Barracks was established as a consequence of Australia’s deepening alliance with the United States. Australia demonstrated its commitment to the alliance by deploying troops to fight with American forces in Vietnam and increasing investment in defence. After reviewing defence

¹ The term ‘northern Australia’ is flexible; it expands and contracts at the behest of various protagonists. During the 1960s the People the North Committee considered northern Australia as the lands to the north of the Tropic of Capricorn. Lyndon Megarrity has described northern Australia as the ‘parts of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia which are located north of the Tropic of Capricorn.’ This paper subscribes to the Tropic definition. Lyndon Megarrity, “‘Necessary and urgent’? The politics of Northern Australia, 1945-75,” *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 97(2) (2011), 136.

² Gough Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government 1972-1975*, (Ringwood, Victoria: Viking, Penguin Books Australia, 1985), 230-37.

³ Patrick Timothy White, *Townsville and Lavarack Barracks: The Early Years*, (Honours Thesis, James Cook University, 2007).

force infrastructure in 1964, the Australian government committed to building a new army base. Suddenly, the idea of building a new military base in Townsville gathered momentum. Australia's escalating defence commitments in Southeast Asia added urgency and, within two years, Lavarack Barracks was opened in Townsville. Locating the new army base in Townsville was, at first, a pragmatic decision by the Federal Government: northern Australia provided strategic benefits to an active Australian military force, and Townsville had better credentials than other northern cities. But leading into the 1966 federal election, Prime Minister Harold Holt described the project, orchestrated by the Coalition, as a notable triumph for northern development. Holt alleged that Coalition ministers pushed for a northern location in the interests of northern development and overruled the military's recommendation the new base be built in Victoria. Holt's assertion was politically motivated and his interpretation became the subject of a dispute detailed in this paper. Perhaps the real triumph was the rapid completion of a project without preliminary planning. The sudden emergence of the Lavarack Barracks project led to a competition of interests between the army and all levels of government. Influential forces drove the project forward: Australia's foreign policy and defence commitments ensured powerful executive support. The politics of northern development added political legitimacy and hopes of a positive outcome for civilian development.

What is 'Northern Development'?

After the Second World War, the perception that external forces threatened Australia's security led politicians to assert that northern Australia deserved special attention from the Commonwealth.⁴ The Curtin-Chifley Labor governments adopted a policy of decentralisation designed to facilitate regional settlement beyond the capital cities. The settlement of northern Australia attracted much debate, but Labor was defeated in 1949 and replaced by the conservative Menzies government. Lyndon Megarrity suggests that the Menzies government adopted a conservative approach to northern development.⁵ In opposition, Labor attempted to exploit the coalition's alleged lack of interest in the North by campaigning in support of northern development.⁶ Eventually the external threat of communism and a national security agenda placed the North back in the Coalition government's gaze and Lavarack Barracks was built.

Economic development and population growth also feature in the base's story. These themes relate to the federal northern development narrative described by Megarrity, and to the prominence of developmentalism in Queensland politics. Prior to increased federal interest in northern development, developmentalism was already a strong theme in Queensland state politics.⁷ For Queensland, a large state with several distinct regions, economic development was a significant political issue. A northern focus, however, represents a slight distinction. A distinct focus on 'northern' development emerged in political vernacular in the colonial era.⁸ Ever since New South Wales was established, a place in the 'North' has always been less developed, and much less populated than the 'South.' The role of imagining the frontier is discussed by Regina Gantner.⁹

4 Megarrity, 'Northern Australia,' 136.

5 *Ibid.*, 142.

6 Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government*, 230-37.

7 Ross Fitzgerald, Lyndon Megarrity and David Symons, *Made in Queensland: A New History*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009).

8 Edward Palmer, *Early Days in North Queensland*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1903)

9 Regina Gantner, 'The View from the North,' in *Australia's History: Themes and Debates*, ed. Martyn Lyons and Penny Russell (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005), 41.

Whether imagining the 'North' as a vast empty space containing untapped economic opportunity, or as a magnet to hostile external forces, the 'North' appeared sporadically to motivate politicians, entrepreneurs and opportunists to push for special development there. As a separate political theme, with the potential to influence political campaigns and election outcomes, 'northern development' remains relatively unexplored.¹⁰ But it is understood that Queensland is amplified in political discussion on northern development because it had the largest population north of Capricorn, and was quickest to suggest that the Federal Government was neglecting the region.¹¹

Fortuitous Events

The economy and development issues were prominent in the 1961 federal election. The incumbent Coalition government, led by Sir Robert Menzies, was surprisingly dumped in Queensland. The Coalition only narrowly avoided overall defeat to the Australian Labor Party (ALP) after very poor polling results in Queensland.¹² The ALP, led by Arthur Calwell, won eight new seats in Queensland and enjoyed a swing of ten per cent.¹³ The result surprised the federal Coalition. Queensland's Country Party-Liberal coalition had increased its margin at the 1960 state election by restating its ambitious development schemes. However, unemployment was a big issue in Queensland and the public reaction to the national economic downturn amplified the state's strong swing to the ALP at the 1961 federal election.¹⁴ In the years following its near victory, the federal Australian Labor Party attempted to increase its public support in Queensland by focussing on northern development. Deputy ALP Leader Gough Whitlam, in particular, saw an opportunity to acquire political currency from northern development, spearheading successful political campaigns in Queensland between 1961 and 1967.¹⁵ Whitlam endeavoured to attach northern development to Labor and strengthen the party's appeal in northern electorates.¹⁶

The Menzies government recognised the threat, and attempted to wrestle back momentum by creating a Northern Division within the Department of National Development (DND). The DND was an apolitical public service department, but the creation of a new northern-focused division was a notable act upon which the Federal Government could focus public and media attention on. The Northern Division was tasked with reviewing the North's natural resources and providing advice on accelerating development in northern Australia.¹⁷ The DND was soon lobbied by the Townsville-based People the North Committee (PNC). The PNC was attached to the North Queensland Local Government Association and was led by Harry Hopkins. It was established in 1962 to promote development and population growth in northern Australia.

10 Other works that make mention of northern development include Fitzgerald, Megarrity and Symons, *Made in Queensland: A New History*; Russell McGregor, 'Developing the North, Defending the Nation? The Northern Australia Development Committee, 1945-1949,' *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 59(1) (2013), 33-46; Ray Evans, *A History of Queensland*, (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

11 Megarrity, 'Northern Australia,' 136.

12 'Australian Political Chronicle November 1962,' *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 8(2) (1962), 226.

13 'Australian Political Chronicle July-December 1961,' *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 8(1) (1962), 104.

14 Ross Fitzgerald, *From 1915 to the Early 1980s: A History of Queensland* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984), 221-222.

15 Brian Costar, 'Political Leadership and Queensland Nationalism,' *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland* 19(9) (2006).

16 Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government 1972-1975*,

17 'Plans for Northern Division Outlined,' *Canberra Times*, 17 January 1964.

The PNC sought federal support for population growth initiatives and became a prominent force in the politics of northern development. A significant meeting between a DND representative and the PNC occurred in Townsville in 1964. Dr Rex Patterson, a senior public servant with experience in several government departments, led the DND's Northern Division. He arranged to meet with the PNC in Townsville on 18 October 1964, to discuss the work and problems of his division.¹⁸ Patterson delivered a report to the PNC titled 'Can Defence Development Assist in the Development of Northern Australia?' Patterson declared that a major defence base could accelerate population growth in northern Australia and insisted that the Federal Government could orchestrate growth through coordinated defence planning.¹⁹ Patterson's report coincided with the final stages of a government review of Australia's defence capabilities, and potentially reshaped a key recommendation made by senior army and government bureaucrats.

The Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy (October 1964) review identified measures to strengthen and expand the nation's defence forces and, as later claimed by Prime Minister Harold Holt, advised that there was an urgent necessity to build a new military base in Victoria. But by 6 November 1964 the Chief of General Staff, Sir John Wilton, had directed the army's Northern Command to make a preliminary reconnaissance of the Townsville area.²⁰ Three weeks later, the army selected a site for a new base in Townsville. It is difficult to prove that Patterson's report to the PNC inspired the government's decision to build a new army base in Townsville. But the theme of northern development was closely linked to the project.

The Community's Response

Although community consultation did not occur, Townsville's municipal leaders and print media enthusiastically embraced the idea of building a base in the city. Underpinning their response was the belief that a new base would increase population growth and ignite further development in the North. Supporters of the project, such as the Townsville City Council (TCC), believed that locating a large and permanent military force in Townsville could assist population growth, increase services, provide employment opportunities and stimulate economic development. Townsville interests, such as local media and the president of the North Queensland District of the Returned Sailors Soldiers and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia (RSL), JA Sherriff, also identified the base's potential to enhance Australia's security and stimulate northern development.²¹

After returning from the RSL's national congress, Sherriff stated that the RSL believed that 'more should be done in north Australia with regard to defence.'²² But the RSL's northern interest was not limited to defence. The RSL national congress passed a resolution calling for the development of northern Australia's mineral, pastoral and agricultural potential. The RSL sought the cooperation of the Commonwealth and the State Governments of Queensland and Western Australia, in evolving the DND's Northern Division into a separate development authority, similar to the Snowy

18 'Defence Base in North 'Would Boost Area,' *Courier Mail*, 19 October 1964.

19 Rex Alan Patterson, 'Establishing a Permanent Population in Northern Australia: Can Defence Development Assist in the Development of Northern Australia?', in *Conference of People the North Committee*, (Townsville: James Cook University, 1964).

20 *The Lavarack Barracks Project – Townsville Queensland The First Phase*. [c.1966], 2RAR Museum, Lavarack Barracks, Townsville, 1.

21 The RSSAILA formally changed its name to the Returned Services League of Australia (RSL) in October 1965. The organisation was referred to as RSL by its members, including JA Sherriff, before the formal change.

22 'RSL Welcomes Defence Base,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 10 November 1964, 3.

Mountains Authority, and to make it responsible for devising and implementing a plan for northern development.²³

The RSL's link between defence and the development northern Australia was not a new idea. Russell McGregor argues that since the colonial era, northern development has been closely connected with defence.²⁴ Since federation, successive governments felt a sense of vulnerability about an under-developed North and the Second World War exposed Australia's military vulnerability more starkly than ever before. In contrast to the inter-war discussion about the relevance of northern development to defence, the discussion after the World War Two split the military aspects of defence from the geo-political issues of security. The changed conceptions of global politics, the emergence of the Cold War dynamic and modern warfare intensified this debate.²⁵ The formation and demise of the North Australia Development Committee (NADC) within a few years after World War Two is linked to the complexities of achieving civilian development aims and improving national defence in the same political and financial effort. After NADC's demise, the politics of defence and civilian development continued to evolve separately. But by 1964, new regional threats to Australia's security had emerged and population growth, considered a vital ingredient of northern development and a focus of the PNC, was again conveniently linked to defence initiatives.

If a defence project stimulated the North's population, then economic development would follow and both were regarded fundamental to the survival of northern communities. The appeal of northern development underpinned assumptions that the base was good for Townsville, diminishing the political imperative for community consultation. With high-level support assured, and a political climate demanding decisive action on defence, the base project catapulted into action. Furthermore, Townsville's rapidly unfolding base project typified the Federal Government's prioritisation of foreign policy and defence agendas, indicating that the base was strongly linked with Australia's alliance with the United States and the Vietnam War.

The Role of the Vietnam War

Foreign policy played a significant part in shaping Townsville's infrastructure during the 1960s. The development of the Cold War, its associated military engagements in Southeast Asia and the much-discussed 'domino effect' made a military base in northern Australia an attractive proposition for the Federal Government.²⁶ During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States was increasingly invested in conflicts associated with its rival superpower, the Soviet Union. The influence of Cold War politics on local and regional developments in Australia was significant.²⁷ With Moscow interested in expanding communism across the globe and Washington concerned about the threat of expanding communism, the Cold War quickly spread into Southeast Asia.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ McGregor, 'Northern Australia Development Committee, 1945–1949,' 33–46.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁶ During the 1950s and 1960s the 'domino effect' refers to the idea that the fall of a non-communist state to communism would lead a non-communist neighbouring state to fall to communism. The idea influenced United States foreign policy and became popular after President Dwight Eisenhower applied it to Southeast Asia in 1954. The domino theory was used to support United States military action in the Vietnam War. See for example PT Leeson & AM Dean, 'The Democratic Domino Theory: An Empirical Investigation,' *American Journal of Political Science* 53(3) (2009), 533–551.

²⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 156.

When Townsville was confirmed as the site for Australia's newest army base, the global conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was entrenched in Southeast Asia. The region was the focus of global security concerns, which created challenges for Australia's foreign policy practitioners.²⁸ It also led toward a pivotal moment in the United States alliance. Australia had been engaged as a military advisor supporting the United States' objectives in Vietnam since 1962.²⁹ That initial commitment was a decisive ideological and political act.

When the United States drew closer to deploying combat forces to Vietnam in 1964, Australia's on-going commitment to the alliance was tested. Australia's support for the alliance was, so far, mostly political, but a commitment by Australia to send combat forces to fight alongside the United States military in Vietnam would substantially escalate Australia's support for American foreign policy. McDonald suggests that during this era, the post-war decline of Britain's role in stabilising Southeast Asia had disappointed the Australian Government, but this sense was offset by Australia's increasing enthusiasm for the United States.³⁰ In an increasingly hostile and politically unstable region, the Federal Government considered the support of a powerful ally to be vital to Australia's security. This logic had consequences; any commitment to fight in Vietnam would pit Australia, politically and militarily, against communism, establishing new enemies in the region and further afield. In tying its defence policy to American power, Australia faced the prospect of further military engagement in Southeast Asia. This alarmed the Federal Government, who responded by ordering the 1964 defence review.³¹

The timing of the defence review directly corresponds with the United States' escalating military interest in Vietnam, demonstrating the depth of influence that American action had on Australian politics. Prime Minister Menzies linked foreign policy and defence planning by stating that the defence review 'was designed to meet Australia's strategic position due to events in Vietnam and Malaysia.'³² The government's desire to support the United States added urgency to the review, and high-ranking defence and government officials worked 60 to 70 hour weeks for three months.³³ The defence review was expected to address the discrepancy between Australia's broadening international commitments and its defence capacities.³⁴ The review was concluded in October 1964 and cabinet began considering its content in early November.³⁵ To support the United States, Australia required an expanded and capable defence force, and in late 1964, the Australian Regular Army (ARA) had only 23,000 troops.³⁶ The ARA was considered ill-equipped to meet the government's goal of active military engagement in Southeast Asia. This view was evident when criticism suggested that the review had not gone far enough in addressing Australia's 'inadequate'

28 Matt McDonald, 'Foreign and Defence Policy on Australia's Political Agenda, 1962–2012,' *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 72(2) (2013), 173.

29 John Rowe, *Vietnam: The Australian Experience*, (Sydney: Time-Life Books, 1987), 6.

30 McDonald, 'Political Agenda, 1962–2012', 173.

31 Ian McNeill, 'The Australian Army and the Vietnam War,' in *Vietnam Days: Australia and the Impact of Vietnam*, eds. Peter Pierce, Jeffrey Grey, Jeff Doyle, (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1991), 11.

32 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 11 November 1964, 1.

33 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 6 November 1964, 1.

34 'Bad Climate for the Senate Election,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 October 1964.

35 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 5 November 1964, 1.

36 Joan Beaumont, *Australian Defence: Sources and Statistics*, vol. VI, (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), 124.

defence capability.³⁷ Infrastructure, equipment and preparedness issues compounded the shortage of troops.

The media, increasingly focussed on defence, demanded a decisive response from the government. The political climate was defined by an impending half-Senate election and a Labor opposition determined to focus debate on defence matters.³⁸ Throughout this period, the ALP increasingly advocated stronger defence preparedness.³⁹ The government was extremely vulnerable to criticism on defence issues because of the violence in Southeast Asia and Australia's increasingly close association with the foreign policy objectives of the United States.

Shortly after the government began announcing the outcomes of the defence review, a critical moment in the United States-Australia alliance occurred. In December 1964, the United States Assistant Secretary of State, William Bundy, told the Australian ambassador in Washington, JK Waller, that the situation in Vietnam was fragile and that Australia should consider deploying combat forces. Bundy outlined the United States' plans to increase pressure on Communist North Vietnam through military action. He advised that the United States would deploy troops to fight communist forces and suggested that Australia should support the Americans with whatever troops it could provide.⁴⁰ The timing suggests it is likely that the Australian government conducted its defence review in anticipation of this moment.

Keen to demonstrate its support for the United States alliance, Australia sent combat forces to Vietnam in 1965. That commitment led to the implementation of the National Service scheme and the expansion of defence force infrastructure, including the hasty construction of Lavarack Barracks. To increase troop numbers, Australia implemented the National Service scheme between 1964 and 1972. The scheme increased Australian troop numbers from around 23,000 in 1964, to a peak of 44,533 in 1970.⁴¹ The maintenance of a politically unpopular National Service scheme suggests that the pragmatic coalition government considered defence a priority. Although it is clear this priority provided impetus to build a new military base, the decision to locate the base in Townsville was not the outcome of long-term, strategic planning by government.

Townsville: What Military Base?

Despite ample media coverage of the Vietnam War and the defence review during October and November 1964, northern media and politicians seemed unaware of imminent defence proposals featuring northern Australia. The *Townsville Daily Bulletin* reported that cabinet was discussing a three-year plan to improve the power of all three defence services, but seemed oblivious to Townsville's place in these plans. Speculation focussed on cabinet's consideration of further military aid to Malaysia and South Vietnam. A northern military base was not mentioned.⁴² News of a development symposium, to be held in Townsville on 27 and 28 November 1964, appeared on 6 November. The symposium was described as an opportunity for persons concerned with

37 'Australia's Defence Review Still Leaves Some Gaps,' *Canberra Times*, 13 November 1964.

38 'Impact of World Events on Coming Campaign,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 October 1964.

39 'Australian Political Chronicle January - June 1963,' *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 9(2) (1963).

40 McNeill, 'The Australian and the Vietnam War,' 21-22.

41 Beaumont, *Sources and Statistics*, 124.

42 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 5 November 1964, 1

the development of Townsville to hear from prominent public officials and private industry representatives about the importance of town planning and other large projects. Representatives from the town planning and architectural professions had organised the symposium, and cited the important role the new University College of Townsville would play in developing the North. A major military project was not mentioned.⁴³

The *Townsville Daily Bulletin* also focussed on the 1964 centenary celebrations of Townsville.⁴⁴ Ironically, the role of war, conflict, and military operations in Townsville's history were central to this publicity. The local paper carried a supplement emphasising the 'vital part' played by Townsville in the Pacific war in the early 1940s.⁴⁵ It did not suggest that the defence department were about to build a military base in Townsville, a surprise considering that Patterson's report to the PNC in Townsville on 18 October, was covered by the media only a few weeks earlier.⁴⁶

Speculation about Townsville's place in defence plans did not begin until after the defence review findings were released. Once cabinet released its conclusions on 7 November, northern Australia was suddenly thrust into the spotlight of defence planning. The first report claimed that north Queensland was being 'considered' as the location for a new military base.⁴⁷ Three days later the front page exclaimed that the city was 'almost certain' to become the base for a new defence force including '10,000 soldiers and their families.'⁴⁸

The Army Comes to Townsville

As the likelihood of a new army base became apparent, the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* became its enthusiastic champion. The theme of national security was prevalent within the Australian community and the threat posed by Japan to northern Australia during the Second World War provided a motive for locals to embrace the strengthening of defence assets. An editorial in the paper discussed the potential for increased defence spending to impact on taxes and stifle other developments, but asserted that those outcomes were preferable to being unable to repel an attack. The editorial stated that the conditions faced in Australia's northern strategic environment were 'similar to those experienced when Japan was a threat during its imperial expansion.' The article affirmed its support by writing that any decision to permanently locate troops in the area would be 'a wise one' and that 'the sooner the plans... are implemented the better.'⁴⁹ The North Queensland RSL President, JA Sherriff, stated that his organisation welcomed the expansion of the army, anywhere in the north, due to regional threats.⁵⁰ A few weeks later a *Townsville Daily Bulletin* editorial claimed that 'the situation overseas [in Southeast Asia]' confirmed the importance, the planned military deployment to Townsville, would have in protecting Australia.⁵¹

43 'Symposium at Townsville,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 6 November 1964, 11.

44 Townsville was first 'settled' by Europeans in 1864, declared a port in 1865 and a municipality in 1866. Townsville will officially celebrate its sesquicentennial anniversary in 2016.

45 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 2 November 1964, 10.

46 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 19 October 1964, 2.

47 'Major Military Base in North Likely,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 9 November 1964, 1.

48 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 12 November 1964, 1.

49 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 12 November 1964, 2.

50 'RSL Welcomes Defence Base,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 10 November 1964, 3.

51 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 28 November 1964, 2.

The idea of building a major military base in Townsville was gaining significant momentum. Discussions regarding where to locate the base and how to proceed with the project were held between municipal alderman, senior army and government officials.⁵² It is not clear who exactly represented Townsville other than its Mayor, Angus Smith. The state government was not represented. The Minister for the Army, Dr AJ Forbes, the Chief of General Staff, Lieutenant Sir John Wilton, and the Army Department Secretary, Mr Bruce White represented the army. The party of senior government and army officials short-listed three sites following a 'detailed examination of possible barrack and training areas' with local municipal leaders.⁵³

These sites - including the one eventually chosen below the foothills of Mount Stuart - were inspected and endorsed by Angus Smith. In a letter to the Prime Minister, Smith wrote that he was 'pleased to confirm that the areas... were quite suitable for the siting of a new battle group at Townsville.'⁵⁴ But the land chosen by the army and endorsed by Townsville's Mayor was privately owned and would later become the subject of dispute. On 26 November 1964, the Minister for the Army, AJ Forbes, told Townsville's civilian community that a decision had been made, and construction on a new base would soon begin. Forbes confirmed on local television that a new military base would be built in Townsville. The announcement was preceded by an advertisement in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, encouraging Townsville residents not to miss the 'important' address.⁵⁵ The Liberal Party sponsored the advertisement, probably expecting that the announcement would provide positive political currency for the coalition in Townsville. The city formed the basis of the federal electorate of Herbert and Labor had defeated the incumbent Liberal candidate at the 1961 federal election. The conservative coalition was determined to win back the support of the local community and it seemed to help; the Liberal Party defeated Labor in Herbert at the 1966 federal election.

During the 1964 announcement, Forbes detailed the impact the base was expected to have on Townsville. He advised that the army would require the construction of 'approximately 750 houses' for families of defence personnel and claimed that 'Townsville would soon become a major defence establishment.'⁵⁶ A *Townsville Daily Bulletin* editorial suggested that local merchants, wholesalers, retailers, government departments, rail services and post offices would need to adjust to cope with the increased population. The necessity for intense cooperation between all levels of government was stressed, and the local council was warned that it should prepare for a heavier workload.⁵⁷

It was a decisive moment for Townsville. Government and military officials, without community mandate, had permanently altered the city's future social demography. The Federal Government's foreign policy and military objectives had established urgency and the decision to locate the base in Townsville was made very quickly. It was unclear whether the community supported the decision because they had not been consulted. Independent analysis of the base's likely impact on Townsville was not conducted. Key details, such as funding arrangements, were still undetermined and this caused significant disputes later in the project.

52 'Army Talks Tomorrow,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 25 November 1964, 1.

53 Smith to Menzies, 27 November 1964.

54 Smith to Menzies, 27 November 1964.

55 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 26 November 1964, 20.

56 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 27 November 1964, 1.

57 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 28 November 1964, 2.

Rapid Decision Delivers a Difficult Project

The lack of planning exacerbated an inevitable conflict of interest between the army and local authorities. The local council was determined to protect local interests. But the army, increasingly engaged in Southeast Asia, was focused on expansion and the Federal Government expected the project to advance quickly. Negotiations were difficult and several points of contention emerged. The base's transition from idea to reality in less than two years reflects the government's priorities at the time, a view expressed by Peter Bell in his history of Townsville's James Cook University. Bell highlights the comparatively slow progress made on developing Townsville's University College site at Douglas (adjacent to the Lavarack Barracks site); a project which took six years from the time the site was first acquired by the TCC.⁵⁸ Bell, however, neglects to mention that defence was exclusively a federal responsibility, while state governments retained some responsibility for education.

Early enthusiasm regarding Lavarack Barracks was tempered by the emergence of problems between local and federal authorities. In 1966 the construction of Lavarack Barracks was described by the Minister for the Army, J Fraser, as 'the single biggest project ever undertaken by the Australian Army.'⁵⁹ It is unsurprising that conflict developed in the early stages. The TCC staunchly resisted some of the army's demands and disputes raged over land requirements, infrastructure, government and defence responsibilities, and the provision of funding for various subsidiary projects and initiatives. Townsville's mayor stated publicly that the 'council would require a substantial amount of finance over its normal allocation.'⁶⁰ The *Townsville Daily Bulletin* insisted that the State and Federal Governments help the TCC to 'cope with the extraordinary demand... placed on [it] by the influx of people... associated with the army program.' The editorial suggested Townsville should receive special consideration, due to its rapid growth rate.⁶¹ These reports indicated that six months after Townsville had been named as the site for the base, funding arrangements had still not been determined.

The Federal Government was frustrated by the progress of negotiations. A letter written by the Prime Minister to the Queensland Premier on 9 December 1964 reveals his expectation that the base be operational by 1966. Menzies sought the cooperation of the Queensland Government to assist in achieving that goal.⁶² But the disputes over funding and land allocation became so fractured by late 1964 that the army threatened to move their base to another city.

As a result of the souring relations with Townsville, the army met with the Mayor of Cairns in mid-1965.⁶³ Army officers also held discussions with local authorities in Rockhampton.⁶⁴ These moves were part of a clever negotiation strategy. Although the TCC was concerned by many of

58 Peter Bell, *Our Place in the Sun: A Brief History of James Cook University*, (Townsville: James Cook University, 2010), 33. The University College of Townsville initially existed under the auspices of the University of Queensland. Its first campus was located in the Townsville suburb of Pimlico and opened in 1961. Construction works began on the Douglas site in 1965 and it was officially opened on the same day as Lavarack Barracks, 29 July 1966. In 1970 the University College of Townsville gained independence from the University of Queensland and became James Cook University.

59 'Army's Biggest Single Project,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 30 July 1966, 1.

60 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, May 7 1965, 2.

61 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, June 15 1965, 2.

62 Prime Minister of Australia, RG Menzies to Premier of Queensland, GFR Nicklin, 9 December 1964, 2RAR museum, Lavarack Barracks, Townsville.

63 'Army Officers to Talk with Cairns Mayor,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 22 June 1965, 2.

64 'Army Officers to Talk with Mayor of Rockhampton,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 23 June 1965, 2.

the army's plans, they feared losing the project to another city and eventually acceded to most of the army's demands. The Federal Government and Department of Army were always principally interested in Townsville and wanted to their plans to succeed.

The barracks site proved to be contentious because the land on which the army planned to build the base was owned by Queensland Meat Exporters (QME). This site and other adjacent land and water resources produced conflict with private owners, local municipal leaders, the army and the Federal Government.⁶⁵ The local council supported the intention of the Federal Government and the army to acquire the private lands held by QME, but the company resisted the proposal.⁶⁶ A bitter dispute emerged between the Commonwealth and QME. Military documents allege that QME were difficult to negotiate with and demanded exorbitant compensation.⁶⁷ An unofficial document dated 4 May 1965 stated that the Department of the Interior failed to reach agreement with QME and, in order to secure the land, applied to acquire the land by legal force through the Lands Acquisition Act.⁶⁸

The QME dispute demonstrates that the Federal Government and the Department of Army, distracted by foreign policy and defence agendas, underestimated local negotiations. The result was an unsystematic project. The QME land issue is only one example of the disputes featuring throughout 1965. The boundaries of the army's training land to the south of Mount Stuart were also disputed by the TCC. In a letter to the Minister for the Army in April 1965, Townsville's Mayor outlined the council's concerns regarding the base's civil infrastructure requirements and the army's plans to conduct training exercises near the city's water supply.⁶⁹ The TCC were 'disturbed' by the army's desire to acquire lands stretching to the southern banks of the Ross River, including one of the city's popular suburbs (Annandale), now home to many professionals serving the adjacent army barracks, Townsville Hospital and James Cook University. Queensland's Premier implored the Prime Minister to not allow the Department of the Army to acquire certain lands reserved for a proposed university campus.⁷⁰ The TCC fought valiantly and succeeded in resisting the full force of the army's demands.

Reflecting on the negotiations between the army and the TCC, Brigadier E. Logan emphasised the magnitude of the army's requirements, indicating that the Federal Government pressured the TCC to accept them. Logan observed that the nature of the project, and its associated political and social implications, gave rise to conflicts of interest between negotiating parties.⁷¹ An impatient Federal Government was trying to strengthen its capacity to provide military support to the United States, but in an effort to protect local government interests, Townsville's alderman attempted methodical negotiation, to the annoyance of army chiefs. The lack of planning and the government's impatience compounded these conflicts, but when the base opened in 1966, these tensions subsided and were replaced by hopes of stimulated development in north Queensland.

65 'Army Wants Land Near City's Water Supply,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 23 June 1965, 2.

66 Smith to Menzies, 27 November 1964.

67 *The Lavarack Barracks Project – Townsville Queensland The First Phase*. [c.1966], 2RAR Museum, Lavarack Barracks, Townsville, 2.

68 Unofficial copy of document subject titled 'Compulsory Acquisition of Land' dated May 4, 1965 signed by Alex E Ross Brigadier for Major-General, Quartermasters General, 2RAR Museum, Lavarack Barracks, Townsville.

69 Mayor of Townsville, A Smith to Minister for the Army, AJ Forbes, on 30 April 1965, 2RAR museum, Lavarack Barracks, Townsville.

70 Premier of Queensland, GFR Nicklin to Prime Minister of Australia, RG Menzies, 26 May 1965, 2RAR museum, Lavarack Barracks, Townsville.

71 Brigadier E Logan, 'Establishment of Task Force at Townsville,' *Army Journal* 254, June-July 1970, 18.

The Politics of Northern Development

The influence of northern development politics was emphasised during the opening ceremony in Townsville on 29 July 1966. The base was named Lavarack Barracks, in honour of the late Lieutenant General Sir John Lavarack.⁷² The Australian Prime Minister, the Premier of Queensland, senior army officials and municipal leaders from Townsville attended the ceremony. The guests' speeches focussed on positive economic themes and emphasised commercial opportunities and population growth.⁷³ The Premier of Queensland, Frank Nicklin, described the opening of Lavarack Barracks as 'an event of great consequence to northern Australia and its economic future.' Prime Minister Harold Holt's speech emphasised that the politics of northern development were never far from the Lavarack Barracks project. Holt stated that government ministers had favoured Townsville as the site for the new base in the interest of northern development. He added that the 'decision to establish this base here [Townsville] was not primarily a military one.' In a stunning exposition, Holt revealed that military advisors and public servants, who had worked on the 1964 defence review, had recommended the base be built on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, but cabinet's interest in northern development was led them to overrule this advice and locate the base in Townsville.⁷⁴

One week after the opening ceremony, Dr Rex Patterson, former head of the Northern Division of the DND, publicly refuted Holt's interpretation of these events. Patterson had left the DND and pursued a career in politics, representing the ALP and winning a federal by-election in the north Queensland seat of Dawson.⁷⁵ Patterson accused Holt of seeking to gain political capital with northerners by creatively reinterpreting the events of 1964.⁷⁶ Patterson believed that his report to the PNC in Townsville on 18 October 1964 influenced the government to change the proposed site for the base from Victoria to Townsville.⁷⁷

Recalling those events in 1966, Patterson claimed that 'if it had not been for a chain of fortuitous circumstances' the base would have been built in Victoria.⁷⁸ By delivering his unofficial report to the PNC in October, prior to the government publicly announcing its defence review conclusions in November, Patterson and his colleague, Sir Harold Raggatt, believed that they inadvertently changed the location of the base. In light of the publicity generated by Patterson's speech in Townsville, the defence chiefs were furious that their defence base recommendations were undermined in the public domain. Patterson claimed that he and Raggatt were summoned to the Prime Minister's office on 19 October 1964 and reprimanded for embarrassing the government. He asserted that he and Raggatt had no idea that the government was reviewing defence infrastructure, or even planning to build a new base. Patterson believed the government would

72 Christopher David Coulthard-Clark, *Soldiers in Politics: The Impact of the Military on Australian Political Life and Institutions*, (Allen & Unwin, 1996), 34. Lieutenant General Sir John Lavarack served in the highest office of the Army as the Chief of the General Staff. During WWII he commanded the Seventh Division and the First Australian Corps in the Middle East. After his role in the Middle East, Lavarack became the commander of the First Australian Army until late in WWII before serving as the head of Australia's military mission in Washington D.C. Lavarack was a Queenslander who served as Governor of Queensland from 1946 to 1957.

73 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 30 July 1966, 1.

74 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 30 July 1966, 2.

75 Colin A. Hughes, 'The Dawson by-Election, 1966,' *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (1966).

76 'Claims Trust Breached Over New Army Base,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 10 August 1966, 2.

77 Patterson's speech to the PNC in Townsville on 18 October 1964 was reported in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* and in the Brisbane based *Courier Mail* on 19 October 1964.

78 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 10 August 1966, 2.

have found it difficult to establish a defence base in Victoria after the publicity following his report on northern development.⁷⁹

If, as alleged by Patterson, Prime Minister Holt's speech at the opening ceremony was politically motivated, then it must be said that Patterson's recollection of those events and his criticism of Holt might also be tainted by political ambition. Patterson departed the DND in acrimonious circumstances, and Menzies made his final weeks at the department as uncomfortable as possible.⁸⁰ Holt and the Liberal Party were Patterson's political rivals and a federal election was on the horizon.

The politics of northern development were clearly exploited for political gain by both major parties. Whether or not Townsville was chosen in the interests of northern development, one thing is clear: the base would not have been built if the government and army did not believe it would enhance Australia's military capability and strengthen national security. The day after Lavarack Barracks was opened in 1966, Holt identified the proximity of Townsville to the 'danger areas' of the north, indicating that was also a determinant for the base's location.⁸¹ Australia's north was close to the conflict zones in Southeast Asia. The memory of Japanese bombing in Darwin and Townsville during the Second World War had not faded and the Federal Government considered the North to be vulnerable.

Why Not Somewhere Else in the North?

Considering the criteria outlined by Holt, there were arguably more suitable locations for the base. Cairns, approximately 340 kilometres north of Townsville, had better access to jungle training areas, a seaport and even closer proximity to Asia. Mackay, south of Townsville, also had better access to jungle terrain. Darwin is closer to Southeast Asia than Townsville and Cairns, and other small cities in north-western Australia would facilitate rapid deployment to the region. The Douglas Shire Council, located north of Cairns, lobbied the Queensland State Government to support its 'agitation' to establish a major defence installation sixty-five miles north of Cairns.⁸² Considering these points, the decision to build in Townsville must have been motivated by reasons beyond what Holt described.

Unlike Cairns or Mackay, Townsville was not a prominent agricultural district. It had cheaper areas of land relatively close to the city, and may have been chosen because it was already a public service town. It was also larger than Cairns and Mackay and further away from the threats than Darwin, which may have been deemed too close to Southeast Asia to be considered safe. Commenting on these issues in 1964, the federal Minister for the Interior, John Anthony, stated that the availability of land close to Townsville's amenities was enticing, but that security and defence effectiveness were the principle criteria determining the base's location. Anthony emphasised that cabinet had 'undoubtedly...given priority consideration [to Townsville] because of its excellent air base – the largest in [northern Australia], and its port facilities.'⁸³

⁷⁹ *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 10 August 1966, 2.

⁸⁰ Hughes, 'The Dawson by-Election, 1966', 12-13.

⁸¹ *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 30 July 1966, 1.

⁸² 'Move for Far North Defence Base,' *North Queensland Register*, 14 November 1964, 25.

⁸³ '1200 Houses May Be Built Here for Army,' *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 25 November 1964, 2.

Townsville trumped Cairns, Mackay and Darwin because of its infrastructure, terrain and geographic location. In 1970, Brigadier Logan suggested that the ability for servicemen and their families to interact within the community of Townsville was an important feature. He observed that careful consideration was given to the availability of land for close training, range practices and field manoeuvres. The existence of large areas of rain forest and jungle terrain at Mount Spec, Paluma and Mount Elliot were beneficial. These areas provided the ability for all components of the army to train in jungle terrain.⁸⁴ Although defence personnel would spend considerable time living in the field while training, the training areas were within reasonable reach of the Lavarack Barracks site and defence personnel would have first class quarters and city facilities to return to. With less commuting, personnel with dependents would have more time to spend with their families.⁸⁵ These observations were reinforced by a Federal Government report on defence resources in the 1980s.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Although development themes had long been part of Queensland's political landscape, the ALP's interpretation of election results inspired greater federal interest in the politics of northern development. During the early-mid 1960s, the ALP attempted to obtain electoral support by campaigning on northern development. The Coalition government responded and established a northern-focussed division within the Department of National Development. But with global security concerns increasingly focussed on Vietnam, a pragmatic Coalition was more interested in foreign policy and defence. The Coalition strengthened the United States alliance and expanded Australia's defence forces, necessitating the urgent construction of a new military base. Townsville's emergence as the location for the base was linked to the politics of northern development. The rapid pace and lack of planning associated with Lavarack Barracks reveals the project's suddenness and imperatives. The fortuitous timing of Dr Rex Patterson's public report to the PNC contributed to the idea that Lavarack Barracks was a project of northern development. The northern location certainly provided political benefits to the Coalition in Queensland and satisfied important military objectives. But although politicians such as Frank Nicklin and Harold Holt linked Lavarack Barracks with northern development, if Australia did not take interest in Southeast Asian conflicts and increase its military support for the United States' action in Vietnam, it is unlikely that Lavarack Barracks would have been built at this time.

84 Annex 'D' of Army Letter, General Officer Commanding, Major General MF Brogan, to Northern Command 17 November 1964, 2RAR museum, Lavarack Barracks, Townsville.

85 Logan, 'Force at Townsville,' 17.

86 Robert J Cooksey, *Review of Australia's Defence Facilities*, Report to the Minister for Defence, Kim C Beazley, 18 December 1987, (Canberra: RD Rubie, Federal Government Printer, 1988), 93.
