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(Flint)lock, stock and two smoking barrels: A modern military interpretation of frontier economic warfare

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ABSTRACT

Despite the recent upsurge of interest in the Australian Frontier Wars, the military tactics adopted by First Nations groups have consistently failed to attract the attention of scholars. What work that does exist often struggles to move beyond a characterisation of First Nations dispossession as a profound defeat, one that continues to resonate in contemporary Australia. Yet by utilising a centre of gravity analysis, a standard military appreciation tool, it is possible to identify compelling evidence that the economic warfare, as practiced along multiple frontiers in Australia by First Nations groups, was both sophisticated and remarkably effective. By utilising modern military analytical frameworks to assess Frontier Warfare, it is possible to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of First Nations tactics and identify lessons for modern military operations.

KEYWORDS

Centre of Gravity Analysis, Frontier Wars, Military Tactics

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Introduction

Despite the recent upsurge of interest in the Australian Frontier Wars, the military tactics adopted by First Nations groups have consistently failed to attract the attention of scholars. What work that does exist often struggles to move beyond a characterisation of First Nations dispossession as a profound defeat, one that continues to resonate in contemporary Australia. Yet as Nicholas Clements (2014) observes, "although they ultimately lost the war, [First Nations'] resistance against a technologically and numerically superior enemy was nothing short of extraordinary" (p. 17). By utilising a centre of gravity analysis (a standard military appreciation tool to identify the central concept that allows an enemy to win) it is possible to identify compelling evidence that the economic warfare, as practiced along multiple frontiers in Australia by First Nations groups, was both sophisticated and remarkably effective. By addressing it through the lens of a military appreciation process, it is possible to explore the under-analysed success of First Nations resistance as a case study to inform future military operations. Specifically, this article seeks to address economic warfare as a concerted, planned method of warfare by First Nations peoples against colonial expansion. Henry Reynolds (1982; 2006) and John Connor (2010) characterise it as the most effective form of resistance adopted by First Nations peoples.

Decentralised warfare (warfare that seeks opportunistic targets) has been practiced with great effect across the world, from the chariot detachments of Rameses II to the German Panzer units of the Second World War, to the jungles of Borneo, Malaya, and Vietnam and recently in the mountains of Afghanistan where the Taliban regularly use improved explosive devices. Such a decentralised approach to warfare is now formalised in the concept of *mission command*, an approach which empowers individual soldiers or groups of soldiers to make decisions in real time which are relevant to their environment and the task at hand. For example, First Nations peoples were aware that the small and dispersed white population left stock and crops a clear point of vulnerability. As a result, they availed themselves of every opportunity to target them in a manner that modern military theorists would characterise as the adoption of the three interrelated processes of tactics/techniques/procedures (TTPs). This approach was not lost on Governor Arthur Philip, either; in June 1790, he identified spearing of livestock, attacks on 'stragglers', and burning of cornfields as the three major strategic weaknesses of the colony (Gapps, 2019, p. 143).

Economic warfare is a complex phenomenon and is far from being a homogenous term that covers all types of conflict fought over resources. The 'maize wars' of early frontier conflicts, which were characterised by the competition over food that inevitably occurs when two societies seek to draw on the same limited resources, can lack nuance. Indeed, the use of the term 'economic warfare' in this context requires particular care, as each frontier brought with it its own complications, factors, and actors. For example, in 1829 in the colony of New South Wales, there were three major frontiers: the 'big man's' sheep frontier in Country Westmoreland (west of Sydney), the 'small man's' cattle frontier in County Argyle (south-west of Sydney), and the immigrant's mixed-farming frontier in the Hunter Valley (north-west). Each was an entirely different district with unique characteristics (Wright, 2011, p. 152). In Queensland (the northern, tropical colony on Australia's east coast) the nature of the terrain was different again and shaped tactics that were unique, both internally and with the other colonies. Jungle warfare negated the advantages of mounted troops, and as a result increased numbers of First Nations peoples that survived colonial expansions (Loos, 1982). Elsewhere in the state, such as the flat plains of western Queensland, mounted troops could be deployed which allowed a rapid advance on the frontier with a commensurate increase in massacres.

Failing to address military operations from military perspectives has led to a sustained debate as to whether the Frontier Wars even constitute warfare as it is widely understood in European contexts. This disagreement is exacerbated by the fact that "traditional indigenous society was not an internally hostile one" (Martin, 1989, p. 11). The controversy over nomenclature is further evident in the First Nations view of European settlement as primarily an infringement of resources, rights and sacred space rather than as a loss of sovereign territory. Instead, the First Nations peoples viewed their lands as an amalgam of these things, rather than as political entities

that could be diminished, enlarged, sold or conquered. This is evidenced in the fact that they usually employed containment operations only when certain resources – viewed as sacrosanct – were disturbed. For example, Lyndall Ryan (2020), who has spent decades analysing the origin of massacre events, explored an early phase of the Frontier Wars in the beachhead settlement of Newcastle:

> What you see, actually, is that it was the middens that were fought over most in Newcastle. If it was just trees being cut down, there doesn't appear to be as much, or really any, conflict. Nor with the mines in Newcastle. But when the middens were touched, then warfare broke out. These middens were tens of thousands of years old – they were being used to make lime – but they were sacred.

To Europeans, middens appeared to be simply heaps of discarded shells, but they were in fact deliberately placed to return fish and molluscs to Creator Spirits, and for that reason they sometimes doubled as burial grounds and signalling spots. They were also involved in inter-tribal feasts and corroborees (Uhlmann, 2014). Their real value was that they were markers of past, present, and emerging culture. Their value was thus not the land they occupied but their existence, one that would be defended by force.

All conflict across the Australian frontiers, however, was characterised by the use of economic warfare. As such, this article will be framed by an exploration of the military tactic of draining a targeted economy through financial and reputational costs, an approach that allows for a nuanced assessment that considers regional and situational differences.

First Nations tactics and the centre of gravity

The reality of any sort of campaign – military or civilian - along the Australian frontier has only become publicly palatable over the last twenty years despite clear evidence of uniformed and settler operations (Gapps, 2019). Early Frontier War studies were dominated by the issue of how to best classify the conflicts. Those who argued that the Frontier Wars never occurred relied, and still rely upon nebulous legal thresholds for warfare that are inherently political (McLaughlin, 2020; McLaughlin, 2009). They do not deign to confer belligerency status on First Nations warriors, claiming instead that their conduct constituted criminal acts – a 'crime wave' - by British subjects of First Nations heritage (Windshuttle, 2002). At the very most, historians who share this view characterise First Nations-settler conflicts as a type of 'irregular warfare'. Nevertheless, as military historian and scholars William Vacca and Mark Davidson (2011) note, the term irregular warfare "conflates tactical asymmetry with strategic difference. While the tactics employed by the belligerents may be different, the strategic objective is the same. Suggesting otherwise is both ahistorical and misleading" (p. 7).

The fact that First Nations Australians did not conduct operations in the European tradition of decisive, pitched 'battles to the death' does not render their form of warfare invalid (Kerkhove & White, 2021). What are known in military parlance as *guerrilla, resistance, insurgency, and militia* tactics (GRIM Operations) are a standard element of the history of warfare, even in Europe, home of the pitched battle (Harari, 2007). Others dismiss First Nations insurgencies for not reaching some nebulous casualty threshold necessary for "recognition", although such a qualification has never been identified much less adopted within historical scholarship (Grey, 1999, p. 25). Western battles have been won and lost without significant casualties, and furthermore, GRIM operations do not usually lend themselves to an easy quantification of casualties in the same way as a pitched battle between regular Western forces.

The use of economic warfare as a form of GRIM operations makes military sense. Under modern military doctrine, identifying and targeting an enemy's centre of gravity is the result of the military analysis process (MAP) (US Department of Defence, 2012). It is a scaleable process that goes from combat level to individual level, and staff level to joint level (C-MAP, I-MAP, S-MAP and J-MAP respectively). At the heart of all MAP is the centre of gravity, as the First Nations use of

economic warfare tactics recognised. The Centre of Gravity is "the source that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act" (US Department of Defence, 2002). In other words, it is the singular, main capability that enables the enemy to act. Once the Centre of Gravity of the adversary is identified, it is possible to target critical vulnerabilities, which – when exploited through a decisive blow – leads to defeat. Examples of centres of gravity include the freedom of action that an adversary may enjoy with a particular weapon system such as improved explosive devices in Iraq and Afghanistan and the use of rocket systems by the Ukrainians to target Russian logistics, or the morale of a target population which provides to their will to fight, which is why ISIS targeted the morale of the Yazidi people. It might be the freedom of manoeuvre the enemy enjoys in a particular environment such as the Viet Cong's ease of movement in jungle environments and within the local Vietnamese population during the Vietnam War. It may also be the economic basis of a society, which led to the targeting of industrial sectors in the Great War (Douhert, 1933), the sale of black-market oil or antiques in the Middle East, or stock and crops on the Australian frontier.

Targeting the economic basis of a society is a tactic that Europeans have utilised since the age of chivalry, as is evident in the concept of the *chevauchee*, a raiding method used in medieval warfare (White, 2021) The reticence to recognise First Nations tactics as concerted, military strategies is not accidental. As David Day (2001) argues, this approach "undercut any sympathy that their plight evoked amongst Europeans. It painted them as treacherous savages who did not merit the respect that they might otherwise have conceded to foes adopting more conventional methods of warfare" (p. 28). The following discussion of the financial and reputational costs to European official and semi-official forces during the Frontier Wars will highlight the sophisticated economic warfare pursued by First Nations peoples.

Financial costs inflicted by economic warfare on the Australian Frontier

The targeting of stock and crops and other items of value to colonists occurred at such a breadth and depth across multiple frontiers that it was clearly not merely a matter of theft but also an act of economic warfare. Military expenses were huge in the early years of the Sydney colony, which was the beachhead for British colonisation on the Australian continent. Since the landing of 1200 convicts and military personnel in 1788, there had been a state of "petty and sporadic warfare" with the First Nations (Tench, 1789, p. 137). The subsequent issuing and maintenance of equipment, troops, horses, and defensive positions was a large drain on early colonial governments (Gapps, 2019). The costs were compounded by a distinct lack of military preparation for the colony, due to a false assumption that the land was *terra nullius* – unpopulated and uncultivated. In early Sydney (1802) once the value of sheep was understood by First Nations warriors, over 200 sheep were "thrown down an immense precipice" with another 50 having "their eyes gored with spears" (Gapps, 2019, p. 77).

Events on the Hawkesbury River also demonstrate the effectiveness of these tactics/techniques/procedures (TTPs). In 1794, Colonel Francis Grose - the Acting Governor of NSW - granted land upland on the Hawkesbury River. As Connor (2010) notes, this was not without its challenges, for it "had been possible for the British and Darug on the coast to share the resources of Sydney Harbour, but the land on the Hawkesbury could not be shared. It could be used to grow yams or corn, but not both" (p. 10). Through relentless corn- and farm-raids and attacks on the Hawkesbury Settlement's supply lines, the Darug successfully forced the abandonment of the settlement in 1796 and again in 1804 ('Sydney News', *Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser*, 2 June 1842). It was only in 1816 after nearly twenty years of disease had decimated the Darug population that settlers forced their way into the valley. Nevertheless, soldiers and sailors from the original military contingent who decided to stay in the colony and take land grants (the Veteran Company) were sufficiently degraded by First Nations resistance operations that they required reinforcements from regular troops from the 46th Regiment (Gapps, 2019). In April 1816, further First Nations resistance raids forced Governor Lachlan Macquarie to reinforce the settlement with the best troops of the 46th regiment, the light infantry

and grenadier companies. When their supplies ran out at the end of the month, and unable to survive off the land due to First Nations tactics, they returned to Sydney a degraded force element (Gapps, 2019).

This use of economic warfare was repeated across the various colonies. In the early years of the colonisation of Tasmania in the 1820s First Nations peoples destroyed 2,200 sealskins (items of clear value) and burnt 930 sheep in another raid (Reynolds & Clements, 2021). In a bid to control key terrain, the Government of Tasmania declared martial law and attempted to cordon and search the entire island through the establishment of a 'Black Line'. The failed six-week operation cost the colony one-half of their normal annual budget (Reynolds, 1992). In western Victoria, over 1,300 sheep were burnt after being herded in a swamp ('Sydney News', *Port Phillip Patriot and Melbourne Advertiser*, 2 June 1842). Like other attacks, the aim was to starve out the colonists and create fear in the populace, an approach that had both financial and opportunity costs that placed a considerable drain on government budgets. Indeed, by the time Queensland, the site of some of the most brutal fighting, became a self-governing colony in 1859, there had been a shift from military to paramilitary forces. This was the result of a combination of pressures, including the slow arrival of military reinforcements from Britain due to distance and the Napoleonic Wars, frustration with repeated requests for more troops, and the speed and ease at which local militia forces (in accordance with the British tradition of decentralised home defence) could be raised (White, 2021).

The impact of this economic warfare exerted a considerable influence on public attitudes. Comparisons were often made between the money spent on 'imaginary' external threats such as France and Russia and 'real' internal threats. A correspondent in *The Queenslander* in 1887 observed that:

> There are thousands that can be spend in Defence Forces, to protect the inhabitants of this country from the invisible, perhaps imaginary, but for certain distant enemies; but we cannot afford to keep an efficient body of police to keep in check the enemy we have at our door, the enemy of every day, that one that slowly but surely robs us and impoverishes us (26 November 1887, p. 4).

Despite these types of misgivings, the economic cost to the new colony remained exorbitant. Of the initial State budget in 1859, 6% of Queensland's income was allocated to the Native Police (Queensland Government Authority, 1909). In contrast, the Australian Government currently spends 2% of GDP on the Department of Defence (States lost the right to hold military forces after the Australian Constitution came into force in 1901).

In addition to the official government costs, the financial impact of successful First Nations economic warfare was felt by the settlers themselves. Sheep and cattle constituted a critical vulnerability in the settlers' economic centre of gravity. They were also easily targeted due to their large number and their large range whilst grazing. Moreover, shepherds were often convicts with little interest in their master's economic success. In contrast, horses and oxen, which were far less numerous, were more closely observed. In Victoria, each sheep cost £3 to purchase and transport to the Port Phillip District (Learmonth, 1853). Given that a cook made £11 a week in 1850, each sheep represented a substantial percentage of a weekly wage for many workers of this time. Their loss could deeply affect pastoralists, whose entire finances were committed to their agricultural ventures (Hibbert, 1987). First Nations warriors were well aware of this vulnerability, as this newspaper report from the Albert River area in Queensland attests:

> The blacks on the Albert River have for some months past been exceedingly troublesome, and have on various occasions driven away sheep from the station at Kerry, belonging to Mr. Francis Clarke… On Saturday, the 15th instant, a flock of ewes, on the above station, was attacked, and several driven off, the blacks at the same time threatening the shepherd, who was unarmed, and was under the necessity of offering them flour and tobacco, in order to induce them to spare the remainder of the flock… Mr. Clarke has already lost upwards of two hundred sheep by these and similar depredations of the blacks… Similar losses have been

> experienced by other gentlemen in the same district, and from a similar cause (*Moreton Bay Courier*, 1848, p. 2).

The loss of part, let alone an entire flock would have rendered many 'runs' (pastoral properties) inoperable, and indeed many were eventually abandoned on account of frequent raids. The flock or herd was sometimes killed en masse, scattered into the bush, or both, with First Nations warriors "driving everything before them and killing cattle in all directions" (The Argus, 1851, p. 14). At other times, they moved from one run to the next, inflicting similar damage within a short period (Kerkhove, 2004). Although some of the meat was eaten, there are many accounts of flocks and herds being killed by scores or hundreds and left to rot. This again highlights that First Nations warriors were not stealing food; they were taking deliberate actions against an identified centre of gravity.

Though they have largely disappeared from the national consciousness, the names of First Nations leaders have not completely disappeared from the historical record. Mingburne, for example, succeeded in driving back settlers from his domain in western Victoria for quite a few years. The financial costs were often too much for individuals to absorb. As one squatter in 1845 noted:

> after wasting two months in the vain hope that some decided steps would be taken (by the authorities and police) to preserve the lives of my men and my property, I returned to the Bogan… I collected my cattle and drove them to a station on the Lachlan River. … A few months afterwards, it appeared that the gentleman to whom I handed over my Bogan station… was (himself) obliged to vacate it with a loss of 500 head of cattle. (Balfour, 1845, p. 20)

In targeting flocks, First Nations warriors effectively undermined the colonies' centres of gravity and thereby restricted their expansion. Settlers themselves were well aware that these large-scale killings and thefts were intended to drive them off the land. For example, an early west Victorian settler recalled how:

> Mingburne (a headman) discovered that by burning the grass and spearing their sheep and cattle they could disturb the white men more effectually than by fighting them; and with that discovery a new species of warfare commenced between them and was carried on so persistently that a partially civilised blackfellow known as "MacJullooh' Joe " burnt out three settlers on the Glenelg during one summer (*Border Watch*, 5 June 1880, p. 3)

The First Nations warriors were therefore pursuing a style of economic warfare well suited to the context in which they found themselves. Newspaper reports indicate that the colonists were aware of the tactics being used against them and the vulnerabilities they exposed:

> Mingburne, the king of the black fellows, carried on a long and bitter warfare with Mr. Monro, often destroying has stock, his buildings, and his grass; and in the end forced him to quit Upper Crawford, where Mingburne again reigned monarch of all be surveyed (*Border Watch*, 5 June 1880, p. 3)

The destruction of pasture indicates that First Nations fighters understood the importance of grasslands for the survival of the pastoral economy. Connor (2002) noted that the Nyungar people of Western Australia attacked "not only with the spear, but the torch; the most dangerous of all weapons in a country so full of combustibles" (p. 78). Fire had a twofold effect, for it was both psychologically shocking, and it affected the soil. Further, it was economically more damaging to light large-scale fires than to kill livestock, on account of Australia's fragile soils. Leached of nutrients by millions of years of sun and rain, Australian soils were not renewable in the same manner as the soils of the British Isles (Diamond, 2005). Consequently, aggressive firing severely curtailed any district's carrying capacity for stock, even if it equally devastated the First Nations economy which similarly relied on grazing animals. Although settlers were not at first aware of this, they were certainly vocal about the threat First Nations attempts to 'burn them out' posed to

stock, pasture, and buildings. This process was exacerbated by the destruction of crops by First Nations peoples, who would destroy crops rather than raid them for food. For many acres, whole crops were pulled up on such a scale and frequency that the survival of settlements – such as Nundah in Queensland – were imperilled (Moreton Bay Courier, 1847). 'Runs' were constantly sold and resold, and the 'edge' of the frontier waxed and waned due to losses from stock raids. Some districts were abandoned for years or even decades. When the first wave of pioneers entered central Queensland, they were doubtful that they had the capacity to retain the region for "the loss of property from the depredations of the blacks has been more than can be endured by even our richest squatters. Every day complaints reach us of loss of sheep and cattle" (Brisbane Courier, 1867, p. 2)

First Nations attacks on stock and pasture relied heavily on movement both through 'scrub' – a form of bushland that is impenetrable except on foot. First Nations groups therefore made use of a form of war that was 'regular' before modern supply chains tied force elements in place, joining such illustrious names as the Athenian strike forces of the Peloponnesian war; the Scandinavian raids (*vikingr*), the Bushveldt Carbineers in the Boer War, the operations of the Chindits in Burma, and the mobile strike forces utilised in the Vietnam War which all used the same tactics to undermine the enemy. These are classified as *strike force operations,* which are an effective method of undermining an enemy's freedom of movement and freedom of action which hampers any attempt to control the battlespace and theatre of operations. Importantly, in conducting their strike force operations, First Nations warriors were not limited to the bush on the edge of and beyond the frontier but could rely on the operational tactic long used by guerrilla forces and popularised by Mao Zedong, who opined that the insurgent must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea. In other words, although First Nations fighters were clearly delineated from the settler population through their ethnicity, insurgent 'movement' within settler society was still possible because so many 'sole traders,' fishermen, boatmen, domestic servants, shepherds, pastoral workers (and all Native Mounted Police troopers bar the officers) were First Nations. There are several examples of 'friendly' First Nations workers (especially women and children) acting as informants/spies and signallers for resistance groups. Nevertheless, a significant portion of First Nations workers were extremely loyal to settlers. In fact, many Frontier War casualties on the settler side were First Nations, both because resistance fighters viewed them as traitors and because they were perceived to be more expendable and their deaths far less likely to lead to repercussions from white authorities.

Reputational

Reputational cost is harder to quantify than economic disruption, but it often had a tangible impact on the course of frontier conflict. Critical vulnerabilities existed in the supply lines of the settlements, the arterial highways of the day. Until the 1870s, long convoys of bullock drays delivered most of the essential goods required by the giant pastoral holdings and farms that formed the 'edge' of the frontier, such as tools, weapons, seed stock, medicines, and food supplies. The drays also carried the mail that included orders and directives which pastoralists and police required to occupy new territories or 'punish' First Nations groups. Equally, they carried saleable produce back into the larger settlements. The frontier pastoralists and farmers depended on sale of their produce to continue operating. Until the period between the 1860s and 1890s, when roads and railways began to appear, horses, stagecoaches and trains played only a limited role in colonial transportation and communication, with the exception of horsemen, who doubled as messenger-mail men. Impeding the traffic of bullock drays was a means of disrupting, isolating and even starving out new settlers. Across Australia, bullock drays were regularly targeted through ambushing and sacking individual drays; fencing (closing) the roads they traversed (*Brisbane Courier*, 23 December 1869), frightening or harassing the teamsters, dispersing the bullocks when they were camped overnight, or setting large packs of dogs upon drays (Lergessner, 2008). Targeting command/control/communication (C3) networks – such as the officer class who make decisions, or the actual communication systems (smoke, carrier

pigeons, electronics, radio waves) is a highly effective, traditional approach to insurgency warfare seen across a spectrum of small and large wars.

In contemporary military doctrine, to *degrade* means reducing the effectiveness of a capability. To *undermine* is to weaken someone's capability, morale, loyalty or reliability by affecting their military, cultural, economic, societal or political strength. First Nations resistance in many instances degraded and undermined a fledgling colonial economy. Evidence is often ambiguous and is usually based on a comparative analysis of Frontier growth rates, although these could be affected by other variables such as terrain and climatic issues such as drought. Yet as Ray Kerkhove (2014) has remarked, the 'slow drip' of 'tiny warfare' was substantial for a small and dispersed European population, which in turn discouraged further expansion. 'Tiny attacks' in Tasmania killed over 369 colonists by 1828, approximately 6% of the population (p. 4). In Southeast Queensland, as much as 8% of the population were killed in the first decade of settlement while in other areas of Queensland the total rises to nearly 30% (Burke et al., 2020).

The number of casualties and the reputational damage thereby inflicted served to slow rather than prevent colonial expansion. Nevertheless, all over Australia, there were attempts by First Nations groups to destroy the fledgling pastoral industry by killing the shepherds and moving the flocks from place to place and keeping them overnight in natural enclosures (hilltops and valleys) or in brush yards. Many military and para-military incursions were in vain. Squatters would hunt for months to re-assemble their scattered flock or locate its secret hiding spot, and then battle with or negotiate with a First Nations group to ensure (or enforce) the safe return of at least some of the flock, only to find the flock that could be recovered had been deliberately maimed. As was so often the case, newspaper reports provide compelling evidence that the colonists were well aware that this was a tactic rather than a unique event:

> News has been received of the murder of a shepherd by the blacks at Mount Elphinstone. A flock of sheep belonging to Mr Alexander Evans has been driven off - two hundred of them have since been recovered, most of them crippled and rendered useless by the blacks. (Northern Argus, 6 Feb. 1869, p. 2)

Like the First Nations tactics as a whole, the mutilation of stock had psychological and reputational effects. In some cases, the animals' bodies were deliberately littered around the fields or had their organs and heads staked on poles and trees to terrorise the colonists, as this example from the McIntyre River region of north New South Wales shows:

> A horse belonging to a squatter named Dight was killed, the head was taken off and its entrails were hung from bush to bush... Seventy-five head of cattle were found slaughtered and between a quarter and half of the original herd was damaged. None of the carcasses has been taken away for food. The Bigambul stuck the hearts of two heifers on poles facing each other, similar to gateway posts (Reynolds, 1992, p. 62).

This may well have been a formal declaration of war, although the literature on these customs is limited. Nevertheless, the reporting of the mutilations was sure to have had wider ranging reputational consequences for both First Nation warriors and colonists. It also highlights that newspaper readers of the time were aware that they were engaged in a war, and many understood that First Nations warriors were attacking points of vulnerability. Two years after Queensland became a separate colony in 1859, the Northern Australian reported that:

> So injurious to the best interests of the colony do outrages by the blacks become, in deterring settlement and keeping out capital, that we look upon them as the worst evils of our position, and as the greatest barriers to the development of our resources. If there be in Queensland at the present moment one subject, which more than any other is of the highest importance… that subject is the better protection of the frontier districts. (*Northern Australian*, 6 December 1861, p. 5)

The impact of sustained attacks was equally widely acknowledged. A settler at Mackay in north Queensland whose property had been attacked twenty times was an example of what defeat meant:

> Three or four days ago, Mr. R. Martin relates that he came across the tracks of a large mob of blacks whilst riding within a mile of the homestead, and from the terrified appearance of some of the cattle at once concluded that his run had for the twentieth time been the scene of gashed and mutilated beeves [beef cattle]. His loss he has not yet discovered… To such a length have these depredations on runs, where shelter is found in the thick scrub and ranges, been carried on by the blacks, that it is almost inconceivable the losses sustained by the victims of them. (*Mackay Mercury and South Kennedy Advertiser*, 24 August 1867, p. 2)

This scenario was repeated on countless other frontiers, as was the awareness that any defeat of colonial forces or successful challenge to European settlement constituted the infliction of reputational damage. Thomas Darling observed the fractured remains of a 'frontline' in northwest NSW, along which settlement had quite obviously been defeated:

> On the 4th January 1840, the party crossed the neutral ground between the western squatters and the aborigines, and here, in the shape of burnt and broken buildings, ruined stockyards, and pathways grown with grass, they received abundant proofs that the whites had been compelled to give way before the blacks (Darling, 1905, p. 13)

Military and quasi-military forces were relied upon to respond to First Nations economic warfare operations. The advent of Federation in 1901, and the drafting debates surrounding the new Constitution demonstrate the ongoing fear of First Nations warriors. A key aspect of Federation was the creation of a singular command of the military, with one common system of taxation (Quick & Garran, 1908). The responsibility to defend white Australia against First Nations groups (particularly in the less populated states of Queensland and Western Australia) was clearly articulated in Section 119 of the Constitution: "The Commonwealth shall protect every State against invasion and, on the application of the Executive Government of the State, against domestic violence". The term 'domestic violence' comes from the American Constitution, which was concerned with fears of slave revolts; the term 'domestic violence' as opposed to 'insurrection' allowed for military force to be used against those (slaves) who did not have the legal right to commit riots (not being legal persons). So too under the Australian Constitution, First Nations peoples were not recognised as legal individuals, yet their military impact on Australian frontiers was widely acknowledged.

Conclusion

The financial and reputational cost of First Nations warfare is only slowly being recognised despite the plethora of evidence. The pacification of the Sydney Basin took nearly forty years: twice the time spent by Western forces in Afghanistan and ten times the length of the Great War. That First Nations continued a tradition of warfare (economic warfare, strike force operation and 'tiny wars') that pre-dates the pitched battle by millennia is remarkable, given the geographic separation of the Australian continent for nearly 10,000 years. The tradition of warfare in Australia, now often forgotten, was clearly in the minds of the self-governing colony on the advent of Queensland's separation from New South Wales. John Watts MP, at the opening of the new Queensland Parliament in 1861, conceded that "the people of this colony must be considered to be, as they always have been, at open war with the Aborigines (*Queensland Guardian*, 4 May 1861, p.2).

Once alerted to the colonial perspectives, from speeches and diaries through to newspaper reports, the dismissal of First Nation's resistance as something less than war becomes untenable.

To deny that colonial centres of gravity in expanding frontiers was repeatedly and deliberately attacked, across the continent and across generations is to deny the colonial experiences and understanding at the time. Understanding and accepting the violent colonial experiences of the past is necessary for *makarrata* (truth-telling) and to inform the Australian public about critical modern issues, such as whether to constitutionally enshrine First Nations Voices to Parliament, or to become the final British colony to sign a treaty with its First Nations population. By re-evaluating the colonial experiences, Australians can approach modern issues demonstrating what the Wiradyuri call *yindymarra winhaganha* – a process of self-reflection to better the world we live in.

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