

A disturbing journey

JAMES DUNN reviews a book which analyses newly declassified information about Australia's role in the occupation and ultimate independence of East Timor.

THE TIMOR DRAMA WHICH began to unfold 35 years ago deserves a special place in the study of the recent history of Australian foreign policy, but the subject and its wider implications cannot be said to be popular with most of our academic institutions. However, for those who care to take a closer look at how events unfolded during those three and a half decades it is a disturbing though revealing journey, one that is more likely to arouse shame and disappointment than pride. Most of us tend to focus on the role Australia played in 1999 when our Interfet force played a key role in the withdrawal of an ABRI (Indonesian military) force that had conducted a brutal occupation of the former Portuguese colony for some 24 years. Our troops were seen as the liberators, a role filling Australians with a sense of pride—one that captured the fancy of

many politicians, but a closer look at the role played by the Australian political establishment since 1974 is more likely to lead to dismay and disquiet.

Now, Dr Clinton Fernandes, an associate professor at our Defence Force Academy, has published a detailed study of what transpired when, after the Lisbon coup in April 1974, Portugal offered the East Timorese the right to shape their own destiny. Among the Timorese this was an exciting and challenging development, one that aroused great expectations in a community eager for decolonisation. It was an enthusiasm that I witnessed when

in East Timor on a fact-finding mission in June-July 1974. The Timorese recalled the promises of those commandos whose gallant struggle against Japanese invaders

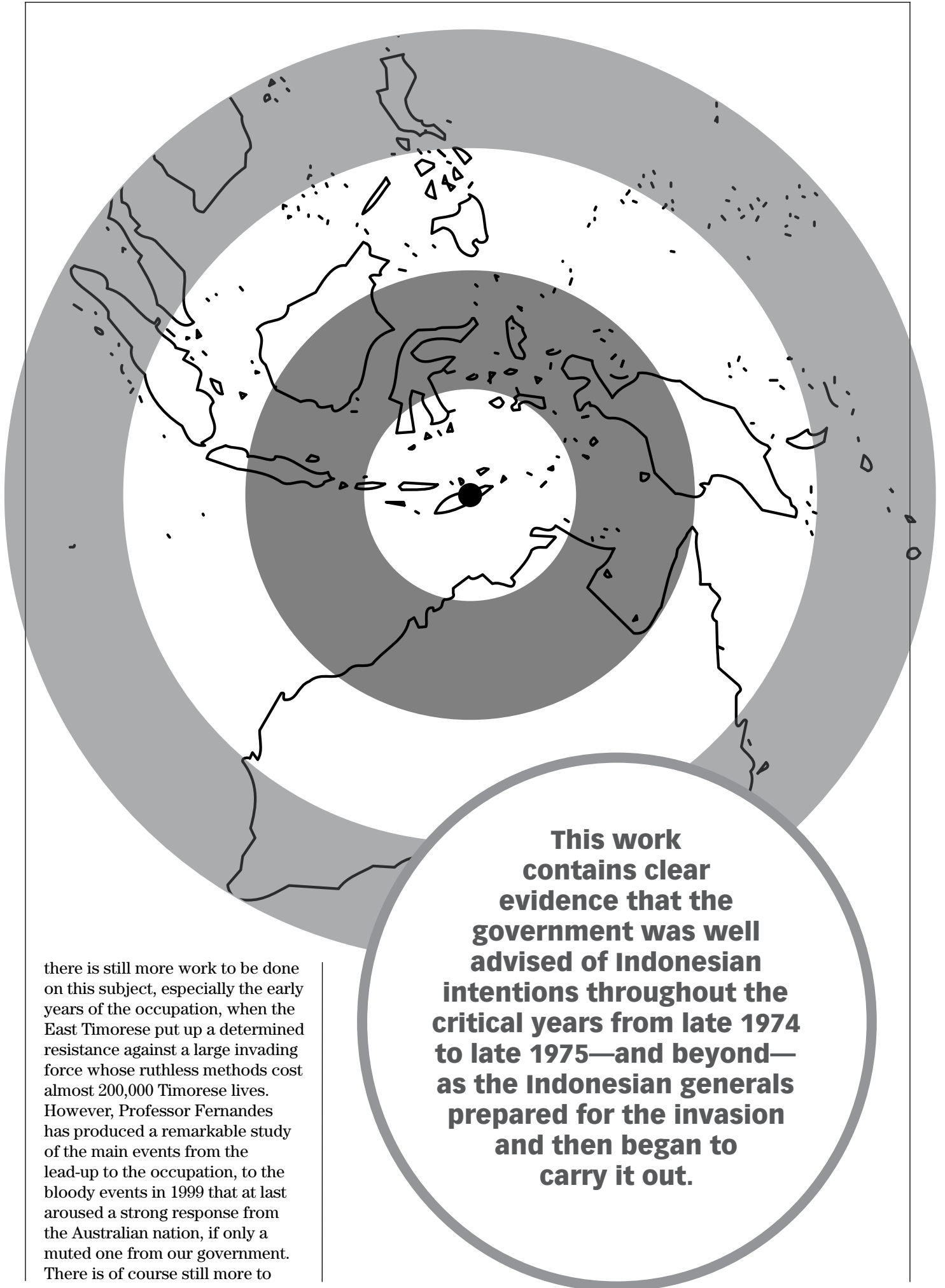
they had selflessly assisted during our darkest hours in World War II. They recalled their promise to return and repay a people for whom their courageous part in the conflict had catastrophic consequences. This important book sets out in detail the shaping of events from the

lead-up to the brutal Indonesian invasion and harsh occupation, until it ended in equally brutal style 24 years later.

As the author acknowledges,

The Independence of East Timor: Multi-Dimensional Perspectives – Occupation, Resistance, and International Political Action

Fernandes, Dr Clinton
Sussex Academic Press
RRP \$34.95



there is still more work to be done on this subject, especially the early years of the occupation, when the East Timorese put up a determined resistance against a large invading force whose ruthless methods cost almost 200,000 Timorese lives. However, Professor Fernandes has produced a remarkable study of the main events from the lead-up to the occupation, to the bloody events in 1999 that at last aroused a strong response from the Australian nation, if only a muted one from our government. There is of course still more to

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be written about what was a shameful episode in Australian foreign policy during which we endorsed a gross violation of the United Nations Charter, and as this work shows, gave formal support to the occupation, both internationally and domestically. It was surely the sorriest chapter in the history of the foreign policy of this country, a nation with mostly small states as neighbours. In particular, the way Australians turned their faces away from the brutal consequences of the 24 years of Indonesian occupation that had been encouraged by Canberra, with the implicit denial of self-determination to a small neighbouring community.

The victims were a people who had rallied in support of Australian troops when Japanese forces swept through the rest of Southeast Asia in late 1941 and early 1942, delaying the consolidation of Japan's occupation. By bringing out in detail the events of the time, and the response of the parties involved *The Independence of East Timor* by Clinton Fernandes is thereby a very important work, one of the most important to have emerged so far on this subject. He was clearly helped by his experience as an intelligence officer in the last years of Indonesian occupation and his later role as a special adviser to the coronial enquiry into the killing of the journalists at Balibo. But this book reveals a strong commitment to justice and fundamental human rights. It is a very detailed and carefully researched work on the key events in this unfolding drama and makes this book an extremely valuable research tool.

It is an essential reference for those seeking a better understanding of the roles of the key players and a particularly important study for those seeking a clearer picture of the murky role played by Australian governments which, right to the end, favoured the integration of the Portuguese colony into Indonesia. It leads us to a different conclusion from that suggested in a recent brief account from Gareth Evans, a former

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Foreign Minister, who is now Chancellor of the ANU. Of course Evans is not the only former player in this tragic affair to find shallow excuses for past policies.

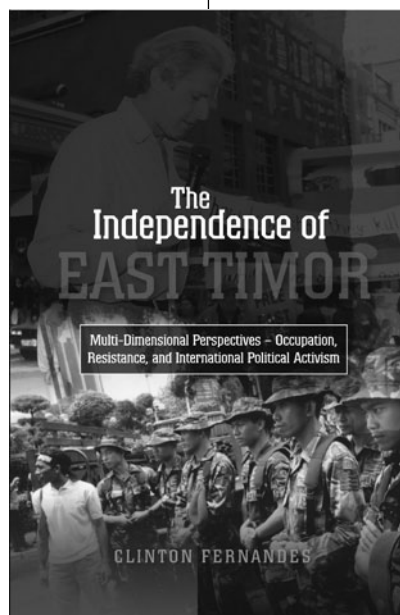
As an intelligence officer, Clinton Fernandes specialised in monitoring events in Indonesia for our intelligence community and, in the period leading up to the referendum in 1999, the rapidly changing situation in East Timor. His interest and involvement clearly increased later, when he assisted the coronial enquiry in Sydney into the 1975 Balibo killings. He has managed to obtain the declassification of a large amount of intelligence material, and is thus able to throw fresh light on the role of the parties involved, including the Australian governments of the time.

This work contains clear

evidence that the government was well advised of Indonesian intentions throughout the critical years from late 1974 to late 1975—and beyond—as the Indonesian generals prepared for the invasion and then began to carry it out. Their intentions were

clearly known to the Whitlam Government, based on intelligence material. Contrary to the recent statement by Gareth Evans, the government not only declined to discourage the impending military intervention, but by constantly reminding the Indonesians that Australia favoured integration,

actually encouraged it. As a cable from our Ambassador in Jakarta in mid-1975, put it: 'Our policies should be based on disengaging ourselves as far as possible from the Timor question ... leave events



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IN EFFECT, AUSTRALIA WAS LETTING events take their course. As far as officials were concerned, East Timor's fate was a foregone conclusion. I confronted these attitudes when I returned from the fact-finding mission to Portuguese Timor. I was then a specialist foreign affairs adviser to the Parliament, and found that mainly senior parliamentarians, on both sides of the house, simply didn't want to hear that integration of a basically Christian community into an Islamic community was an unrealistic expectation. I informed them that East Timorese leaders, with the exception of a handful of APODETI (Timorese Popular Democratic Association) members, were strongly opposed to integration with Indonesia and that, having declared our support for self-determination, we had an obligation to support a people who had rallied to our support in our darkest hours in World War II.

Could Australia have done anything to prevent the invasion? Gareth Evans declares that we were powerless to change Indonesian intentions. I believe that this common defence is wrong. Indonesia was then a major recipient of aid, and Suharto himself was nervous about the reaction of the US and European states. We could, I believe, have headed off the annexation, using diplomacy, not tough language. As was known to the officials concerned, Suharto aspired to become a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). He was concerned that his prospects could be affected by Third World reactions to Indonesian moves to deny self-determination to East Timor, especially responses that would come from those African states that had been colonies of Portugal and were then in the process of securing independence. Australia could have sought support from other members of IGGI, the Indonesia donor consortium.

In the western intelligence community Australia was respected as a leading authority

on Indonesia, and our views would have carried some weight. As Fernandes points out, Suharto himself resisted the pressure of his generals after the Portuguese Governor had withdrawn to Atauro in late September 1975, preferring covert action. As I understood the situation, the President gave the go-ahead to his generals only when he was assured that Indonesia's relations with the US, Australia and other key countries would not be imperilled.

The early covert operations, led by Kopassus, showed that the Fretilin military was a force to be reckoned with, and the first major attack was a substantial operation, one that took the lives of five newsmen from Australia.

From the declassified material that Fernandes has been able to obtain, we can now have a better

understanding of how the situation involving East Timor unfolded at key stages after Portugal's new regime decided to allow its colonies to end colonial rule and become independent states. In late 1975 the Indonesians were very concerned

about the possibility that the Balibo incident would lead to negative international reactions, but thanks to the gentle way the Whitlam Government handled this issue the generals had little to fear.

The reaction from Canberra was muted,

with our government declining to accuse the TNI (Indonesian military) of killing the newsmen, even after their fate had been revealed in sensitive intelligence material. This policy was followed by the Fraser Government which meant that at no stage was a formal protest lodged with Jakarta



The late Australian activist Dr Andrew McNaughton speaking at a Sydney rally in 1999. PHOTO: ENRICO ADITJONDRO

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about the summary execution of the newsmen. Months later a mission led by Alan Taylor was sent to Balibo from our embassy in Jakarta, but its probing was superficial, with no firm conclusion on an event which was already well known to the government. The way the issue was handled by Canberra merely served to encourage the Indonesian forces to continue their invasion and to employ harsh methods, knowing that there was little risk of exposure from Australia.

THE CHAPTER ON EVENTS leading up to the referendum, or consultation, as it was officially called, is of special importance. It shows that, despite growing international pressures, and the new stand of President Habibie, TNI generals, mainly those from Kopassus who had led the invasion in October 1974 and had then virtually controlled the administration of the annexed province, sought desperately to head off the loss of the 27th province, especially when it became clear that UN involvement would make this difficult. Hence the setting up of the militia had nothing to do with pro-integration Timorese. It was formally launched at ABRI headquarters in August 1998 by Kopassus generals Zakky Anwar Makarim and Sjafrie Sjamsuddin who gave the few assembled

Timorese pro-integration leaders the operational agenda—in effect the formation of military units to sabotage the independence movement by intimidation and the use of violence. These were key generals, not rogue commanders as Alexander Downer described them in 1999, when mass killings began to take place. And so, Indonesia's last year of occupation ended as it began in Balibo—in a wave of violence and terror, and massive destruction. According to a UNTAET (UN Transitional Administration in East Timor) report in 2000, 73% of all houses and buildings were destroyed or seriously damaged, and one third of the population forcibly displaced.

As Fernandes shows, the Howard Government's position remained ambiguous. While the Prime Minister's letter to President Habibie suggested a referendum, he also recorded his own preference for East Timor to remain with Indonesia. His foreign minister's statements suggested that what was clearly a carefully planned ABRI operation was in fact the work of 'rogue elements'. There was an element of continuity in Australian foreign policy. Under Whitlam, the government had been careful not to draw attention to Indonesian military preparations for the invasion of East Timor, even though these were well known to it from intelligence sources, and in 1999 the Howard

Government declined to endorse well-founded reports that the TNI had itself set up the militia units and controlled them.

When in 1999 US officials, among them Stanley Roth, became concerned at reports that the TNI was directing the operations of the militia, Australian officials were instructed that such intelligence material should not be passed on to the Americans. When Major Merv Jenkins, a concerned Australian officer stationed in Washington, passed on such material to his US counterparts he was threatened by Australian officials with prosecution. Following this incident Jenkins committed suicide.

I encountered this protective attitude when I became UN specialist on crimes against humanity in East Timor. A senior Australian official let me know that I would get no assistance from them in my search for evidence on the role of Indonesian military commanders behind the violence and destruction carried out in 1999. It was my conclusion that Australian mission officials also encouraged Timorese leaders not to press for an international tribunal to try those military leaders responsible for major war crimes. Much has been written about how Australian attitudes to Timor had changed, but in reality it was more about opportunism than substance. Thanks to these attitudes a number of senior TNI officers have escaped the exposure they richly deserved, including officers who gave drugs to reluctant militia 'to make them brave', and massacres of dozens of civilians followed.

James Dunn is a former diplomat and Director of the Foreign Affairs group in the Australian Parliament's Legislative Research Service. His fact-finding mission to East Timor in 1974 resulted in a report recommending self-determination for the now independent nation of Timor Leste. He also worked with the UN as an advisor, producing a report in 2001 on crimes against humanity in East Timor.

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