Military spending and mythology in Australia have taken on a life of their own. We need an Iraq War inquiry and a more realistic view of the last century of war.

A large chunk of humanity tumbled into World War I just over a hundred years ago. Now it's consigned to be yet another centenary, clearly visible in backward view as an opportunity for commemoration.

Expect the first significant stirrings around the end of June, which in 1914 saw the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire. The diplomatic crisis his assassination triggered led to the first shots a month later. Then Britain declared war on Germany, which had invaded Belgium and was bearing down on France, on 4 August.

These and other dates will be presented to us as times for solemn reflection on the sacrifices of war and the nobility of suffering for one’s country. Prime Minister Tony Abbott has been urging attention not merely on the “magnificent defeat” at Gallipoli in 1915, but also the “terrible victory” of the Western Front.

His government is, he announced in a speech at the Australian War Memorial, considering setting up an “interpretive centre” in France to gather materials charting the Diggers’ role in trench warfare, presented as an essential defence of freedom and democracy.

At the same time, Abbot has set his sights on a massive increase in military spending, to bring Australia’s defence budget up to 2 per cent of GDP within 10 years. In the “lessons” he wants us to learn from the Great War, there’s a not-too-subtle connection: we should go along with preparations for future wars, lest we dishonour the fallen from a century ago.

While you listen to the litany of cuts to social provision in Joe Hockey’s budget speech next month, the 2015 "Anzac Centenary" Defence White Paper is being prepared as a rearguard action, as the military tries to cling on to as many as possible of the expensive commitments it wrung out of the Rudd government from 2007.

The most egregious example dates from even earlier – the Lockheed Martin F35 "Joint Strike Fighter", supposedly the world’s most advanced combat plane but so bedevilled by cost overruns that it is still impossible to say how much each will cost.
The original order for 100 JSFs, set down with a swish of John Howard’s pen on a visit to Washington (and pre-empting a Defence study of its claims against those of rival systems) was whittled down this week to a mere 72, with a notional price tag of $12.4 billion.

Its purpose is to enable Australia to “take part in future Coalition operations”, according to Senator John Faulkner, Rudd’s Defence Minister, who confirmed a previous spending commitment on the project.

In the years since Faulkner’s 2008 Senate announcement, Western “Coalition” military operations have fallen further into disrepute. Canberra’s white-collar skirmishes are fought out against the background of a widely perceived crisis of military legitimacy.

Australian troops have left Afghanistan, having suffered 40 dead, over 200 wounded and – we learned this week – an expected avalanche of cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Their presence in Uruzgan Province had long since lost majority support among the Australian public.

Frank Ledwidge, UK intelligence officer and "justice advisor" in Helmand Province, testified last year to an Inquiry by the UK House of Commons Defence Select Committee, capturing the sense of inversion laid bare by the failures of western troops in Afghanistan.

It was, he declares, “a campaign that arose out of determinism. We had this big army. We needed to use it and to do something. We are expeditionary warriors, so let’s go and do that”.

Military spending and planning habitually presents itself as a response to perceived threats. In reality, it exerts its own gravitational pull over political agendas for responding to conflicts and crises, an effect well captured in the phrase popularised by President Eisenhower, as he left the Oval Office over 50 years ago: the “military-industrial complex”, with its propensity for “unwarranted influence ... whether sought or unsought” over spending decisions by governments. If threats do not exist, they have to be invented, to justify the outlay.

In Helmand, as British troops pulled out, the number of hectares under poppy cultivation rose by a third in 2013, while opium production in Afghanistan as a whole jumped by almost 50 per cent.
The “insurgency conflict” perceived by outsiders ultimately pitted occupying troops against a shadow enemy, Ledwidge concluded. The locals were fighting a different war, one that has roots going back over decades and divides along faultlines of tribe and community.

Uruzgan briefly re-entered the news in February this year, with a suicide bomb attack on a hotel in Tarin Kowt, where the Aussies had been based, which killed nine people and was blamed on “the Taliban”. Perhaps they had been seeking revenge for one of the most notorious massacres of the war, when a US field commander in the province called down air strikes on what turned out to be a civilian convoy, four years earlier.

Unlike in the UK, politicians here seem to take a "see no evil, hear no evil" approach to any bad news involving military operations. The Liaison Office, a respected Afghan NGO, lost its contract with AusAID after refusing to water down its conclusions from a 2012 report on Uruzgan that raised the alarm over the rule of law and women’s rights. Canberra simply did not want to hear it.

The disastrous conduct and consequences of another Coalition operation, the invasion of Iraq, has been the subject of several official probes in Britain, the latest of which, the Chilcot Inquiry, has heard copious confirmation of what was suspected all along: that allied countries committed support long before they knew what was at stake. In the words of a leaked memo from the head of MI6, “the intelligence and the facts [were] fixed around the policy” – again, that sense of inversion.

There is a campaign for an Iraq War Inquiry in Australia, which is a good thing, since we’ve never had one. It also campaigns for a reform of war powers, to oblige Prime Ministers to obtain backing from Parliament before committing to the use of force.

How do we keep getting into these messes? We can guess – the self-abasing urge, on the part of political leaders here, to gratify the every whim of powerful factions in Washington, whether they be neo-conservatives bent on war, or their suppliers of military hardware. It’s high time it was exposed by a properly constituted investigation, with appropriate powers to collect evidence and compel witnesses.

That might, in turn, prompt and enable the lessons of history to be reassessed. Chief of the Defence Force, General David Hurley, used a newspaper column on Anzac day last year to rehash the argument that Gallipoli was “the day Australia came of age” as a
nation. Respect for the fallen, and a misty sense of national destiny, are implicitly evoked to win support for the campaign to retool our warfighting capabilities.

Professor Marilyn Lake of La Trobe University has reminded us that, by 1915, Australia already had notable achievements to its credit in the shape of advances in democracy and trade union rights – a more fertile source, surely, for concepts of our national identity. And, lest we forget, Australians used their voting rights to reject conscription into military service, in the plebiscite of 1916.

There are, visible if you look for them, challenges to the official interpretation of the upcoming anniversaries too. Campaigners from the Marrickville Peace Group are working on a soon-to-be-launched Gallipoli Centenary Peace Campaign.

Perhaps we can use 2014 and 2015 to switch our critical faculties back on, and use our freedom and democracy to loosen the grip of the military-industrial complex and our deference to warmongers across the Pacific. That would be a fitting codicil to a century of war.

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