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Herb Feith

Herb Feith was a scholar, teacher and peace activist. He started his career as an Indonesian specialist, and wrote a treatise on the development of the Indonesian state. One of Australia’s first international volunteers, he worked as a volunteer in Indonesia in the early 1950s. He was a supporter of peace research, and initiated peace think tanks and forums in Australia, in addition to supporting and publicising many international causes. He campaigned vigorously for self-determination in East Timor. Throughout his career he built up a large network of contacts with scholars, politicians and activists around the world. He was known as a generous mentor and teacher, influencing many now-prominent international relations experts both in Australia and internationally. Herb died in 2001.

Herb Feith (right) with his adopted Indonesian family, including Ibu Kromodiharjo (seated far left) and Bapak Kromodiharjo (seated middle), in Pedoworedjo, Yogyakarta, when Herb was an Australian Volunteer translator with the Indonesian Ministry of Information, early 1950s. (Courtesy Australian Volunteers International and David Feith.)
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Herb Feith: Working for Peace across Cultures

Gary Smith

Herbert Feith escaped the Holocaust as a seven-year-old boy, and came to Australia as a refugee. His parents, Arthur and Lily Feith, fled with him from Vienna in 1938, just ahead of the Nazi pogroms, not expecting to find passage on a ship to Australia. Herb (as he would always be called) spent the rest of his childhood in the relative security of Melbourne during World War II, and attended university in the immediate postwar years. He then set off on an extraordinary path of intellectual and political activity, analysing and acting on challenging global problems, their manifestations in Australia’s region, particularly in Indonesia, and their implications for Australians.

From his youngest days as an activist/scholar, Feith sought to make intellectual sense of some of the largest problems facing humanity. He understood these in global rather than national terms, and devoted attention to mass poverty, the gap between rich and poor, and the profound cultural differences within and between states. He sought to understand and challenge violence, militarism, repression and war as persistent features of political life. His activism was in turn based on human rights and global values rather than national values. These agendas included the alleviation of poverty, inter-cultural dialogue and understanding, peace and conflict resolution. Feith became Australia’s leading scholar of Indonesia, and the Australian best-known there for his knowledge and understanding of that country. He sought to advance an agenda of cooperative Australian–Indonesian relations at both the inter-governmental and people-to-people levels. He went on to address the difficult circumstances of groups who sought more autonomy in the international system. He mapped out the moral and practical dimensions of self-determination claims, seeking new UN mechanisms for conflict resolution, and he supported East Timorese self-determination campaigns over the quarter-century of Indonesian occupation.
Unlike many notable refugees in Australia who became successful in business, law and medicine in the conventional national context, Feith’s life was deeply informed by a cosmopolitan perspective. This derived from his personal immersion in the understanding of other cultures and wider international forces, and from the values that he developed to guide his research and action. ‘Success’ for Feith might be a problematic idea when the bar he set was so high, but he had extraordinary achievements as an Australian thinker, educator and activist who maintained a vibrant cosmopolitan outlook. His life’s activity had a major impact in Australia and abroad, as can be readily seen in a brief review of his main activities.

**Founder of Australian overseas volunteer movement.** Shortly after Indonesia’s independence, the young Herb Feith went to work in Indonesia along-side Indonesians, as a volunteer working in the new Ministry of Information. He lived and worked in Indonesia for a total of four years in the early 1950s. By personal example and through his lobbying in Australia, Feith became the driving force behind the new Australian overseas volunteer movement, later known as Australian Volunteers International (AVI). AVI, more than fifty years on, has about 1000 Australians currently working under its auspices overseas and with Indigenous Australians.

**Australia’s leading scholar of Indonesia.** Feith’s deep engagement with Indonesia continued and was combined with brilliant academic work. He completed a Masters at the University of Melbourne, and a PhD at Cornell University on Indonesian politics in the 1950s. His studies were undertaken in a period when the new democracy conducted its first major elections and then faltered into governmental instability. His book *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (1962), with its unparalleled use of local sources, and his subsequent writings, established him as one of the world’s foremost Indonesia scholars, and the Australian academic most well known within Indonesia. He became Professor of Politics at the relatively new Monash University in 1968, as Monash became a hub of knowledge and expertise about South-East Asia. He remained committed to the idea of the federal democratic Indonesian state as an appropriate political community for the former Dutch East Indies.

**Peace educator and activist.** The extensive anti-communist massacres in Indonesia in 1965–66, and the turbulent 1960s student protests in western countries over the Vietnam war, shifted Feith’s focus in the 1970s and 1980s to peace and justice issues. He developed peace education courses at Monash University, and was a major force behind the Labor government’s decision to establish the Peace Research Centre at the Australian National University.
He was the leading figure in the creation of the Victorian Association for Peace Studies and then the Secure Australia Project as academic/activist organisations.

The problem of self-determination. The great wave of decolonisation after World War II led to the creation of many new states, large and small, with political independence. Feith celebrated the emancipatory nature of these dramatic events, but he was immediately alert to problems generated by the artificial nature of new political communities, in particular the problem of self-determination of groups disaffected with their minority status, and seeking to retain and develop a separate identity. For Feith, the question was framed by concern for human suffering: how to mitigate the brutality that new states often used against claims to self-determination by minority groups. He sought to engage the UN in assessing such claims, and proposed that federalist political solutions be pursued rather than centralist military solutions. He also identified Indonesian–Australian joint approaches to global crises, campaigned against excessively military tactics in Australia’s approach to the world, and expressed concern about the possibility of an Australian–Indonesian arms race.

In the firing line. Feith applied this global thinking to the case of East Timor, and contributed to keeping the idea of options for self-determination alive after the Indonesian invasion and occupation of 1975. At the same time he sought to educate not only Australians about Indonesian thinking, but also Indonesians about the strength and validity of the self-determination claims by the East Timorese. Over two decades later, in 1999, Feith was an observer of the independence ballot in East Timor. The ballot was followed by an intensified period of orchestrated militia violence and killings, until the UN-authorised and Australia-led military intervention brought the country under control. Angus MacIntyre, friend and fellow Indonesia scholar, recounts a series of events at a house in East Timor that he and Feith were visiting during the period of violence. The day before, militia had entered the house and issued a threat to return and kill the inhabitants. The militia returned while Feith and MacIntyre were present. MacIntyre recounts that ‘a raging argument ensued at the front door’ (Encounter 2003):

Herb had come forward through the house to the front and these militia men I think were a little taken aback to see this very old and frail man with flashing eyes and perfect Indonesian condemning them for their behaviour and while this was going on the people in the house actually escaped, ran away out the back door and so in the end it was just Herb arguing with the militia on the veranda with an empty house behind him.
This chapter reviews Feith’s impressive legacy across these diverse areas of activity. ‘Herb was an ideas man’, said one of his Australian colleagues (Mackie 2002: 19), and this chapter explores some of his key ideas, taking us through the sweep of half a century of international politics. But Feith was also an activist, from the perspective of an Australian deeply concerned with the wider issues of common humanity in the region and the world at large.

Feith’s journey is tracked from his pioneering role as an Australian volunteer in Indonesia; a world-renowned scholar of Indonesia; a writer and teacher on global peace and justice; a supporter of the project of Indonesian democracy through its forty-year suppression by authoritarian forces; an activist on East Timorese self-determination, and also against tendencies to militarism in the Australian Government’s approach to the region.

Early days: founder of Australian volunteers movement

Contemporary discussions of cosmopolitanism often seek to identify the current reality and future prospects of an emerging global civil society (Anheier et al. 2006). This concept describes emerging phenomena of non-governmental organisations and social movements that address common global problems. These organisations are creating, in uneven and haphazard ways, a new set of positive ‘people-to-people’ forces in international politics, cutting across and influencing inter-governmental relations. Those same discussions will often identify two of the harsh and persistent constraints on the development of a sense of global community: deep inequalities in wealth between (and within) nations, and the enduring difficulties of cross-cultural communication and understanding.

As a young graduate, Feith was a pioneer in this new frontier of global cooperation, creating elements of civil society across national boundaries where none had existed. With no organisational structure to assist in the task, he arranged to work in post-independence Indonesia as a volunteer in 1951, in the Ministry for Information. He returned for a second period, spending a total of four years in Indonesia as a larger volunteer movement began to follow his example. Feith described his interest in volunteering as a way of addressing global divides: seeking culturally appropriate ways for people in a rich and mainly western country to assist those in a poor and non-western country, with both enriched by the experience. His personal example and engagement provided impetus to the establishment of the Australian overseas volunteers movement, based on these ideas of accepting local living conditions and extensive periods of involvement.
Volunteering is part of the Australian community fabric, and part of ‘civil society’. Feith was tapping into and extending this important Australian tradition. Australians volunteer locally to fight fires, to provide emergency services and ambulance services, and to assist international sporting events. To be a volunteer is to perform a service to a community wider than one’s family, of one’s own free will. This is a double freedom: from the market and from the state. It is a freedom from performing a service for the purpose of financial reward, and from performing a function required by law, although there may be a structure of basic financial support, and the legal frameworks of the state may play an important enabling role.

Feith’s originality was to take this tradition into the international sphere after the debilitating world wars of the twentieth century. Internationally, Australians in the first half of that century volunteered in large numbers to fight in major wars. Mostly this involved signing a contract with the state, and the free will of the volunteer became compromised. After World War II, this kind of volunteering, to fight for country and wider cause, had lost its appeal. But new international challenges reshaped the concept of volunteering, and Herb Feith played a key role in this process.

The unravelling of European colonialism was the great historical drama in Asia, on Australia’s doorstep. New, independent but very poor states were being created in South and South-East Asia as the force for decolonisation became unstoppable. The Indonesian nationalist revolution, for example, had secured independence from Holland. Australia’s official response to these developments in the 1950s was characterised by the poor leadership of British Empire loyalists such as Liberal prime minister Robert Menzies, who had once dismissed the Indonesian nationalist leader Sukarno as a collaborator with Japan. Whereas the Labor governments at the time of Indonesian independence had facilitated and welcomed the process of decolonisation, for many Liberals of that era, there was an overriding concern about new insecurities, a fear of communism in Asia, and fear of ‘Asia’ itself, as China aligned with Moscow in the Cold War. It was in the conservative climate of Liberal governments in Australia that Feith volunteered to assist in administration in the new state of Indonesia in the 1950s.

Feith and the early volunteers in Indonesia were an important group in Australian political life in this early Cold War period (Diprose 2002). They brought back to Australia a sense of Indonesia as neighbour, an understanding of the complexity of the neighbour’s society, and enjoyment in the challenge of cross-cultural understanding. These perspectives worked against the dominant official and popular tendency to stereotype and fear the Asian region. Their influence endured as the international volunteering
movement grew in size and complexity to become an established part of Australian community life. Herb Feith was, by imagination, determination and example, to initiate a movement that would in time propel many thousands of fellow Australians into experiences that would give them a wider sense of global community.

Understanding Indonesia

Herb Feith established a worldwide academic reputation as a pre-eminent 'Indonesianist', widely respected outside the country as one of a handful who were the best in the field, but also inside Indonesia as one who had a deep understanding of Indonesian social and political life. His work clearly benefited from what was unmatched access to Indonesian local publications and newspapers, but also access to intellectuals, political figures – a network which he had developed from his time as a volunteer – and the everyday life and perspective of Indonesian families and villagers. He was able to integrate his deep experience of life in Indonesia with the intellectual currents emanating from North America's most prestigious centre of research excellence on South-East Asian Studies, Cornell University. Out of this inter-cultural experience he produced a unique body of work.

Two key dimensions of Feith's work that are of particular interest in the context of cosmopolitanism are his approach to the questions of human agency versus historical determinism, and the response to the murderous crisis that engulfed Indonesia in 1965.

Herb Feith's worldwide reputation as a scholar of Indonesia rests on his book about the fate of Indonesian democracy in the 1950s, and on a series of articles and chapters on the Guided Democracy period under Sukarno that began in 1958 and continued until the tragic events of 1965–66 (Feith 1962; 1967). His book The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia (1962) examines the various cabinet governments that formed and re-formed in the lead-up to the first parliamentary election in 1955, the elections that year, and the character of the four major political parties that emerged at the election and the diverse social forces they represented. It further analysed the subsequent political instability in Indonesia as 'Western type political institutions ... worked unsatisfactorily and finally crumbled' (Feith 1982a: 50). President Sukarno's decision to create Guided Democracy curtailed the evolution of constitutional democracy, a path not resumed until forty years later in 1998.

From a cosmopolitan perspective, the most significant dimensions of Feith's book are revealed in the far-reaching debate which it generated. The
debate began between Feith and Yale University Professor Harry Benda, an eminent Jewish-Czech historian, and continued with new contributions for over thirty years (Benda 1964; Feith 1965). Benda charged Feith with asking the wrong question: it should not be ‘why did Indonesian democracy fail?’, but why did anyone think it had a chance of succeeding given Indonesia’s divergent social currents and historical experience. Concerning the course of the 1950s, Feith (and his supporters) would assert that it was quite conceivable that instead of an emerging presidential authoritarianism, alternative democratic forces could have prevailed. These forces were led by those who saw the value in constitutional democracy as an Indonesian solution for its problems as a modern, emerging independent state. On this account, it was touch and go, and the outcomes could have been very different (Feith 1994).

For some this was a debate about the particular times of the 1950s, to be won or lost, and indeed recontested, as fresh perspectives and new research weighed in on each side. But there was a much larger question at stake. Feith’s own self-assessments were somewhat complicated by his later disaffection with the ‘political science’ categories that he used in his early writing, and its overstated claims to objectivity. Nevertheless, he regularly reasserted his conviction about his general position in the debate. For him, this was as much a key assumption about the fundamental nature of politics as it was a statement about a particular time. Feith believed in the possibility of human agency, in the potential for people (as citizens, national or global) to take control of difficult courses of events, and steer them to more just and humane outcomes. In all his intellectual work, Feith would resist the construction of deterministic pictures of politics that allowed no scope for human agency.

The decline of constitutional democracy in Indonesia became a catastrophic fall, destroyed by the extremely violent events of 1965–66 through which General Suharto took power. At the peak of its academic success, the political science project for Feith became unhinged. The Indonesia that Feith knew and admired, even as it lurchcd from democracy to authoritarianism, was all but destroyed by the mass killings of many hundreds of thousands of people seen as communists and communist supporters in 1965–66, following the coup attempt against army leaders, and the counter-coup led by General Suharto. The scale of these killings made it one of the most violent events of the second half of the twentieth century. By virtue of his expertise, Feith was called on to explain and interpret what was going on to Australians, and indeed a wider global community of concerned observers.

These bloody events shook Feith’s conviction in the value of studying and interpreting Indonesian political life. His optimistic spirit for the new nation, in which ‘administrators’ might balance the work of ‘solidarity
makers', within a democratic framework, seemed inappropriate to the world after 1966. At the same time, the wider social currents in western societies, triggered particularly by the reactions to the deepening US involvement in war in Vietnam, stimulated Feith to look for more comprehensive analyses of wider forces affecting the developing world as a whole. He also began to search for ways of thinking and writing which could be grounded in realities but also identify with progressive forces for change.

Feith returned to Indonesia in 1968, and wrote for the New Republic a detailed account of the state of political prisoners who he observed and visited, which led the government to ban him from Indonesia for several years. In it he wrote: 'The Suharto government has... done much less than it could to live down the shame that surrounds its birth, the slaughter of probably well over half a million people in the anti-communist holocaust which followed the abortive coup of October 1965' (Feith 1968a: 17). To use the term 'holocaust' was to make a direct comparison with the mass murder of Jews from which Feith himself had narrowly escaped, and implied the strongest possible condemnation. Yet, in that same year he also wrote an article on the early Suharto period which acknowledged the benefits of economic stability, compared with the downward spiral of poverty of the last years of Sukarno (Feith 1968b). With this ambiguous signature on two decades of intense application to understanding Indonesia, Feith shifted his intellectual focus to a wider canvas, and did not return to Indonesia for a decade.

**Peace, justice, development**

In the 1970s and 1980s, Herb Feith became much less an Indonesianist and more a social thinker, activist and educator preoccupied with the major themes of peace, justice and development—wider, global paradigms. His cosmopolitanism would be derived less from his far-reaching inter-cultural experience and would be based more on the writings of others on global issues. At the same time, he shifted his intellectual identity from that of a 'professionally political scientist kind of person' (Feith 1972: 1) to that of an engaged intellectual who could champion human rights and take political stands, firmly aligning himself with the traditions of value-oriented social inquiry. Developing an activist style, he also explored and refined a reflective approach to his values.

Feith came to be strongly influenced by a radical thinker on poverty and development, Ivan Illich, who established the Center for Intercultural Documentation in Mexico as a forum for discussion of the meaning of
development in areas of public health, education and transportation. Illich had been born in Central Europe and went to the US after World War II as a Catholic priest in Harlem. He then became president of a Puerto Rican University before establishing the Center. Feith described it as a centre ‘for thinking about new ways of tackling problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality . . . in ways which look to simple technology and human ingenuity’. Feith was greatly impressed by Illich’s ideas, stating that his ‘three page piece called “Outwitting the developers” . . . did more to turn my thinking on this whole subject upside down than all the learned articles I had been reading for years for my course’ (Feith 1972: 5).

With these new frameworks, Feith wrote a major article on the phenomenon of ‘repressive developmentalist’ regimes, as a Third World regime type, which then included Brazil, Iran, South Korea and Indonesia (Feith 1982c). In these countries, highly authoritarian regimes, often militarised, presided over rapid economic growth and growing inequalities. These regimes created a degree of political legitimacy from the scale of growth, but at the same time undermined that legitimacy with the unequal distribution of costs and benefits. In an empirically open analytical style, Feith would list the ‘case for’ as well as the ‘case against’ these regimes, but the latter would weigh more heavily on his mind, and his argument. ‘Growth’ could no longer be seen as the same as ‘development’, and he became sharply critical of conventional assumptions that celebrated economic growth. He was shocked by the deepening corruption that came with the acquisition of massive wealth by key individuals close to these regimes, and analysed the narrowing basis of regime legitimacy and potential for legitimation crisis. In the case of Indonesia, Suharto’s longevity as ruler confounded the analysis, as he remained in power until 1998, when the East Asian economic crisis finally drove him from office, leaving behind an economic ruin.

In the first half of the 1980s, the resurgence of Cold War tensions between the US and the Soviet Union, and the emergence of the European peace movement, created the context where Feith would become both a peace activist and peace educator. He was greatly concerned that the escalating nuclear arms race might lead to nuclear war, and he was one of the drivers behind the formation of the Victorian Association for Peace Studies (VAPS) in the early 1980s. He wrote with prescience in February 1980 about an emerging social movement (Feith 1980: 3; see also 1982b):

If I am right that we are all going to be seeing greater connections between global-level militarization and our own week-to-week lives, and that antimilitarism and survival will become the basis for new coalitions comparable
to the anti-Vietnam war one and the anti-nuclear power one, and the anti-fascist one of the 1930s, we... are likely to find ourselves charged with a new range of common tasks.

VAPS established itself as an important component of the re-emerging Melbourne peace movement, the People for Nuclear Disarmament coalition, and undertook a range of activities that developed into a style of social activism for which Feith helped to set the model. These included calling public meetings; publishing ‘dossiers’ on key peace issues, and a newsletter that developed into a national peace magazine; building links with professional associations such as the Medical Association for the Prevention of War and church peace groups; and issuing ‘Statements of Concern’ to the media signed by a broad range of community leaders. At Monash University, Feith offered a highly innovative course entitled Peace: Theories, Strategies and Movements (Bretherton, Burns et al. 1989).

Cold War tensions eased in 1986 with the Reagan–Gorbachev talks, and within three years the nuclear threat of massive casualties from an ‘East-West’ conflict had disappeared. Conservatives would claim the US and Reagan ‘won’ the Cold War through economic and military strength. For Feith, the peace movement in Western Europe had played a crucial role in ending this confrontation of nuclear-armed powers. The massive display of international solidarity had demonstrated to the leaders of the Soviet Union that they had an exaggerated sense of the expansionist ambitions of the West, and to western leaders that the citizens of Europe were not prepared to be the passive pawns in a nuclear war.

Feith shared in the general mood of optimism over the prospects for a new world order after the Cold War. He saw this not just as an opportunity to address the continuing issue of potential inter-state violence, but to focus in a renewed way on the intractable issues of intra-state violence and injustice in many regions. Many of the crises of the twentieth century, and in particular the two world wars, took the form of inter-state violence, and the Cold War was an inter-state conflict between the two superpowers and their allies. Yet it was a conflict that often involved tight constraints on the behaviour of allies. Intra-state problems across the various continents were certainly not new (witness the massacres in Indonesia), but they appeared to increase in number and scale as the constraining settings of the Cold War vanished. In Africa, there was the Rwandan genocide of Tutsis by Hutus. In the case of Europe, the focus was on the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia. In Asia, the problems were often connected to the artificiality of the entities that became the successor states to the colonial order, with disaffected and often repressed minorities yearning for much greater autonomy
and possibly secession. The pattern of violence was linked directly to the politics of repression and self-determination.

Feith had already shown an interest in this larger problem. In the early 1970s, for example, he closely followed the situation of the Pakistan civil war, and took on a public education role in Australia, arguing that the case for an independent state of Bangladesh was strong (Feith 1971). The Bangladeshi case was based on their sense of identity and legitimate representation, the repressive practices of the Pakistani government, and the impossibility of holding together a Pakistani state in two vastly separated halves.

Rethinking self-determination

In the 1990s, Feith ambitiously sought to engage the United Nations in a set of new processes to assist in the recognition of legitimate claims to self-determination. This would lead to much greater accountability for the treatment of regional and ethnic minorities by governments (Feith and Smith 1994). Writing with colleague Alan Smith, he framed the issue in an original and insightful fashion: the UN had played a critical role in the resolution of ‘first generation self-determination claims’, or the decolonisation of the world once controlled by European powers. Now there was a critical role in assessing and resolving ‘second generation self-determination claims’, by groups unreconciled to their place within the current state borders. He put out proposals for UN reform in a decade in which new hopes for the UN were often expressed, now that the superpower standoff that once permanently crippled the Security Council had ended. Of course, such proposals challenged the fundamental principle of sovereignty as ‘non-interference’, and yet they intersected with the new debates about humanitarian intervention, and the limits on sovereignty of those states that failed in their responsibility to protect their citizens.

To a number of groups seeking self-determination, Feith would elaborate a range of options, and often suggest a preference for seeking greater autonomy within states, for new kinds of federalism, rather than challenging the symbols of state sovereignty directly through demands for secession. He was strongly opposed to the idea that every claim of self-determination was a case for secession, and this led him into conflict with some sections of the social justice movement who might on principle champion a group’s claims where there was an authoritarian government. His main reason for seeking accommodations along a spectrum of possibilities was pragmatic and informed by an essentially realist conception of international politics. Changing borders is often one of the hardest and most bloody struggles of
international politics. Bangladesh was seen by Feith as very much the easy exception on separatism that confirmed the hard rule. After all, Pakistan was geographically in two parts, with its arch-rival India controlling the extensive territory in between.

Interestingly, Feith was relatively unconcerned with the dilemmas that would preoccupy many European cosmopolitan thinkers—over their distaste for the very idea of ‘ethnic self-determination’. These European perspectives were in turn influenced by the Yugoslav experience of the 1990s, where there was far-reaching concern over the prospects of ‘ethnic cleansing’ by minorities who now found themselves free from repressive majorities. Feith was more willing to champion the cause of an oppressed group to secure a political space and reduce its exposure to violence, than to worry over how, in their ethnic particularism, once-oppressed groups would behave, if and when faced with their own minorities. But in addressing such groups, who may have thought little about their struggle as expressing global values, he was in turn also a counsel of accommodation, of new arrangements within states, of living in a better but less than perfect world. He wrote his own script on this complex global issue, with a focus on minimising violence, unimpressed by dogmas on the left or right of those who may romantically elevate the ‘people’ or the state as the agent of universal values. He was at times criticised by opponents and supporters of separatist groups alike for being too radical and for being too conservative.

Indonesia and East Timor

These explorations of a wider world canvas of intra-national conflict, from the global surveys of repressive developmentalist regimes to the proposals to reform the UN so that it may assist in the resolution of self-determination claims, did not stray that far from Feith’s lifelong interest in Australia’s neighbour, Indonesia. The sprawling archipelago of Indonesia was beset by a range of centrifugal forces, by claims by regional and ethnic groups for autonomy, and indeed for secession. The major claims were made in Aceh by Muslim separatists, in West Papua by the OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, or Free Papua Movement), and by the East Timorese resistance. How should the validity of these claims be judged? Who was worthy of support?

These are difficult questions from a cosmopolitan perspective. Feith sought to develop principles and make political proposals on these questions, aware that his opinions and arguments carried considerable influence in academic circles, among NGOs in Australia and Indonesia, and among wider
civil society networks mobilised behind the claims of particular groups. An important part of Feith’s views was an abiding commitment to the idea of the Indonesian state as the expression of a larger community purpose. For him, it was an ‘eminently reasonable’ view that the Indonesian state ‘rooted in eight decades of common endeavour and struggle, should not be allowed to founder’ (Feith 1992a: 77). How, then, to balance this view against the claims of more particular ethno-nationalisms, in a context of conflict and oppression?

Feith took the following positions on issues of ongoing importance (Feith, Bell et al. 1986; Feith and Smith 1994).

**Aceh** had only a weak claim to secession from the Indonesian state. In the international norms of decolonisation, which was in effect the new international law, Indonesia was the successor state to the Dutch East Indies, and Aceh an integral part of it. If Aceh were to break away, the disintegrative forces would multiply. On the other hand, Aceh had serious complaints against the repression of the central government over many years, and of exploitation of resources, and there was clearly a case for substantial autonomy. This autonomy was eventually confirmed in 2005–06 after the devastation wreaked by the 2004 tsunami.

**West Papua** had a more protracted history of incorporation into Indonesia, as a Dutch holdout until a switch in US policy saw Indonesian control achieved through a 1962 agreement ending Dutch rule. West Papua was part of the Indonesian nationalist imagination from the beginning, and in international law its status is arguably similar to Aceh. This legality is qualified by the contrived act of incorporation conducted under UN auspices in 1969. Having allowed such an inadequate and manipulative process to take place, the UN remained open to the criticism that the outcome was invalid. The OPM emerged as an organisation seeking independence from Indonesia for West Papua. A distinct Melanesian identity is a core part of the OPM ethno-nationalism. Nevertheless, for Feith, West Papua should have substantial autonomy within Indonesia. He told a dialogue in East Jakarta about Aceh and West Papua (reported in *Jakarta Post* 2001):

> In the long run there should be a new formulation on the autonomy given to both provinces. For example, like those implemented in Hong Kong, which is part of Mainland China, or those imposed in England. Both provinces must be given greater authority and bargaining positions so that they can fully accommodate their needs.

When interviewed by the *Jakarta Post* in October 1999, Feith pointed out that one of the founders of the Indonesian state and later a vice president,
Mohammad Hatta, was a federalist by principle, and it was ‘a greater degree of federalism’ that Feith urged as a solution to secessionist struggles in Indonesia in both Aceh and Papua (King 2004: 74).

**East Timor**, however, was in another category, principally because it had not been part of the Dutch East Indies, and was not part of the Indonesian nationalist project that led to Indonesian independence. After the 1975 Indonesian invasion of the former Portuguese colony, Feith joined the attempts the following year to get the Indonesian Government to withdraw, and to lobby the Australian Government to refuse to condone the occupation. These efforts were unsuccessful, and the Australian Government became the first in the world to recognise Indonesia’s claim to sovereignty over the area. Subsequently, the Hawke Labor government in 1984 formally abandoned the ALP’s commitment to support an act of self-determination in East Timor. Feith campaigned assiduously to keep East Timorese self-determination alive in international forums, as well as in Indonesia and Australia, once the policy door in Australia had been shut.

Feith’s activism was based on an argument about global decolonisation norms, and he presented alternatives which he thought may be accommodated by the international system even if they offered less than the East Timorese were entitled to (Feith 1992a). He argued this was essentially an unresolved ‘first generation’ self-determination claim where the East Timorese were entitled to be the successor state to Portuguese colonialism. However he proposed international solutions based on far-reaching autonomy, notionally within Indonesian sovereignty, which he thought might appeal to a post-Suharto leadership. This approach appealed to the East Timorese leadership at one time. Such ideas were attacked, however, by international supporters of East Timorese independence who were sometimes less interested in the possibility of a political compromise than the recognised leadership of the resistance.

In his campaigning, Feith drew attention to Indonesia’s inability to carry the Non Aligned Movement with it on this issue (due especially to the influence of ex-Portuguese colonies), and how the occupation of East Timor continued to damage Indonesia’s standing in world affairs. He publicised this damage to audiences in Indonesia in an attempt to build on the currents of independent thinking that existed under the authoritarian regime. He then mapped these currents of opinion inside Indonesia on the issue, and alerted non-Indonesian audiences about the possibilities of a change in policy after Suharto. In the 1990s, he wrote a series of incisive papers on the situation in East Timor, on Indonesian political turbulence and on the global NGO and state activities in support of East Timor (Feith 1992a; 1992b; 1992c; 1993). At the same time, he was also working against those in
Australian public life who represented ‘Indonesia’ itself as a threat to Australia rather than attributing responsibility to the nature of the specific Indonesian regime.

A less militarist approach for Australia

In addition to seeking a solution to East Timor’s oppression, Feith was more generally interested in making the most of the post-Cold War opportunity in Australia’s international diplomacy. He accepted that from governments, the best that may be expected was an internationalist rather than a cosmopolitan approach, as they were constrained by the system of ‘sovereign’ states and the idea of the ‘national interest’ in such a system. But the constraints were not absolute and there was an opportunity for governments to pursue ‘good international citizenship’ if they were supported in doing so. He encouraged the diplomatic rhetoric and activism of Australia’s foreign minister, Gareth Evans, along with his emphasis on the UN, and UN reform.

One of Feith’s major concerns, building on his knowledge and life experience of Australia and Indonesia, was the potential for an emerging arms race between Australia and Indonesia. He was apprehensive that the Indonesian armed forces and their political supporters would find additional reasons for maintaining their special status in Indonesian politics by pointing to the ‘Australian threat’. He believed that the excessive military spending and modernisation program that Australia was embarking upon under the leadership of Labor’s defence minister, Kim Beazley, in the late 1980s would contribute to this dynamic. These concerns led to his involvement in the Secure Australia Project (SAP) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Secure Australia Project, formed just as the Cold War was ending, sought to restrain the ‘new militarism’ which came to the fore briefly in the Labor Party. The project sought to reassert the primacy of foreign policy and diplomacy in regional relations. Feith hoped the existence of the project would be noticed in Indonesia and would help restrain some of the impulses to militarism in that state.

Beazley responded to the critique and rejected its argument, but he later acknowledged that his attempts to reassure Indonesian leaders had met ‘with some scepticism’ from them (Andrews 2001: 291). In an essay in a 2005 Quarterly Essay on ‘Australia as a military power’, writer John Birmingham (2005) paid tribute to the prescience of aspects of the ‘new militarism’ critique — and also to the fact that the Labor government of the time was willing to enter into an intellectual engagement with the arguments. Feith’s concerns about the excessive military dimension to Australian foreign relations
Conclusion

In the midst of these energies, engagements and writings, Feith was also doing things that many other Australians might more easily relate to. He was married to Betty for almost fifty years, a father, then a grandfather, lived in suburban Glen Iris, held down a job at Monash University, paid the bills. He had less familiar qualities: a demanding and restless intellect, which Betty Feith put down to coming from a Central European Jewish background (at the time of the Holocaust). He lived out an anti-materialist lifestyle in an era of unprecedented boom in economic affluence. He was deeply interested in the spiritual, and deeply disaffected with the selective passions and narrow politics of mainstream Judaism, and organised religions generally. Betty Feith said she thought of him as a Christian. They met in the Student Christian Movement, and he went to church regularly. Feith wrote in his later years that he thought of himself as a ‘syncretistic Jew’, who added elements onto Judaism from other religions, in the way that many nominal Muslim Indonesians (abangan) added elements from other religions and cultures to fashion a personal syncretic religious view (Feith 2002).

Contemporary research on the cross-cultural learning associated with the acquisition of a second or subsequent language and embedded cultural experiences emphasises that every person comes to occupy their unique hybrid inter-cultural space. Feith’s cross-cultural engagement was so profound that he was seen by many as authoritative in the insights that he might offer to European Australians about their region. Feith was admired as a person who provided leadership to Australians, as to how they might relate to ‘Asians’, and to Australian policy makers and governments as to how they may relate to Asian governments. He gave grounds for this admiration in areas of continuing importance. For example, he spoke passionately for a humane approach to refugees in the Indochinese refugee crisis of the 1970s, promoting settlement schemes that could use the refugees’ agricultural skills. He observed that ‘I am one of those who owes his life to the fact that Australia was willing to open its doors to [a] sizeable number of European Jewish refugees in 1938–9’ (Feith 1979: 25). Feith’s self-perception as an
educator was based on the need for all to fashion their own understanding of how to live in an interdependent world as one humanity. His personal example was too daunting and daring for most to be able to follow. In the area of cross-cultural understanding and empathy, he led a kind of exemplary life that began as an overseas volunteer and developed into an immersion in two cultures, to become an unconventional, yet striking and influential figure in both.

For all his cosmopolitanism, Feith was keenly aware of the policy settings of states in the international system, and acted and argued as though Australian policy makers and Indonesian policy makers could make a difference. They had choices on fundamental matters of human wellbeing; they could make different and better ones under the pressure of social movements and civil society activism. Feith certainly made a difference by opening up people-to-people exchanges between Australia and Indonesia, and by arguing persistently for the importance of a just world order. His voice, urging practical action towards such an order, was heard by many, as witnessed by the overflowing attendance at memorial ceremonies in three countries – Australia, Indonesia and East Timor – after his accidental death.

Long before the idea of an emerging global civil society that would influence and moderate the behaviour of states had become a familiar one, Feith was active in civil society networks across the two societies. He pursued complementary agendas, which could advance greater understanding between communities and shape inter-governmental relations towards directions that would advance peace and justice in the region. In this engagement with state power, Feith was always in some way 'arguing with the militia on the veranda'.

Note

1 I would like to thank Betty Feith, who kindly provided me with access to the Herb Feith archives at Monash University and the National Library of Australia, and also Roderic Pitty for his invaluable comments and suggestions for improvement.

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