


The Prime Ministers in America

James Curran
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THE PRIME MINISTERS IN AMERICA

That Scott Morrison has been granted the honour of a state visit to Washington – the first since John Howard in 2006 and only the second granted by the Trump administration – is a mark of his early success in connecting with the American President, a leader not normally known for his acoustic sensibility to close US allies. The prime minister's visit will undoubtedly give a symbolic flourish to the recent description by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo of the US–Australia alliance as “unbreakable”.¹

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Yet amid the pomp and pageantry that is the hallmark of such occasions, the prime minister's visit comes at a particularly delicate time for his government's management of Australian foreign and defence policy. The truism that Australia can maintain its delicate traversal of the diplomatic tightrope between Washington and Beijing is coming under increasing strain. While President Trump continues to escalate trade tensions with Beijing, US policy towards China remains unsettled, and it is not yet clear where it will come to rest along the spectrum from engagement to containment.

What is clear, however, is that some parts of the Trump administration would like to see Canberra take a tougher line on Beijing. But the prime minister does not necessarily talk the same language as the Trump administration on China. The government has not endorsed the US National Security Strategy's definition of China as a “strategic competitor”,² and Morrison has consistently eschewed the hot talk of a Cold War–style containment policy towards the Middle Kingdom. That gives him an opportunity to expand on Australia's position to President Trump and a range of figures across the Washington political community.

At the same time, he might seize the occasion to make the case for why Australia and other US allies would like to see more of an American shoulder put to the diplomatic wheel in Southeast Asia. He can help reinforce to the president and his advisers the benefits to the region of an engaged and committed United States.

The records of past meetings between Australian prime ministers and American presidents provide no ready-made template for the Morrison visit. Nevertheless, some themes do emerge and two in particular stand out.

The first is that there is nothing new in leaders of the United States and Australia adopting contrasting positions and policies on how to approach challenges in Asia. Menzies and Kennedy, for instance, had to grapple with conflicting approaches to the challenge of Indonesian president Sukarno's aggression towards West New Guinea and the new

Malaysian Federation. John Gorton worried that Lyndon Johnson's administration was preparing the ground for American withdrawal from Asia, while Nixon and Whitlam had acrimonious exchanges over the end of the Vietnam War and the membership and shape of new multilateral forums in the region.

The second is that these occasions can prove somewhat hollow. French President Emmanuel Macron found that a state visit to Washington was no guarantee of progress on issues that mattered to his country or to Europe. Beyond the standard fare of "announceables" that accompany such visits, Prime Minister Morrison will be hoping his visit can achieve a genuine cut-through moment with Trump, not least on the need for the US and China to reach a resolution on their trade dispute. Equally, he may also be hoping that the White House does not press its Australian guest to abandon the measured and moderate tone he has adopted on China since coming to office.

ROBERT MENZIES AND JOHN F. KENNEDY, FEBRUARY 1961

When Prime Minister Robert Menzies arrived in Washington in February 1961 to meet the newly inaugurated US President John F. Kennedy, it is likely he would have much preferred to enter an Oval Office occupied by Richard Nixon, Kennedy's opponent at the presidential election the previous November. Menzies and Nixon had first met when the latter visited Australia as Vice President in 1953, and over the next seven years through correspondence and meetings the two had developed a cordial relationship.

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Menzies was later to openly confess that “it would have been difficult for any American President to start, before I knew him, further back in my estimation than John Fitzgerald Kennedy”. Menzies recalled that Kennedy's father, Joseph P. Kennedy, had been tainted with the charge of appeasement when he served as American Ambassador to Great Britain in the late 1930s. Reflecting on his first meeting with JFK, Menzies added, “any prejudice I had was not in his favour”.³

Menzies had also long been a sceptic of American global leadership; indeed, of Americans in general. The conclusion recorded in his diary at the end of his very first visit to the United States in 1935 was that the Americans were not “our blood cousins”, and that “overshadowing all is that I dislike the American accent and baloney”.⁴ He told Nixon in the early 1950s that the United States had assumed unprecedented global power too early and opined to his first Minister for External Affairs, Percy Spender, that the ANZUS treaty would be “a superstructure on a foundation of jelly”.⁵ Throughout his first decade in power, Menzies had also shown a capacity to challenge US policy, urging a more restrained American response to the crises across the Taiwan Strait, maintaining a profitable trading relationship with Beijing in non-strategic goods, and backing Britain, not the United States, in the Suez crisis of 1956.

Menzies' call on Kennedy in February 1961 was an informal visit: the Australian leader was en route to a Commonwealth Prime Ministers conference in London that was to take place the following month. The new president hosted Menzies at a private working lunch with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs JG Parsons, and Australian Ambassador Howard Beale. One US official recalled the lunch as a “memorable occasion” that had been “completely informal, completely relaxed ... Two of the greatest spellbinders that I had ever encountered were the principals. Menzies is just a fascinating figure and a man of immense stature — he would have been in any country, let alone Australia — and a very colourful and persuasive talker and relater of anecdotes. And, of course, the President

... a man of great humour, great presence, great wit.”⁶ The two leaders also discussed the legacy of the Second World War, most particularly Kennedy’s military service in the Pacific.

But there was also business to discuss. Although US officials told Kennedy that there were “no important problems in ... bilateral relations with Australia”, describing Menzies as a “strong friend of the US, and a fervent Anglophile”, the two leaders did focus on the festering problem of Indonesian president Sukarno’s claims on the Dutch-held territory of West New Guinea. For Sukarno it would be the final step in the completion of the Indonesian state.

Australia favoured either the Dutch retaining control or that the West Papuans be given an exercise of self-determination. Washington recognised that Sukarno’s hold on government was a fine balancing act and feared that if he did not get his way over West New Guinea, then the Indonesian Communist Party may seize leadership of the national cause and possibly overthrow him. As one of Kennedy’s advisers concluded at the time, “it was worth sacrificing a few thousand miles of cannibal land” to satisfy the Indonesian nationalist cause.⁷ Australia’s regional security fears were thus sacrificed on the altar of American Cold War globalism.

On China, Menzies reaffirmed Australia’s support for non-recognition of the Communist regime: “right or wrong”, he told Kennedy, “Australia would support the United States’ position, as it did not wish to see the United States defeated or isolated on this”.⁸ But however supportive he might have been on China, Menzies was sceptical of being drawn into any grand US designs for how the Asia-Pacific might be organised.

During their discussions, Kennedy tried to get Menzies’ support for the creation of a ‘New Pacific Community’, what he described as “some kind of non-military institutional framework” comprising Australia and other non-Communist Asian states. It would “supplement” rather than “duplicate” the ambit of the United Nations and other international organisations. As historian Timothy Maga has argued, the idea was for this new body to be headquartered in Australia: the White House’s way of trying to encourage Australia into a more “active, interventionist foreign policy based on American goals in the Cold War”. But Menzies would not sign up to this part of Kennedy’s new frontier, fearing that the idea was attempting to manoeuvre Australia into a ‘spokesman’ role for American policy in Asia and the Pacific. The Australian reluctance to take up the mantle envisaged for it by the president was not received well in Washington. As Maga concluded: “Kennedy’s ... discovery that Australia could say ‘no’ and still remain a friend to American policy must have been an amazing, hard-in-coming revelation for him.”⁹

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JOHN GORTON AND LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON, MAY 1968

Prime Minister John Gorton's first visit to Washington in May 1968 took place against the background of a worsening situation in Vietnam and a swelling anti-war protest movement in both Australia and the United States. On becoming prime minister, Gorton had said that Australia would not increase its commitment of manpower to the war. After President Lyndon Baines Johnson's speech in March 1968, which announced a unilateral limitation on the bombing of North Vietnam, Gorton grumbled about the lack of consultation with Australia on Vietnam policy and cast doubt on America's commitment to Asia. It was "no way to treat an ally" he said.¹⁰

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The Americans had doubts about Gorton. "Behind the crumpled nose which makes him look like an ex-prize fighter", one US brief noted before Gorton went to Washington, was a leader they saw as "not a profound thinker ... a conclusion jumper" and one "who lacks experience in foreign affairs".¹¹

Nevertheless, Gorton was eager to replicate the intimacy of the Holt-Johnson relationship. The Americans received a most unusual request from the Australian side. Aware that on Holt's last visit to the White House in July 1967 the president had departed from the schedule to share a casual sandwich with him in a small room adjacent to the Oval Office, Gorton was hoping for a similar invitation. Indeed, the Australian embassy even cancelled a lunch invitation from the US Secretary of State, "just in case the president should wish to extend the meeting" beyond the allotted hour. The prime minister's desperation, recalled Australia's ambassador in Washington Keith Waller, "was one of those agonies to which ambassadors are exposed from time to time".¹² The Australian embassy apparently made it clear that Gorton's ego would be bruised if "he didn't get some of the Holt treatment". According to Walt Rostow, Johnson's special assistant for national security affairs, it was evident that the Australians were "hoping for another sandwich" and a "spontaneous show of instant fellowship".¹³

In the end, the presidential sandwich eluded Gorton. But he was certainly accorded the VIP treatment — with Air Force One being sent to Honolulu to bring him to Washington ("He was already one up on Holt there", Waller recalled). There was also an invitation to dinner on the presidential yacht *Sequoia*, an impromptu breakfast with Johnson, and a weekend sojourn at the LBJ Ranch in Texas where he was briefed by the commander of US military operations in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland.

Gorton, however, was hard to please. It had all started badly on the cruise down the Potomac River. Gorton had been summoned to the boat almost immediately after arriving in Washington, and the invitation was deemed an “unexampled honour”. Yet in the words of Waller, “a more uncomfortable first meeting between two men I have never seen”. The leaders sat alone on the stern but as the vessel chugged down the river, “having to shout against the noise of the motor and the noise of the wind, conversation wasn’t terribly easy”. Johnson and Gorton were locked in a “conversational embrace ... like a Marx Brothers film”.¹⁴ As a metaphor for an alliance attempting to chart other more troubled waters at the time, it could hardly be bettered.

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According to his private secretary, Ainslie Gotto, Gorton was “tremendously impressed” with the welcome mat rolled out in Washington and on the LBJ ranch in Texas, but he remained “extremely nervous about Australian public reaction to that treatment”, fearing “it would appear as if he was being bought”. Gotto complained that Gorton had read few of the briefs prepared by his officials, and stayed up so late each night that “after several days he was so groggy that his public speaking performances were affected”.¹⁵ The pressure on the prime minister was taking its toll. Waller also detected the strain: though Gorton was flattered by the “honours and attention” from the president, he “soon sensed that the President was bent on ‘annexing him’”, as if, Gorton had said, “I were a piece of colonial territory”. Far from finding the privileged access exhilarating, Gorton felt the opposite, telling Waller that he found Johnson “much too demanding”. The Australian leader said all the right things in public, but the lack of rapport in his private dealings with Johnson sprang “in large part from his feeling that he was being ‘captured’”.¹⁶

Gorton, however, left Washington empty-handed. He arrived seeking a guarantee from the Americans about their commitment to Australian security under the terms of the ANZUS treaty — and specifically as to whether American military aid would be forthcoming should Australian forces get into trouble in Malaysia and Singapore after the British withdrawal. But the Americans, as they had done before, would have none of it, telling the Australian leader that he should not even mention ANZUS publicly in this way. As his foreign affairs adviser, Alan Griffith, remarked on returning to Canberra, the whole visit had been a “bit of a disaster”, not least because Gorton had “overplayed his mission of sounding out US intentions in Asia”. It was apparent to the Australian press, Griffith noted, “that the President and others had turned the tables on [Gorton] by pointing out that it was for Australia and other Asian powers to set the course in Asia; the US performance in that area would depend upon Australia and others carrying at least a fair share of the burden”.¹⁷

WILLIAM McMAHON AND RICHARD NIXON, NOVEMBER 1971

The atmosphere surrounding William McMahon's call on President Richard Nixon towards the end of 1971 was one of barely concealed frustration. Earlier that year, McMahon had been publicly embarrassed by Nixon's historic shift on China policy. The US president had announced that he would visit Beijing. Opposition leader Gough Whitlam had also been in Beijing only days before the arrival of Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger. McMahon had attempted to make Whitlam look like a puppet of the Chinese, but the joke was very quickly on the prime minister. In a flash, what had been an article of faith for conservative Cold War politics — the fear of China or the 'red peril' — became a symbol of outdated politics.

McMahon's disappointment with Nixon's failure to warn him of the change in US China policy culminated in a bitter letter of complaint to the president, in which he bemoaned the lack of "foreknowledge" of at least the broad trends of American policies. McMahon added that Australia had been "placed in a quandary" by this dramatic step, "the more so because we have attempted under all circumstances to co-ordinate our policies and support you in what you are doing".¹⁸ Of course, the Australians were by no means the only ones excluded from the administration's thinking on this question. Nixon's Secretary of State, William Rogers, senior Republicans on Capitol Hill, and even the US president's closest Asian ally, Japanese leader Eisaku Sato, had not been given prior warning. US officials reported that McMahon was in a "nervous state" and the editor of the *Canberra Times*, John Allan, told the US embassy that the prime minister was "almost psychotic" about being humiliated not only by the American president but also by Whitlam.¹⁹

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At a speech in Sydney to the American National Club in late July 1971, McMahon could no longer contain his outrage. In remarks laced with "unmistakable sarcasm" concerning the Nixon announcement, McMahon not only referred to the "sweet letter" he had received from the president explaining the need for secrecy about the move, but speculated that he "wouldn't be surprised if [Chinese premier] Chou En-Lai didn't get the best of President Nixon which in turn will adversely affect Nixon's election chances in 1972".²⁰ Such a public assessment of US domestic politics was all the more remarkable given that McMahon had excoriated Whitlam for daring to suggest to the Chinese premier during his visit to Beijing earlier in the year that Nixon's Vietnam policies, like those of Lyndon Baines Johnson, might well be his electoral undoing.

Much repair work, then, was needed when McMahon arrived in Washington in November 1971. The Australian prime minister, however, was singing from the oldest of ANZUS song sheets: pleading for yet another security guarantee from his hosts. During his meeting with Secretary of State William Rogers, McMahon said that the best thing the president could do to help was to “declare that [the] ANZUS treaty is as important now as [the] day it was signed”.²¹

Nixon didn't quite go that far — although in his toast to the visiting Australian he stressed that the treaty was “one of the fundamental pillars of our policy of peace in the Pacific” and that it went “far beyond simply that piece of paper”. He was happy “to reiterate that support and that commitment”. The language was strong but essentially theoretical and lacked what McMahon most wanted — a touch of the definitive. And so if the president would not say the magic words, McMahon would do it for him. In his reply to Nixon, he hinted at a more independent role for Australia in Southeast Asia, but went on to add that it rested on a “basis of security ... the guarantee and the assurance from you and from your administration that the ANZUS treaty is as sacred today and as valid today as when it was first signed a few years ago by Mr Dulles and our own foreign minister, Sir Percy Spender”.²²

But the “red carpet treatment”, according to US official reports, had worked. On his return to Australia, McMahon duly thanked the president not only for talks which “took place at a formative stage of decision making”, but also the “robust reaffirmation of the ANZUS treaty” and for making “Blair House available to us”. As a further concession to Australian protests over the lack of consultation on China, the Nixon administration had agreed to the establishment of a secret ‘hotline’ between the White House in Washington and the Lodge in Canberra, but it was apparently used only five times in its thirteen-month life — and mainly to convey birthday wishes.²³

McMahon's visit was subsequently remembered for just one thing: the dress split to the thighs and armpits and held together by rhinestones that his wife Sonia wore at the official state dinner. Nearly four years later, as Washington was receiving news about an ailing Labor government in November 1975, Kissinger asked senior officers in the State Department who might become the new leader. He confessed that he had great difficulty remembering the identity of the “last conservative prime minister” in Australia. Nor could his advisers, until one of them suddenly recalled: it was “the guy with the wife — McMahon”.²⁴

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GOUGH WHITLAM AND RICHARD NIXON, JULY 1973

Even before he became prime minister, Gough Whitlam had clear ideas about how an Australian leader's visit to Washington should transpire. In opposition he had expressed his distaste for what he called "coronations" on the South Lawn of the White House. He believed that the relationship had become too captive of the relations between leaders and that "adherence to ANZUS does not constitute a foreign policy". Only weeks after becoming prime minister, his first test in the alliance would come. It would be brutal. Following his condemnation of President Nixon's so-called 'Christmas bombings' of North Vietnam in December 1972, and in light of Whitlam's belief that Australia could have an Asia policy outside the framework of the US alliance, Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, were in no mood to issue an official invitation for Whitlam to visit. This despite the fact that they were preparing to welcome the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at around the same time.²⁵

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For the first five months of 1973, the Nixon White House put Australia in the diplomatic deep freeze. Whitlam, initially, was in denial and became somewhat impatient with the constant press speculation about whether or not he would be received by Nixon. He even expressed the view that it should be possible "without formal planning for the Prime Minister to stop for a chat at the White House". All this "hoohah", he added, that "has accompanied visits by Sir Robert Menzies' successors, is sycophantic".²⁶

But the snub became such a sensitive issue for Whitlam domestically that he was forced to send his private secretary, Peter Wilenski, to Washington to meet with Kissinger, clear the air, and press for a White House invitation. Deputy Prime Minister Lance Barnard also pleaded with the new American Ambassador, Marshall Green, to resolve the matter, as it had become an "emotional issue" in Australia with "average Australians" now concerned about the state of the relationship. Opposition leader Billy Snedden wrote to Nixon imploring him to invite Whitlam for the sake of the alliance's future.²⁷

Nixon finally agreed to the Whitlam meeting through clenched teeth. Kissinger had stressed that such an encounter was needed to "keep Whitlam in line" on Asia policy. And Marshall Green believed the delay in extending the White House invitation had made the Labor leader "sweat a bit", arguing that now was the time to try to "broaden" Whitlam's regional vision. The White House briefing notes prepared for the Whitlam visit were full of the relish senior Nixon aides felt at the prospect of their president delivering the Australian leader a lecture on how the world really works.²⁸

Whitlam got what he wanted: the most minimalist of visits. As one editorial shrewdly observed, this was a “working visit between two lawyers”.²⁹ Before going in to see the president, Kissinger assured Whitlam that he would “keep the conversation [with Nixon] moving in various ways”. Whitlam’s reply was surprising: “I would appreciate that”, he said. “I’m not particularly inhibited, but I’m afraid I might freeze up with him.”³⁰ It was a remarkable comment, and this account of Whitlam verging on stage fright seems surprising given his signature single-mindedness in so many other spheres of his political career, particularly on the world stage.

Kissinger stressed Nixon’s distaste for being lectured, and that there was no need for “softening” up the President: “we are approaching this”, he told Whitlam, “with the attitude that Australians and Americans have strong emotional bonds. This is reflected in our ties. We can’t deny that we have had some strains recently — but we consider these a matter of the past ... we are not looking for the slightest confrontation.”³¹

In the Oval Office, Nixon did not mince words. Now was not the time, he told his guest, for flirtation with new ideas of regional cooperation or zones of peace. There was a need to resist the isolationist trends in public opinion. As Nixon put it: “Suppose we were to face another crisis in Berlin or the Middle East, our intellectuals would demand that we stay out of these affairs and we would have a hard time exercising influence. Thus we really have to decide whether we are going to opt out of the world.” Nixon told Whitlam he had “never met an Aussie [he] didn’t like”, but his message was clear — any Australian withdrawal from military commitments in Malaysia and Singapore, for instance, could have “tragic consequences”. Whitlam’s response was one of reassurance, telling the president that “it is widely understood that Australia’s effectiveness in its relations with Asia depends upon a reputation for good relations with the US”.³²

In public, however, Whitlam kept to his theme of updating the alliance for the new times. During his speech to the National Press Club, which came immediately after his meeting with Nixon, Whitlam reaffirmed that ANZUS was not the “be-all and end-all” of the relationship and that it should not be the only significant factor in Australia’s relations with the United States. He rejected as “absurd” the idea that his country was “moving into a different ideological orbit”. Rather “what we are trying to do is break out of a kind of ideological isolationism which has limited the conduct of our affairs in the past”. Giving voice to his own view that the region around Australia should be kept free of superpower rivalry, he emphasised that “in our dealings with all the countries of that region we think it is time for an ideological holiday”. In his address, Whitlam came to the heart of the new relationship: “we are not a satellite of any country. We are a friend and partner of the United States particularly in the Pacific but with independent interests of our own”.³³

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JOHN HOWARD AND GEORGE W. BUSH, SEPTEMBER 2001

Writing in his memoirs, John Howard recalled that he was “not to know” on his arrival in Washington on 8 September 2001 that “the epoch-changing events of three days later were to take the alliance to new levels of intimacy”. Howard came to the conclusion that the “personal relationship between the American president and me would become the closest of any between the respective heads of government of the two countries”.³⁴

However, on the Sunday before the 9/11 attacks, Howard could be accused of struggling to articulate the meaning of the alliance. On 9 September, the prime minister hosted a barbecue for the Washington political elite at the residence of the Australian Ambassador, Michael Thawley. A third of the Bush Cabinet were present that evening, including Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell, as well as two Supreme Court Justices and the then nominee for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

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When his turn came to speak to the gathered dignitaries, Howard compared the alliance to the weather: “When I think of the relationship I can’t do any better than sort of imagine this evening. A beautiful balmy evening. This could be Sydney or Brisbane or Perth in January or February. It’s a glorious balmy evening.” No relationship, he continued, was “more natural, more easy and one more deeply steeped in shared experience and common aspiration”.³⁵ As Peter Hartcher concluded, Howard “gave every appearance of doing what the US itself is often accused of doing with the alliance — taking it for granted”.³⁶

In their official talks, which were preceded by a ceremony at the naval dockyard to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the ANZUS treaty — a “spick and span turnout from the US military on a clear and beautiful Washington day” as Howard recalled — the two leaders recommitted to the alliance. Howard put a free trade agreement with the United States on the agenda, reminding Bush of the continued harm that American protective tariffs inflicted on Australia’s agricultural sector. Bush, for his part, made much of his attempt to restart the US–Russia relationship via his supposed close relationship with Vladimir Putin.³⁷

John Howard would quickly rediscover his alliance voice. Much of this can be attributed to his presence in Washington on the day of the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon. Being in Washington, he wrote later, “meant that I absorbed, immediately, the shocked disbelief, anger and all of the other emotions experienced by the American people”. In the space of 24 hours, he noted, “the psychology of

the American people was transformed". At a press conference in the grounds of the ambassador's residence, he declared that "Australia will provide all support that might be requested of us by the United States in relation to any action that might be taken", words that would ultimately see Australian military commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was time, Howard would later say, for Australia to be a "100 per cent ally, not a 70 or 80 per cent one". He was sure that the "gratitude of the American people for the speed and unconditional character of our response remains to this day".³⁸

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On the day following the attacks, Howard attended a special sitting of Congress (he had been due to deliver an address there on 12 September) at which resolutions condemning the attacks and discussing possible responses were the subject of debate. As the only foreign leader present in the public gallery, his presence on the occasion drew a standing ovation from those below. There can be little doubt of the impact this had on Howard: he subsequently confessed to being "quite emotional...at that time, in those circumstances to be in the capital of the United States to convey the sympathy and support of the Australian people. Tragic as the circumstances were, I felt especially privileged to be there."³⁹

On the flight back to Australia, Howard and his Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, agreed that the ANZUS treaty should be invoked for the first time in its history. The move was widely interpreted as a gesture of solidarity that came in the wake of the invocation of NATO. The Australian decision was subsequently confirmed at a special sitting of the federal Cabinet held on Howard's return. Speaking to journalists following the announcement, he said that it has "both a symbolic resonance but it also means something in substance and it does mean that if there is action taken then we will naturally consider any requests from the Americans for assistance".⁴⁰

From the time of this visit Howard claimed the alliance as his own. *The Australian* would later describe Bush and Howard as "hyper-powered mates".⁴¹ Perhaps of far greater import was the conclusion Howard reached as a result of his support for the US-led 'war on terror'. He was emboldened to make the claim that "the American alliance is going to get more important as the years go by. I mean, America's power is going to grow. America is getting stronger economically, not weaker. A lot of the assumptions some people made about Australian alliances were posited on 1990s views about growth and military power and influence, and they have been proved wrong."⁴² By the time his prime ministership was over, however, Howard's close relationship with Bush had become something of an electoral liability.

KEVIN RUDD AND GEORGE W. BUSH, MARCH 2008

Much like Gough Whitlam, Kevin Rudd came to office following an era of conservative political dominance and a period in which the relationship between the Australian prime minister and the American president had been exceptionally close. But for Rudd the spectre of one of his predecessors as Labor leader, Mark Latham, loomed equally large. Latham's strident criticism of Bush, and in particular his opposition to the war in Iraq, had allowed Howard to attack Labor as untrustworthy on national security and weak on the US alliance.

Accordingly, Rudd set out for the American capital determined to showcase Labor's alliance credentials, establish an independent Australian position on key policies — especially Iraq and climate change — and, to some extent, depersonalise the alliance. Australians, observed the *Economist* in late 2007, “wanted to see clear blue water between their country and the American flagship”.⁴³

...seeing Curtin's autograph on the morning of [Rudd's] official talks with Bush underlined...“how much this alliance has been the product of common nurturing by Presidents and Prime Ministers for a long time”.

Rudd's strategy, however, put history first. It worked. During his press conference with President Bush, Rudd recounted how he had been shown John Curtin's signature in the guest book at Blair House, the residence across from the White House reserved for visiting VIPs. Rudd said that seeing Curtin's autograph on the morning of his official talks with Bush underlined to him “how much this alliance has been the product of common nurturing by Presidents and Prime Ministers for a long time”.⁴⁴ The remarks carried a generous bipartisan tone, but they also prioritised the past over personality.

As journalist Tony Walker remarked at the time, “if there is one overriding lesson to be learned from the past seven years, it is the undesirability of personalising an alliance relationship”. Or as the Lowy Institute's Michael Fullilove noted, the atmospherics at the press conference were more “businesslike” than those involving Howard and Bush. There was “less clenching of the jaw and squaring of the shoulders; fewer misty looks into the middle distance”. Rudd called Bush ‘George’ and labelled him an “honorary Queenslander”. Bush called his visitor a “fine lad” and a “straightforward fella”, leading the *Washington Post* to conclude that the two had established a “burgeoning diplomatic relationship”.⁴⁵

In Washington, Bush publicly endorsed Rudd's decision to withdraw Australian combat troops from Iraq as a measure not only of the Australian leader's commitment to meeting his election promises, but, more dubiously, as a mark that the situation on the ground in Iraq was improving. The Australian withdrawal, said Bush, was “a return on

success". Rudd also won praise for reaffirming that Australia would be in Afghanistan for the "long haul". But as US Ambassador to Australia Robert McCallum warned the State Department in a confidential diplomatic cable before the visit, there were some niggles. The United States had been alarmed that Canberra had chosen to tell China "before telling us of their opposition to continuing quadrilateral discussions between the US, Australia, Japan and India".⁴⁶ They were also disappointed that Rudd had chosen to visit Beijing before Tokyo. But the two leaders did try to maintain a balance in their approach to China, expressing strong displeasure with Beijing's crackdown on Tibetan protesters while at the same time trying not to alienate a crucial economic partner.

But the euphoria was short lived. Rudd's visit to Washington might have been "all very jolly", to quote journalist Michelle Grattan, with Rudd winning his "alliance spurs", but by the time he was caught on camera a few days later saluting Bush at a NATO summit in Bucharest, critics were quick to pounce. Opposition leader Brendon Nelson labelled it "conduct unbecoming of an Australian prime minister" while the Greens' Bob Brown classified it as a "huge mistake" that "belittled" Australia and "reminds us of John Howard and his deputy sheriff gaffe back in 2003".⁴⁷

Later in the year much of the goodwill generated between the two leaders dissipated with reports that Rudd allowed newspaper editor Chris Mitchell to listen in on a confidential telephone conversation with the president. An article about the conversation reported that Rudd had been "stunned to hear Bush say, 'What's the G20?'" in reference to a future gathering of world leaders. As the US ambassador reported back to Washington at the time, "Rudd's refusal to deny that his office was the source of the leak ... confirmed to most Canberra observers that he showed exceptionally poor judgment in trying to aggrandise himself at the expense of Australia's most important relationship".⁴⁸

American displeasure ultimately took the form of the diplomatic cold shoulder Bush offered to Rudd at the G20 Summit in November 2008. By that time, the mellow rhetoric of March had well and truly receded into the diplomatic mist.

"...[Rudd] showed exceptionally poor judgment in trying to aggrandise himself at the expense of Australia's most important relationship".

MALCOLM TURNBULL AND DONALD TRUMP, MAY 2017

Most, if not all, prime ministerial visits to the United States since the end of the Second World War have involved ringing declarations of shared military sacrifice over the preceding century. But perhaps no visit more completely demonstrated the fusion of the Anzac legend with the US alliance than Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's visit to New York in May 2017.

The visit coincided with the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea, in which these two allies combined to turn back the tide of Japanese imperialism in the Second World War. To mark the occasion, Turnbull and Trump met on board the USS *Intrepid*, now a museum moored on the Hudson River. There, the American president was given his own history lesson via a stirring audiovisual presentation of Australian and American feats of arms in successive wars.

Their meeting also came in the wake of a moment of discomfort in the relationship, after a brusque telephone exchange between the two leaders in late January 2017 over the fate of a refugee resettlement deal that had been negotiated in the dying days of the Obama administration. That deal held that around 1200 asylum seekers then in Australian offshore detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru were to be resettled in the United States.

That a US president could so caustically disparage his telephone conversation with Turnbull as the “worst call by far” of the day... left many Australians scratching their heads.

The *Washington Post* called it the phone call that “reverberated around the world”.⁴⁹ Trump abruptly ended the call (the president was not disposed to honour the deal, although he ultimately did) and then took to Twitter, compounding the problem by airing his contempt for the deal and insulting the Australian prime minister. That a US president could so caustically disparage his telephone conversation with Turnbull as the “worst call by far” of the day⁵⁰ – this coming not long after he had spoken with foreign leaders such as Russian President Vladimir Putin – left many Australians scratching their heads.

Then a transcript of the conversation was leaked to the American media.⁵¹ Such treatment of Prime Minister Turnbull by a fledgling Trump White House seemed for a moment to confirm all the worst fears about how the new president would handle the management of key US alliances, especially in Asia. The fallout saw some panicked analysts calling for Australia to have a ‘Plan B’ in the event that Trump inflicted further damage on alliance relations.

At their meeting in New York, Trump and Turnbull apparently had a brief discussion about their respective experiences in business, but substantive outcomes were hard to find. Still, the overwhelming feeling in Canberra and among many commentators was sheer relief. In this view, the alliance had been successfully ‘reset’. This said much more about the short-termism informing much contemporary analysis of the relationship, for this fracas was a long way from the kinds of disagreements Australian prime ministers have had with American presidents in the past.

Australia’s emphasis on “100 years of mateship” at the Intrepid event might well have been tailor-made for this particular Trumpian moment: the thinking being that the best way to handle the president’s unpredictability and inexperience on the world stage was to smother him in a heroic retelling of US–Australian history, leaving issues of substance to the senior policy professionals.

It also showed that Prime Minister Turnbull had long lost his healthy scepticism about the relationship with Washington. Before arriving at the Lodge, Turnbull warned “extravagant professions of loyalty and devotion to the United States” were simply unnecessary.⁵² Australia’s job, according to the earlier Turnbull, was to prevent US–China competition from spiralling out of control and towards military conflict. It is not often recalled that at the end of that spirited phone call in January, Turnbull reassured Trump that “you can count on me”.⁵³ The White House extracted no quid pro quo from the Australian Government for its decision to proceed with the refugee deal, but later that year Turnbull expressed the view that Australia’s ANZUS obligations would come into effect in the case of clear-cut North Korean aggression against the United States. In effect, he needlessly diminished Australia’s freedom of manoeuvre in the event of conflict, thus giving the Americans a blank cheque.

Despite the seeming success of this New York meeting, welcomed by alliance sentimentalists as a reaffirmation of all that the ANZUS Treaty stands for, risks remained. It projected a view of the relationship that at times remains too tightly moored to memory, one still failing to directly engage in the more difficult conversations about what the American posture in Asia will look like in the years ahead, and what that means for Australia.

Before arriving at the Lodge, Turnbull warned “extravagant professions of loyalty and devotion to the United States” were simply unnecessary.

NOTES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



James Curran

James Curran is a Professor of History at the University of Sydney. He specialises in the history of Australian and American foreign relations. In 2013 he held the Keith Cameron Chair at University College Dublin, and in 2010 was a Fulbright scholar at Georgetown University. Prior to joining academia, Curran worked in The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Office of National Assessments. He is the author of *Unholy Fury: Whitlam and Nixon at War* (2015) and his most recent book is *Fighting with America*, a Lowy Institute Paper published by Penguin Random House Australia. He is a regular commentator on radio and television, and his opinion pieces on foreign affairs and political culture have appeared in major Australian newspapers as well as *The Interpreter*, *China-US Focus*, the *East Asia Forum* and the Council on Foreign Relations 'Asia Unbound' series.

James Curran
james.b.curran@sydney.edu.au

LOWY INSTITUTE

31 Bligh Street
Sydney NSW 2000 Australia

Tel: +61 2 8238 9000
Fax: +61 2 8238 9005

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