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Still looking to America: Labor and the US alliance

Public lecture presented by JCPML Visiting Scholar Dr Michael Fullilove on 9 August 2007.

Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to be invited to give this lecture. I am conscious of the long list of distinguished historians who have delivered lectures in this series before me – and conscious, too, that I am neither an Australian historian nor an expert on John Curtin. I am, as it happens, a lapsed international historian, and my doctorate was on a person of some importance in Curtin's story: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In the course of my research I spent several pleasant weeks at the Roosevelt Library in upstate New York, so as you can imagine I am a strong supporter of the great national institution which is our host today, the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. I would like to thank Curtin University and the excellent staff of the Library, in particular Lesley Wallace and Lynne Vautier, for having me here today.

I certainly could have composed a lecture for you on President Roosevelt. FDR has his detractors in the academy, and I guess they are all correct. He achieved nothing in his life, apart from saving American democracy from the Depression; bringing the United States into the Second World War and, through his defeat of isolationism, into the world; leading the Allies to victory over the dictators; winning an unprecedented four consecutive national elections; and doing all this with a broken body.

However, I've decided to spare you such a rant. Today, instead, I intend to turn away from history and cast my eyes forward – to the topic of Labor and the United States alliance in this century, not the last one.

A good deal of copy has been written about the alliance in the past few years, but almost all of it has, naturally enough, described the alliance as it has developed under the current stewardship of conservative leaders in Canberra and Washington. The political constellations are shifting, however. There is a reasonable chance that the alliance will soon be in the hands of a Labor prime minister. Within eighteen months we might even have an alliance conducted between a Democratic administration and a Labor government, a situation that has not obtained since the period 1993-1996, under President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Paul Keating. The time is right, then, to ask how Labor – and the broader political movement it represents – might approach this vital bilateral relationship, and how it should do so. What does the ALP's alliance DNA look like, and how would it manifest in government?

It is only right, of course, to begin with John Curtin. I have taken my lecture title from Curtin's famous statement, published in the Melbourne Herald on 27 December 1941, in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor and at a moment of high danger for this country:

'Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links of kinship with the United Kingdom.'

I am well aware there are different views on the writing of that article, and Curtin's intentions for it. The romantic view – that with these words Curtin created and consecrated an alliance with the great republic, that he sealed that alliance through his close personal relations with General Douglas MacArthur, and that it has remained tranquil and unchanged to this day – has not survived the close attentions of pesky historians. In fact, Curtin was wary of the Americans and remained a British Empire man until he died, as illustrated by his 1944 proposal for imperial defence and his appointment of a non-Australian – the King's brother, no less – as Governor-General. Anyone who doubts this fact should read Curtin's speech at Mansion House in London in May 1944, in which he declared that 'Australia is a British land' and 'the seven million Australians are seven million Britishers', who 'would refuse to contemplate a world in which there would be a jurisdiction over Lord's which would

prohibit the playing of Test matches'. On the other side of the Pacific, Roosevelt was unimpressed by Curtin's declaration and Washington continued, for the moment, to view its ties with Canberra mainly as a subset of its special relationship with London. A full decade would pass before the connection would ripen, after some careful gardening by a Liberal foreign minister, into a formal security alliance, ANZUS.

Notwithstanding all this, Curtin's clear-eyed statement of December 1941 foreshadowed very accurately Australia's post-war foreign policy. It shaped the way many Australians came to remember the Second World War, and what they think of the United States. Just as importantly, it has influenced the way the Labor governments that followed Curtin's have made Australian foreign policy. Both major Australian political parties claim authorship of the US alliance, which is a healthy thing for the alliance. Even Mark Latham – who was, as we shall see, no alliance groupie – defended his party's ability to deal with America by pointing to a photo of John Curtin on the wall of Labor's Caucus Room in Parliament House and reminding the journalists present that 'he founded this alliance.'

To this day, then, Curtin's foreign policy turn retains its hold on Labor's imagination. And in my view, if Labor is elected later this year, Australia will still look to America.

I'd like to begin my lecture by reviewing the left-wing critique of the US alliance – a critique with which a future Labor government would need to engage. Second, I will argue that the alliance is in Australia's national interest and that it deserves the support of progressives in particular. I will then explore what being an ally requires of us; examine the difficult issue of Australian influence in Washington; and finally sketch out how a Rudd Government would manage the alliance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Duke of Marlborough is supposed to have said that in every alliance one party wears the boots and the spurs while the other wears the saddle. Many Australian progressives would agree with His Grace in relation to the US alliance. In their view, Australia is being ridden: we are mere beasts, obedient carriers, with no say in the direction we take, getting nothing much from the experience but a saddle sore.

To some extent, this is a reaction against the United States' cultural power as much as its political and economic might. America looms large in the world. Their television is our television; their celebrities are our celebrities; their politics are our politics. (All three came together in *The West Wing*.) This generates great interest in the US: many non-Americans follow the fortunes of particular presidential candidates as closely as they follow their own national politics. But it also generates ill feeling.

So part of this is structural, but part of it is personal, too. In his first term in the White House, President George W. Bush pursued a muscular grand strategy designed to impose America's will on the world, an approach which proved deeply unpopular almost everywhere. His administration largely eschewed the Rooseveltian tradition of projecting influence not only via hard power but through allied nations and multilateral institutions. Instead US policy was marked by unilateralism, pre-emption and regime change through the use of force. The President lectured the United Nations while his Defense Secretary dissed 'Old Europe'. Multilateral agreements were binned. The world was divided into men of steel and evildoers. And most importantly, Iraq was invaded and occupied without the support of the UN Security Council but with the assistance of a small number of allies, including Australia.

The balance sheet on Iraq is now pretty clear: it was a mistake. Yes, a murderous tyrant who brought suffering down on the heads of his people has been ousted. But the country is a bloody mess and numberless Iraqis have lost their lives; the fabled weapons of mass destruction were not located; the jihadist fire has been fuelled, not smothered; the Middle East has been reordered only to the extent that Iran has been strengthened and emboldened. The blood and treasure spent by the Americans now totals well over 3600 troop fatalities and US\$400 billion, but the cost to American prestige and influence is even greater. Five years ago all the talk in the corridors of foreign and defence ministries around the world was about American strength; now, too often, it's about American weakness.

Australian progressives are understandably disturbed by all this. Some argue that the US is a 'rogue state' and 'the world's most dangerous nation'. Australia is, for these critics, 'hooked on dependence': it is 'the kid in the schoolyard, who for little

reward sucks up to the bully, and at his bidding kicks the smaller and weaker boys around, always hoping for the bully's protection.' We are told that 'ANZUS now actually endangers more than it protects Australia'. It complicates our relations with East Asia, undercuts Australian independence, isolates us at the United Nations and increases our visibility in the eyes of terrorists.

This kind of Sturm und Drang is not limited to extra-parliamentary observers. The early years of the Bush presidency made it much harder to speak up in favour of America in the councils of the world's centre-left parties, including British Labour, the French Socialists and the German Social Democrats. The ALP is no different. In his diary, former Labor Leader Mark Latham described the alliance as 'the last manifestation of the White Australia mentality' – a statement which must have surprised Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice. He wrote that it is 'a funnel that draws us into unnecessary wars... it's just another form of neocolonialism.' Latham had an alternative in mind: 'Look at New Zealand: they have their foreign policy right, and it's the safest country in the world.'

There are certainly costs to the alliance: anything that is valuable has a price. But most of these claims are exaggerated. The suggestion that the alliance necessarily prevents the development of an independent Australian foreign policy conflates alliance management in general with its conduct at particular points in time. The argument that an alliance with Washington damages us in the eyes of Asians is hard to square with the fact that Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand are also US allies, and states like Singapore and Indonesia are moving towards closer relations with America. The claim that Americans are unappreciative of Australian support is contradicted by formal statements of policy such as the Quadrennial Defense Review⁷ and the existence of institutions such as the annual AUSMIN talks involving the US Secretaries of State and Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. My personal experience has been that Americans understand the strategic benefit the US derives from the alliance. For Australia, the US is a powerful ally. For the US, Australia is a reliable ally: the only country to fight beside the US in every major conflict of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The regular refrain that allying ourselves with America makes us a bigger target for terrorists may or may not be correct, but it is beside the point: if you start setting your foreign policy on that basis, you are in trouble as a nation. As for New Zealand, apart from the fact that Wellington is envious of Australia's access to Washington, the fact is that New Zealand can act like it does precisely because we don't. Finally, there is a definite strain of inconsistency which runs through these polemics: everyone in the world notices our groveling, except the country to which we abase ourselves; we have no influence on Washington, however we encourage its unilateralism; America is the most powerful and arrogant country in history, but we've backed the wrong horse because it is on the decline.

The critics are right, however, that it is important for us to think about the alliance's strategic value to us – to ensure that what Paul Keating called 'the warm fog of sentimentality that swirls around the relationship' does not obscure its fundamentals. Shared history, democratic habits, economic practices and cultural tastes are important, but they are not sufficient weight-bearers for such a significant international commitment.

Why, then, is the alliance in Australia's national interest? The reasons include the promise that we would be protected from a strategic threat, unlikely though that may be, and the interactions with US military forces and their technologies that keep the Australian Defence Force sharp. Furthermore, our alliance affords us privileged access to the thinking of the sole superpower. Even after its Iraq folly the US has unprecedented reach: it spends roughly as much on defence as the rest of the world put together, and it is the only country with a truly global foreign policy.

America's wrong-headed misadventure in Iraq does not wipe out the credit it deserves for the provision of international public goods since the close of the Second World War – or indeed for the security contribution it makes now. In our own region, US power – in the form of GIs deployed in South Korea and Japan and the US Navy's Pacific Fleet – keeps a lid on interstate friction. In the Middle East, it is only the threat of US force that gives the international community any chance of talking Tehran out of its nuclear weapons ambitions. By allying ourselves to the US, then, we contribute to global security as well as our own.

If the alliance serves the general national interest, it also deserves the support of progressives, who believe in human rights and champion Australian activism in foreign policy.

The US has surely committed its share of sins against human rights. Abu Ghraib and Camp X-Ray both violated individual liberties (as well as offending against American self-interest). But to focus disproportionately on those transgressions – or to compare them to the gulags that the US helped close when it defeated the Soviet regime – is bloody-mindedness. Few countries have done more than the United States to promote the cause of human rights – through direct advocacy (a category of diplomacy that Australia seems not to go in for these days), operations undertaken to protect innocent populations (such as the Kosovo war of 1999), and by providing an umbrella of security and prosperity under which rights have a chance of being protected.

Similarly, an alliance with a like-minded superpower is a pragmatic move for a middle power such as Australia which is intent on improving the world. Unlike Britain, for example, Australia is not a member of the Security Council, the Group of Eight, the nuclear weapons club or NATO. In order to influence events we need to use all the means at our disposal, including, of course, close relations with our neighbours and sustained engagement with international institutions, but also skilful dealings with and upon the Americans. As the new British Labour foreign secretary observed last month, when the US is engaged – ‘whether on the Middle East peace process or climate change or international development – it has the greatest capacity to do good of any country in the world.’ Solving the world’s pressing problems requires us to engage the Americans. The alternative is to turn away from the inevitable compromises of global politics: but progressives who want to make the world better should be the last people to advocate that.

One curious element of the debate on the alliance is that although its critics are unrestrained in the charges they make, they usually stop short of advocating its junking altogether. Perhaps the alliance’s continuing popularity has spooked them, because they are generally too timid to follow their arguments through to their logical conclusion. Instead they say ‘I’m not opposed to the alliance, but...’, and then

they describe something that doesn't sound like an alliance at all, but rather the kind of polite arms-length relationship that two states might have if they were not mixed up with each other – say, Switzerland and Solomon Islands.

An alliance denotes more than that. It requires that you support your ally when it is in the right, even on the hard cases – as Australia did by helping the Americans eject Saddam from Kuwait in 1991 and the Taliban from Afghanistan in 2002, over the opposition in both cases of segments of the Australian left. It does not require that we follow our ally reflexively, and indeed sometimes the best assistance we can provide is to counsel caution. Our alliance with Washington would certainly have survived had we opted out of the historic blunder of the Iraq war. Nevertheless an alliance is a serious thing, and we should avoid the temptation always to put the worst possible interpretation on American conduct. Our attitude need not be 'my ally, right or wrong', but neither should it be 'anyone but my ally'.

In the past three years, for instance, the Bush Administration has changed direction and started running a reality-based foreign policy. Washington cooperated with Paris to get the Syrians out of Lebanon. It joined forces with Asian powers to negotiate a nuclear agreement with North Korea. America's Iran strategy, with its emphasis on working closely with other states and through international institutions such as the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency, is strikingly different from its earlier approach on Iraq.

This shift in policy is not due to any Damascene conversion, but rather to a realisation that the administration's freedom to move has shrunk in tandem with US prospects in Iraq. Nevertheless, it does make life much easier for America's friends and allies – and it should theoretically make it easier to support American initiatives.

If the first term was saddening, however, the second term has been maddening. After years of complaining about American unilateralism, much of the world is now ignoring American multilateralism. Opinion polls indicate that anti-American feeling around the globe remains unmoved. People either have not noticed that Washington's approach has altered, or they refuse to give the administration credit

for its grudging about-face. Governments are more alert to the change in Washington's behaviour, but many have been slow to reward it.

Granted, the United States has to accept that Iraq will remain its own special problem: Washington cannot really expect other countries to pull its chestnuts out of that particular fire. It's also true that the European allies have been solid on Iran recently, supporting strong resolutions in the UN Security Council that have had a greater effect on Tehran than most observers predicted.

However, on other threats to international security, the record is more patchy. One example is Afghanistan, where NATO forces are fighting the Taliban, who are hell-bent on reviving their fundamentalist Islamic state. Suicide bombers have appeared in the country for the first time, and last year was the bloodiest since the Talibs were expelled. If Afghanistan were to collapse in on itself, it would again become a Petri dish for transnational terrorism and crime. This would represent a crashing failure for the international system.

Most traditional allies support the US-led, UN-sanctioned effort in Afghanistan. But if most states agree this is a good fight, who's actually fighting it? The truth is that few capitals are prepared to put their people in harm's way. Thirty-seven countries have deployed personnel to Afghanistan as part of the International Security Assistance Force but most of the actual fighting is being done by the Americans, Canadians, British, Dutch and Australians. The activities of many of the NATO contingents are seriously restricted by operational caveats imposed by their capitals – units cannot be deployed outside certain areas, or at night, or in certain weather conditions, or even without an ambulance in tow.

The mission in Afghanistan needs more robust common rules of engagement, a massive infusion of economic resources to develop the country and wean the economy off opium, and more international troops, especially in the south. In other words, it requires more governments to share the burdens and risks that others are bearing in the common interest.

If we want Washington to regard its alliances as valuable, we need to be valuable allies. If we want Washington to work through multilateral means, we have to make sure multilateralism works – which usually means working with America, not opposing it at every turn.

The alternative would be to smile at the Bush administration's sorrows, turn away, and leave all the hard tasks to Washington – but that would only encourage the American unilateralists who got us all into this mess to begin with.

I'd like to pause for a few minutes, if I may, and explore the issue of Australia's influence in Washington. As I intimated above, Australia's reliability as an ally buys us access – but what about influence? How successful have we been at moving American thinking on issues of importance to us? I believe we have had less influence on the Americans than many other alliance supporters believe, and less than we might have.

There are certainly instances where we have intervened decisively. A recent example is the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement of 2004. A legitimate argument can be had about the merits of the FTA, but the fact is that such agreements with the US are often sought but rarely achieved, and it is unlikely that our diplomats could have pulled it off had they not had access to the levers of the alliance: personal relationships, sentiment, inside knowledge, and memory. (Harbour cruises and BridgeClimbs also seemed to be factors.) Another example of Australian influence was Paul Keating's conversion of Bill Clinton to the idea of APEC leaders meetings in 1993, which upgraded that organisation to the pointy end of the regional plane. But there have been just as many notable failures: Prime Minister Robert Menzies over Suez and West New Guinea, for example, or the inability of Australian governments of both colours over many years to persuade Washington to pay real attention to Indonesia, or to shield Australian farmers from brutal American farm subsidies. Furthermore, one gets the distinct impression that some of our politicians have shied away from playing the Washington influence game. In a short history of the alliance published by the Lowy Institute, former Curtin Lecturer Peter Edwards observed that sometimes Australians have elbowed their way into the big Washington offices and found themselves with nothing of interest to say. There 'has long been a suspicion

among some well-placed observers', he wrote, that 'access has been treated too often as an end in itself and too seldom as a means towards achieving policy ends'.

I am not well disposed to counterfactual history, but let me mention the Iraq war here. I opposed Australian participation in that war, for the same reasons that I opposed the war itself. Some observers propose a different standard: they say that through our participation we demonstrated our reliability to Washington at minimal cost. However, alliance considerations, while important, can hardly outweigh the broader consequences of actions in which we joined, including the self-harm done by our great ally. (In any case, the strange dispute last February between Prime Minister John Howard and Senator Barack Obama demonstrated that cost-free reliability has its limits.)

I agree with Owen Harries, therefore, that an appropriate Australian response to the US request for us to join in the invasion of Iraq would have been 'restraint, some deep reflection and a request for clarification, rather than eager and unqualified support'. Even if Canberra were minded to participate, would it not have been in our interests – and in the interest of our great ally – to ask more searching questions about how the invasion and the occupation would play out? We probably would not have slowed the momentum to war, but both American and Australian officials from the period have suggested to me that a concerted effort by London and Canberra might at least have forced the Bush Administration to focus more intently on its plans for post-war reconstruction, which turned out to be so inadequate.

We need to be realistic, of course, about how much influence a middle-sized foreign country can actually exercise in Washington. You have to be working on the right issue, at the right time, in the right way. Success requires hard work, ingenuity and chutzpah. But sometimes a single note can penetrate the Washington babble – and our quality as an ally has certainly earned us the right to step up to the microphone.

Let me close this lecture with some thoughts on Labor's plans for managing the alliance. If Kevin Rudd were elected prime minister, what kind of tone would he strike? The first thing to say is that Australia would certainly continue to be a close and reliable ally of the United States. Every Labor prime minister since John Curtin has

supported the alliance and sought to use it to Australia's advantage, and in the past quarter of a century it has emerged, for sound political as well as strategic reasons, as a core feature of Labor foreign policy. Everything we know about Mr Rudd's background and instincts indicate that there would be powerful continuities in alliance management under his prime ministership.

Labor's approach to the alliance would differ from the Coalition's, however, in two important respects. First, the limits to Australian support for the use of force by the US would be clearer. Australia would participate in most foreseeable American-led coalitions: a century of Australian diplomatic and military practice tells us that. However, if the Bush Administration were to abandon its new-found and prudent multilateralism and initiate another risky military operation, without clear provocation and in the face of strong opposition in the international community and the UN Security Council chamber, then Washington would be unwise to assume Australia would participate.

In another sense, though, Labor may actually move Australia closer to the United States, especially if a Democrat were elected president next November. We could see a renewed emphasis on influencing Washington, not only on events close to our shores but also on the great global issues of the day, such as climate change and nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. When Labor leaders talk about the alliance, they typically emphasise the advocacy of Australian interests and the quality of Australian ideas, rather than the familiar catechisms of Australian loyalty. In March 1942 John Curtin, for instance, told the Parliament that the Commonwealth had insisted on having a direct voice on equal terms with its allies on decisions relating to the Pacific. 'The weight and authority which that voice might command', he warned, 'are for ourselves to ensure.' Paul Keating wrote of his period in office that 'one of the important roles of a visiting prime minister is that of the traveling salesman. Success depends partly on selling skills and partly on the quality of what you've got in your sample bag – and for Australia at that time, it was our ideas.' Of course, sales is a tough business. You need to know your customers: you need to be in their ear and, sometimes, in their face. Under Labor, I suspect Australia would be a busy ally.

Reconceiving the relationship in this way would help Labor to persuade its skeptical supporters of the alliance's value. It is always harder for Labor governments than Coalition ones to make the case for the alliance. Because conservative voters are, by and large, supporters of America's role in the world, Coalition governments which act in concert with Washington are pushing on an open door. When Labor is in power, public debates about US actions tend to develop in a more hostile fashion: this is a partial explanation, I think, for the relatively gentle treatment Mr Howard has received over the Iraq war compared to the savageries inflicted on British Prime Minister Tony Blair. In the nineteen-eighties Prime Minister Bob Hawke and his Defence Minister Kim Beazley addressed this problem by reframing the debate on the joint facilities around nuclear deterrence and arms control agreements and developing the doctrine of 'self-reliance in an alliance context.' Just as a post-Vietnam labour movement needed reassurance then, so a post-Iraq labour movement would need reassurance now. A Rudd Government would need to put in similar intellectual and policy grunt work in order to explain the alliance to its supporters.

Next year's presidential election will pose a second alliance challenge for Labor. The election of a new president will produce a global sigh of relief, no matter who she or he is. I'm also confident that whichever combination of the political Rubik's cube clicks into place in the next eighteen months – whether it's Howard-Clinton, or Rudd-Romney, or even Costello-Obama, the alliance will remain strong. There are risks, however. The alliance has achieved an unprecedented intimacy over the past half-decade of conservative rule in Washington and Canberra. Once the Vulcan mind meld between President Bush and Prime Minister Howard is broken, the relationship will lose some of its current emotional resonance. It will become less 'special'. We will need to think about how to retain our current level of influence in Washington if Bush's successor is an anti-war Democrat who has no tender feelings about our participation in Iraq and is more interested in renewing ties with disillusioned European allies and satisfying his or her protectionist colleagues in Congress.

Finally, the rise of China will further increase the level of difficulty. In recent decades Australia has enjoyed a congenial situation in which its biggest trading partner,

Japan, is itself an ally of our strategic ally, the US. However given the clip at which China is currently growing and the complementarity of the Chinese and Australian economies, China will soon overtake Japan. Then Australia's largest trading partner will actually be a peer competitor of Australia's principal ally. The changing relativities do not just apply to trade, either: China's growing confidence, diplomatic dexterity and military power would, if plotted on a chart, produce a growth curve that is just as impressive as its economic results. Beijing's influence is growing in the oil-rich regions of Latin America and the Middle East, at the United Nations in New York and – most importantly for us – in Northeast and Southeast Asia. One of the big tasks for Australian diplomats in the future, then, will be managing the US-China-Australia 'strategic triangle'. Given the ALP's historical attachment to Asian engagement, including Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's role in opening diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1972, a Labor government will have to work hard to keep that triangle stable.

On the other hand, Labor has one advantage on the alliance: its likely approach would be consistent with Australian public opinion. Last year's Lowy Institute poll found that although more than two-thirds of Australians believe the alliance is important to our security, a similar number believe we take too much notice of the US in our foreign policy. The appearance of total association with an ally, even if it is a misperception, can be dangerous for an alliance. No-one wants to live in an echo chamber. It is possible for politicians and commentators to love an alliance to death. If Labor could balance Australia's reliability with new ideas and a more independent bearing, it would do the alliance an important service.

This reminds me of my favourite story about alliances. Winston Churchill visited the White House in late 1941 to confer with Franklin Roosevelt. On New Year's Day 1942, it is said, FDR wheeled himself into the prime minister's bedroom to talk to him about something, only to find Churchill in the bathtub. 'I'm sorry Winston, I'll come back later', he said, and started to back out. Churchill rose from the bathtub and stood before Roosevelt naked, plump, pink and dripping. 'Come back', he cried, 'the prime minister of Great Britain has nothing to hide from the president of the United States!'

It's not always an easy thing, identifying when alliance behaviour is too close. In my view, that's too close.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What you think about the United States alliance depends a good deal on what you think of the United States. It's always good sport to criticise the Americans. It is the lot of the sole superpower to be on the receiving end of sycophancy and resentment, often simultaneously. It has to be said, too, that sometimes Americans make it easy for their critics. But I have a different prejudice, and I freely admit it to you. I like America – its energy and its idealism – and for all its flaws, I believe the country still does much more good than ill. So I am not unhappy to report that, in my view, Australia will continue to look to America for some time yet.