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A missed opportunity: The Curtin-Roosevelt meetings and Australian-American relations

Public Lecture presented by JCPML Visiting Scholar Dr Steven Casey on 8 May 2008.

The Second World War saw the birth of regular summit meetings. Today we are used to our national leaders travelling long distances to meet their counterparts in a range of bilateral, regional and global settings. During the Second World War, however, such globetrotting was a relatively new phenomenon. Its culmination came with the big three meetings at Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam in 1943 and 1945, where the American, Soviet and British leaders met to resolve the broad issues of winning the war and maintaining the peace. But the budding game of summitry also included a host of other meetings between allied warlords, including one post-lunch discussion in April 1944 between the American President, Franklin Roosevelt, and the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin.

Because of its short duration, historians have often considered the Curtin-Roosevelt meeting as something of a sideshow in the grand narrative of the U.S.-Australian wartime alliance. It certainly pales by comparison to the momentous – and dangerous – months of early 1942, when Australia was threatened by Japanese invasion and Curtin began his close and controversial relationship with General Douglas MacArthur.

In this lecture, I want to repair this neglect. I intend, in particular, to use the Curtin-Roosevelt meeting to explore two broader sets of issues that have been given far less attention than the earlier phase of the war: on the one hand, the two men's strikingly similar visions for the post-war world; and, on the other, their very different attitudes about the importance and use of top-level diplomacy.

But let us begin with John Curtin's expectations about his first overseas trip.

Curtin is widely viewed as the father of Australia's alliance with the United States. He was the Prime Minister who famously proclaimed that Australia looked to America, 'free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.' According to many commentators, he was the most pro-American Labor leader until the 1980s, a man who, in the words of a recent article in *The Australian*, understood 'the unique importance, and essential benevolence, of the United States.'

Whatever the truth of these claims, the simple fact is that Curtin did not want to travel to America. He hated the prospect of sailing or flying long distances. In the first years of the war, he had been convinced that his presence in Canberra was vital, as problems of economic mobilization and military strategy continued to plague his government, which until September 1943 relied upon a shaky parliamentary majority. And even when this excuse was removed by Labor's big election victory, Curtin remained reluctant to undertake the long journey. Indeed, although he agreed in February 1944 to make a stop in Washington on his way to the London Dominion Prime Ministers Conference in May, he still hoped that some big event – like the eagerly anticipated second front in France – would intervene 'to delay or defer' his first taste of overseas diplomacy.

As this hesitation suggests, temperamentally Curtin was not suited to the diplomatic high life. Sometimes described as shy, he lacked any great desire to meet foreign leaders and experts. In this sense, he was very different from Bob Hawke, his Labor successor who also placed America at the heart of Australia's foreign policy and who loved the chance to woo foreign leaders. But Curtin's aversion to diplomacy ran far deeper than personality. He also held fundamental suspicions about the overall value of top-level meetings.

On the one hand, Curtin recognized that, in a democracy, the press and public wanted their leaders to return with tangible gains from any top-level meeting. But on the other hand, he also seemed implicitly to believe that Americans equated diplomacy with horse-trading – and that they therefore treated diplomatic encounters as a chance to haggle over exactly who should get what and were

determined to pursue their own agenda aggressively. As a small power, Australia's position in such a bargaining process was always weak. And Curtin had little desire to be dragged into a no-win game of diplomatic bartering over scarce resources – especially in light of the experiences of his External Affairs Minister, Dr. H.V. Evatt. Earlier in the war, Evatt had twice gone off to Washington to lobby for more military support. But on both occasions his actual achievements had failed to match the public's expectations. And it was not a record Curtin was anxious to emulate.

Nor did Curtin think that he personally could make much headway with the American President. In March 1944, on the eve of his departure, Curtin turned to MacArthur for advice about Roosevelt's diplomatic style. And what he heard did nothing to lighten his mood. MacArthur, who had long been at loggerheads with FDR and was currently being touted as a possible presidential rival, warned Curtin that Roosevelt was obsessed by one thing: gaining re-election in November 1944. Even worse, MacArthur continued, Roosevelt couldn't be trusted. He was a charmer, who would try to trap Curtin into making unwitting commitments, while unscrupulously breaking his own word whenever 'it suited him.'

How could Curtin escape being tricked by such a man? In previous diplomatic encounters, Australia had attempted to compensate for its weak bargaining position by using aggressive tactics. But herein lay a final reason why Curtin was not terribly optimistic about his upcoming meeting with Roosevelt: this abrasive style had often backfired, engendering lingering resentments in Washington and London. Evatt's stock was particularly low in both capitals. Indeed, many senior officials in both Britain and America had recoiled from what they deemed to be Evatt's 'blackmailing' efforts, not to mention his tendency to create a 'tempest' wherever he went.

In the months before Curtin's visit, Washington was particularly upset by the Evatt-inspired ANZAC agreement. Although driven partly by Evatt's anger that Churchill and Roosevelt had failed to keep Australia informed about discussions concerning the post-war fate of Pacific islands, American officials – without irony – had bristled at Australia's own lack of consultation. In Washington, Australia's prestige now sank so low that in some quarters its methods and objectives were likened to those employed by the Soviet Union and Imperial Japan – insults indeed!

Curtin thus departed for America in a state of unease. He was not a good traveller. He doubted that high-level meetings could achieve anything of substance. And he recognized that Australia's image in the United States was not particularly high. It was thus an anxious and tense Prime Minister who departed Sydney by ship on 5 April 1944.

Real Opportunities

Now of course, these stresses and strains within the alliance are not news to historians. While the popular image of Curtin often sees him as a cheerleader for American power, the academic literature invariably focuses on the misunderstandings, tensions and resentments which plagued the alliance, starting with the two countries' different strategic priorities in 1942 and culminating in the controversial ANZAC agreement in 1944. What I want to stress in this lecture, however, is that, despite Curtin's deep sense of foreboding, his trip to the United States was actually a major opportunity, both to improve overall relations between the two countries and to reach a real meeting of minds on key issues.

Ironically, Curtin's chance to make a difference in Washington stemmed partly from the fact that U.S.-Australian relations were currently in such a deep trough. Improving the general 'atmospherics' in relations is always a core element of summitry – and, the worse the weather at the outset, the more scope there is for improvement when the actual talks begin. In private, to be sure, Curtin had long been dismissive of this dimension of summitry, utterly rejecting the prospect of travelling long distances just 'to be banqueted'. But in the spring of 1944 he undoubtedly recognized that a major effort was now required to smooth over the problems that afflicted Australia's increasingly troubled alliance with America.

Curtin also seemed poised to benefit from the increasingly complex nature of the two country's decision-making structures. Neither government was a monolith. Both had its internal divisions. And in the months before Curtin's trip, tension had flared largely because diplomacy had been conducted by subordinates and not by the men at the very top.

Indeed, as attention shifted to the post-war world, U.S.-Australian relations were increasingly in the hands of Dr. Evatt and Cordell Hull, two diplomats who were frequently undiplomatic and whose abrasive styles had clearly fuelled the current controversy. It was these two men who had engaged in a bout of caustic correspondence after the ANZAC agreement, accusing each other of adopting an 'officious tone', of misusing minutes of meetings and even of abandoning fundamental allied war aims.

On the American side as well, it was Secretary of State Hull who fanned the flames in other parts of the national security bureaucracy, by circulating memoranda that placed the worst possible emphasis on Australia's ambitions. Hull's motivation was partly personal: like many American officials he disliked and distrusted Evatt. But Hull also had an ideological axe to grind: utterly obsessed with free trade, he already had little time for a country like Australia that he thought remained firmly wedded to the protectionist system of imperial preference. In addition, Hull was currently in the process of seeking congressional support for American membership of a collective security arrangement, and he feared that Evatt's proposal in the ANZAC agreement for an early regional conference to discuss Pacific issues might easily derail this delicate domestic task.

Thus if Evatt was widely disliked in Washington, then Hull was about the worst U.S. official to be left in charge of America's delicate relations with Canberra. Yet crucially, neither man was particularly trusted by their boss. Curtin was increasingly suspicious of Evatt's political ambitions, especially after rumours had abounded that Evatt was manoeuvring to replace him in the wake of the 1943 election. And Curtin consciously decided not to take anyone from External Affairs on his trip to Washington and London, despite Evatt's constant pleas. Roosevelt, for his part, had long bypassed Cordell Hull. Distrusting the 'striped pants' boys in the State Department, Roosevelt generally acted as his own Secretary of State, keeping Hull out of the most important policy areas and even refusing to let him see the minutes of his recent conference with Stalin and Churchill at Tehran.

Seen in this light, a meeting between Curtin and Roosevelt offered a perfect opportunity to repair relations. Both men could heap the blame for recent troubles on

their foreign policy lieutenants. More importantly, they could also discover that, beneath Evatt's and Hull's recent diplomatic spat, both governments were not always too far apart on many of key issues. In fact, much of the recent tension had stemmed from a lack of consultation. This had created a feeling in both capitals that either side was being ignored by an arrogant ally. It had also created a tendency inside both governments to magnify their policy differences. But when the two leaders actually sat down together, these misunderstandings could easily be swept aside, especially as both men shared similar ideas on a number of issues that would affect their post-war relations.

For a start, both Curtin and Roosevelt were, broadly speaking, men of the left. Although the American concept of 'left' has rarely embraced the socialism that characterized Curtin's career, FDR's liberalism was sufficiently robust to encompass his economic bill of rights, unveiled with great fanfare in January 1944. This held out the promise of a job, a living wage, access to 'adequate medical care' and social security for those who couldn't work. It was a platform that Curtin, who led a government committed to full employment, could easily sympathize with. And, indeed, Curtin often laced his speeches with warm references to another of Roosevelt's great public manifestoes – the Four Freedoms – calling repeatedly for a post-war world that would end want and deprivation.

As men of the left, it was not surprising that Curtin and Roosevelt also agreed that a new United Nations organization should replace the League of Nations, and that it should form the cornerstone of post-war global security. Roosevelt, to be sure, had moved cautiously on the subject, acutely aware how Woodrow Wilson's political miscalculations in 1918-1919 had ended with the U.S. Senate refusing to sanction American involvement in the League. But by 1944 Roosevelt had become the main driving force behind the UN, sketching out the organizational framework that would underpin the new organization, selling his vision to international allies and moving slowly to construct powerful domestic support.

Curtin was one ally who would be easy to convince. Although critical about the structure and effectiveness of the League of Nations, Curtin was in no doubt that post-war peace would depend on a global collective security system.

Of course, as the leader of a smaller power, Curtin's focus was somewhat different from the American President's. In mapping out a replacement for the failed League of Nations, Roosevelt's always emphasized the role of great powers. He wanted the big four allies – the United States, Soviet Union, Britain and China – to dominate, acting as the world's 'four policemen' to prevent future breaches of the peace. Curtin, for his part, agreed that the earlier League of Nations system had given too much of a say to the smaller powers. But Curtin was also keen to ensure that 'the pendulum' did not 'swing too far in the other direction.' To this end, he championed an Assembly of Nations, where the smaller powers like Australia could make their voice heard and have an input in policy.

This different perspective between a big and a small power pointed to one possible source of disagreement. But it was not the only potential friction point. Far more troubling was the complex matter of how this new global security regime would interact with regional arrangements. And here, Curtin held some firm views.

At one level, Curtin was an increasingly vocal champion of the British Empire. Convinced that the war would create a new imperial arrangement with the Dominions having a greater say, hopefully through the creation of an Empire Council, Curtin now saw the British Empire as a force for good in the world and a vital component of Australia's defences in the South Pacific. At a second level, Curtin also stressed 'the supreme importance' of buttressing both the British Empire and the new collective security organization with a series of 'regional arrangements and plans.' By this he basically meant the controversial ANZAC agreement, which wasn't merely a veiled attack on America's unwillingness to consult Australia on key issues; it was also a way of containing excessive American influence in the Southwest Pacific. Perhaps the ANZAC pact might even be used to further Australia's territorial aspirations. Evatt was certainly inclined in this direction, and had recently discussed the possibility of securing Australian sovereignty over a string of islands, including Fiji, the Solomons, Java and the Dutch East Indies.

This suggestion of an Australian sub-empire in the South Pacific appalled Cordell Hull and the State Department, for they were opposed to 'closed' spheres of influence in general and what they considered to be Australia's grasping land grab in particular.

But what was Roosevelt's view? The President, of course, was a well-known critic of the British Empire. Whereas Curtin now talked about strengthening imperial machinery, Roosevelt often discussed ways of dismantling an Empire he saw as outdated and an obstacle to progress. Moreover, when it came to disposing of territory in Asia, Roosevelt was generally convinced that no allied power should acquire complete control. In his opinion, areas not yet ready for self-government should be held in trusteeship for a limited time by one or more of the world's new 'policemen'.

Yet, on close inspection, Roosevelt was surprisingly flexible on these two issues. He was always able to hold complex, even contradictory, views in his head. And although his attitude towards empire always seemed so strident and clear, Roosevelt generally left room for a degree of ambiguity, which perhaps suggested that he and Curtin would find areas of agreement when they actually met.

The British Empire's role in world security was one of these areas of possible agreement. Essentially, Roosevelt saw Britain's relationship with the Dominions as an important way of providing post-war stability in certain regions. The British, after all, were one of Roosevelt's 'four policemen'. And, as Christopher Thorne pointed out, along with his leading advisers, Roosevelt tended to act as if the British Commonwealth 'would constitute a post-war asset for the United States' in its bid to create a stable international order. Roosevelt was therefore not averse to Curtin's basic conception of the Commonwealth's continued importance (although he certainly wouldn't have endorsed some of Curtin's grandiose talk about the Empire being a model for international democracy!).

At the same time, Roosevelt was also broadly sympathetic to some of Australia's territorial ambitions. On numerous occasions, Roosevelt hinted that America's own Pacific claims would be north of the equator, that its position in the south was basically soft and that he was sure 'the Americans and the Australians could work together on a liberal policy on these matters.' Although a champion of trusteeship rather than direct control, Roosevelt even contemplated offering Australia the chance to purchase West Timor from the Dutch. As Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, commented after discussing these issues in Washington, Roosevelt was

far less hostile to the imperial aspirations of new regional powers like Australia than he was towards the old style colonial rule of European powers like the British in India and the French in Indochina.

In fact, on many post-war questions, the two men's views overlapped to a surprising degree. Both saw the need for continued allied cooperation to 'police' trouble spots. Both talked about the alliance as a 'family' unit, which must be held together in the future. And, crucially, both agreed about the best way of turning this wartime alliance into a durable post-war arrangement. Indeed, neither Curtin nor Roosevelt favoured a detailed, rigid framework. They wanted to begin, instead, with what Curtin described as 'a loose sort of show', working through existing structures and using these to slowly construct a sturdy new system of global security.

Of course, all this is not to say that the two men were like twins. For one thing, they had contrasting personalities: Roosevelt was the smooth and supremely self-confident aristocrat; Curtin was the shy and intense trade union leader. More importantly, their fields of vision were very different. Roosevelt, the leader of a country that faced two oceans, thought globally. Curtin, the leader who had come to power when Japan directly threatened Australia, naturally focused his attention on the Southwest Pacific. At the same time, Roosevelt always saw Europe as the key to winning the war; by extension he considered the struggle against Japan as a sideshow; and, convinced for much of the war that China would be the most important Asian power, he tended to view Australia as a sideshow within a sideshow. Curtin, for his part, was fully aware that Roosevelt saw Australia as just one 'flank' in a distinctly 'secondary theatre' of the war. And in 1942 and 1943, Curtin was often angry at the lack of help Washington was prepared to provide in the fight against Japan.

Yet these clear contrasts were not necessarily an obstacle now. Roosevelt, as Warren Kimball has pointed out, never let personality get in the way of pursuing diplomatic objectives. More positively, FDR often got on well with reformers and labourites in the Curtin mould – and, indeed, his closest confidant was Harry Hopkins, a former social worker who'd risen to prominence in the rough and tumble of New York politics. But above all, with attention shifting to post-war issues, Roosevelt's aloof attitude

towards the South Pacific might actually become a help rather than a hindrance, for it suggested that his views were soft and that he might be willing to make concessions in this 'secondary theatre.'

In sum, then, a number of factors pointed in the direction of a constructive summit. In recent months, to be sure, the Australian-American official discourse had tended to emphasize major differences rather than shared visions. But with Curtin and Roosevelt finally poised to meet, the two leaders had an obvious chance to rectify this and place the alliance on a far sounder footing.

What, then, happened when Curtin finally arrived in the United States?

Curtin's ship docked at San Francisco on 19 April, and almost immediately he embarked on a concerted campaign of public diplomacy. Before 50 journalists in San Francisco, he not only stressed that Australia's war effort had been 'magnificent' but also suggested that his upcoming meeting with Roosevelt would deal with 'how we shall shape things with each other and the world after the war.'

After a long and cold train journey, Curtin finally arrived in Washington four days later, on 23 April, where he was met by Cordell Hull, who led a brief ceremony at Union Station before the Prime Ministers' party checked in to Blair House, just across the road from the White House. Curtin's first impression of the American capital was not particularly favourable. When an Australian journalist told Curtin that he would be receiving around the clock Secret Service protection, Curtin was aghast. This was 'awful!' he exclaimed – and marked a clear contrast to Australia, where 'public men don't have to fear violence.'

Over the next five days, part of Curtin's time was taken up with the social and public aspects of diplomacy. With Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady, determined to repay Australia for the hospitality she had received a year earlier, official Washington gave Curtin's party the full red-carpet treatment. The White House hosted its first state dinner since the start of the war, a departure that caused quite a stir amongst social commentators. More than 80 leading American reporters also packed in to Curtin's press conference, anxious to pepper him with questions about Australia's ambitions.

And they left suitably impressed with his open and 'quick-witted responses' on issues ranging from the successful war effort in the Southwest Pacific to his calls for as many Americans as possible to migrate to Australia.

But mostly, Curtin faced an intensive round of private meetings with many of the administration's leading players, including the Director of War Mobilization, the Navy Chief and the Secretary of State. On 25 April, Curtin then flew down to South Carolina to meet with Roosevelt. After a lunch that also included the President-Elect of Costa Rica, Curtin and Roosevelt met alone for almost an hour.

From the one record of this meeting, as well as Curtin's comments in the next few days and weeks, it seems that the two men discussed three issues: the ANZAC agreement, relations with the Soviet Union and general post-war matters. To some extent, their meeting was a success, with both leaders using their time to explore their very similar visions of the world. As Curtin stressed in public, his discussions with Roosevelt had focused on 'post-war problems, including . . . insurance against future aggression and the means needed to remove the fear of want and social insecurity for all mankind. The President and I,' Curtin declared, 'found ourselves like-minded on these matters.' According to the private record, the two men also – predictably – blamed Evatt for the recent tension surrounding the ANZAC agreement, with Curtin distancing himself from the initiative by adding that the whole pact had been drafted in an 'excess of enthusiasm'.

That day, 25 April, also saw the most memorable public episode of Curtin's time in America. Early in the afternoon, while Curtin was still meeting Roosevelt, the White House press office announced to reporters that a major statement, 'of interest to the world', would be released at 6. The media held its breath. Everyone expected an invasion of France at any moment. Perhaps the White House would reveal that this pivotal operation was finally underway. Perhaps it might even announce that Nazi Germany had surrendered. Throughout the afternoon, expectant journalists packed into the West Wing, swapping rumours. When the statement was put back another forty minutes, tension mounted to fever pitch. Then, at 6.40 the White House finally unveiled its news. In one terse sentence, it merely stated that the President of the United States had met with the Prime Minister of Australia.

It was a symbolic moment. Curtin's meeting with Roosevelt, which promised so much, had ended in a distinct anticlimax. American reporters, who'd been primed to expect a much bigger headline, were particularly savage. 'The 16-inch cannon that was expected to go off', proclaimed Arthur Krock of the New York Times, 'turned out to be a pop gun.' 'With all of America jittery', complained another reporter, 'with millions of parents on the extreme edge of their anxious seat', this was a cruel 'Hollywoodish prank.'

As with the media reaction, so with the substantive talks: they also turned out ultimately to be a letdown. In theory, of course, Curtin and Roosevelt now had a chance to build up more than just a close personal rapport; they also had a perfect opportunity to discover just how much they agreed on key issues. In practice, however, their actual meeting was far too short to make much of a difference. They simply didn't have time to discuss issues like post-war trade relations, domestic reconstruction, or the framework for the new United Nations organization. Far too much was left unsaid. And certainly nothing happened to deflect Curtin from his determination to go onto London and push for his Empire Council, which he hoped would strengthen the machinery of imperial governance.

Why was this a missed opportunity?

The simple reason for the meeting's brevity – and its lack of a real result – was ill health. By the spring of 1944, these two great leaders were both clearly ailing. The stress of wartime leadership, combined with their large nicotine intakes, had taken their toll. Roosevelt was in a particularly bad way. The gruelling journey to Tehran and back in late 1943 had left him in a weakened state. By March 1944, having not shaken off what he thought was the flu, Roosevelt was examined by a heart specialist who was highly alarmed. With his blood pressure hovering at dangerously high levels, the President was packed off to South Carolina to rest. Throughout April his doctors were so worried about the state of his health that they confined him to no more than four hours of work each day – two hours for appointments and two more for paperwork.

As a result, Roosevelt was not in Washington to greet Curtin. He did not attend the state dinner. He was not at the White House when Eleanor Roosevelt hosted the Prime Minister for the night. And Curtin therefore had to fly down to South Carolina for his one brief meeting with the sick President. For his part, Curtin was probably relieved, if only because he had his own health problems. After a couple of days of gruelling meetings with some of the administration's major players, on 26 April Curtin had to cancel the remainder of his engagements and rest up because of a back pain. His wife thought his ailment was caused by anxiety about his upcoming flight to London. But reporters soon speculated that Curtin, like Roosevelt, was suffering from high blood pressure.

However, ill health was only part of the reason for this missed opportunity. There was also a far deeper cause, which takes us back to where we began: namely, Curtin's reluctance to leave Australia and visit Roosevelt earlier in the war. By temperament, Curtin was not the flashy, gregarious type of leader who looked forward to the glitter of international conferences. By conviction, he also doubted that personal diplomacy could achieve very much. In a sense, of course, Curtin was correct. Leaders at the top are not simply free agents, who can suddenly change the course of history in a face-to-face meeting with their counterparts. They are often hemmed in by their surrounding bureaucracies, who can quickly undermine any attempt to use summits to make a radical break with the past.

Furthermore, a small power like Australia is also in a weak bargaining position whenever it comes to haggling over resources with bigger allies. As David Horner has correctly observed, even Canada, despite its close proximity to the United States and despite Roosevelt's close personal relationship with the Canadian Prime Minister, MacKenzie King, had little success in influencing allied strategy during 1942 and 1943. It therefore seems highly doubtful that even the most skilful Australian negotiator would have achieved much in Washington in the earlier stages of the war.

Still, the point I would like to stress is that by 1943 the nature of diplomacy was changing. By this stage, diplomacy was no longer dominated just by grand strategy. It was no longer purely a matter of trying to get more resources for a particular theatre of the war. It was, rather, about trying to bring a post-war vision to fruition.

And here Curtin – with MacArthur reinforcing his prejudices – clearly misjudged Roosevelt’s thinking.

Roosevelt, of course, was no angel. And he was certainly not averse to playing diplomatic hardball in many policy areas. But when it came to a number of post-war problems Roosevelt’s view of diplomacy was often quite different from Curtin’s fear that he was a typical American out to get the best possible deal from an aggressive haggling process. In fact, Roosevelt generally thought in terms of building up trust. In his view, summit meetings with awkward allies had to concentrate first on forging a close relationship. Only over time, as the necessary trust emerged, would it be possible to broach and then resolve the troublesome issues that divided the allies; with luck, many problems might even disappear in this new environment of goodwill.

It was in this context that Roosevelt had invited Curtin to the United States in the first place. In the wake of Evatt’s tempestuous time in Washington, Roosevelt probably considered Australia as one of the more wayward members of the grand alliance. He also recognized that Curtin was one of the few allied leaders he had yet to meet and he considered this a ‘real void’. In Roosevelt’s opinion, a meeting with Curtin would offer a perfect chance to build up a close personal rapport and sweep away the bad feeling of the past. None of the specific matters they would discuss, he stressed in his invitation, would ‘require immediate decisions’. Diplomacy at this stage of the war was all about exploring broad areas of agreement.

Roosevelt’s conception of diplomacy was yet another reason why such a great opportunity existed for a successful summit. Had Curtin made the trip earlier, when Roosevelt remained the dominant player in Washington, the two men might have been able to construct a close relationship. At the very least, they might have prevented the misunderstandings that had scarred relations over the winter 1943-44.

It was therefore a tragedy that their actual meeting came too late. Throughout Second World War, the U.S.-Australian alliance was established on the basis of hard-headed self-interest. While the Australians wanted American help to protect them against the Japanese aggressor, the Americans needed Australia as a base in the Pacific war. Beyond that, much divided the two powers: disagreements over strategic

priorities, anger at a lack of consultation and misconceptions about each other's goals. Had Curtin been able to forge a stronger bond with Roosevelt, some of these tensions and disagreements might well have been muted or perhaps even resolved.

Indeed, close personal relations between leaders at the top often act as an important layer of adhesiveness to any alliance, binding two countries closer together. During the Second World War, however, this glue just didn't exist. As men of the left, both Curtin and Roosevelt agreed on many issues. But they never had the chance to discover just how much they shared. To conclude, then, their one brief meeting can only be described as a missed opportunity.