

An alliance of shared commitment

Thomas Schieffer

The origin of the Australian–American alliance is essentially a story of two great democracies, brought together out of necessity, who came to understand that their shared values gave them a shared hope for a better and more peaceful world.

The real genesis for the alliance came from a shared experience in World War II. We both looked into the abyss and realised that our chances for survival were far greater together than apart.

This year we celebrated the 62nd anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea. While the foundations of the wartime alliance preceded this battle, the battle itself was a defining experience that caused both countries to realise that our futures were inexorably linked together strategically, politically and culturally. As we look back on that wartime alliance, it all seems so simple now. The Allies would win. Democracy would triumph. Freedom would flourish.

But in May 1942 it did not seem so inevitable. In fact the odds seemed quite long that it would end as it eventually did. The Nazis controlled all of Europe. The militarists in Japan controlled most of Asia. France had fallen, Pearl Harbor was in ruins and the great bastion of British Commonwealth power in the Far East—Singapore—had surrendered. Thousands of Australians were in Prisoner of War Camps. Americans had been defeated across Asia. General MacArthur had barely escaped the Philippines and was regrouping the remnants of US military power from South-East Asia in Australia. Darwin and Broome and Townsville were being regularly bombed. In that time of mutual despair it must have seemed to many that the war might be lost, that the democracy we had known and the way of life we enjoyed might not survive.

Then a glimmer of hope came to both of us out of the Coral Sea. The Japanese advance into the South Pacific had been halted. A month later the decisive strategic blow was struck at Midway in the Central Pacific. We know now the consequences of victory. Thankfully, we only have to speculate on what the consequences of defeat would have been.

What would have happened if we had lost the Battle of the Coral Sea? What would have happened if the American aircraft carriers had been sunk at Midway instead of the Japanese ones?

Some argue that the Japanese had no intention of invading Australia and that would probably have been so in the short run. But would it have been so in the long run, especially once sufficient Japanese land forces, sealift capacity and airpower had been able to be released from other theatres? At the very least Japan was prepared to strangle Australia by blockade. This would have knocked Australia out of the war and forced upon her a humiliating peace. Can anyone seriously argue that a triumphant, expansionist and militarist Japan was prepared to tolerate forever a long-functioning, healthy (and Anglo-Saxon) democracy like Australia on its strategic doorstep?

When MacArthur came to Australia he brought with him the realisation that America had no other place to go. It was from Australia that the tide would have to be turned or the war lost in Asia.

Australians knew that the protective mantle of the British Commonwealth, the linchpin of their liberty for so long had already been defeated in the Pacific theatre and was under increasing difficulty in the Indian Ocean. If Australia was to survive as Australians had come to know it, then the power of America had to be mobilised in her behalf.

No wonder the generation of Americans and Australians who experienced that time together has such a special affection for one another. They know that without the friendship of one for the other at that moment, the world we now know would never have come to be.

The international order that emerged from that terrible conflict made our predecessors look at their security in a totally different way. Americans forever abandoned the notion that isolationism in the Americas would protect them from the risks of overseas conflict. Australians realised that they would have to look beyond the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth for the strategic defence of Australia (and New Zealand). Both of us looked for new ways to protect the way of life we had come so perilously close to losing.

The answer we came up with, almost simultaneously, was the concept of formal and mutually supporting alliance. But while the answer was the same, how we came to it was quite different. The United States believed that the strategic defence of Asia and eventually the whole world was dependent upon the eventual rehabilitation of Japan as a responsible world power. A non-communist, non-aggressive, prosperous Japan was seen by the US as a bulwark against an expansive Communist world led by the Soviet Union. The United States promoted the idea of a 'soft peace' with Japan—low on reparations and strong on democracy that would get the country up and running again as soon as possible.

Many Australians had real reservations about that strategy. They feared a resurgent Japan would risk the re-emergence of militarism. They argued that a soft peace would only hasten the day when the dogs of war would be loose again in Asia. To them an alliance with the United States offered as much insurance against an expansionist Japan as it did against an expansionist Soviet Union.

Some Americans questioned the wisdom of formal alliances outside the scope of the Western hemisphere, the North Atlantic and Europe. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff were initially fearful that the ANZUS Treaty would spread America's resources too thin. They were persuaded finally to support it when it became obvious that Australia was not prepared to make peace with Japan without a guarantee from the US that America would remain committed to the region. The Joint Chiefs came to understand that the wider defence of America was directly linked to the defence of Australia.

In the end each of us came to understand that we could not defend ourselves without defending each other. Each of us came to see an alliance as a means of securing our future. Each of us came to see an alliance as a means of securing our values. Each of us came to see an alliance as a means of furthering peace in the world. But each of us knew that we came to the alliance from a different perspective. Our success since that time has proved that each of us was right. Together we have achieved more than either of us could have achieved alone.

In May of 1942—at the time of the Battle of the Coral Sea—only twelve democracies still existed in the world. Six of these, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Ireland traced their roots to Magna Carta. And of those six, five were under mortal attack from the Axis powers and they were losing. Of the other six, four democracies existed in Latin America. Only two, Switzerland and Sweden, still survived in Europe and they were under the severest pressure from the Nazis. Not one democracy existed across the whole face of Asia.

Today, almost 150 governments are elected in some fashion by their citizens. That did not just happen. It happened because Australia and the United States, and free men and women everywhere, were willing to lend a hand to make it happen. Our alliance has worked not only for us but for many others.

The original threats that brought us together in alliance

in 1951 have long since passed. Soviet Communism is no more. The fear of a resurgent Japan bent on revenge like the Nazis of Germany has been replaced by the realisation that a democratic, prosperous Japan offers us both a friendship that even the most optimistic could not have imagined at the end of World War II.

The march of democracy and prosperity across Asia has been hastened not halted by our alliance. The stability of our friendship has given us both an opportunity to make stable friends in other places.

The alliance Australia and the US have today is far different than the alliance we both first contemplated in 1951. No one could have foreseen then that we would share the kind of policy consultations and intelligence exchanges that we do today. Together we each have a window to the world that would not exist if we were apart. Our militaries exercise, plan and deploy together in the region and to some extent around the world. Each of us is able to enhance our security by leveraging our individual assets with the assets of our ally for the mutual benefit of us both.

We know more, talk more, consult more and trade more because we truly know each other more as the result of this longstanding alliance.

Now, we look out on an emerging world order very different than the one Percy Spender and John Foster Dulles contemplated in 1951. The great power conflict that the ANZUS Treaty was originally meant to deter has largely gone away. But our earlier success at making a safer world must not lull us into thinking we have made a safe world.

In this new world the enemies of democracy will not always wear uniforms or fly national flags. We may see them crossing the street before we realise they have crossed our borders. We may be sure, however, that their purpose can be every bit as deadly to the future of our citizens as any threat we have ever faced in the past.

Terrorism is the bane of our time. It can strike at home or abroad. Whether it is a centre of finance like the World Trade Center or a centre of recreation like Bali—the lives of our citizens can be snuffed out in a moment of irrationality. The need to fight terrorism will be at the centre of our alliance for many years to come.

The focus of our efforts cannot be limited to our immediate neighborhoods in the Asia-Pacific region. The terrorists of our day are transnational in intent, form and practice. They plan their attacks in one country, prepare for their execution in another and carry them out wherever the innocent may gather and be vulnerable.

The threat of terrorism means that we will have to look at our security in different ways than we have in the past. We must quarantine the terrorists from weapons of mass destruction. We must also quarantine those who would provide them such weapons from the rest of the world. The safety of all of us depends on the safety of each of us.

In his last State of the Union message before the United States was plunged into World War II, Franklin Roosevelt said that we sought a world in which four freedoms could flourish—the Freedom of Speech, the Freedom of Religion, the Freedom from Want and the Freedom from Fear. Those

freedoms are still at issue around the world. What we do in their behalf still matters. We can still make a difference in the world just as those who forged the Australia–US alliance made a difference. This is not a time for us to pull apart. This is a time to pull together.

The stakes are too high; the risks are too great for us to be comfortable in going our separate ways. The world may still be a dangerous place but surely we are safer facing it together than facing it apart.

The United States still believes that the principles of the ANZUS Treaty, which underlie our alliance, are as relevant to our time as to any time in our shared history. In 1997 the then American Ambassador to Australia, Genta Hawkins Holmes, noted to an Australian parliamentary

inquiry: ‘Among the ANZUS treaty’s positive features are its brevity ... its flexibility and its adaptability. Like the American constitution, the treaty’s focus on principles rather than details has stood the test of time’.

In September 2004 we celebrate the foresight and courage of those who gave us this alliance 53 years ago. May we have the wisdom to maintain it. ♦

J. Thomas Schieffer is the Ambassador of the United States to Australia. This article is based on his testimony to the parliamentary inquiry into Australia’s defence relations with the United States being conducted by the Defence Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.

association update

Board of Directors meeting

The ADA Board of Directors met in Canberra over the weekend 21–22 August 2004 to review Association activities over the preceding year and refine future policies and plans for the following 6 to 12 months. The meeting was also addressed by, and undertook frank discussions with, representatives from a range of agencies, groups and political parties interested in national security issues. ♦

Annual General Meeting

The Association’s 2004 AGM was held in Melbourne on 29 August 2004. Dr Brian Ridge, Dr Malcolm Kennedy and Mr Alan Collier were re-elected as directors for two-year terms. On the motion of the National President, Dr Brian Ridge, the meeting passed a unanimous vote of thanks honouring Mr Michael O’Connor on his retirement from the Board of Directors, and previously the national council of the Association, on which he had served since 1981. The Directors, on behalf of the Association, also made presentations to Michael and his wife Colleen as a more practical form of thanks for Michael’s 23 years of unbroken service on the executive bodies of the ADA.

Wide-ranging discussions occurred on the significant strategic challenges facing Australia in the immediate and longer-term future, the continuing inadequacy of long-term resourcing of defence capabilities, and the problems in the Australian political process underlying this situation. After some spirited debate the meeting reaffirmed the thrust of Association policy, and noted the continuing need for the ADA to provide informed and independent proposals and comment on national security issues. ♦

Election debate

On 3 September 2004 the ADA delivered letters to the Minister for Defence and the Opposition Spokesman on Defence, offering the Association’s independent good offices as a neutral convener for a public debate on defence issues should the parties be desirous of such an

activity. At the time *Defender* went to press on 20 September the Association has yet to receive a reply from the Minister’s office. ♦

Revamp of ADA website

Further revamping of the ADA website has continued. Association members are reminded that the website provides a range of information on ADA policies and activities, and comment on issues arising in the periods between publication of *Defender* and *Defence Brief*. ♦

2004–2005 subscriptions

All members are reminded that their annual subscriptions now expire on 30 June each year and renewal invoices accompanied the Winter 2004 issue of *Defender* posted out in mid June. Reminder invoices to some members accompany this issue. The Association is largely dependent on membership subscriptions to fund its activities. Please pay your subscription, as soon as possible, by direct credit using internet or other electronic banking, or by returning your cheque in the reply-paid envelope attached to each renewal invoice. ♦

Growing ADA membership

ADA membership continues to grow steadily, not least because more and more Australians see through the political flim flam and realise the sustained neglect of defence over the last three decades under governments of both political persuasions. There are undoubtedly many Australians concerned about our national security who would support the ADA if they had a greater awareness and understanding of the Association’s public interest guardianship work, especially if they received some encouragement from existing members. If you know a likely candidate for membership please give or lend them your copies of *Defender* or *Defence Brief*, draw their attention to the ADA website, bring them along to a Chapter meeting or email their contact details to the national office. ♦