

SPEECH NOTES
CURTIN, MACARTHUR AND THE EVOLVING
AMERICAN ALLIANCE

Hon Kim Beasley

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Six degrees of separation. I knew Mrs Curtin well. In order to drive the family car to University I had to drive Mum and Mrs Curtin to the Fremantle Labor women. Picked her up from their old family home in Cottesloe.

Seeing its modesty was a reminder of a humbler era. We were less acquisitive, more self-reliant, tougher. I have had a better chance to look it over recently as it has passed to Curtin University for display and conservation. In federal campaigns Labor leaders make a pilgrimage there while campaigning in WA.

I did not know Jean MacArthur well but I met her. I was then a Cabinet Minister and I was helping Curtin University raise money for a library/gallery in the University namesake's honour. She was delightfully prepared to lend her name to the effort. She told stories of how well she was looked after in Brisbane where she lived with young Arthur for most of the war. She commented on her freedom. She could grocery shop and walk the suburb like the thousands of soldiers' wives around her. She fitted in to what is still a very egalitarian community. I mentioned this at the time to the man I appointed as Chief of Army, General John Coates. He told me his family were neighbours and he was about the same age as Arthur. He considered him one of his playmates.

The older buildings in the Defence Department, those known as the Russell Offices when I was Minister, form three sides of a square facing the main entrance to the complex. The square itself is named after the head of Australia's armed forces in WWII, General Sir Thomas Blamey. In its very centre is an enormous plinth atop which is a stylised eagle, modestly distorted enough to be nicknamed in Australia 'Bugs Bunny'. Not without some controversy, the central symbol in the defence complex of a nation which has been at war nine times last century and this and which has participated in numerous peace-keeping exercises, is not a tribute to Australia's service personnel but to those of the United States. In particular it is to the one million who passed through Australia in WWII and those who fought more broadly in the Pacific.

Controversy is lessened by the fact that a mile away stands the best war memorial/museum in the world. It is a more than ample tribute to the Australian veterans of those conflicts.

The location of 'Bugs Bunny' however is a powerful indicator of the sub-conscious state of mind of the political leadership of Australia's greatest generation. They were the humble, depression handicapped people who confronted in 1939 the automatic commitment of their ill-prepared forces to the defence of the United Kingdom and in 1941/42, the collapse of its old ally in the face of a Japanese assault, an event much anticipated in Australia if rather pushed to the back of the mind in Britain. Two things were not options. One was a massive effort at national defence. The other was that Australia would look to the United States to give that defence effect. That state of mind was induced by the overwhelming American presence, one million through a nation of seven million. At its centre, giving it focus, was General Douglas MacArthur.

I can see from your programme you have pretty well rehearsed the basic details of his direction by the President and chiefs to Australia. Let me make one or two points about it. The defence of Bataan and Corregidor by the hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned American and Filipino forces is one of the great American stories. It contrasts dramatically with the flaccid effort in South East Asia through to New Guinea on the other side of the archipelago. It bought time, critical for us. It put a question mark over how omniscient Japanese forces really were when seriously confronted. The Japanese Commander Masaharu Homma was sacked after the fight for the humiliations inflicted in the fight to emerge after the end of hostilities to be hanged as a war criminal. From the Australian point of view MacArthur was a successful general.

Less well rehearsed is the Australian perspective. The demand for MacArthur from Australia was not the product of a scared, incapable folk simply looking for a protector, unprepared for responsibility. Australia at the end of 1941 was war hardened and strategically wise.

- Though the depression had gutted Australia's armed forces, thought was still possible. Considerable criticism of a strategy of reliance on Imperial Defence was canvassed among staff offices.
- Australia had already had a hard war – not entirely happy about being the effective 'go to boys' for the tough stuff in the Middle East, the hold out in Tobruk, the futile campaign in Greece. The overthrow of the Vichy French in Syria. Though it was later in 1942, and the other divisions were on their way home, El Alamein pivoted on the Australian 9th Division. Huge numbers of youngsters in the Empire Air Training Scheme. Fighting in the air commands in Europe.

- We had already in the aftermath of Pearl Harbour announced our turning to America. As we did so we were conscious of the demand to keep our divisions in the Middle East whilst a million trained men stood in Britain.
- As we considered the accumulating evidence of being rolled over by a juggernaut, it was not a view that the Japanese could not be held but an awareness of a gap in location, understanding force structure timing mainly, between the war we had been fighting and the one we now had to.

Too much is made in the histories of Curtin's World War One objection to conscription and his longer struggle with alcohol. Not enough is made of his strategic vision, his internal toughness in the Labor Party, his quite strong understanding of contemporary military technologies. Likewise his self-educated grasp of managing a centralised economy. He had audited the lectures in the 1930s of a brilliant economist at UWA. He did not approach government with mindless socialist sloganeering. He was looking for the tools in central banking and mobilising private sector industrial expertise that would permit a ruthless direction of a war economy without concerning himself with anyone's shibboleths.

Curtin may have been traumatised by the troops at sea, worried inordinately about failure, and maintaining throughout a strong supportive sentiment for both Britain and post-war, an assumption imperial defence would be recreated.

- He recognised the here and now needed a hard head with a tough minded attitude to a couple of really hard men in WSC and FDR. He was going to have to manoeuvre with a poor hand with the profound conviction that if push came to shove Australia was expendable.
- Insisting on MacArthur was Curtin's best shot. He assumed his regard in the US would weigh in the balance against 'Beat Hitler first'.

- Odd because he had already secured Australia's safety with the amendment to strategy secured by Admiral Ernest King – defend a line Australia to Hawaii but aggressively not defensively.

Curtin had been put into Government five months earlier by two conservative independents. Reasons:

1. He refused to enter a coalition though would serve on the War Advisory Council – only way you could get Curtin was on his own – but bipartisan acceptability.
2. Disunity of the Conservatives.
3. Had conveyed an expertise on military matters.
4. No inhibitions on government economic direction and full mobilisation.

One thing Curtin was not however was a man of the inter-war Australian establishment. He had no connection with the military leadership. He had no connection with those who commanded in the reserves after evolving into post World War One civilian life as leading figures in business, the professions, the state civil service, particularly law enforcement and engineering.

He turned to America “without inhibitions of any kind” and to MacArthur with few.

- Much criticised because from time to time appeared patronised by MacArthur – quote always appears “you take care of the home front I'll take care of the front line... we'll do this together”.
- Criticised for not demanding Australians on MacArthur's staff, not protesting MacArthur's concealment of Australian roles in victories, not pushing conscription further afield, not engaging with the broader Australian command

– he was Defence Minister. There were many others, these were the most war relevant.

Several things about Curtin

- He knew he had a great general.
- He knew he would be engaged most of the war extracting concessions from a reluctant set of allies.
- He had less time for Blamey and that was in large part Blamey's fault.
- The home front was significant – MacArthur was starved. Part of his genius was making do on starvation rations. 1943 700,000 Australians under him and only 200,000 US.
- Only theatre in which the US was substantially always, overwhelmingly occasionally supplied by another power. For MacArthur the Australian home front was a big deal.
- Overall Curtin was not a blowhard or a credit hog. Winning was enough.
- Conscription – did what he could, would have had enough for Japan. The Philippines was American politics – at Leyte Gulf anyway. Did mopping up in the Islands.
- Had Japan required invasion the criticism would have been forgotten.

The history of the Pacific War has a heavy navy emphasis and rightly so. The war pivoted on Midway, followed by the rapid (in hindsight) charge out of the South Pacific across the central Pacific to Iwo Jima and Okinawa .

By a long way though the biggest action took place in the Philippines. We celebrate D Day today. For MacArthur there were 87 D Days. He was the master

of the amphibious landing. His genius was to rise above well set inter-service American rivalries to reach bench mark combined arms operations.

- He faced the most complex theatre of war logistically.
- His troops fought in the worst terrain of the war (a fact he was slow to appreciate).
- No-one seriously contested he was the man to invade Japan.
- Churchill, despite having nothing to do with him, ranked him the Western allies' greatest general.

Vignettes

- Never lost his sense of responsibility for his Australian troops. He visited the landings at Tarakan and Balikpapan. The last two amphibious assaults of the Pacific War.
- When Curtin died he went out and sat on his porch for hours, smoking and would not be disturbed.
- Dad picking Chifley up at the airport and Chifley asking him: "What is the difference between MacArthur and the Emperor"? Answer "The Emperor has renounced his divinity."
- Arthur Calwell:
"Now he is dead. There is neither rank nor prerogative in the democracy of the dead or the republic of the grave. For us, however, Douglas MacArthur belongs to the immortal dead. But he belongs forever in the hearts and history of the Australian people. In the words of the poet, this country, as does his own, owes him 'the debt immense of endless gratitude.'"