

Global Affairs Commentary

Australia's Unseemly Grovel to a Worrying Ally

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During his recent trip to the United States Australian Prime Minister John Howard, in only the latest example of his blind loyalty to the United States, moved hastily to endorse the first strike (or "pre-emptive attack") doctrine proposed by President Bush. This doctrine could be used to justify a preemptive nuclear strike by the United States. Although American concern with defending itself against further terrorist attacks is understandable, Washington still needs not only to abide by international rules, as set out in the UN Charter, but also to show the rest of the world the example of a responsible global citizen. In today's world there is a strong emphasis on collective security, which, implicitly, means that no government, however powerful, should assume the right to use nuclear or biological weapons against another state or terrorist group, at least, in an emergency, without the endorsement of the Security Council. Personally I believe that the long-running principle of no first strike should still be observed. It helped keep nuclear weapons under control in the cold war, and should still apply today. But that limitation is not what Mr. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld have in mind. It is yet another example of the Bush policy of placing the United States outside the United Nations and its laws.

To go all the way with the U.S.A. would not even be justifiable if we had full confidence in Washington's judgement, but we surely cannot at this time have such confidence. The past record offers a strong warning of the risk of uni-

lateralism when it comes to the world's most powerful state. Post World War history offers several worrying cases. U.S. intervention in Vietnam did nothing to contain the spread of Asian communism. The U.S. assault on the tiny Caribbean state of Grenada was a heavy-handed military action against a regime whose politics might not have been to Washington's taste, but which did not really threaten U.S. interests. U.S. support for right-wing regimes in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Chile helped dictatorships, not the cause of democracy. Past U.S. military support for Iraq in its war against Iran, and for the Taliban in their struggle against the Soviet Union are cases of Washington's strategic misjudgement. Unfortunately, in all these cases we acted supinely, giving the U.S. diplomatic support when we should have been calling for moderation.

The central problem is the nature of the Bush administration. It is arguably the most right wing and aggressive administration in recent American history, and does not deserve the kind of trust that President Bush is calling for—or virtually demanding—in his war against terrorists. His clear preference is for military solutions, with Secretary of State Colin Powell being shunted aside, and the much more important diplomatic and peace negotiation processes being given a lower priority. The Bush administration's weaker support for collective security has created anxiety among America's NATO allies, as well as in the Security Council. Mr. Bush's agenda is clear enough: it is about a

new form of nationalism. It is not about leadership—which he seems incapable of providing. The U.S. will abide by UN rules if it suits the administration. If not, the international rules and laws that Americans helped draft can be ignored. If other countries were to follow the U.S. lead in its current trend toward selfish nationalism, our world could slide back to the anarchy that prevailed before World War II.

The decision by the U.S. to withdraw support for the International Criminal Court is a disturbing aspect of this problem. The excuse that U.S. servicemen could be caught up in the process is quite unacceptable. Our Prime Minister, whom the Americans have briefed on the subject, should reject these arguments, and Australia should support this important initiative. What are we afraid of? From my observations in East Timor, Australian troops are so well disciplined that they have absolutely nothing to fear. But even in the unlikely event that Australian troops were to commit a serious crime, why should they not appear before the

International Criminal Court? If our citizens commit crimes overseas they have to face the courts of the country concerned.

The main purpose of the International Criminal Court will be to deal with the kinds of cases exemplified by the Indonesian military's role in organizing the violence in East Timor in 1999. Under the flawed *ad hoc* arrangements that existed in the past, the perpetrators of such monstrous crimes have been able to escape prosecution, unless the UN agreed to an ad hoc process. The weak performance of the tribunal the Indonesians managed to persuade the UN to accept highlights the need for a process of international justice, one applying to all citizens of the world. The U.S. refusal to accept the jurisdiction of the Court is a sorry comment on the values of the Bush administration. In fact the existence of the International Criminal Court should have a restraining effect on all countries, especially in relation to the operations of national defense and security agencies. Our Prime Minister's claim before Congress to

be America's best friend was unseemly grovelling, as well as inappropriate. A best friend status is essentially a matter for the judgement of the country concerned, not for fawning pretenders. If we are really to stake a claim to be America's best friend then blind loyalty is not good enough. We should be urging changes to a Bush foreign policy that has diminished the importance of peacemaking and international human rights, deviating dangerously from the objective international interests of the world community.

*(James Dunn
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