

Howard confirms Canberra's commitment to a US-invasion of Iraq

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In the midst of furious international manoeuvring in and around the United Nations, Australian Prime Minister John Howard stepped forward last Thursday to pledge his unwavering support for the Bush administration and its planned war of aggression on Iraq.

In a keynote speech to the National Press Club, Howard did everything but formally declare that his government would commit Australian troops to a US-led invasion—with or without the passage of a second resolution in the UN Security Council authorising military force. He bluntly told his audience that a second resolution was not required “as a matter of international law” and was only needed politically “in terms of the united voice of the international community”.

With war imminent, the US is becoming increasingly isolated diplomatically. Despite a concerted campaign of bribes and bullying, it appears unlikely that the Bush administration will obtain the support of a majority in the UN Security Council. France and Russia are threatening to veto any resolution giving the green light for war. Without a UN vote of support, the Blair government is facing an internal Labour Party revolt.

As a result, Australia, a second-rate power in the South Pacific, has assumed increasing importance in US efforts to “prove” it has firm allies. Significantly Bush phoned Howard just prior to the National Press Club speech and the audience included US ambassador Tom Schieffer, who later described the speech as “a very powerful statement”, and British High Commissioner Alastair Goodlad.

Howard's speech was pitched at further ingratiating himself to Washington by demonstrating he would not be swayed by widespread opposition to the war within sections of the political establishment and among broad

layers of the public. In the leadup to the press club luncheon, Howard fed media speculation that he would provide damning new intelligence linking the Hussein regime in Iraq to Al Qaeda and other terrorist outfits. No such evidence was produced.

His speech consisted of a crude restatement of discredited lies and unsubstantiated assertions that Washington has repeated ad nauseum as the pretext for an unprovoked act of aggression against a small, and largely defenceless, country. Stripped to its basics, his argument consisted of the following: Al Qaeda wants so-called “weapons of mass destruction.” Iraq has such weapons. Unless Iraq is disarmed, it could hand these weapons over to terrorist groups.

The prime minister offered no evidence that Iraq actually possesses nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. In fact, weeks of intense activity by teams of UN inspectors have confirmed claims by Iraq that both its weapons and its production facilities were destroyed or dismantled in the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf War. Parrotting Washington's line, Howard contemptuously dismissed the work of the UN inspectors, declaring that the whole matter boiled down to “a question of Iraq's attitude”. In other words, there is nothing Baghdad could say or do that would deter Howard from supporting war.

Howard's speech also failed to demonstrate any link between the Hussein regime and Al Qaeda, which, as many commentators have pointed out, are ideologically hostile to each other. Just two days before the press club luncheon, intelligence analyst Andrew Wilkie quit his job with Australia's leading intelligence agency, the Office of National Assessments (ONA), and declared a war on Iraq was unjustified. As Howard was speaking, Wilkie was telling an antiwar protest outside parliament house that he had seen no evidence linking the regime

in Iraq to Al Qaeda.

Howard used his speech to reiterate his complete backing for the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism" and its doctrine of preemptive strikes. A war on Iraq was necessary, he argued, in order to send a message to other "rogue states" such as North Korea. His comments amounted to an open-ended commitment, not only to a war on Iraq, but to further military adventures as Washington pursues its broader goals of global dominance.

Sections of the state apparatus and the political establishment have expressed fears that Howard's slavish support for Washington will cut directly across Australia's "national interests" by disrupting economic and political ties in Asia and making the country the target of Islamic extremists. Howard bluntly dismissed such concerns and reaffirmed "unapologetically" his backing for the US-Australia alliance. "Australians should never forget," he declared, "that no nation is more important to our long-term security than the United States."

The prime minister is gambling that by backing the Bush administration's global ambitions, including control of Iraq and its huge oil reserves, Canberra will secure US support for its own neo-colonial objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. Howard is well aware that Australia's military intervention in East Timor in 1999, to grab the lion's share of Timor Gap oil and gas, could only have taken place with US backing.

The most cynical aspect of Howard's speech was his mimicking of Bush and Blair's professions of concern for the Iraqi people. He trotted out a list of Saddam Hussein's brutal crimes—neglecting to mention that Australia, following the US, lined up with the regime in the 1980s—and then argued that war was needed to end the suffering of Iraqis. While the Hussein regime is a vicious dictatorship, a US-led invasion will no more bring peace and democracy to Iraq than it did to Afghanistan.

The country's top political journalists allowed Howard to posture at the press club as a leading statesman. Not one of them directly challenged his threadbare arguments or the lies on which they were based. No one referred to the underlying interests driving the Bush Administration's plans for domination in the Middle East, or Howard's motives in backing it. The questions carefully sidestepped any mention of oil.

A couple of journalists politely pointed out that Howard had offered no proof that Iraq had links to Al Qaeda. Howard responded dismissively that it was not a matter of evidence but of judgement. "We're not talking about proving, beyond reasonable doubt, to the satisfaction of a jury at the Central Criminal Court in Darlinghurst, if you excuse my Sydney origins." This was a line he smugly repeated several times. No one objected that the Iraqi people were being condemned to death and destruction on the basis of arguments that would fail to establish a *prima facie* case against a petty criminal.

The media's reaction to Howard's performance reflects a certain closing of the ranks now that war is imminent. The following day the Murdoch-owned media predictably celebrated Howard's speech as a masterpiece. Other newspapers, which have previously expressed certain reservations, joined in the praise. The *Australian Financial Review* declared that the prime minister "deserves respect," noting only that the American plan to ignore the UN, while "risky," was also "understandable". The so-called "liberal" Melbourne-based *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* simply regretted that Howard had not spoken in a similar vein earlier.

The thrust of Howard's speech was not directed at winning over public opinion, which remains overwhelmingly opposed to a war on Iraq, particularly without explicit UN support. Its purpose was to prove the Australian government's unswerving loyalty to Washington. In that respect, it was successful. The following day US Secretary of State Colin Powell duly singled out Howard's address for special mention, emphasising it demonstrated that the US was not internationally isolated.



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