

Darwin commemoration highlights US-Australia military ties

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The anniversary of an event that has been officially downplayed for decades—the Japanese bombing of the northern Australian city of Darwin in February 1942—was elevated to the status of a national day of observance last weekend. Significantly, the Gillard government had first proposed the new annual remembrance day just three months ago, following the visit to the city by US President Barack Obama.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard and assorted dignitaries, notably the US Ambassador to Australia, Jeffrey Bleich, marked the 70th anniversary by declaring that the previously unheralded event was one of the most important days in Australia's history, and marked a turning point in US-Australian relations. Ceremonies were conducted to commemorate the bombing, honour the 89 US sailors who died when the USS Peary was sunk in Darwin harbour, and open a \$10 million interactive war museum—the “Defence of Darwin Experience.”

Gillard referred to the “darkest day” in Australia's history, which would be “inscribed in the story of our nation forever” as “Australia's Pearl Harbor”. She declared that February 19, 1942 was the date that “the distant pre-war friendship between Australia and the United States became a firm and lasting alliance.”

Likewise, Governor-General Quentin Bryce said February 19 ranked as importantly as January 26, when British settlement of the continent began; January 1, the date of Australian federation; and April 25, when Australian soldiers landed at Gallipoli in World War I. “After the 19th of February 1942, Australians came to appreciate that, ultimately, our security rested on cementing an alliance with the United States of America.”

Completely buried in the coverage was a media

release by the Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia), noting that there were now five annual days commemorating warfare. Since 2008 the Labor government has added three—Bombing of Darwin Day, Battle for Australia Day (1942-43 Pacific War) and Merchant Navy Day (merchant seamen who served in wartime)—to Anzac Day (Gallipoli) and Remembrance Day (World War I). The additions, the association commented, “serve to exemplify the creeping militarism overtaking our national imagination.”

The proclamation of Bombing of Darwin Day cannot be explained by what actually happened on the day. Because of official indifference, the town's defences were inadequate and unprepared. No alarm was sounded until bombs were already falling. After the barrage by Japanese airplanes killed about 250 people, and destroyed eight ships and 20 aircraft, panic ensued. Military orders were confused and garbled, triggering desertions, looting and a stampede out of the city. A subsequent judicial inquiry described the response as “deplorable”.

Contrary to the official myth-making, Darwin was not attacked because Japan was intent on invading Australia. Instead, Darwin was a target because it had become a US military headquarters for the war then being waged against Tokyo for control over the Asia-Pacific region.

Today's glorification of these events has less to do with the last war, than with the preparations for the next conflict. Obama's visit last November was part of an aggressive drive by his administration to diplomatically and militarily confront China, and decisively curb Beijing's rising economic influence in the region.

Obama announced plans for the basing of US Marines in Darwin, expanded American use of Australian ports and airbases, and enhanced joint

training and exercises. Speaking later to Australian troops, he made clear that the heightened presence was aimed at projecting US military power throughout South East Asia. "This region has some of the busiest sea lanes in the world which are critical to all our economies," he said. "In times of crisis ... Darwin has been a hub," Obama declared.

A critical aspect of Washington's offensive, which includes closer military ties with the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Japan and India, is to station US forces in locations where they could potentially cut off access to China's trade routes in the South China Sea and the straits of Malacca, Lombok, Makassar, Sibutu and Mondoro. These are the "choke points" through which ships carrying energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa pass between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Darwin's strategic location, within striking distance of these sea lanes, was specifically mentioned last Saturday by Bleich, the US ambassador, during an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's News 24 channel. He described Darwin as one of the most strategic locations in the world because of its proximity to vital "sea channels" and the South China Sea.

Speaking at the launch of the Darwin war museum, Bleich heralded the imminent arrival of US troops in the city, but reverted to the official script, claiming that their purpose was peaceful. "Soon US and Australian troops will be training side by side here in Darwin, and they come to help both of our nations protect and preserve the peace that our people have worked for so hard, and for so long, and for which so many men and women have given their lives."

There was nothing peaceful about the US war against Japan from 1941 to 1945, which culminated in the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and which established the US as the predominant Pacific power. Nor is there anything peaceful about Washington's aggressive stance today. To stem its relative economic decline amid the deepening global financial crisis, US imperialism is resorting to military might to undermine its rivals, above all China.

Equally, the Labor government's opening up of northern Australia to US military forces strikes an aggressive, not a defensive, posture that puts the country on the frontline of any US conflict with China.

The saturation media coverage of the Darwin anniversary is to ramp up fears over the threat to Australia's "vulnerable north" to justify Labor's unconditional support for American militarism and to cover up the real dangers of another Pacific war.

The entire political establishment, including the Greens, who prop up the Labor government, is complicit in this. The Greens publicly joined in welcoming the new day of observance. "I encourage Australians to remember the sacrifices of those who died for their country," Greens spokesperson for Veterans' Affairs, Senator Penny Wright, said in a media statement.

The Greens once posed as opponents of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but their stance was never a principled opposition to US or Australian militarism. On the contrary, it was always based on urging the withdrawal of Australian troops to the Asia-Pacific region, in order to secure the strategic interests of Australian imperialism. By lining up with the Bombing of Darwin Day commemoration, the Greens are pledging to stand four-square behind the US and the Gillard government in the developing confrontation with China.

Gillard's effusive homage to the "firm and lasting" American alliance was a deliberate public reminder of her government's unequivocal alignment with Washington. As the WSWS has explained, the Obama administration was deeply involved in the mid-2010 removal of her predecessor, Kevin Rudd, who had sought to moderate tensions between the US and China. Now that Rudd is preparing to challenge her leadership, Gillard is anxious to restate her unswerving commitment to the US.



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