

Nixon-Whitlam tapes shed light on current Australian rifts over US-China conflict

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If a revealing historical episode, substantially buried for decades, is suddenly revived in the media, it invariably relates to contemporary political tensions. That is certainly the case with the August 1 publication in the *Australian* of an edited essay from the *Monthly* magazine documenting acrimonious exchanges in 1972–73 between the Nixon administration in the US and the Australian government of Gough Whitlam.

The essay appeared amid an increasingly public rift within the Australian political and strategic elite over the current Labor government's unconditional line-up behind aggressive moves by the Obama administration to counter China's influence in the Asia-Pacific region. That alignment, which includes the basing of US Marines in northern Australia, and the hosting of other American military facilities, places Australia in the front-line of any war by the US against China.

In the original essay, as published in the *Monthly*, James Curran, a Sydney University historian, criticised Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her predecessor, Kevin Rudd, for being “quick to wrap themselves in the Stars and Stripes” and “falling over themselves to appear unwaveringly American.” Curran argued that Whitlam, by contrast, had set a more independent foreign policy, and proved that the US-Australia relationship could “survive periods of discord and divergence.”

The same edition of the *Monthly* contained a generally favourable review by former Liberal Party leader Malcolm Turnbull of strategic analyst Hugh White's book, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power*, which warns of a possible nuclear war between the two powers, and argues for a power-sharing “Concert of Asia” to avert a catastrophic conflict. Both items reflect alarm in sections of the Australian political and business elite over the Gillard government's military commitment to Washington.

The differences involve an intractable historic dilemma. Since World War II, Australian imperialism has depended on the US for strategic and military backing to pursue its own predatory interests in the Asia Pacific region. The US also remains the largest source of overseas corporate investment in Australia. At the same time, however, major Australian companies, especially the mining giants, now rely heavily on exports to China and other China-dependent Asian economies, and these markets are threatened by the Obama administration's all-out diplomatic and economic operation throughout the region to undercut China, and to line up every other country in the region against Beijing.

Extraordinarily, Curran's essay made no mention of the fact that Whitlam was ultimately dismissed from office by Governor-General Sir John Kerr in 1975, in an anti-democratic constitutional coup. In

fact, the documents unearthed by Curran provide further evidence that the White House and the CIA played a key role in Whitlam's ouster. That event sent a signal warning to future Australian governments not to call into question, even to the slightest degree, the American alliance.

Drawing on Vietnam War-era White House tapes in the Nixon Library, Curran reported tense exchanges between Washington and Canberra after the newly-elected Whitlam sent a mild private letter to Nixon challenging the wisdom of the so-called “Christmas bombings” of Hanoi and Haiphong. For nearly two weeks, beginning on December 18, 1972, American B-52s and fighter-bombers dropped over 20,000 tons of bombs on Vietnam's two major population centres, killing an estimated 1,600 civilians.

Whitlam, like the Labor Party as a whole, was firmly committed to the US alliance and he was certainly no opponent of the Vietnam War. But popular opposition to the war, and to the conscription of 18-year-olds to fight it, had grown rapidly since the late 1960s. In order to prevent that movement, which erupted largely outside the control of the Labor Party, from challenging the parliamentary order itself, Labor promised to end conscription and withdraw Australian troops from Vietnam, subject to consultation with the White House. This pledge was crucial to Labor's victory in the December 1972 election. Whitlam thus felt it necessary, for public consumption, to distance himself from the bombings, which attracted worldwide condemnation.

Whitlam's concern was not the barbarity of the slaughter but its tactical value. Writing to Nixon, he questioned “most earnestly” whether they would achieve “the return of the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table in a more forthcoming frame of mind.” He signalled his intention to invite Asian nations to join Australia in publicly appealing to the US and North Vietnam to return to the so-called peace talks in Paris.

On receipt of Whitlam's letter, Nixon's national security adviser Henry Kissinger, the architect of the Christmas bombings, immediately rang the Australian embassy to deliver a blunt ultimatum. If Whitlam's intention became public, “it must have great consequences for our relationship.” This was an unambiguous threat to terminate the US-Australian alliance.

According to the White House tapes, Kissinger told Nixon that Whitlam's letter was an “absolute outrage.” Accurately enough, he accused Whitlam of making a “grandstand play” to domestic public opinion. Pointing to future retaliation, he added that once the Vietnam War was over, the Australians “will need us one hell of a lot more than we need them.” The US president agreed to “freeze” Whitlam for a few months so he would “get the message.”

Nixon appointed Marshall Green, a long-time operative of the State

Department, as the new US ambassador to Australia. At Green's farewell lunch, Nixon declared that he could not "stand" Whitlam—using a string of expletives to describe him. He told Green: "Normally, I wouldn't send you to a place like Australia ... but right now it is critically important."

These remarks were highly significant. Green had been involved in a series of interventions in Asia and the Pacific to enforce US imperialism's bloody agenda, including the massacre of up to one million workers and peasants during the 1965–66 Indonesian military coup that brought General Suharto to power. Under Green's command, State Department and CIA officials at the US Embassy in Jakarta provided the Indonesian armed forces with "shooting lists" bearing the names of thousands of local, regional and national leaders of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). (See: "Former US Ambassador Marshall Green dead at 82: A key participant in Indonesian massacre").

This was not the first time that Green had been in charge of a US embassy during a military putsch. He was the senior American diplomat in South Korea at the time of the 1961 coup d'état that brought Major-General Park Chung Hee to power. He was also one of Washington's most experienced agents in the region, having been posted to South Korea twice, Japan twice, Hong Kong and New Zealand. Between 1969 and 1973, he served Nixon as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Just months before his Australian appointment, Green had travelled with Nixon to meet Mao Zedong and open relations with China.

During Green's time in Canberra, the US administration and intelligence agencies helped destabilise the Whitlam government before its dismissal by the governor-general in November 1975. Businessmen with various intelligence connections embroiled the government in a scandal involving overseas loans, while Washington raised doubts over its collaboration with Canberra in the US spy satellite base at Pine Gap.

Green's participation in these machinations has been previously reported. In his book, *A Secret Country*, John Pilger recounted that in early 1974, soon after Green's arrival in Canberra, he addressed the Australian Institute of Directors. The next day, a member of the audience told a Whitlam minister that Green had said Australian business leaders "could expect help from the United States" similar to that "given to South America." This discussion took place just months after the September 1973 US-backed and CIA-orchestrated military coup in Chile, which overthrew the government of another social democrat, Salvador Allende.

Curran's essay was silent on all this. He did, however, record Green advising Nixon in mid-1974 that Whitlam was a "whirling dervish" who had been "moving on matters of vital interest to the US without the prior consultation that we have come to expect from Australia."

Curran conceded that by the time Whitlam was granted an audience with Nixon, in Washington in late July 1973, the Australian prime minister had done everything he could to show that he had fallen into line. He had dropped talk of withdrawing from the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO)—an Asian equivalent to NATO; decided not to remove Australian air force squadrons from Malaysia; and backed away from advocating a grouping of non-aligned nations in Asia and a zone of peace in the Indian Ocean.

Just before the Oval Office meeting, Whitlam told Kissinger that any new Australian prime minister had to "get his legitimacy within the first few months by gaining accolades from the White House." Whitlam then reassured Nixon that "Australia's effectiveness in its

relations with Asia depends upon good relations with the US."

Whitlam had also assuaged American concerns that a Labor government would rescind the agreements over Pine Gap and other US installations in Australia, even though, in Curran's words, "the Americans made few if any substantive concessions over the question of Australian access to the bases and control over their use."

Apparently, these assurances failed to convince Nixon. Just a month before the Watergate affair forced him from office in August 1974, the US president ordered a secret study of American relations with Australia. He asked officials to explore options for relocating US intelligence facilities elsewhere, and assess "the impact on our alliance with Australia of curtailing or ending ... intelligence sharing."

These instructions provide crucial new evidence of the subsequent US-backed operation to destabilise and remove the Whitlam government in 1974–75. They also bring to mind the more recent US involvement—confirmed by US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks—in the operation to oust Kevin Rudd as prime minister in mid-2010.

Rudd too had incurred the wrath of a US administration—that of Obama—for taking diplomatic initiatives, such as his proposal for a new Asia Pacific grouping that would include China, without first consulting Washington. Reflecting the dilemma confronting Australian imperialism, Rudd had sought to find a way to head off a confrontation between the US and China, an orientation that cut across the Obama administration's determination to reassert US hegemony over the region.

Despite this record, Curran concluded his essay by asserting: "The Whitlam experience showed that it is possible for Australia to earn American respect."

On the contrary, the Nixon-Whitlam tapes underscore the ruthlessness with which the US ruling elite will deal with Australia, one of its closest allies, let alone other governments, in order to maintain its domination in the Indo-Pacific region and globally.

This is even more so today, as the Obama administration steps up its military and diplomatic aggression—from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to the regime change operations in Libya and Syria—in a bid to offset America's protracted economic decline.

Significantly, Curran's conclusion that the "Whitlam experience" showed how to "earn American respect" was edited out when his essay was published in the *Australian*. It was one of several omissions designed to water down Curran's argument for a more independent foreign policy. That editorial modification, itself, testifies to the tensions wracking the Australian media and political establishment over the prospect of conflict between the US and China.



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