

Sydney University's US Studies Centre: A bastion of pro-war strategy and propaganda

Oscar Grenfell—SEP candidate for Grayndler
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As Australia's role in the US-led preparations for conflict against China escalates, a host of government-connected institutions dedicate substantial resources to geo-political strategising, war preparations and the promotion of militarism. Universities, corporatised by decades of funding cuts and pro-business restructuring, are at the forefront of this campaign.

One of the most significant institutions on Australian campuses is the University of Sydney's United States Studies Centre (USSC). Its specific function is to formulate the strategic conceptions underlying Australian involvement in US-led military interventions and to promote the US-Australia alliance, particularly among young people. Formed in 2006, with the backing of powerful sections of the corporate elite, its founding aim was to overcome the deep-going hostility of broad layers of the population to Australia's participation in the criminal US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The origins of the USSC highlight the determination of the corporate and financial elite to counter and suppress widespread anti-war sentiment. At a meeting of the American-Australian Association (AAA) in 2006, media mogul Rupert Murdoch pointed with concern to polling results from the Lowy Institute think-tank, which showed that the majority of the Australian population, some 57 percent, viewed American foreign policy as a potential threat. Murdoch reportedly declared: "This is ridiculous, what are you blokes going to do about this?"

In May 2006, the Liberal-National government of John Howard announced it would provide \$25 million to finance the USSC, if the figure could be matched by funds from other sources. The AAA announced a competition to determine which university would host the centre, with the University of Sydney registering the successful bid.

From the outset, the powerful backers of the institution made clear that its funding was tied to a definite political agenda. In 2007, the same year the USSC was opened, Michael Baume, former Liberal Party politician, and consul-general to New York, told the Murdoch-owned *Australian*: "If the centre [USSC] succumbed to the anti-American prejudice endemic in Australian universities, the AAA would pull the funding."

The significance assigned to the USSC came into sharp focus in 2011. In March, the Labor government of Julia Gillard

announced that it would provide the centre with \$2 million to establish a research group entitled "Alliance 21," which would function from 2011 to 2014.

The group was established less than a year after protected sources of the US embassy within the Labor Party and trade unions removed Kevin Rudd as prime minister. The overnight inner-party coup followed intense hostility from Washington to Rudd's calls for the US to make a limited accommodation to China's rise. Upon being installed as prime minister, Gillard immediately pledged her unconditional allegiance to the US.

In November 2011, the Gillard government, backed by the Greens, hosted Barack Obama as he announced the US military and strategic "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia, directed against China, from the floor of the Australian parliament. Gillard signed a military agreement with Obama that provided for the establishment of a new US Marine base in Darwin, and other measures to integrate the Australian military into the US war machine.

The purpose of Alliance 21 was two-fold. One was to serve as the centre for discussions among the military, political and intelligence establishment regarding the military buildup in Asia and the preparations for war. The other was to promote the US alliance, as it was stepped-up in line with Washington's "rebalance" to Asia.

The sponsors and leading personnel of the USSC and Alliance 21 are intimately tied to the military and corporate elite. Sponsors have included Rupert Murdoch's News Limited, US arms conglomerate Northrup Grumman and Dow, the manufacturer of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and a continuing supplier to the US nuclear and chemical warfare industry.

The USSC's current director is former army officer and Afghan war veteran James Brown—the son-in-law of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Its board of advisors includes former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke, who dispatched Australian forces to the 1991 Gulf War; former Coalition Prime Minister John Howard, who committed Australia to the criminal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; and former US ambassador to Australia Jeffrey Bleich, who was serving in Canberra during the coup against Rudd.

Many of Alliance 21's publications have advocated policies

to prepare for war. A paper by retired US admiral Gary Roughead in October 2012 called for the greater integration of the Australian and US militaries. The “interoperability” of the two countries defence forces, he wrote, “will become increasingly more important in the likely future strategic environment, particularly as China continues to gain power in the Asia-Pacific region.”

In 2012, Alliance 21 published a paper by Andrew O’Neil, a Griffith University academic, warning: “Whilst Australia assumes the US would extend its nuclear umbrella in the event that Australia was ever subject to nuclear coercion or attack, this has never been formally confirmed.” O’Neil called for the Australian government to push for guarantees that the US would support Australia in the event of a nuclear conflict.

Other papers advanced similar militarist arguments, with titles such as “US Basing in the Asia-Pacific: of rebalancing, AirSea Battle, Nuclear Deterrence, and our collective response to China’s rise” and “Security challenges in the Asia-Pacific Region: A US perspective.” AirSea Battle is the Pentagon’s strategy for war with China, involving a massive air and missile assault on the Chinese mainland, supplemented by a naval blockade.

In October 2014, Alliance 21 presented its final report to the Australian government. Along with calling for a deepening of the US alliance, it warned: “Demographic and generational changes in the two countries mean young and immigrant populations are less attached to the alliance in historical, cultural, and emotional terms.”

The report declared: “Careful attention to the relationship is needed across government, business and social sectors in both countries, with an eye to demonstrating the value of Australia–United States ties and the mutual benefits they bring.” To that the end, the report called for the introduction of “educational components at schools and institutions of higher learning on the history of shared values and commitments between Australia and the US, as well as the meaning of the alliance today.”

The USSC offers a government-approved class on American politics and society for high school students and hosts an annual school debating tournament on the “future of America.” University students can apply for internship programs, including to the US Congress and Chamber of Commerce, aimed at developing relations between a layer of students and the American foreign policy and corporate elite. The centre also hosts talks involving high-level figures in the US and Australian political and intelligence establishments.

In March, amid mounting demands from the Pentagon that Australia conduct incursions into Chinese-claimed territories in the South China Sea, a USSC report warned that the alliance between the two countries “is driven too much by policy elites in both countries... There is low public support in Australia for joining the United States in an Asian contingency.”

An “Asian contingency” is a euphemism for a military clash,

or war in Asia. The report also called for the US-Australian alliance to become “more enmeshed in the emerging regional web of relationships” that the United States is developing against China.

The significance of the USSC is underscored by the anti-democratic decision of University of Sydney authorities to ban a meeting of the Socialist Equality Party, and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), on the weekend of the Anzac Day celebrations last year. The university declared that the meeting, entitled “Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism and the drive to world war three” would have risked disrupting other pro-war events being carried out on campus.

As the preparations for an “Asian contingency” intensify, universities are being transformed ever more directly into think-tanks for military preparations and centres of pro-war propaganda. At the same time, decades of funding cuts and the ever-greater reliance of university authorities on corporate financing have eroded any conception of democratic rights on campus. The IYSSE, in conjunction with the SEP, has been alone in mobilising students against the promotion of militarism and attacks on political liberties at universities. In response, university authorities and student unions at campuses across the country have sought to curtail, and in some cases, such as at the University of Melbourne, effectively proscribe the IYSSE.

The SEP is standing candidates in the Australian federal elections to fight for the development of an international anti-war movement of the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist program, to prevent the catastrophe of a nuclear world war. As part of that struggle, we will continue to expose the subordination of universities to militarism, war and the dictates of the corporate elite, and fight for campuses to be genuine centres of scholarship and critical inquiry.

To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our website or Facebook page.

The author also recommends:

Further on political censorship at the University of Sydney [6 May 2015]

Authorised by James Cogan, Shop 6, 212 South Terrace, Bankstown Plaza, Bankstown, NSW 2200.



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