

Friends in a naughty world

John Roskam reviews

The Partnership: The inside story of the US-Australian alliance under Bush and Howard

by Greg Sheridan (UNSW Press, 2006, 260 pages)

There's a saying about the Cold War. 'The right side lost, but the wrong side won.' This is the attitude of most Australians writing about their country's foreign policy. This is not to say that it's the attitude of most Australians. It's just that in this country practically anyone who puts pen to paper about international affairs comes from an instinctively anti-American position. What passes for foreign policy analysis is usually little more than a recounting of America's sins, which are variations on a theme: America is too rich, America is too unilateralist, or America is too imperial.

So if being American is bad, being an ally of America is just as bad.

Greg Sheridan is different. For more than a decade as Foreign Editor of *The Australian* newspaper he has consistently supported freedom for individuals, and liberal democracy for nations. He's never believed that the economic and political privileges we have in 'the West' should be confined only to those lucky enough living there. What's more he's been prepared to support those who argue that the West has a moral obligation to do what it can to spread liberal democracy. This makes him almost unique in Australia. And it places him at odds with those in the domestic foreign policy establishment who,

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if they had to choose, would prefer the countries they deal with to be predictable rather than free.

At the same time though Sheridan is realist enough to appreciate Australia's alliance with the United States is not a product of convenience or an inferiority complex. The alliance has been supported by both major parties because its maintenance is in Australia's national interest.

The philosophical perspective from which Sheridan approaches the alliance is made clear early in *The Partnership*. Sheridan presents his case honestly and sincerely.

One of the reasons I always hated Marxism, which was fashionable when I was an undergraduate, was because of its determinism: its view that history had an inevitable course that it must follow. I don't believe anything is inevitable, and think that history is enacted, unpredictably, by independent human beings who made unpredictable judgments.

For all its sins, the United States has stressed in its founding and defining documents, in its highest public leadership, and in most of the life of the nation, qualities which accord with the deepest

nature of human beings—liberty, self-determination, democracy, hard work, the rule of law, civic equality, religious equality.

The Partnership is presented as 'the inside story of the Australia-US alliance under Bush and Howard'. Much of what Sheridan writes about in relation to the operation of the alliance, particularly regarding military and security operations in Afghanistan and Iraq is revealed publicly for the first time. The book has already become a vital source document on the alliance.

Many Australians would genuinely be surprised by the extent to which the American military rely on the skills of the Australian Special Air Service Regiment (the 'SAS'). Sheridan uses Operation Anaconda to demonstrate the importance of military cooperation between the allies. Anaconda was a Coalition forces action against al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan in February 2002 and if it had not been for the performance of the Australian SAS the mission would almost certainly have failed.

However *The Partnership* is important not only because of its detailed examination of the alliance. The book also provides an engaging and often engrossing account of the themes of Australia's defence and foreign policy since the Second World War. Sheridan brings his vast practical experience and his deep learning to bear on questions such as whether we should have an 'independent' foreign policy, the failures of the 'Defence of Australia' doctrine, and the phenomenon of international terrorism.

The idea that Australia must have an 'independent' foreign policy is one of our nation's great moral hypocrisies. To stand aside and to not become involved in a battle between two sides is effectively to condone the actions of both. For the last century this country's foreign policy choices have been clear. 'Independence' was an idea pursued by Doc Evatt, La-



Australian and American military leaders discuss the naughty world

bor's foreign affairs minister of the 1940s, and someone who is still a hero to the Left. Evatt wasted no opportunity to display his 'even-handedness' between the Soviet Union and the United States. Notoriously, he defended the post-war imposition of Soviet totalitarian rule on eastern Europe as Stalin simply engaging in an act of self-defence. Evatt, like many of his confreres, was in awe of the sacrifices made by the Soviet Union during the Second World War and he was blind to the failings of communism, both in theory and in practice. He didn't understand that the alliance of Roosevelt and Churchill with Stalin, was nothing more than an arrangement formed with one evil regime in order to defeat another evil regime.

In the Second World War it would have been unimaginable for Australia to have done anything other than what it did. Similarly during the wars in Korea and Vietnam it was in our national interest to intervene. The same applies to our battle with radical Islamism.

The 'defence of Australia' doctrine

(DOA) is the modern manifestation of the sort of thinking behind an 'independent' foreign policy. Sheridan's discussion and dissection of DOA is one of the highlights of *The Partnership*. Put simply DOA asserts that Australia's only defence interest is to protect our own shores and therefore we don't need an army because it will be the navy and air force that will stop potential invaders. As Sheridan says 'This unnatural and frankly weird doctrine lead to many bizarre results'. Yet DOA was official policy under Labor, and under Kim Beazley as defence minister. The result of DOA was that the army was starved of resources. For example, when a coup occurred in Fiji in 1987 the then Labor government considered employing the Australian military to restore democracy.

Sheridan's comment about Labor's Fiji strategy is acute. 'That [strategy] may in any circumstance have been a very problematic proposition, but it was entirely irrelevant because Australia had absolutely no way of transporting the troops there and mounting any kind of operation.'

Very perceptively Sheridan unpacks

the ideology behind DOA. It was based on the myth that in 1942 Labor prime minister John Curtin 'brought home' the troops to protect Australia, rather than having them overseas to protect Britain's imperial interests. Sheridan notes that of course those troops that were 'brought home' were actually sent overseas to New Guinea. 'But the myth served the Labor Right well, because it allowed them to steer the Labor Left away from outright pacifism and to maintain some defence spending, rather than abolishing almost all modern defence capabilities in the mode of New Zealand'.

Sheridan's final remarks in *The Partnership* about the Australia-US alliance are accurate: 'In a naughty world, it is a candle in the darkness.'

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