Australia’s relations with the United States could never be other than paradoxical. On the one hand, nothing could be more natural than a close relationship between these two continental, British-begotten, frontier-shaped, Pacific powers, both with striking cultural and political similarities and vitally concerned with global security. On the other hand, any relationship that did develop between them could only be perforce asymmetrical. Since the last decades of the nineteenth century, the United States could normally count on at least fifteen times the population and nineteen times the economic resources of Australia. This huge disparity in power had one inevitable consequence: in any partnership, the United States was always going to be vastly more important to Australia than Australia could ever be to the United States. This is not to say, however, that the relationship did not pull in both directions, for clearly it did, as in the case of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s effusive approval of Australia’s support of the Vietnam War¹ or, years later, President George W. Bush’s equally public gratitude for Australia’s participation in the Iraq War.² Normally, however, the problem, as Australian diplomats typically lament in private, was that great powers are not in the habit of taking too much notice of smaller powers. Or, as the controversial Minister for External Affairs


in the 1940s Dr. Herbert Evatt liked to say, “The truth is that Great Powers are inevitably preoccupied with questions of prestige and spheres of influence.” Winning the attention of Washington would always be a problem and a fact of international life for Australian leaders.

What Americans generally knew of Australia in the early 1940s – and it wasn’t much in the beginning - may be attributed to the efforts of Australia’s first Minister to the United States, Richard Gavin Gardiner Casey (1890-1976) who presented his credentials to Washington on March 5, 1940. His achievements, including commissioning a New York public relations firm to conduct a confidential survey with a view to “increasing American knowledge of, and interest in, Australia,” were considerable. Casey, determined to put Australia front and center in the American mind – as opposed to just another element of the British Empire - advocated clearing normal channels for routine and legitimate Australian news; supported efforts to seek arrangements with newspapers, press associations and syndicates under which correspondents could be exchanged or American newsreel news, one of the most potent forces in the field of U. S. public opinion; and even adding a press secretary to his staff.

In establishing Australia’s first diplomatic post in Washington, Casey, fifty years old with his boyish charms and courteous deference, proved to have an extraordinary flair for meeting the right people. According to Alan Watt, a former secretary of the External Affairs Department, Casey managed to develop relations of confidence with numerous influential Americans – presidential advisor Harry Hopkins, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, and Secretary of War Henry Stimson, to name three – while maintaining the closet contact with two British ambassadors, Lord Lothian and Lord Halifax. In twenty-one months, Casey became well and favorably known to most everyone who counted, enjoying access to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the friendship of leading politicians and pollsters. Up to this time, there was little official knowledge of Australia, apart from the echoes of the adverse American reaction to the Imperial trade diversion policy that had still not died away. Under, if not because of, Casey’s watch, Roosevelt had at least shown himself to be sympathetic to this country of small population (7 million), military power, and international impact. But Casey had more on his mind than making friends and influencing people.

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5 For this and other insights into Australia’s relations with the U. S., see Alan Watt, *The Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy, 1938-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967).
Enter Peter Mauch. Mauch, a respected scholar of Japanese foreign policy and the author of a highly acclaimed diplomatic biography of Admiral Normura, calls into question whether Casey’s “performance was truly stellar” (4). Mauch, who has no particular quarrel with the traditional portrait of Casey as an accomplished diplomat with a knack for gathering information vital to Canberra’s policy-making purposes, calls into question Casey’s accomplishments and acumen. To begin with, Mauch “shows how Casey in the initial months of his mission made little impression on his hosts and fumed at what he supposed was the refusal of the Americans either to identify or align more properly with the British Empire’s cause,” in the process showing little appreciation of American domestic politics or even Roosevelt’s steps for ever greater support for Britain (4). Moreover, despite his government’s presumption of the necessity of U. S. involvement in resisting the ambitions of Imperial Japan, Casey recoiled from the implications of American leadership in both Europe and the Pacific. Finally, and most important, Mauch exposes the limits of Casey’s influence in revealing “how British Prime Minister Winston Churchill completely undercut Casey’s diplomacy in late November 1941,” exposing “the limits of Casey’s influence in Washington – and also on his ability to smooth over the cracks in the Anglo-Australian relationship” (4). Mauch’s conclusion is subtle but significant: while not suggesting that Casey’s mission was a failure, he makes a good argument that it was less than truly stellar. In this sense, Mauch has made a solid contribution to the Australian diplomatic literature on this subject. That said, I believe it could have been an even stronger contribution if the author had given some speculative thought to Casey’s state of mind – the push and pull of ideas, in a distinct climate of opinion, that drives people and nations forward.

Like most members of his class, Casey served as an officer (rising to the rank of major) in the Australian Imperial force in World War I; and like so many of them and others, Casey rarely referred to his war service. There was good reason. World War I was a traumatic experience for Australia, touching the lives of countless Australian families. About 59,000 Australian soldiers died in World War I, out of a population of 4.87 million; and an additional 153,731 were wounded, leaving thousands mentally scarred by their experience. If one contemplates the damage done to the American national psyche left by the 58,000 soldiers who died in the Vietnam War, a fairly clear image arises of what the Australia experience, going to the aid of the British Empire in World War I, meant to the next generation of politicians, policy makers, and ordinary citizens. They knew it was a near-run thing. Looking down the barrel of Imperial Japan in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Casey and others sensed the importance of getting the U. S. to play its role. Casey and others also sensed that the imperial-trade off, whereby the British Navy, operating from Singapore, would provide a protective shield between the mainland and any threat from Asia in exchange for Australian troops to help defend England itself and the Suez, was

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pretty much finished. The Japanese sinking of the British capital ships, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, off the coast of Malaya on 10 December 1941 and the surrender of the British garrison at Hong Kong on 26 December, sealed their fate. Casey knew full well that Australia could be conquered and Britain could still hold on. In any case, I think it is fairly safe to say Casey had a lot on his mind.


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7 For a preview of what Australia could have expected under the Japanese yoke, see Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 59-75.