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James Curran. "Beyond the Euphoria: Lyndon Johnson in Australia and the Politics of the Cold War Alliance." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 17:1 (Winter 2015): 64-96. DOI: 10.1162/JCWS_a_00531. http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00531

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Review by **Peter Edwards**, Australian National University

This article is a valuable contribution to the body of scholarship on the Australian-American alliance in the second half of the twentieth century, a field in which James Curran is establishing himself as a leading scholar. Much of that reputation has come from his book on the rift between President Richard M. Nixon and Prime Minister E.G. Whitlam in the early 1970s, unquestionably the time of greatest tension in the alliance established in 1951 and the only occasion when its continued existence was seriously in question.¹

That rift, the nadir of the Australian-American relationship, came only a few years after its high point, when Lyndon B. Johnson became the first incumbent president to visit Australia. The visit had a huge impact on Australia, as Curran points out. Holt's huge electoral victory a few weeks later – bigger than any of the seven successive victories won by his predecessor, Robert Menzies, the most electorally successful Australian politician ever – cemented the Johnson visit into the Australian psyche. Moreover, while the public clearly welcomed their presidential visitor with huge enthusiasm, some relatively small but highly visible protests are usually seen as the beginning of significant opposition to Australian involvement in Vietnam. In the way of such things, reality and myth have become entangled in recollections of the time. A serious piece of diplomatic analysis is greatly to be welcomed.

Curran's article takes up themes that have been outlined by other writers, most notably his academic mentor Neville Meaney, and develops them in the light of new material from diplomatic archives.² The old glib

¹ James Curran, *Unholy Fury: Whitlam and Nixon at War*, Melbourne University Press, 2015. This reviewer's assessment of the book may be seen at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/whitlamnixon-clash-of-tempers-explained-in-currans-unholy-fury/news-story/d9d7028a27f703e3a6288f72bdd1452a>

² See J. Curran and S. Ward (eds.), *Australia and the Wider World: Selected Essays of Neville Meaney* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2013; Neville Meaney, *A History of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy 1901-23*, vol 1, *The*

assertions, some examples of which Curran quotes, that Australian foreign policy consisted of blind loyalty and obedience to first Britain, then the United States, looks increasingly superficial. Harold Holt's declaration that Australia was 'all the way with LBJ' was not only highly public at the time but has defined a whole era of analysis.³ In fact Australia was playing its own game, using the imperial system and then the quasi-imperial American alliance, to protect and promote Australian interests. This has been argued for so long that one might accuse Curran of grappling with a straw man, were it not for the fact that the argument is still found in important works by influential historians, such as that by Stuart Macintyre cited in footnote 10 of the article.⁴

As Curran states, both Menzies and Holt saw the Vietnam commitment as ensuring that the United States would fight Australia's war. The commitment emerged from the longstanding fear that the American security guarantee implied in the ANZUS treaty might not live up to public expectations. The Australian government did not merely welcome American proposals to place what the two governments called 'joint facilities,' and their critics called 'American bases,' on Australian soil. Canberra had proposed this use of Australian territory, as a way of locking in American support for Australia.

Curran, either by himself or in collaboration with Stuart Ward, has published a number of works about Australian perceptions of national identity, and the tensions between Australia's links with Britain and the United States. Like Meaney before him, Curran understands that Australia's decisions in foreign and defence policy, up to and including commitments to war, have been based on perceptions of national identity, and not merely calculations of security and national interest. At the same time, Curran is right to indicate that Australian attention, in both the policy-making elites and the general public in the early and mid-1960s was focused on current and potential threats from Indonesia. Australians at all levels were deeply concerned by the clear divergence of policy and priorities between Washington and Canberra over the fate of West New Guinea and then Indonesia's confrontation of Malaysia. In the Australian mind, the regional context was all-important. The greatest dilemma for policy-makers in the early 1960s was the tension between British pressure to support Malaysia against Indonesia while staying out of Indochina, and American pressure to give priority to the growing crisis in South Vietnam, while showing restraint over Indonesia.

Curran is right to point to the contrast between Holt's ill-advised and spontaneous use of Johnson's electoral slogan, 'all the way with LBJ,' and the actual level of Australia's military commitment in Vietnam. He might perhaps have said a little more on the place of the Johnson visit on the development of Holt's views in his short tenure as Prime Minister. Holt became Prime Minister in January 1966 and drowned in December 1967. In 1966 and the earliest months of 1967, Holt genuinely believed in the commitment and in the vision of a prosperous, non-communist Southeast Asia, a vision he shared with Johnson. At that time Holt seems to have regarded the military commitment to Vietnam as the price that had to be paid for the future security and prosperity of the region, to which he paid several visits in his first year in office. Holt appears to have personally driven a major increase in the commitment in early 1966. But by early 1967 the financial and

Search for Security in the Pacific 1901-14 (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1976), and vol. 2, *Australia and the World Crisis 1914-23* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009).

³ Peter Edwards, *A Nation at War: Australian politics, society and diplomacy during the Vietnam War 1965-1975*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1997), 111-113.

⁴ Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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political costs were mounting. The last increase in the commitment, in mid-1967, was only secured against his strong resistance, after Johnson had exerted an unprecedented degree of pressure on the Australians.

This article is a valuable contribution to an understanding of a critical period in the Australian-American alliance. It reveals some of the dynamics which would transform the apparent high point of the relationship into a serious rift within a few years. It is also an indication of the growing sophistication and nuance in Australian diplomatic history, to which Curran has been a major contributor.

Peter Edwards is an honorary professor at both the Australian National University, Canberra, and Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He gained his D.Phil. degree from Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He has published extensively on the history of Australian defence and foreign policy, and was general editor of *The Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-75* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 9 vols, 1992-2012). His most recent book is *Australia and the Vietnam War* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2014).

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