ARTICLES

"Merely a Facade"?
Roosevelt and the Southwest Pacific

Warren F. Kimball
Rutgers University (Newark College)

In the great game of high politics, the role and importance of seemingly lesser players is often overlooked and eventually forgotten. So it is in histories of World War II for the Southwest Pacific and for Australia, the region's geographically largest nation. So it is for Australian-American relations in the midst of a conflict that reshaped the geopolitical, economic, and even ideological face of the entire world.

Nothing has made, and continues to make, Australians bitter and angry more than to be taken for granted. Britain had made a habit of it even as the colony developed its own identity as a nation—well before official independence. The most flagrant examples came in the two twentieth-century world wars. Had Britain made and suffered, on a per capita basis, Australia's contributions and losses in World War I, His Majesty's Government would have sued for peace. Then, in the early years of World War II, Britain followed a logical Germany-first policy without ever consulting the Australians. Troops from Down Under, their homeland directly threatened by rapid Japanese expansion, were expected (not asked) to participate in campaigns across North Africa that were peripheral to both the Pacific and the European wars—though not peripheral to British imperial interests. Then came the Americans, Douglas MacArthur and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who treated Australia as a launching pad either for personal fame or for a counterattack against the Japanese. Granted, the Australians des-

©Copyright 1994 by Imprint Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.

My thanks to David Day, then of Bond University, who organized the excellent conference on H. V. Evatt that spawned this paper; to the Australian-American Educational Foundation which provided the Fulbright award that got me to Australia; and to Peter Edwards of the Australian War Memorial and the staff of the Australian Archives in Mitchell, ACT, for their help in the archives. I should also mention that one of the most effective, quick history lessons I have ever received came from two visits to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. The sense of pride, anger, and nationalism that exudes from the exhibits is extraordinary. Thanks also to the Rutgers University Research Council which has provided steady support for my work on FDR.

1. The label "Down Under" is, itself, an example of the Anglo-centric view of many Australians, for the reference point was, quite obviously, London. Similarly the Near East and the Far East. "Near" to what? "Far" from what? Again London was the answer.
perately wanted the American presence, but decision-making was re-
served to Washington.

Into that atmosphere came the man who created the first Aus-
tralian Ministry for External Affairs (after all, British governors-general
had argued, that sort of thing is taken care of in London, isn’t it?). Dr.
Herbert V. "Doc" Evatt possessed a keen mind, a quick temper, an
abrasive manner, political ambition, and an intense sense of being an
Australian.2 Whatever his private charm and warmth, as a public offi-
cial he was aggressive and intense. Which leaves the question, did
that style work on the international scene? Did his forays into great
power politics achieve his goals, or merely create minor tempests that
men like Roosevelt simply steered around?

As with almost everything in "Doc" Evatt's career, attempts to an-
swer that question have generated angry, emotional reactions.3 Yet for
all the smoke and fury, those arguments are but proxy for a bigger
battle; the broader, often presentist arguments among Australians over
national self-consciousness versus colonial mentality, over dependency
versus an independent foreign policy, over nationalism versus the
imposed internationalism of an imperial structure. Taken as part of
such far-reaching and crucial debates, Evatt’s personality and politics
seem less important, and the relationships between governments and
societies—in this case between Australia and the United States—take
on a different perspective.

2. Dr. Herbert Vere "Doc" Evatt, invariably called "the Doc" in the rigidly egalitarian
world of Australian politics, was a distinguished lawyer and judge who became minis-
ter for external affairs (later foreign affairs) when the Labor government of Prime Minis-
ter John Curtin took office on 3 October 1940. That government remained in power
throughout the war. Evatt reorganized the Department of External Affairs into a self-
conscious agent of national foreign policy, as Australians began to reject the practice of
dealing with foreign nations through the British Imperial/Commonwealth system. The
development of that sense of nationalism is vigorously described in David Day’s books,
Menzies & Churchill at War (North Ryde, NSW and London, 1986), The Great Betrayal:
Britain, Australia & the Onset of the Pacific War, 1939–42 (North Ryde, NSW and London,
1988), and Reluctant Nation: Australia and the Allied Defeat of Japan, 1942–45 (South
Melbourne, 1992).

3. The historiographical warfare over Evatt’s temperament and career is risky busi-
ness for knowledgeable Australians—and downright dangerous for the uninformed.
Common sense and self-preservation warn against involvement in debates between such
solid scholars as P. G. Edwards, David Day, Roger Bell, Carl Bridge, Paul Hasluck, Wayne
Reynolds, and others, though Evatt’s style and personality make neutrality difficult. A
representative sampling of entries into the debate would begin with P. G. Edwards, “Evatt
and the Americans,” Historical Studies 18 (1979), and “On Assessing H. V. Evatt,” ibid. 21
or Innocent Abroad?” ibid. 22 (1987); Roger J. Bell, Unequal Allies: Australian-American
Relations and the Pacific War (Melbourne, 1977); Carl Bridge, “R. G. Casey, Australia’s
First Washington Legation and the Origins of the Pacific War, 1940–42,” Australian Jour-
nal of Politics and History 28 (1982).