

World War II: British treachery in the Pacific

The 70th anniversary of the bombing of Darwin recalls the little known history of how British imperial strategy betrayed Australia and left it at the mercy of the Japanese, until John Curtin came to power and asserted Australia's national sovereignty by forging an alliance with the United States. Excerpted from *The Rise and Fall of Australia*, as printed in the CEC pamphlet *STOP the British Crown Plot to Crush Australia's Unions*.

The Brisbane Line

The British strategy for World War II in the Pacific was to give Japan all of Southeast Asia, including all of Australia, at least down to the "Brisbane Line." (See Map 1, also *EIR* Special Report, *Britain's Pacific warfare against the United States*, *EIR*, May 12, 1995). Japanese control of this extensive territory and of its raw materials deposits (urgently required by the resource-poor island nation of Japan) would, the British expected, lead to a bloody war in the Pacific between the U.S. and Japan which would last until 1955, with huge casualties on both sides. This strategy was defeated by the heroic collaboration between the Australian nation led by Prime Minister John Curtin, and General Douglas MacArthur, the U.S. commander of the South West Pacific theatre. It was Australia's great fortune to be led during the war by Curtin, a man whose political identity had been forged during the struggle of Jack Lang and his tendency in the Labor Party against Britain's prolonged assault on Australia's sovereignty and development potential.

From the time of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 until the end of World War II, the British maintained an unbroken, sometimes formal, sometimes informal, alliance with Imperial Japan. The alliance had immense strategic ramifications for the United States, as was recognized in the U.S. War Plan Red-Orange for the eventuality of a simultaneous war on two fronts, against the Japanese and against the British. War Plan Red-Orange was on the books up until the verge of World War II.

For Australia, the British strategy put into question the national existence. Leading British permanent civil servant Edwin Montagu acknowledged as much in a cynical comment to Prime Minister Herbert Asquith in 1915: "I would far rather cede Australia to the Japanese than cede to Australia anything the Japanese want."

Ever since 1902, Australians, particularly those suspicious of British intentions, had pointed with alarm to the growing reach of the Japanese fleet. Foremost among these were King O'Malley's two closest parliamentary associates, Dr. William Maloney and J.H. Catts. Said Maloney, "In this decade or the next ... the East [Japan] will most assuredly insist on what she may regard as her rights; and those rights may include the domination, if not the occupation, of the Eastern Hemisphere.



Above: The Brisbane Line. The British intended for the Japanese to copy Australia at least down to this line, as part of their strategy to have the Americans and Japanese exhaust themselves in a 15-year war in the Pacific. In furtherance of this strategy, Churchill induced Menzies to send virtually all of Australia's trained manpower to the Middle East and North Africa.

Right: A plaque commemorating tank traps near Tenterfield, NSW, installed as part of the Brisbane Line strategy.



How stand we then?" Maloney called for a massive defence build-up and a strategic alliance with the United States. In 1908, Prime Minister Alfred Deakin had invited the American "Great White Fleet" on a tour downunder, tweaking the British nose. In 1909, Deakin made "a proposition of the highest international importance" to the British Colonial Office, namely that the American Monroe Doctrine—the prohibition of foreign imperial presence—should be extended to cover the South Pacific.

At the Versailles conference after World War I, to the consternation of the Australians, the British arranged to give the former German possessions in the Pacific, including the Mariana, Caroline, and Marshall Island groups, to the Japanese.

Throughout the 1930s and particularly after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, as the shadows of war grew across the globe, the British constantly assured the Australians that they would be defended, if necessary, by a British fleet dispatched to the great naval base in Singapore,

World War II: British treachery in the Pacific

the anchor of Britain's Pacific empire. Australia could either begin to take measures for her own self-defence, or rely on those British promises. In 1936, John Curtin, as leader of the Labor Opposition, argued that "The dependence of Australia on the competence, let alone the readiness, of British statesmen to send forces to our aid is too dangerous a hazard on which to found Australia's defence policy." What was required, said Curtin, was the build-up of an Australian army, and most importantly, an air force. Naval power would be insufficient in this war; air power would also be needed to keep an enemy from Australia's shores.

The conservative governments of Lyons, Menzies and Fadden, which ruled from 1932 until late 1941, however, accepted British assurances. And after the declaration of war on Sept. 3, 1939, former First Lord of the Admiralty, Prime Minister Winston Churchill repeatedly assured Prime Minister Robert Menzies that a British fleet would be sent to Australia if necessary. Stripping Australia of virtually all its trained manpower, Menzies in 1940-41 sent the Australian 6th, 7th, and 9th divisions to North Africa and the Middle East, soothing the Australian people with British assurances *which both he and Churchill knew to be lies*.

Already in 1919, the former First Sea Lord of Britain, Lord Jellicoe, had rendered a formal judgement that a British fleet would not be sent to Singapore to meet a threat in the Pacific, if there were a simultaneous threat in Europe.

In the 1930s, it was widely acknowledged that it was precisely a conflict in Europe, which would encourage the

Japanese to move in the Pacific.

The indefensibility of Singapore was not merely theoretical. The British Chiefs of Staff had determined in May 1940, with the fall of France imminent, that no British naval force could be sent to East Asia. On June 13, 1940, Secretary of State for Dominions Lord Caldecote sent Menzies a most secret message, stating that Singapore was no longer the second pillar of British defence, and that "It would be most unlikely that we could send adequate reinforcements to the Far East."

Then, in late 1940, a joint conference of Australian, New Zealand and British military representatives in Singapore determined that the defence of this base, *which had no ships and no air cover*, was hopeless. Furthermore, despite intelligence reports of large Japanese troop concentrations in south Indo-China in August 1941, indicating near-term attack, nothing was done to fortify the Malayan peninsula, at the southern most tip of which lies Singapore.

Menzies, who described himself as "British to the bootstraps," was more than willing to accede to British demands for Australian troops. Elements of the British establishment had dangled in front of this vainglorious fool, the possibility he might become Britain's wartime prime minister. At the end of January 1941, he left for a four-month visit to Britain to pursue that fantasy.

Menzies, who had argued that Hitler had "reasonable" goals in Europe, not only disarmed Australia, but had arranged to ship 300,000 tons of scrap iron to raw materials-starved Japan. Many Australians argued that the iron would come back to Australia in the form of bombs, as it indeed did; this episode earned Menzies the nickname, "Pig Iron Bob."

Thus, when John Curtin became Prime Minister in October 1941, Australia had no tanks, no airplanes except for a few Whirraway trainers, no pilots (Menzies had also sent them overseas), and virtually no battle-ready troops to defend the Australian continent.

Curtin against Churchill

On December 7 (Dec. 8, Australian time), Japan wreaked massive destruction on the U.S. Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbour. Churchill exulted that "greater good fortune has rarely happened to the British Empire than this event..."

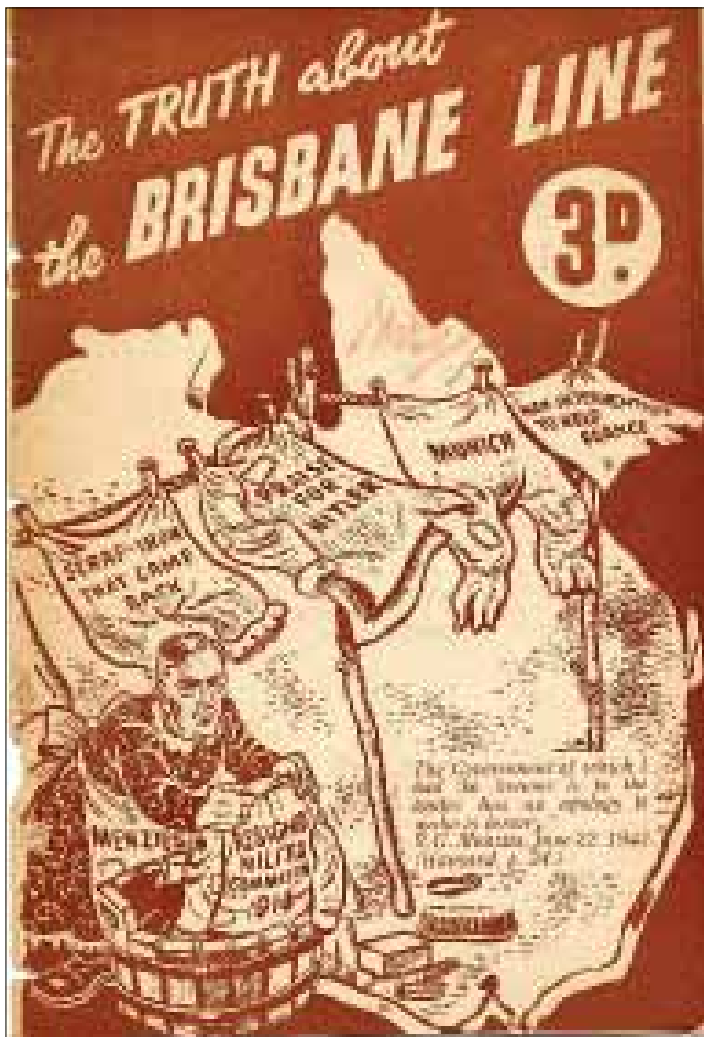
He had shortly before sent two capital ships, the Prince of Wales and the Repulse, to Singapore with no air support, a move the British Admiralty denounced as "a major strategic blunder fraught with the gravest of risks." On December 10, these were sunk by the Japanese off Thailand.

In December, Churchill and his senior defence staff travelled to Washington. There, over Christmas, the joint U.S.-British Commonwealth Basic War Plan, "Rainbow Five," was cemented. It called for a "Germany first" strategy of putting all resources into defeating the Nazis first, and only then turning to the Pacific.

By that time the Japanese had taken Hong Kong, had landed in the oil-rich British colony of Sarawak, had taken the American possessions of Guam and Wake Island, and were besieging General Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines, the fall of which was expected imminently.

On December 27, Prime Minister John Curtin made the following statement to the Melbourne *Herald*:

"I make it clear that Australia looks to America, free from any pangs about our traditional links of friendship to Britain. "We know Britain's problems. We know her constant



A political tract attacking Menzies' Brisbane Line betrayal, when it was exposed.

World War II: British treachery in the Pacific

threat of invasion. We know the dangers of dispersing strength—but we know that Australia can go and Britain still hang on.

“We are determined that Australia shall not go. We shall exert our energy towards shaping a plan, with the United States as its keystone, giving our country confidence and ability to hold out until the tide of battle swings against the enemy.

“We refuse to accept the dictum that the Pacific struggle is a subordinate segment of the general conflict. The Government regards the Pacific struggle as primarily one in which the United States and Australia should have the fullest say in the direction of the fighting plan.” (emphasis added)

Churchill bitterly denounced Curtin. The Australian leader had not only definitively broken with the British, but had broken with the Churchill, as opposed to the Roosevelt, version of the “Germany first” doctrine, under cover of which the British intended to cede all of the Pacific to the Japanese.

The December 1941 U.S.-British defence consultations in Washington had established the South-West Pacific military theatre, commanded by the British General Wavell. Wavell’s area of responsibility excluded Australia and New Zealand. Curtin wired Churchill that the result of the strategy was to offer Australia as a “sacrificial offering” to the Japanese, who were being virtually encouraged to “avoid main allied concentration in South West Pacific Theatre and attack the Australia Area which will be weakly held.” To Churchill’s response that Wavell’s job was to protect Australia as well, Curtin replied that the Australian Chiefs of Staff were “unable to see anything except endangering of our safety by proposal to exclude Australian mainland and territories from South West Pacific Area.”

In January, Curtin started to demand that Churchill return at least some of Australia’s battle-hardened divisions. On February 15, Singapore fell, and 15,384 members of Australia’s Eighth Division, who had been shipped in just days before, were taken prisoner. More than a third of them would die under brutal conditions on the Burma railway or in the Changi prison camp. Churchill blamed the fall of Singapore on the Australians, who, he said, “came of bad stock.” On February 19, the Japanese launched a devastating air strike against the city of Darwin on Australia’s northern coast, inflicting extensive damage to the port and airport, sinking 8 vessels in the harbour, killing 243 people, and causing large-scale panic.

Japanese commander Tomoyuki Yamashita, in reports back to Tokyo, expressed great surprise at the lack of resistance the Japanese encountered early in the war in Southeast Asia, particularly by the British in Malaya. If the British had taken minimal moves to defend the Malayan peninsula, Singapore would not have fallen. Japanese Lieutenant General Fujikawa later described in his book, *F-Kikan*, the conditions the Japanese faced, the very day Singapore fell: “The Japanese were facing an acute shortage of ammunition ... Yamashita was concerned with a dwindling supply of munitions and increasing casualties, and he could not afford to let the negotiations drag on much longer if he was to avert the crisis that his armies were facing ... If the British had come to know



Australian Prime Minister John Curtin with General Douglas MacArthur.

about our shortage of manpower and munitions, and if they had held out for a few more days, they could have defeated the Japanese forces.” The day before Singapore fell, General Yamashita himself had visited the front line to apologise to his troops that they had no ammunition, and to tell them to use their bayonets.

With Singapore gone, the way was clear for the invasion of Australia. Japanese master strategist, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto drew up plans for five Japanese divisions to invade Australia’s southeast, where Sydney, Melbourne, and the capital, Canberra, are located. He intended to prepare for this by seizing the islands north and east of Australia, most crucially, Papua-New Guinea.

Curtin and MacArthur turn the tide

On February 21, with Australia unarmed and General MacArthur stuck on the island of Corregidor (“the Rock”) outside Manila Bay, Prime Minister John Curtin intervened to change the course of the war. General MacArthur recorded the moment in his *Reminiscences* :

“[T]he cabinet in Canberra had requested my immediate assignment to Australia as Commander of the newly formed South-West Pacific Area. When Prime Minister Curtin’s recommendation reached the White House, President Roosevelt personally sent me a message to proceed as soon as possible to Mindanao. There I was to do what I could to buttress the defences, then go on to Australia.”

MacArthur’s biographer William Manchester observed, “[i]t is almost certain that he would have been left to die on the Rock had Australia not intervened.” Curtin, who had been in radio contact with MacArthur in the Philippines, determined that the general should come to Australia.

Curtin thus forced the hand of Churchill, who, desperate to keep Australian troops in North Africa for the battle of El Alamein, agreed that MacArthur would command the South-West Pacific theatre from Australia and acquiesced to Curtin’s demand that the Australian 6th and 7th divisions, for the return home of which he had been fighting Churchill for weeks, come back to Australia. In exchange, the Australian 9th Division could stay in North Africa.

After a harrowing night time escape from Corregidor,

MacArthur landed in Australia on March 17, having sent an aide ahead to assess the combined American and Australian military capabilities on the continent. As he received the report back on the train trip from Alice Springs to Melbourne on March 20, 1942, that there was less than one American division, virtually no planes, and that most of Australia's experienced troops were still abroad, MacArthur said, "God have mercy on us." He said later of the conditions bequeathed to him by Menzies, "It was the greatest shock and surprise of the whole war."

After the fall of Singapore, Churchill, notwithstanding the deal he had struck with Curtin, unilaterally ordered the Australian 6th and 7th divisions, then at sea, to land at Burma instead of Australia. His ostensible purpose was to prevent the fall of Burma to the Japanese, a task that even leading British commanders viewed as hopeless.

When Curtin protested, Churchill snarled, "I am quite sure that if you refuse to allow your troops, which are actually passing [then near Sri Lanka], to stop this gap, and if, in consequence, the above evils, affecting the whole course of the war, follow, a very great effect will be produced upon the President and the Washington circle, on whom you so largely depend."

Curtin stood his ground, whereupon Churchill simply re-deployed the ships toward Burma anyway, and cabled Curtin, on February 22, "We could not contemplate that you would refuse our request, and that of the President of the United States, for the diversion of the leading Australian division to save the situation in Burma ... We therefore decided that the convoy should be temporarily diverted to the northward. The convoy is now too far to the north for some of the ships in it to reach Australia without refuelling."

Curtin cabled back, "We feel a primary obligation to save Australia, not only for itself, but as a base for the development of the war against Japan. In the circumstances it is quite impossible to reverse a decision which we made with the utmost care, and which we have affirmed and reaffirmed."

Faced with Curtin's steadfastness, Churchill had no choice but to send the Australian troops home. But for the following two weeks, as the Australian troop ships were crossing the Indian Ocean without air cover or naval escort, Curtin was racked with nightmares and barely slept. As he told one journalist, "I'm responsible for every life on those ships. If anything like that [his nightmare of torpedoed ships and dying soldiers] happens, it will be because of my decision."

Under the command of Douglas MacArthur, those Australian troops were to fundamentally change the course of the war in the Pacific.

As inadequately armed and supplied as he was, MacArthur decided within weeks of his arrival, to rip up the infamous British plan for "defending" Australia along Lord Kitchener's old "Brisbane Line," ceding everything north of that line to the invader. Instead, MacArthur would meet the Japanese advance in Papua-New Guinea, disrupting their timetable and strategic planning.

Under MacArthur's command and with American logistical backup established at Port Moresby on the southern side of the island, Australian troops carried out some of the toughest fighting of the war in the swamps, and jungles surrounding the barely passable Kokoda Track over the Owen Stanley Mountain range. In May 1942, American ships stopped the Japanese attempt to round the tip of the island and take Port Moresby, in the Battle of the Coral Sea. With the Battle of Midway in June, where the Japanese lost four aircraft carriers, the momentum of the Pacific war began to shift. In ferocious fighting at Milne Bay in August, the Australian 7th Division stopped another Japanese attempt to round the peninsula toward Port Moresby. This was the first time in the war that the Japanese had been defeated on land.

Japanese commanders reported after the war that they had been stunned by the MacArthur-Australian strike into Papua-New Guinea, and that it had disrupted their entire timetable for the war.

John Curtin died suddenly on July 5, 1945, a month before the Japanese surrender. As MacArthur said of him, "He was one of the greatest of wartime statesmen, and the preservation of Australia from invasion will be his immemorial monument."



The infamous Kokoda track going up the Owen Stanley Range.

