

The day that shook Howard's world

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The key to understanding the Prime Minister's extraordinarily intemperate remarks about US presidential hopeful Barack Obama last weekend is to remember that John Howard was in Washington DC on September 11, 2001. He was right at the epicentre of the emotional firestorm that engulfed US politics after the al-Qaeda attacks and that helped forge his relationship with George Bush, the rookie US President, whom he met for the first time the day before.

Howard's Washington visit had been eagerly anticipated and carefully planned. He had not been close to Bush's predecessor, Bill Clinton, and he was looking forward to building a friendship with a political soul mate.

As it turned out, terrorism became the bonding agent for one of the closest political relationships ever experienced between an Australian prime minister and a US president. Trouble is, the war in Iraq has become a huge political liability for Bush, but Howard seems unable to relate to this new reality. His loyalty to Bush as a result of the terrorism attacks is blinding him to the seismic shift that occurred in American politics in November.

On the morning of September 11, after hearing about the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, Howard pulled aside the curtain in his room in the Willard Hotel and saw smoke pouring from the Pentagon, where he had been just the day before. His response was visceral, emotional and stays with him today.

"The shock, the disbelief and the realisation came slowly at first but then with a rush, that this was an event that was going to change the way we lived," he told Tim McDonald, a former diplomat who had earlier served in Washington in a senior capacity. "I couldn't get out of my mind the desperation of the people who were trapped in those buildings and the sense of loss and despair of those families."

McDonald's paper, *Mr Howard Goes to Washington*, delivered to a seminar, John Howard's Decade, in Canberra in March last year, is part of a bigger work on the impact of September 11 on Howard's stewardship of the American alliance.

Howard's immediate response was to write a short personal letter to Bush, and later that night to sit in the visitors' gallery of the House to express his solidarity with US representatives. Upon being noticed by the Speaker, he was the object of extraordinarily warm and grateful greetings. Later, he went over to the Senate, where he was called onto the floor and had emotional encounters with New York senators Hillary Clinton and Charles Schumer.

These events formed the essential emotional backdrop to how Howard had conducted the alliance ever since, and help to explain his utter intransigence on the war in Iraq.

While other original members of the "coalition of the willing" such as Spain and the Netherlands have pulled out, Australia, along with Britain, has "stayed the course". You have to wonder what level of public opposition to the war Howard will tolerate before he is willing to review his position.

Howard has finally been galvanised to action over David Hicks by the high numbers of Australians wanting to see justice done. He said on Thursday he was "quite angry" that it has taken so long for Hicks to come to trial and that he proposed to communicate that anger to the US Vice-President, Dick Cheney, when he visits Australia next week. It has taken a while. But the issue of staying the course on the "war on terrorism" is of a different order.

The day after September 11, Howard pledged an unprecedented degree of fealty to the US when he announced that "Australia will provide all support that might be requested of us by the United States in any action that might be taken". He became the first Australian prime minister to invoke the ANZUS Treaty, a largely symbolic gesture but one that remains the basis of Australia's unwavering commitment to stay with the US in Iraq.

Howard's close relationship with the President has paid off in all sorts of ways: the free trade agreement, enhanced intelligence and a special visa program for 10,500 business and professional Australians to work in the US. But as this week's events have made clear, it is also a superficial, even risky, relationship. Howard's commitment to the US is a personal, partisan one - not the kind of multilayered, apolitical liaison that a robust and resilient alliance requires.

This is the time in the US political cycle when maintaining the alliance should require Australian diplomats to be building relationships with all credible presidential candidates. Instead, the Prime Minister has insulted a US senator and has called into question the anti-terrorist credentials of the entire Democratic Party. Not surprisingly, the former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, Terry McAuliffe, responded: "We don't care what [Howard] says."

Howard should not need reminding that the Democrats now control Congress and as such are the gatekeepers for any trade or other concessions Australia might be seeking.

A number of former diplomats made the point to me this week that Howard's comments will make it that much more difficult for our people in Washington to get access to members of Congress and especially to Democrats.

If Obama becomes president, Australia's standing in Washington will diminish. But even if he fails, he will still be a US senator, a powerful position in American politics, able to block Australian interests in Congress. Australia may not require every US senator to be a friend, but can we afford to start accumulating enemies?

The Howard/Obama exchange might not cause any ripples with the Australian electorate but the diplomatic ramifications are potentially huge.

One former Washington diplomat recalled last week how frosty relations were in 1993 between the newly inaugurated Clinton and the British prime minister John Major who, it had been reported, had given political aid to his mate George Bush snr during his unsuccessful bid for a second term.

Interfering in the political affairs of another country is risky business. Australia could pay a high price for Howard's ineptitude.

The alliance ought, and used to be, a complex and nuanced association, covering many issues and involving many layers of contact. Howard's recasting of it into a partisan, personal relationship is not the way to advance Australia's interests. And, given the blanket publicity Howard's anti-Obama remarks received in the US this week, it could hurt us.

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