

Heavy artillery trained on PM

Michael Fullilove

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Talk about defying the zeitgeist: in the space of a single week, Prime Minister John Howard has queried the link between carbon emissions and climate change (a query he later withdrew), and dissed an American political phenomenon, Senator Barack Obama.

In response to Senator Obama's call for US troops to be withdrawn from Iraq by March 2008, Mr Howard unleashed a barrage. 'If I was running al-Qa'ida in Iraq,' he said, 'I would put a circle around March 2008 and pray, as many times as possible, for a victory not only for Obama but also for the Democrats.' In case the message was not received properly, he gave Obama this verbal slap: 'he's a long way from being president of the United States'.

There is a saying that in diplomacy, words are bullets. However in the context of a charged US presidential campaign, these particular words were more like artillery shells.

It is wise for elected leaders to maintain a civil tone in their comments about sitting and potential heads of state of allied nations. Just as it was ill-advised of Mark Latham to describe President Bush as 'the most dangerous and incompetent president in living memory', it was impolitic of John Howard to suggest that Osama Bin Laden votes Democratic.

We should not exaggerate the damage done by Mr Howard's loose words. Indeed, one of the common criticisms of current Australian foreign policy is that Canberra has been too circumspect in putting contrary views to Washington. Our consistent support for America's war in Iraq entitles us to speak our mind about its conduct.

Nevertheless this contretemps is developing in a troubling way.

Firstly, the tenor of Mr Howard's comments may have undercut Australia's influence with the Democrats. Last year murmurs were heard in Washington that the unprecedented intimacy of the relationship between John Howard and George Bush was rubbing some congressional Democrats up the wrong way. The past forty-eight hours will only have reinforced the perception that the alliance has been politicised and personalised – as will the arrival in Australia next week of Vice-President and *uber*-hawk Dick Cheney. Sure enough, one Democrat described Mr Howard's intervention as 'bizarre' and another said that, given Howard and Bush have been 'lockstep from day one on this war in Iraq... we don't care what he says.'

The problem is, we want Democrats to care what Australian leaders say. Democrats control both houses of Congress, and there is a reasonable chance they will soon occupy the White House too. We need to influence Democratic thinking on many issues, including Sino-US relations, the disposition of US forces in Asia (where we rely on our ally to keep a lid on interstate tensions), and even the marketing of Australian wheat. Mr Howard has adroitly cultivated the current administration, but we need to think about how to retain that influence if President Bush's successor is an anti-war Democrat who has no special feelings about our participation in Iraq and is more interested in renewing ties with disillusioned European allies.

Even more disturbing than Mr Howard's intervention, however, was Obama's deadly response. The senator compared the 1450 personnel Australia has deployed in and near Iraq with America's deployment of roughly one hundred times that number. If Mr Howard wants 'to fight the good fight in Iraq,' said Obama, 'I would suggest that he calls up another 20,000 Australians and sends them to Iraq, otherwise it's just a bunch of empty rhetoric'.

Obama's argument drew blood because it highlighted the gap between the Howard Government's commentary on the importance of the struggle in Iraq and the actual scale of our deployment there. The Bush Administration has been very polite about this mismatch, but it seems that Democrats may not be so charitable.

Australia has a strong claim to being the most reliable US ally, and that is how we like the Americans to see us. There is no doubt that tradition strongly influenced Mr Howard's decision to support the invasion of Iraq.

It is ironic, therefore, that as a result of his intervention we now have a serious candidate for the presidency making light of a dangerous deployment we have undertaken largely for alliance management reasons – and even implying that Australia is not living up to its full responsibilities.

'It's flattering that one of George Bush's allies on the other side of the world started attacking me the day after I announced', Senator Obama said at the weekend. But Australia is not an ally of George Bush: we're an ally of the United States. That is a critical distinction, one that is consistent with both sensible statecraft and Australian public opinion – and one that we should be very careful to maintain.

Michael Fullilove directs the global issues program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.