The Great White Fleet arrives at Sydney 20 August 1908. (US Naval Historical Center)

One man undoubtedly well pleased with the visit's success was Australia's then Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, who had not only initiated the invitation to US President Theodore Roosevelt, but had persisted in the face of resistance from both the British Admiralty and the Foreign Office. By making his initial request directly to American diplomats rather than through imperial authorities Deakin had defied protocol, but he was also taking one of the first steps in asserting Australia's post-colonial independence. His motives for doing so were complex. He was, after all, a strong advocate for the British Empire and Australia's place within it, but he also wished to send a clear message to Whitehall that Australians were unhappy with Britain's apparent strategic neglect.

The security of the nascent Commonwealth might still ultimately depend on the Royal Navy's global reach, but the ships of the small, rarely seen and somewhat obsolescent Imperial Squadron based in Sydney did not inspire confidence. As an officer in the US flagship, observed during the visit: 'These vessels were, with the exception of the Powerful [the British flagship], small and unimportant …Among British Officers this is known as the Society Station and by tacit consent little work is done'.

Equally galling to local opinion, the passage of the unpopular Naval Agreement Act, 1903 had meant that although Australia contributed £200,000 per annum for its upkeep, the Squadron could be withdrawn in times of danger to fulfil imperial priorities. To many commentators this simply represented taxation without representation, but for those looking deeper the implications were rather more disturbing. During even a transitory enemy cruiser raid, Australian commerce might face the choice of being driven into harbour or destroyed, while local ports could readily be threatened and held to ransom.

Feeling both isolated and vulnerable, it was easy for the small Australian population to believe that Britain was ignoring its antipodean responsibilities. The 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance (renewed in 1905), which had allowed the Royal Navy to reduce its Pacific presence, did little to alleviate these fears. Remote from the British Empire's European centre, Australians had no confidence that their interests, and in particular their determination to prevent Asiatic settlement, would be accommodated in imperial foreign policy. Japan's evident desire for territorial expansion, its decisive naval victory over the Russians at Tsushima in 1905, and its natural expectation of equal treatment for its citizens all seemed to reinforce the need for Australia to explore alternative security strategies.

Staunchly Anglophile, Deakin was not necessarily seeking to establish direct defence ties with the United States, but more than a few elements in Australian society were prepared to see in America the obvious replacement for Britain's waning regional power. A new and evidently growing presence in the Pacific, the United States possessed a similar cultural heritage and traditions, and as even Deakin took care to note in his letter of invitation: 'No other Federation in the world possesses so many features [in common with] the United States as does the Commonwealth of Australia'. Attitudes towards Asians, and more particularly hostility towards Japan, seemed likewise to be shared, particularly after a rise in Japanese immigration to the US West coast sparked riots in California and the passing of discriminatory legislation.

President Roosevelt had initiated the deployment of the US Atlantic Fleet to the Pacific — the first such movement of great battleships — to test his Navy's professionalism, arouse popular interest in and enthusiasm for the navy, and demonstrate that the United States had arrived as a world power. Wanting foreign nations to accept that the fleet should from time to time gather in one ocean just as much as it should in another, Roosevelt claimed publicly that the cruise was not directed against Japanese interests. Nevertheless, for most Australians the visit became an unmistakable expression of Anglo-Saxon solidarity; an 'essentially peaceful' mission, but simultaneously 'an armed assertion that the White Race will not surrender its supremacy on any of the world’s seas'. Unsurprisingly, the epithet 'Great White Fleet' only
came into popular usage during the visit to Australia, and referred as much to race as it did to paint schemes.

No British battlefleet, let alone a modern fleet, had ever entered Australasian waters. So with the arrival of the American vessels locals were treated to the greatest display of sea power they had even seen. While the public admired the spectacle’s grandeur, for those interested in defence and naval affairs it was an inspiration. This too was a part of Deakin’s plan, for although he was a firm believer in Australia’s maritime destiny, where defence was concerned national priorities still tended towards the completion of land rather than maritime protection. The Prime Minister’s own scheme for an effective local navy was making slow progress, and like Roosevelt he recognised the need to rouse popular support.

Deakin’s party lost power before his plan could be set fully in motion, but he had laid the groundwork and established many of the essential elements. Most importantly, he had obtained Admiralty agreement to allowing full interchange of personnel between the British and Australian naval services. Without such unfettered access to technology and doctrine a local fleet would most likely become a wartime liability; with it the Australian Navy would achieve major economies in infrastructure and training.

In February 1909 the new Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, placed orders in Britain for three 700-ton destroyers, the first of up to 24 similar vessels which would allow Australia to take responsibility for its own coastal defence. The unsettled nature of local politics always made the completion of this plan unlikely, but in the event it was overtaken by a far more daring scheme. In July, the British First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Fisher, proposed that Australia acquire a ‘Fleet Unit’. Comprising a battlecruiser, several supporting light cruisers, and a local defence flotilla of destroyers and submarines, the ‘Fleet Unit’ represented an ideal force structure; small enough to be manageable by Australia in times of peace, but in war capable of efficient action with the imperial fleet. Moreover, alone it would be strong enough to deter all but the most determined adversary in local waters.

The Director of Commonwealth Naval Forces, Captain William Creswell, had argued for years that the nation’s ‘sea efficiency’ was ‘the first and most urgent call upon responsible authority’. Australia now stood poised both to accept this responsibility and to take an active part in the collective security of the Empire. ‘In my judgement’, Defence Minister Joseph Cook argued before the House, ‘we are in these proposals, beginning, almost for the first time, to realize the promise of Federation … we shall turn over a new leaf in the book of our evolution. Our tutelary stages are past, our time of maturity is here.’

Parliament accepted the proposals and great efforts were thereafter expended to ensure that the navy would be a thoroughly and recognisably Australian force. On 4 October 1913 the first flagship, the battlecruiser HMAS Australia, and her escorts sailed into Sydney Harbour to a welcome no less enthusiastic than that accorded the Great White Fleet five years before. Just ten months later the fleet set out to face the harsh test of a brutal global war and its professionalism was not found wanting. For a newly acquired navy it was a remarkable achievement, and one which owed much to Deakin’s foresight.

In this, the visit of the Great White Fleet played a crucial role, for it necessarily brought broader issues of naval defence to the fore, and made very plain the links between sea power and national development. Americans clearly had a real sense of patriotism and national mission. Having been tested and hardened in a long and bitter civil war they were confident that the United States was predestined to play a great part in the world. Moreover, alone it would be strong enough to deter all but the most determined adversary in local waters.

The Royal Australian Navy