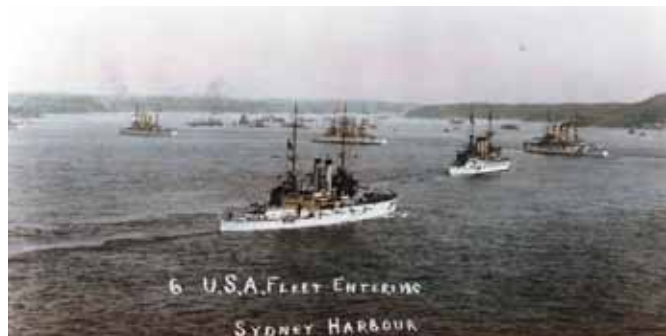


## THE GREAT WHITE FLEET'S 1908 VISIT TO AUSTRALIA

*We live in hopes that from our own shores some day a fleet will go out not unworthy to be compared in quality, if not in numbers, with the magnificent fleet now in Australian waters.*

Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, August 1908<sup>1</sup>

On 20 August 1908 well over half a million Sydneysiders turned out to watch the arrival of the United States (US) Navy's 'Great White Fleet'. For a city population of around 600,000 this was no mean achievement. The largest gathering yet seen in Australia, it far exceeded the numbers that had celebrated the foundation of the Commonwealth just seven years before. Indeed, the warm reception accorded the crews of the 16 white-painted battleships during 'Fleet Week', was generally regarded as the most overwhelming of any of the ports visited during the 14 month and 45,000 mile global circumnavigation. The NSW Government declared two public holidays, business came to a standstill and the unbroken succession of civic events and all pervading carnival spirit encountered in Sydney (followed by Melbourne and Albany) severely tested the endurance of the American sailors. More than a few decided to take their chances and stay behind when the fleet sailed!



*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'.<sup>2</sup> 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'.<sup>3</sup> Attitudes towards Asiatics, 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'.<sup>4</sup> 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 battleship, 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.



*US Navy bluejackets coming ashore at Melbourne  
29 August 1908. (US Naval Historical Center)*

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. Australians, on the other hand, still saw Federation as a novelty and their first allegiance as state-based. One English traveller captured well the prevailing mood. 'Australia', he wrote, 'presents a paradox. There is a breezy buoyant Imperial spirit. But the national spirit, as it is understood elsewhere, is practically non-existent'.<sup>5</sup>

Aiming to foster both national unity and spirit, Deakin (a Victorian not overtly popular in Sydney) used the Great White Fleet's visit to demonstrate the community of feeling between the two nations as well as provide context for his own vision for a recognisably 'Australian' navy, one which he felt must be capable of announcing the nation's entry as a credible player on the world stage:

But for the British Navy there would be no Australia. That does not mean that Australia should sit under the shelter of the British Navy – those who say we should sit still are not worthy of the name Briton. We can add to the Squadron in these seas from our own blood and intelligence something that will launch us on the

beginning of a naval career, and may in time create a force which shall rank amongst the defences of the Empire ...<sup>6</sup>

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'.<sup>7</sup> 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'.<sup>8</sup>

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.

1 Cited in AW Jose, *The Royal Australian Navy*, University of Queensland Press, 1987 (reprint of 1928 edition), p. lviii.

2 Cited in JR Reckner, "A Sea of Troubles" *The Great White Fleet's 1908 War plans for Australia and New Zealand* in D Stevens & J Reeve (eds), *Southern Trident*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 2001, p. 191.

3 Cited in JR Reckner, *Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1988, p. 76.

4 *The Lone Hand*, 1 August 1908, p. 352.

5 J Fraser, *Australia: The Making of a Nation*, Cassell, London, 1911, p. 11.

6 Cited in Jose, *The Royal Australian Navy*, p. lvii.

7 Cited in GL Macandie, *The Genesis of the Royal Australian Navy*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1949, p. 252.

8 Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 24 November 1909, p. 6251.

