

**Blue Poles: A Window into the Diplomatic and Cultural History of the Whitlam
Government**

“It is easy for honourable members opposite to condemn the United States of America, as they frequently do, in one form of words or another. The United States of America has done more than any other country or group of countries in the history of the world has done to maintain democracy by proper methods [...] The world is very disturbed. Anything could happen at any time, and this is a time when we have to stick to our friends and to our convictions. The United States of America is on our side. It is on the side of democracy, decency and right, and the forces of darkness opposed to it are very apparent and very powerful. The world may have a show-down at any time between our form of life and the forces of darkness.”

The Right Honourable Baron Richard Casey KG PC,
Minister for External Affairs, Parliamentary Hansard,
House of Representatives, 8 April 1954: 3rd Session of
the 20th Parliament¹

“There are many people who see something sinister or threatening in the idea of a "new nationalism": some disturbance to our way of life, the overturning of received ideas and settled traditions, the breaking off of old friendships. That is not what we intend the new nationalism to mean. Rather than discard our authentic traditions, we want to restore and invigorate them. Rather than break off old friendships, we want to form new ones. Friendships that will enhance our name and reputation in the world as a good friend, a concerned and helpful partner in our region and beyond. Rather than overturn the true values of Australian society, we want to resurrect and foster those values. The Labor party, the present government, has never had any doubt about what those values were. They were, in truth, identified and proclaimed at Eureka: justice, freedom, independence, fraternity, the instinct for fair play and equal opportunity for all our people. Egalitarianism by whatever name we call it is at the heart of the Australian tradition.”

Speech by the Prime Minister MR E.G Whitlam,
MP at the Unveiling of the Eureka Flag, Ballarat
Fine Art gallery, Ballarat, 3 December 1973²

“They’re maniacs to step-up Hanoi raids.”

*“Labor Blasts US Bombings”,
The Age, December 30, 1972, 1.³*

¹ https://historichansard.net/hofreps/1954/19540408_reps_20_hor3/#debate-28 Last Accessed 25/4/2025.

² <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3092> Last Accessed 25/4/2025.

³ Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

In September 1973, when Gough Whitlam approved the purchase of Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles for \$1.3 million, he was trying to cement Australia's status as a cosmopolitan society finally grown to international maturity without the crutch of great and powerful friends. This act of enlightened cultural bureaucracy was the perfect midwife for a nation that recognised '*it was time*' (paraphrasing Whitlam's 1972 campaign slogan) to renegotiate its subservient relationship with Washington. The nurturing of culture in Australian civic life through exposure to world art, and the pursuit of independent relationships with allies were flip-sides of the same coin. For Whitlam argued that only "nations with a secure and distinctive national identity" could be "forces for peace and cooperation", able to act "with maturity and originality" on the world stage.⁴

As a contribution to the "benign and constructive nationalism" Whitlam was trying to cultivate, the purchase of Blue Poles for the highest price ever paid for American art was bound to be controversial.⁵ The vociferous opponents of this painting, which seemed so devoid of aesthetic merit, were convinced that Whitlam's attempt at cultural sophistication was second-rate and imitative. The scenario was derided for illustrating the vacuum at the centre of national identity. Whereas Whitlam saw Blue Poles as part of the very Western civilisation that had formed Australia's culture, the painting was received by the public as foreign rubbish. Whitlam was pilloried for not being "ruggedly honest and Australian enough"⁶ to reject American consumer culture, epitomized by Pollock flinging paint at canvases for mass-produced-masterpieces, but the advert sections of the same newspapers that publicized this gunnut nationalism were full to bursting with adverts for American consumer goods, entertainment, and even home-scaping. Therefore, there are two paradoxes that this essay tries to make sense of. Firstly, how do we disentangle Whitlam's self-confident foreign policy statements on the alliance and his projection of the "new nationalist" moniker from his belief that American Abstract Expressionist painting was relevant enough to modern Australia to justify such eye-watering expenditure? Secondly, how do we make sense of the performative rejection of "Americanisation", as epitomized by Pollock, when American

⁴ Gough Whitlam, Speech at the Unveiling of the Eureka Flag, Ballarat Fine Art gallery, Ballarat, 3 December 1973, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3092> Last Accessed 25/4/2025.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mr J Warren, "Letter to Editor", *Sun Herald*, 28 September, 1973 quoted in Lindsay Barrett, *The Prime Minister's Christmas Cards* (Power Institute: 2001), 20.

culture continued to occupy an enormous place in public life, informing how the middle-classes formed and communicated their social identity?

Ultimately, the controversy over Blue Poles demonstrates that during the Whitlam era, the growing desire for national self-assertiveness was commensurate with increasing confusion as to what the national culture actually constituted. This schizophrenic dynamic was caused by the confluence of several factors: the burgeoning desire for clearly defined civic identity emerged during the Gorton years, reaching its apogee under Whitlam *at the same time*, and in large part because, America's image as leader of the free world was in crisis. By the late 60s, Australians begun to tire of the idea that 'going all the way' with team America on the geopolitical and cultural crusade against communists abroad, as well as the 5th columns within, was the only way to protect Australian society from subversive forces. However, this crisis also coincided with the unprecedented reach of American culture as the universal language of Western modernity, as well as, for Australia, an unprecedented level of integration with the United States' military strategies. In geopolitics, as in culture, changing attitudes had to confront historical realities of the abiding importance of America.

The relationship between culture and diplomacy is one that tends to have been treated in a more teleological than analytical way in Australian historiography. This stems from an anxiety about accurately dating the arrival of national maturity to Australia. In leftist-nationalist historiography, which saw itself as the source of necessary resistance to Americanisation, a perceived lack of geopolitical independence was blamed on ingrained cultures of dependency on great power protectors, linked to Australia's history as a transplant society languishing far from the British metropole. Thus writers like Stephen Alomes and Gareth Evans have tended to portray American cultural imperialism as a natural extension of Australia's domination within the US alliance, preconditioned by servility to Britain.⁷ However the link between culture and diplomacy must be more complicated than that, if only because foreign policy is, in states like Australia, a professionalized pursuit where culture is but one ingredient in the matrix that informs cabinet briefings, executive decisions to sign treaties, and parliamentary debates to ratify international commitments. Causal relationships

⁷ For examples of this hallowed tradition of Labor "radical nationalism" see Stephen Alomes, *A Nation at Last: The Changing Character of Australian Nationalism, 1788-1988*, (Angus & Robertson, 1988), 171: "Politically, the American Alliance played its usual role for the conservative parties: it helped create a climate of fear"; see also Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s* (Melbourne, 1991), 26.

cannot and should not be forced. What is required is nuanced observation of the way culture and diplomacy *interrelated* in this period, often in distorted and counterintuitive ways.

Accordingly, in the first section, I give an account of diplomacy during the New Nationalism, against which cultural changes can be compared. While Whitlam proudly advertised his more independent foreign policy, even flirting with the ideology of the non-aligned movement, for example with his belief in Australian resource sovereignty, he retained a pragmatic belief that the US shared the same Western civilisational traditions as Australia, and was central to security arrangements. In the second section, I will explore the oddly distorted way in which diplomatic changes resonated in the cultural sphere. The chauvinistic rejection of Blue Poles as foreign rubbish at a time when Australians were increasingly embracing American visions of middle-class existence was paradigmatic of Australia's schizophrenic aspirations of cultural independence in the 1970s. Finally, the controversy over Blue Poles revealed a surprising, albeit modest, shift in conservative thinking about America as Liberal and Country MPs joined the populist press in expressing the view that American culture risked corrupting Australia. This was almost apostatic, given the right-wing view in the 50s and early 60s that to criticize the worthiness of America for global leadership was a socialist act of betrayal in Australia's fight against Asian Communism.

I - An essay in definition, not a declaration of independence⁸

Firstly, despite pretensions to historical agency, the New Nationalism's drive to turn Australia into a cosmopolitan hub that would no longer be "the satellite of any other country" was a reaction to the shrinking of American force projection signalled by détente.⁹ Whitlam, in his own words, "could not change the essential foundations" of Australia's foreign policy: "what has altered is the perception and interpretation of those interests, obligations and

⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs, Policy Planning Paper, "Australia's Relations with the United States," October 1973, A 1838, 250/9/1, part 17, NAA quoted in James Curran, "The Dilemmas of Divergence," *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 2 (2014), 400.

⁹ Gough Whitlam, Speech to National Press Club, Washington, DC, July 30, 1973, Australian Foreign Affairs Record, Vol. 44 (August 1973): 527–30, published in full at <https://whitlamdismissal.com/1973/07/30/whitlam-npc-address-washington.html/> last accessed 25/4/2025.

friendships”.¹⁰ In the gulf between rhetoric and diplomatic reality, diplomatic approaches to the alliance had a surprising amount in common with the hypocritical manner in which the Australian public reached for the safety blanket of American consumer culture even as they roared loudly about the irrelevance of American painters like Pollock. The large historical role of the United States, especially during the height of red-scare fears from the 50s until the mid-60s, could not be wished away overnight, and America continued to loom large in Australian civic culture, as it did in Australian security policy, despite anxious professions of national awakening.

A key result of Washington’s continuing importance was a tendency for outward ambitions of national deliverance to be contradicted by the deferent tone struck in private diplomatic conduct. Thus, during the “*It’s Time*” speech of November 1972, where Whitlam delivered Labor’s election policy platform at the Blacktown Civic Centre, he eviscerated the Liberals for “18 years of bombing, butchering and global blundering” in Vietnam.¹¹ Similarly, in Peking one month after Blue Poles hit headlines, Whitlam declared “Australia is moving in a new direction”. He likened the way both countries sought to “seize the opportunities for greater independence” and praised “China’s support for the principles of respect for the national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states”.¹² This was surely a dig at the US’ war in Vietnam. On the other hand, when push came to shove Whitlam anxiously stepped back in line with Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy. Having annoyed the Americans by advocating the dissolution of SEATO – a move which was central to Labor’s vision of neutral zones in South-East Asia -¹³ Whitlam apologised in a meeting with Secretary of State Will Rogers for taking “potshots” during his Whitehouse visit of July

¹⁰ Gough Whitlam, Opening Address by The Prime Minister, Australian Institute Of Political Science Summer School Canberra, 27 January 1973, published in full at <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-2803>, last accessed 25/4/2025.

¹¹ Gough Whitlam, Election Policy Speech, Blacktown Civic Centre, 13 November 1972 published in full at <https://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1972-gough-whitlam>, last accessed 14/6/2025.

¹² Gough Whitlam, Address at Premier Chou En-Lai’s Banquet at Peking, 31 October 1973, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3059>, last accessed 14/6/2025.

¹³ For Whitlam’s view on zones of peace see Gough Whitlam, Opening Address by The Prime Minister, Australian Institute Of Political Science Summer School Canberra, 27 January 1973. Furthermore, illustrating the way such military commitments impeded Australian foreign policy, Whitlam complained that SEATO was going to perform military exercises in the South China Sea *during* his visit to China: Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 31 July 1973, *FRUS*, 1969-1976 Volume E-12, Documents On East And Southeast Asia, 1973-1976, Document 39.

1973.¹⁴ Similarly, he anxiously highlighted to Nixon that “The international moves you spearheaded have Australia's support ... Australia is not pulling out of Southeast Asia; its air squadron will remain in Malaysia.”¹⁵

Furthermore, Labor bent over backwards on the issue of military installations and use of ports to keep the US committed to Australian security. In a meeting at the start of 1974 between Foreign Minister Lance Barnard, and senior members of the US Department of Defense, Barnard confessed Labor had been “embarrassed” by the lack of notification before military bases at Northwest Cape were put on DEFCON3.¹⁶ Instead of emphasizing how this jangled with his government’s posture on independent foreign policy, he meekly noted that advanced warning would be appreciated because the bases “make a significant contribution to US and Australian security and to world peace. I want to get them accepted by the public and not a subject of debate”. Defence Secretary Schlesinger then admonished that “Australia’s most important national interest is to retain the support of the US”. It is hard not to cringe as Barnard is next browbeaten by Admiral Moorer into conceding his stance on banning visits of US Nuclear Power Warships was “flimsy and technically wrong”.

The greatest thorn in the relationship was surely the Vietnam War. Yet even here, Whitlam’s resistance was based on pragmatic convictions that involvement had hurt US interests, rather than the more purely nationalistic view held by some Labor politicians that to arrive at cultural maturity, Australia needed to untether itself from Washington totally, and that the Vietnam War represented the imperialistic machinations of a foreign culture. Whitlam thus framed criticism of the Vietnam War as helping America to remain the “most generous and idealistic country in the world”.¹⁷ Most tellingly, in 1971, when the Labor party capitalised on the release of the Pentagon Papers to go after the McMahon Government, Whitlam (then

¹⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 31 July 1973, *FRUS*, 1969-1976 Volume E-12, Documents On East And Southeast Asia, 1973-1976, Document 39.

¹⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 30 July 1973, *FRUS*, 1969-1976 Volume E-12, Documents On East And Southeast Asia, Document 38.

¹⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, Deputy Prime Minister Lance Barnard with Defense Secretary Schlesinger Washington, 9 January 1974, *FRUS*, 1969-1976 Volume E-12, Documents On East And Southeast Asia, 1973-1976, Document 45. See also document 35.

¹⁷ Gough Whitlam, Opening Address by The Prime Minister, Australian Institute Of Political Science Summer School Canberra, 27 January 1973, published in full at <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-2803>, last accessed 25/4/2025.

opposition leader) stated: “America is too great a democracy and the American people value too highly the spirit of truthful and free inquiry to condone or continue a war begun and nurtured in deceit”.¹⁸ An extension of time was granted to allow former ALP leader Arthur Calwell to deliver some closing remarks: his reasoning was devastatingly simple, and the contrast highlighted how far Whitlam’s pragmatism was from a wholesale rejection of Washington. Calwell said, “I am not going to pull kids out of bed...to kill or be killed in the interests of American capitalism. I am a socialist and I speak as I feel.”

Thus, we must reject the tradition of Labor historiography which holds that Whitlam awakened the slumbering beast of Australian nationalism to cast off the yoke of subservience which conservative leaders like Menzies had placed around Australia’s neck, by, for example, signing ANZUS in 1951. Whitlam was not, as Gareth Evans has written, “finally shrug[ing] off the assumption that Australia would be endangering its security if it did not accept the role of loyal ally of the United States in this part of the world”.¹⁹ In reality, Labor was doing little more than riding the geopolitical wave initiated by the pronouncement of the Nixon doctrine in 1969.²⁰ In the wake of America winding down its war in Vietnam, even the *Age* could see: “It is no longer enough to frame our policies on Washington’s orders because Washington is seeking new directions which might leave us with no policy at all.”²¹ Having grasped this, it becomes comprehensible how, on the one hand, Whitlam could advocate for “insulat[ing] the region against ideological interference from the great powers” that had “bedevilled its progress for decades,”²² while on the other hand, he could paint a rosy picture

¹⁸ Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 18 August 1971, 2nd Session of the 27th Parliament.

https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1971-08-18/toc_pdf/19710818_reps_27_hor73.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%221970s%20pentagon%20papers%22, last accessed 6/6/2025.

¹⁹ Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, *Australia’s Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s* (Melbourne, 1991), 26.

²⁰ See in particular *The Prime Minister’s Christmas Cards*, 163. Similarly, see Donald Horne, *Time of Hope*, (Angus & Robertson, 1980), 4-7: Horne argues that Whitlamism was a response to its time, and that in some ways, the years before Whitlam was elected were the real “time of critical change”.

²¹ *The Age*, 24 November 1969, Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

²² Gough Whitlam, Opening Address by The Prime Minister, Australian Institute Of Political Science Summer School Canberra, 27 January 1973, published in full at <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-2803>, last accessed 25/4/2025.

of America as “our great ally”,²³ and continue to maintain the largest peace-time armed force in the country’s history at that time.²⁴

In summary, Whitlam capitalized on the seismic changes of détente politics to carve out a more independent space for Australian diplomacy, but close integration with America was still regarded as paramount. That Whitlam saw American culture as an integral part of the shared heritage of Western nations was evidenced in his government’s strident belief that masterpieces like Blue Poles would help Australia know itself. Barry Cohen, who would later become Labor’s Minister for Home affairs and Environment under Hawke, captured this sentiment best when he refuted the “stupid allegations and the half-witted comments” made by Liberal speakers doubting the relevance of Pollock: praising the Council for the Arts for stimulating art appreciation, he declared “I do not want to see them buckle down to the rockers and the bazaar in this community ... do not let us buckle down and become as isolationist and insular as we have been over the past couple of hundred years when this great new initiative has been taken.”²⁵

II – Popular Reactions

The hypocritical but furious rejection of Blue Poles in mainstream Australian discourse demonstrated that Whitlam’s pursuit of an altered relationship with Washington resonated in a distorted way in the cultural sphere. The rhetoric of the New Nationalism clearly struck a deep chord in the Australian psyche, which was reflected in the performative rejection of American Abstract Expressionism as foreign rubbish. However, whilst the mainstream might have shared Whitlam’s emotional commitment to a more independent outlook, this tended to manifest through an aggressive anti-intellectualism which was diametrically opposed to the

²³ Gough Whitlam, Election Campaign Speech by Mr EG Whitlam, MP, Sydney Town Hall, 1 October 1969, published in full by the Museum of Australian Democracy:

<https://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1969-gough-whitlam>, last accessed 25/4/2025. Note the echoes of Menzies’ famous moniker “our great and powerful friends”.

²⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, Deputy Prime Minister Lance Barnard with Defense Secretary Schlesinger Washington, 9 January 1974, *FRUS*, 1969-1976 Volume E-12, Documents On East And Southeast Asia, 1973–1976, Document 45.

²⁵ Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 17 October 1974, 1st Session of the 29th Parliament. https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1974-10-17/toc_pdf/19741017_reps_29_hor91.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%221970s%20Blue%20Poles%22, last accessed 6/6/2025.

cosmopolitan vision Whitlam advocated. The patriotic provincialism of the public was hypocritically undercut by continued reliance on American mass-marketing and consumption, and, ironically, reinforced a continuing lack of imagination about what an independent Australia would look like.

Thus, tabloid press reactions were characterised by the stark contrast between derisive rejections of Blue Poles as a foreign fad, and the underlying embrace of American consumer culture to be found a few pages deeper in the same newspapers. Both conservatives, and old-school working-class Labor made an unholy alliance with the Fairfax press to vituperate Whitlam,²⁶ clamouring that the money should have been spent “retrieving for the public great paintings of our own” instead of “a trend which has no value for Australia other than as a cause of controversy”.²⁷ A common theme was that “What Australia needs is much more... self-reliant judgement of the trends that other countries try to export and impose on us”.²⁸ The well-known connoisseur of fine arts, Paul Hogan, inimitably opined that “Ya gotta be up the pole to go for this [...] me four year old daughter could do better”.²⁹ But driving home after delivering this tirade, Hogan’s radio probably bleated out the words of a top-five Australian billboard hit:

“Long nights crying by the record machine
Dreaming of my Chevy and my old blue jeans”³⁰

Hogan was more likely to be driving an Australian made Holden, or even a Corolla, which Toyota had manufactured in Port Melbourne since the early 1960s.³¹ Even so, Australian visions of modernity wore Levi’s and cruised in Chevrolets. This underscored a broader tendency to rubbish Pollock as an expression of American extravagance that posed a risk of corrupting Australian culture, even as Australians consumed American mass-produced paraphernalia as a key communicator of social identity and membership of the bourgeois middle-class. Roger and Philip Bell have argued that by the 1970s, Australian consumerism

²⁶ Barrett, *The Prime Minister’s Christmas Cards*, 39.

²⁷ *Sun Herald*, 24 September, 1973, Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 April 1974, quoted in Barrett, *The Prime Minister’s Christmas Cards*, 42.

³⁰ “Australian Chart Book,” compiled by David Kent (Australian Music Report, 1973).

³¹ “Corolla Turns 50”, *Toyota Press Release*, 30 September 2016,

<https://pressroom.toyota.com.au/PressRelease?pr-code=8c162cd8-75b8-4268-af80-4e2bfe50ef21#:~:text=From%201968%20until%201999%2C%20more,reliable%20and%20fun%20to%20drive.>

closely modelled itself off that of the US, with department stores in Australia trying to import not just US products, but American ways of shopping.³² Thus, the Herald Sun of 10 October 1973 featured an entire page dedicated to Target advertisements. The franchise had opened in Australia in 1970, unashamedly imitating its unaffiliated American counterpart of the same name, and portrayed itself as the purveyor of the necessities of modern bourgeois life (Figure One).³³ Stephen Alomes has similarly pointed out that classic “Australian” brands of the period, such as Heinz beans, Kellogg cereal, Campbell’s Soups, and Johnson and Johnson pharmaceuticals were American in origin.³⁴ In the same populist papers that argued funding go to Australian painters instead of grubby American art-dealers like Ben Heller, the maligned vendor of Blue Poles, the message shone through that shopping at American-style franchises was a part of the Australian middle-class experience.

As with Whitlam’s attempts to give a new shape to the Australia-US alliance, ambitions for cultural independence outstripped the capacity to rework a history of purposeful alignment with America during the peak of the Cold War. The result was an acute anxiety that there was a void at the heart of Australia’s national culture lurking underneath the self-confident assertions of Australianness. This was reflected in a Herald Sun article on 10 October 1973 titled “chic ‘n cheap”, which argued that the “best dressed” Australian women utilised home-grown imagination, rather than mindless consumption at foreign department stores.³⁵ The article tries to suggest that there is an immutable kernel of Australianness unaffected by American marketing: “The female with true chic is often seen sporting a paper bag at lunch in the city streets. She’s the working girl who ... can make last year’s long scarf into this year’s halter top or turban.” Viewed in the context of the ads in the rest of the paper, it is hard to view this fantasy about the fashionable, “true” Australian girl as anything less than self-consolation. The next few pages of adverts leave the impression that in order to sell anything to Australians, it had to be marketed as American. The most deplorable example is a Coles advert for “American Sim Carnations” for 28c, a competitive price compared to 60c for Australian natives – never mind that carnations are a Mediterranean flower.³⁶

³² Roger and Philip Bell, *Implicated: The United States in America* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 168.

³³ “Target – Tariff Reduced Toys”, *Herald Sun*, 10 October 1973, 14, Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

³⁴ Alomes, *A Nation at Last*, 177.

³⁵ “Chic ‘n cheap”, *Herald Sun*, 10 October 1973, 17, Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

³⁶ *Herald Sun*, 10 October 1973, 31.

The undeniable prominence of American paraphernalia in Australia's civic culture suggests that the furious rejection of Blue Poles was nothing more than the self-assurance of an addicted culture anxiously denying the existence of void which Americana was filling. This tacit acceptance of America was reflected in popular attitudes towards American militarism. At the height of anti-Pollock fervour, when the Yom Kippur War erupted in October 1973, not a single article published in the *Herald Sun*, *Australian*, or the *Age* considered the ramifications of this war for Australia. On the one hand, many editorials called out great powers for playing hard and fast with the interests of smaller nations. The *Age* labelled the UN's failure to peaceably settle the dispute "the blackest mark" in its history, while another leader ran under the title "Big Powers Play False".³⁷ On the other hand, even when it became public knowledge that US installations at North West Cape had been put on DEFCON3, there was not the slightest suggestion in any of these papers that Australia too was a pawn in this very system. Instead, demonstrating the overidentification of Australian geopolitical interest with that of the United States, the technical specs of planes given by the Americans to the Israelis were hashed out in fulsome detail, while readers were treated to blow-by-blow recounts with such titles as "Israelis are feeling vindicated, virtuous and vengeful", and "Arabs fight with new venom".³⁸

Thus, in its choice of targets for criticism, popular nationalism scratched the itch to be self-assertive, but tacitly continued its provincial outlook. The extravagance of Whitlam's highbrow cosmopolitanism provided a scape-goat for the fear that Australian culture was atrophying amidst the ubiquitous presence of Americana. But you would be hard-pressed to find articles that summoned similar rhetorical energy to satirize the enormous degree of foreign ownership of Australian industries. If Hogan thought that "Gough's a goose" for being taken in by American gimmicks, then he had forgotten the forthright manner in which, during his Blacktown policy speech, Whitlam had railed against the fact that "Australia's industries and resources are under foreign control".³⁹ At the same time Blue Poles was purchased, Labor was engaged in a protracted Parliamentary fight for Australian resource

³⁷ "Blackest mark for the UN", *The Age* 10 October 1973, 9 and "Big Powers Play False", *The Age* 11 October 1973, 4 Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

³⁸ *The Age* 10 October 1973.

³⁹ Gough Whitlam, Election Policy Speech, Blacktown Civic Centre, 13 November 1972 published in full at <https://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1972-gough-whitlam>, last accessed 14/6/2025.

sovereignty, attempting to legislate an Australian Petroleum and Minerals Authority to weed out foreign ownership by assisting local companies with financing and exploring.⁴⁰ In March 1973, at the annual dinner of the Australian Mining Industry Council, Whitlam had launched a verbal rocket at foreign owners: “we do not regard the rape of our resources as inevitable, and we certainly do not intend to lie back and enjoy it.”⁴¹

Blue Poles was thus a cosmetic distraction from national issues of substance. In weaponizing patriotic language to attack Blue Poles – language that was ostensibly at home within Whitlam’s New Nationalism – detractors were really confirming a commitment to Australia’s civic culture remaining narrowly anti-intellectual. This philistinism confirmed that the Australian mainstream lagged behind Whitlam’s passionate belief that we were a cosmopolitan country on the same level of cultural sophistication as the US. In their fixation on Blue Poles as a rallying cry for demanding investment in Australian painting, people ironically imitated the American-style search for a Boston Tea Party which had always been alien to Australian culture. Whitlam had warned of this when he stated that Australian nationalism did not have the “civil convulsions and upheavals that provide for older civilisations a focus for nationalist fervour”, and rejected the idea that “true nationhood must spring from the agony and suffering endured by former generations”.⁴² In the final analysis, in this period of New Nationalism, culture seemed to loosely follow geopolitics in becoming self-conscious of the need to assert a more independent outlook. However, whereas Whitlam’s diplomacy was characterised by a more moderate cosmopolitanism, the cultural view formed of America was characterised by panic and aggression that led the Australian mainstream into hypocritical disavowals of American cultural imperialism.

⁴⁰ David Lee, *The Second Rush: Mining and the Transformation of Australia* (Connor Court Publishing, 2016), 234–38.

⁴¹ Gough Whitlam, “Minerals And The Future” Speech To The Annual Dinner Of The Australian Mining Industry Council, Lakeside Hotel, Canberra, 19 March 1973. Published at <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-2854>, last accessed 14/6/2025.

⁴² Gough Whitlam, Speech at the Unveiling of the Eureka Flag, Ballarat Fine Art gallery, Ballarat, 3 December 1973, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3092> Last Accessed 25/4/2025.

Page 14 - The Herald, Wed., Oct. 10, 1973

This week at **TARGET** Discount Department Stores

TARGET Discount Department Stores

TARIFF REDUCED TOYS

IMPORTED TOYS NOW SAVE YOU \$\$'s.

Assorted "Horn" action trucks
Strong metal construction with motor, gears, wheels, and rolling stock. Target is nearly tariff topped against these kinds of plastic. Makes a great gift for boys of all ages.
\$1.99 EACH

Battery operated 6 pc train set
Durable, long lasting, locomotive and tender. Set includes 6 pieces of rolling stock. Target is nearly tariff topped against these kinds of plastic. Makes a great gift for boys of all ages.
\$3.99 EACH

Men's & boys' joggers
Popular hot ball rice-pot shoes, white, tan, or green. Irregular sizes. Made with these modern materials.
\$2.99 EACH PAIR

Men's & boys' gym boots
Featuring a "PUM" sole. Available in sizes 6-11 & Youth 5-11. Fully guaranteed. Available in white, tan, or blue.
\$2.50 EACH PAIR

Battery wall clock
Famous "Mums" brand. Large plastic face. Fully guaranteed. Available in white, tan, or blue.
\$9.99 EACH

Assorted plastic strip curtains
Keeps out insects but lets in cool breeze. For apartment or 2, 4, 6, 8 doorway, only.
\$1.39 EACH

Black & Decker 1/4" drill 1200
Famous B & D quality drill drives all B & D attachments. Fully guaranteed.
\$16.99 EACH

Target Quality Paint
at the best value in town
Interior • Plastic • Gloss
No "smell". "Tasteful" as you know it's the best. Can be mixed to many colors. Value!
\$3.99 GAL

Kodak 565 instant camera
Takes pictures from 4' onwards. Loads, winds, and takes flash pictures too.
\$11.75 EACH

Kodak 155 instant camera
Takes pictures from 4' onwards. Loads, winds, and takes flash pictures too. Shutter speeds. By Kodak so you know it's good.
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Also 24 and 36 exp. 1/125 to 1/5000 shutter speed.
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Hardgoods available: Glen Waverley, Camberwell, Albury, Shepparton, Warrambool, Colac, Mt. Gambier.

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Figure 1: "Target – Tariff Reduced Toys", Herald Sun, 10 October 1973, 14, Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

III – The New Right

Finally, the often-contradictory struggle to articulate the place of America in Australia's public life during the 70s was symptomatic of a relatively rapid decline in America's global prestige over the preceding decade. Nowhere was this confusion more apparent than in the struggle of Australian conservatives to concoct a persuasive brand of patriotic sentiment now that it was no longer viable to suggest that being pro-American was one and the same thing as loyalty to Australia. As the debate over Blue Poles would show, conservatives cautiously started to adopt a gumnut nationalism that framed Americanisation as a foreign deluge of moral corruption to be resisted. While they lacked the anglophile snobbishness about America that characterised the early Menzies years, they did revive limited aspects of this cultural critique which had gone dormant during the height of the Cold War.

At its peak, during the late 50s and up until the start of the Gorton government, the New Right, as Richard White terms it, viewed drinking the American kool-aid on forward defence in Vietnam as the price of freedom. While in the 40s, and in opposition to John Curtin's look to America, they may have professed British cultural allegiance, they now formed the view that, without wholeheartedly embracing America, Australian civilization would be defenceless against the onslaught of yellow communism. In 1954, for example Casey argued in the House of Representatives that supporting US policy in Asia was necessary to protect Australia from the "forces of darkness".⁴³ In a heated exchange over censorship of a letter in the *Canberra Times*, Whitlam and Calwell were admonished to think about their children's future for venturing that newspapers should be permitted to publish the view that not every Vietnamese nationalist was a communist bent on dominating the free world.⁴⁴ The Member for Henty noted that "there is only one struggle in the world. That is the struggle between the free democracies and the Communists."

The embrace of America reached its zenith in 1966, when Holt borrowed the campaign slogan, "all the way with LBJ". This was reflected in the the fawning praise lavished by Australian critics on American Abstract Expressionism in 1967, when the first exhibitions of Pollock, Warhol, Reinhardt and others visited Australia. One commentator in *The Age*, after viewing "Two Decades of American Painting" at the National Gallery of Victoria, gushed: "These are the greatest modern paintings we've seen since the war ... It is quite odd to come out of the exhibition and realise how different Australian art is in its premises. And how much there is to learn from the American experience."⁴⁵ In its originality and energy, American Modern Art was seen as a model for Australia's own development. Critics thus ignored Abstract Expressionism's roots as a countercultural expression of the meaningless of modern life. In the way it was celebrated as a symbol of the success of American civic culture and freedoms, Abstract Expressionism turned into a weapon of the Cold War.⁴⁶ While Australian critics waxed lyrical about how the "centre of vanguard art had shifted

⁴³ Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 8 April 1954, 3rd Session of the 20th Parliament, 245 https://historichansard.net/hofreps/1954/19540408_reps_20_hor3/#debate-28 Last Accessed 25/4/2025.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Patrick McCaughey, 'Great American moderns', *The Age*, 10 June 1967, 24, Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria. See also; Daniel Thomas, 'Australia's most important exhibition', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July 1967, AGNSW archive.

⁴⁶ Eva Cockroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War", *Art Forum*, 12, no. 10 (1974).

dramatically from Paris to New York”,⁴⁷ the Holt government was still at the height of its Cold War powers. On 28 November 1966, two days after Australians had decisively re-elected Holt, and off the back of a roaringly successful visit by President Johnson, Holt attacked Labor for “living in the past” in its opposition to the Vietnam war.⁴⁸ Similarly, the *Age* of 5 June 1967 – 5 days before the gushing review of “Two Decades” hit the press – reminisced about the “expansive mateyness” of Holt’s American visit with LBJ.⁴⁹ Later that year, Holt would commission North West Cape for US Naval Communications, having already signed away Pine Gap in 1966 as one of his government’s first acts after re-election.

The scepticism towards Abstract Expressionism when Blue Poles erupted into headlines in 1973 therefore reflected the fact that the souring of the Vietnam war had brought an end to the honeymoon with America as an exemplar of social and cultural development for Australia. Gushing praise was replaced by condemnation of Blue Poles as the “sycophantic embrace of American cultural imperialism”.⁵⁰ This was consistent with the general battering suffered by American global leadership. In 1971, Nixon had introduced wage controls to deal with an economy increasingly in decay, effectively signing the death warrant of the Bretton-Woods system and the stranglehold of the US dollar. The dropping of 20, 000 tonnes of ordinance on Vietnamese civilians during the Christmas bombings of 1972 had triggered Australian trade unions to announce a “black ban” on US shipping.⁵¹ Finally, the moral failings of the US had already exploded into global consciousness when Daniel Ellsberg had leaked the *Pentagon Papers* in the middle of 1971.

In response to these seismic shifts, even the conservatives who had used their pro-American credentials as a political battering ram against Labor in the preceding decade now begun to express intolerance of American culture. A close reading of Parliamentary Hansard reveals

⁴⁷ Patrick McCaughey, ‘Great American moderns’, *The Age*, 10 June 1967, 24, Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

⁴⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 28 November 1966, Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

⁴⁹ “Holt Puts Case for UK Presence”, *The Age*, 5 June 1967, 2, Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

⁵⁰ Brian Medlin, in the Contemporary Art Society of South Australia, quoted in Barrett, *The Prime Minister’s Christmas Cards*, 103.

⁵¹ “Labor Blasts US Bombings”, *The Age*, December 30, 1972, Herald and Weekly Times Newspapers Reading Room, State Library of Victoria.

that conservative MPs vehemently derided Blue Poles as typical of American ‘levelling down’, and portrayed it as part of a deluge of American excesses, and immorality threatening the core of Australian society. They had certainly evolved from their stance of going “all-the-way with LBJ”, and their belief that “to be anti-American is suicidal”, as another of Holt’s campaign slogans declared.⁵² Over one sitting-year, Blue Poles became a topic of debate in the House of Representatives on no less than 37 sitting days. Conservatives critiqued this grandiose gesture as a comical mismatch for Australian identity, and repeatedly invoked fears of foreign trash corrupting Australia. For example, during a budgetary debate in the House of Representatives about an Appropriation Bill, Blue Poles was labelled “rubbish that has been purchased overseas”, and the rumour was circulated that paint was already “flaking” – a symbol of its worthless status.⁵³ It was an attempt to “present some avant-garde image to the world”, and this sort of socially irresponsible behaviour was going to create “the greatest lot of bludgers and bums” in Australia’s history.⁵⁴ The Liberal Member for Deakin, launched a Jeremiad against Whitlam’s extravagance: “The expenditure of \$1.25 million on the painting Blue Poles” is compounded by “the expenditure of \$100000 to Jermaine Greer to make a film on sex”.⁵⁵ Pollock was implausibly the gateway for wasting money on a “week of socialist propaganda in Canberra for the women of Australia”.⁵⁶ The member for Farrer was dismayed to note that “we get support nowadays ... for unproductive matters – for the purchase of the painting “Blue Poles” and for teaching people how to throw boomerangs.”⁵⁷ And of course

⁵² Barret, *The Prime Minister’s Christmas Cards*, 60.

⁵³ Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 28 August 1975, 1st Session of the 29th Parliament, 757.

https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1975-0828/toc_pdf/19750828_reps_29_hor96.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%221970s%20Blue%20Poles%22, last accessed 6/6/2025.

⁵⁴ Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 2 September 1974, 1st Session of the 29th Parliament, 1163.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 9 September 1974, 1st Session of the 29th Parliament, 2121. https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1974-10-02/toc_pdf/19741002_reps_29_hor90.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22down%20the%20drain%22, last accessed 6/6/2025.

⁵⁷ Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 25 September 1974, 1st Session of the 29th Parliament, 1836. https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1974-09-25/toc_pdf/19740925_reps_29_hor90.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%221970s%20Blue%20Poles%22, last accessed 6/6/2025.

came the constant refrain of conservative MPs asking why Whitlam wouldn't use the money for patriotic purposes like funding Australian artists, fighting weevil infestations of Australian wheat, or "stick it in superphosphates".⁵⁸ MPs brought up the rumour to be found in papers that Pollock had painted Blue Poles in a drunken, suicidal frenzy, barefoot and bleeding over the canvas littered with smashed glass.⁵⁹ Further, they connected Blue Poles and Americanisation with the way the film industry in Australia was starting to portray sex, drugs and crime.⁶⁰ Gripes with Whitlam's stance on indigenous welfare, openness to feminist and socialist filmmaking, and unemployment benefits were thus implausibly linked in conservative diatribes to a pattern of "un-Australian" behaviour. The cosmopolitan outlook on Australian identity that Whitlam advocated had clearly not penetrated into the national psyche. But it is noteworthy that even his detractors felt the need to couch their criticisms in terms of what was most authentic to "Australian" identity. Rhetoric about floods of American, morally corrupting rubbish were strangely reminiscent of what Roger and Philip Bell call Menzies' attempt to "hold the line against the... superficiality and moral decadence conservatives identified as American".⁶¹ More surprisingly, these were the exact metaphors that had been used by left-leaning Australianists like Vance Palmer after WWI, when Hollywood, jazz and Ford first entered Australia: Palmer decried the "steady stream of cheap American fiction."⁶² In the 50s, the communist activist Rupert Lockwood had similarly attacked American comics, noting that "some of the breeding grounds of American crime...are imported in an ever-increasing flood...the whole Australian way of life is at stake".⁶³ That such parallels can be drawn is testament to the profound reshaping of conservative attitudes towards America in the 1970s.

⁵⁸ Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 14 November 1973, 1st Session of the 28th Parliament, 3363. https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1973-11-14/toc_pdf/19731114_reps_28_hor86.pdf, last accessed 6/6/2025.

⁵⁹ Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 4 December 1973, 1st Session of the 28th Parliament, 4182. https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1973-12-04/toc_pdf/19731204_reps_28_hor87.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%221970s%20Blue%20Poles%22, last accessed 6/6/2025.

⁶⁰ Parliamentary Hansard, House of Representatives, 20 November 1974, 1st Session of the 29th Parliament, 3796. https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1974-11-20/toc_pdf/19741120_reps_29_hor92.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22important%20that%20the%20Australian%20film%20industry%20should%20develop%20its%20own%20character%22, last accessed 6/6/2025.

⁶¹ Bell, *Implicated*, 157.

⁶² Vance Palmer. 'Literary America'. *Bulletin*. 1 March 1923 quoted in Richard White, "Combatting Cultural Aggression: Australian Opposition to Americanisation" *MEANJIN* 39, No. 3 (1980): 275-289, 278.

⁶³ Rupert Lockwood, *America Invades Australia* (Sydney, 1954), 8, 15, 93. (Purchased second hand from Abe Books).

Richard White, writing in the early 80s, argues that Cold War anticommunism “got the better of” the “old strand of Anglophile opposition to Americanisation”, and “a certain pernicious American influence became acceptable as ‘the price of freedom’”.⁶⁴ The Australian journalist and writer, Norman Bartlett, thus formed the view that American investment “made the good life possible” in the lucky country - opposition to Americanisation was now portrayed as “the politically motivated anti-Americanism of the extreme left”.⁶⁵ This thesis cannot be fully correct. Whilst it seems like an accurate description of the fanatical attitudes displayed towards LBJ’s visit in 1966, with papers waxing lyrical about the folksy, popular attitude of the Texan President, White understates the extent to which, by the 1970s, even the New Right were deeply concerned by a perceived threat of Americanisation distorting Australian values. In 1973, conservatives did not gush praise of American Abstract Expressionism as papers had done in 1967 - cultural ambivalence towards America did not become more and more suppressed as White suggests. In fact, over this period, and in keeping with the geopolitical embarrassment suffered by America, conservative discourse highlighted the corrupting influence of that culture.

⁶⁴ Richard White, “Combatting Cultural Aggression: Australian Opposition to Americanisation” *MEANJIN* 39, No. 3 (1980): 275-289, 284.

⁶⁵ Norman Bartlett, *Australia and America Through 200 Years, 1776-1976* (Sydney, 1976), 245 - 246.

In the final analysis, Blue Poles provides a window into the cultural malaise underlying the self-confident nationalism so central to the Whitlam era. Undoubtedly, Australia *did* change how it saw itself and was seen on the world stage. When Malcom Fraser visited Washington in 1976, the President was briefed that “the more independent attitude of the Whitlam government was popular in Australia, and Fraser will continue it.”⁶⁶ However, the attempt to formulate a more recognisably Australian civic culture, and give shape to this in the US-Australia alliance, was a process characterised by contradictions and profound anxieties about whether this was all filigree. Furthermore, changes were more reactive to external events than the rhetoric of the New Nationalism would have us believe. Firstly, stripping away the grand mythologization of Labor’s struggle to free Australia from the thrall of Great Powers, Whitlamism was a limited reaction against the view that had dominated in the 50s and mid 60s that American tutelage was the price of freedom. In translating this to diplomatic reality, it was inevitable that contradictions would emerge between rhetorical ambitions, and the realities of continuing American dominance as the foremost military force in the Pacific. Secondly, in popular culture, the profound anxiety about America, and the doggedly nationalist stance taken against Blue Poles as foreign trash were contradicted by an underlying dependence on American cultural production and consumer items to communicate social identity, especially in the middle-classes who shopped at American-style department stores, decorated the gardens of their California-style bungalows with American carnations, and depended on American film, toys, and visions of what middle-class prosperity should look like.⁶⁷ Finally, it appears that, in order to keep in touch with popular attitudes, the New Right revived aspects of an older cultural critique of Americanisation which had gone out of fashion during the height of the Cold War. The suggestion that the New Right in the 70s echoed earlier periods of anxiety about America, such as Menzies’ anglophile disdain, and even the left-leaning Australianism of 1920s literary figures like Vance Palmer is one that remains unexplored in the historiography. This survey of conservative reactions to Blue Poles is a modest start to answering a question that will surely enrich our understanding of the US-Australia alliance.

⁶⁶ Memorandum, Scowcroft to the President, “Meeting with Australian Prime Minister J. Malcolm Fraser,” July 27, 1976, National Security Archive, Presidential Briefing for VIP Visits, Folder 7/27/76, GFL quoted in James Curran, “The Dilemmas of Divergence,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 2 (2014), 407. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26376562>.

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