

National Security

No 'G'day, mate': On call with Australian prime minister, Trump badgers and brags

By **Greg Miller** and **Philip Rucker** February 1 at 8:49 PM

It should have been one of the most congenial calls for the new commander in chief — a conversation with the leader of Australia, one of America's staunchest allies, at the end of a triumphant week.

Instead, President Trump blasted Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull over a refugee agreement and boasted about the magnitude of his electoral college win, according to senior U.S. officials briefed on the Saturday exchange. Then, 25 minutes into what was expected to be an hour-long call, Trump abruptly ended it.

At one point Trump informed Turnbull that he had spoken with four other world leaders that day — including Russian President Vladimir Putin — and that “This was the worst call by far.”

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Trump's behavior suggests that he is capable of subjecting world leaders, including close allies, to a version of the vitriol he frequently employs against political adversaries and news organizations in speeches and [on Twitter](#).

“This is the worst deal ever,” Trump fumed as Turnbull attempted to confirm that the United States would honor its pledge to take in 1,250 refugees from an Australian detention center. Trump, who one day earlier had signed an executive order temporarily barring the admissions of refugees, complained that he was “going to get killed” politically and accused Australia of seeking to export the “next Boston bombers.”

U.S. officials said that Trump has behaved similarly in conversations with leaders of other countries, including Mexico. But his treatment of Turnbull was particularly striking because of the tight bond

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between the United States and Australia — countries that share intelligence, support one another diplomatically and have fought together in wars including in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The characterizations provide insight into Trump's temperament and approach to the diplomatic requirements of his job as the nation's chief executive, a role in which he continues to employ both the uncompromising negotiating tactics he honed as a real estate developer and the bombastic style he exhibited as a reality television personality.

The depictions of Trump's calls are also at odds with sanitized White House accounts. The official read-out of his conversation with Turnbull, for example, said that the two had "emphasized the enduring strength and closeness of the U.S.-Australia relationship that is critical for peace, stability, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region and globally."

A White House spokesman declined to comment. A senior administration official acknowledged that the conversation with Turnbull had been hostile and charged, but emphasized that most of Trump's calls with foreign leaders — including the heads of Japan, Germany, France and Russia — have been both productive and pleasant.

Trump also vented anger and touted his political accomplishments in a tense conversation with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, officials said. The two have sparred for months over Trump's vow to force Mexico to pay for construction of a border wall between the two countries, a conflict that prompted Peña Nieto to cancel a planned meeting with Trump.

Even in conversations marred by hostile exchanges, Trump manages to work in references to his election accomplishments. U.S. officials said that he used his calls with both Turnbull and Peña Nieto to mention his election win or the size of the crowd at his inauguration.

One official said that it may be Trump's way of "speaking about the mandate he has and why he has the backing for decisions he makes." But Trump is also notoriously thin-skinned and has used platforms including social-media accounts, meetings with lawmakers and even a speech at CIA headquarters to depict his victory as an achievement of historic proportions, rather than a narrow outcome in which his opponent, Hillary Clinton, won the popular vote.

The friction with Turnbull reflected Trump's anger over being bound by an agreement reached by the Obama administration to accept refugees from Australian detention sites even while Trump was issuing an executive order suspending such arrivals from elsewhere in the world.

The issue centers on a population of roughly 2,500 people who have sought asylum in Australia but were diverted to facilities off that country's coast at Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. Deplorable conditions at those sites prompted intervention from the United Nations and a pledge from
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Many of the refugees came from Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Somalia, countries now listed in Trump's order temporarily barring their citizens entry to the United States. A special provision in the Trump order allows for exceptions to honor "a preexisting international agreement," a line that was inserted to cover the Australia deal.

But U.S. officials said that Trump continued to fume about the arrangement even after signing the order in a ceremony at the Pentagon.

"I don't want these people," Trump said. He repeatedly misstated the number of refugees called for in the agreement as 2,000 rather than 1,250, and told Turnbull that it was "my intention" to honor the agreement, a phrase designed to leave the U.S. president wiggle room to back out of the deal in the future, according to a senior U.S. official.

Turnbull told Trump that to honor the agreement, the United States would not have to accept all of the refugees but only to allow them each through the normal vetting procedures. At that, Trump vowed to subject each refugee to "extreme vetting," the senior U.S. official said.

Trump was also skeptical because he did not see a specific advantage the United States would gain by honoring the deal, officials said.

Trump's position appears to reflect the transactional view he takes of relationships, even when it comes to diplomatic ties with long-standing allies. Australia has sent troops to fight alongside U.S. forces for decades and maintains close cooperation with Washington on trade and economic issues.

Australia is seen as such a trusted ally that it is one of only four countries that the United States includes in the "Five Eyes" arrangement for cooperation on espionage matters. Members share extensively what their intelligence services gather and generally refrain from spying on one another.

There also is a significant amount of tourism between the two countries.


Trump made the call to Turnbull about 5 p.m. Saturday from his desk in the Oval Office, where he was joined by chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon, national security adviser Michael Flynn and White House press secretary Sean Spicer.

At one point, Turnbull suggested that the two leaders move on from their impasse over refugees to discuss the conflict in Syria and other pressing foreign issues. But Trump demurred and ended the call, making it far shorter than his conversations with Shinzo Abe of Japan, Angela Merkel of Germany, François Hollande of France or Putin.

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“These conversations are conducted candidly, frankly, privately,” Turnbull said at a news conference

Thursday in Australia. “If you see reports of them, I’m not going to add to them.”

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