



## Best we avoid taking sides

**T**HE timing couldn't have been more instructive. The trail from US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta's specially reinforced jet had barely cleared our skies before news broke of yet another Kiwi errand on behalf of the United States gone awry: Our spies were caught out illegally snooping on a Kiwi resident in connection with a possible US extradition effort.

It's not only the specifics of the Dotcom case that should make us wary, but also the pattern of which it's a part: a pattern of promises that getting tangled up in America's business is really nothing to worry about.

Back when the Government Communications Security Bureau spy agency and its networks were being forced into public view, primarily by Nicky Hager in his 1996 book *Secret Power*, we were told — as we always are — that no, it wouldn't spy on New Zealanders and yes, it would be kept under strict oversight.

When we went into post-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan, we were told — as we so often are — that we were there to keep the peace and help with reconstruction.

It was another Hager book, last year's *Other People's Wars*, that disabused us of those notions. Again and again, as Hager meticulously documents, our

### “Wouldn't a cold war with China make more sense?”

troops and hardware were put at the service of the American war effort, often without the knowledge or approval of New Zealand's civilian leadership. It's a sobering read.

Enter Leon Panetta, with talk of fighting and bleeding together, of partnership and friendship, of our ships visiting their ports again and perhaps having some soldiers here if we want them. After all, Australia just got some — a couple of hundred troops have already arrived in Darwin, with more than 2000 yet to come. It's part of what *The New York Times* described as a shift in the American military's long-term focus “toward the Pacific and an increasingly assertive China”.

“Assertive” is the word that gets used just before “aggressive”, which precedes “belligerent”.

By the time you get to “defiant”, as Saddam Hussein found out, the warships are already massing and it's time to run for the bomb shelter.

Think about it for a moment. How long can a war against roving bands of “militants” and “terrorists” in impoverished under-developed countries be used to justify the kind of military spending the United States indulges in? (According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, America spent

more than \$850 billion in New Zealand dollars on defence last year, or about four times our annual GDP.)

Wouldn't a cold war with China make more sense? At least it's an adversary that's closer to the league in which America plays, although despite China having increased its own military budget, it's still a distant second to the US. (SIPRI puts China's military spending last year at around \$175 billion.)

Perhaps the ratcheted up US rhetoric about China is just election-campaign heat, but you never know with the Americans.

China, of course, has noticed what's going on, as English language reports of the Panetta visit show. *The Listener's* Toby Manhire pointed online readers to a *China Daily* article that made specific note of the Pentagon's efforts to shower attention on the Pacific.

And the Pacific, unlike Iraq or Afghanistan, is our neck of the woods. China is an important trading partner, a neighbour with whom more and more New Zealanders are linked by family ties. The best thing we could do is exercise some of that independent foreign policy we bang on about and keep well clear of America's military build-up.

As Leon Panetta himself said while he was here — albeit in the context of China's territorial dispute with Japan: it's best not to take sides, and to avoid engaging in “the kind of provocative acts that could result in conflict or violence”.

Good advice.