

# The limping lion, 1945–55

## Introduction: a tale of two narratives

Britain's involvement in the Second World War, which its political leaders had tried so hard to avert, gave rise to two sharply contrasting narratives. The first presented the successful struggle against evil dictators as a new and uniquely glorious instalment of a continuous story, depicting Britain as a great power which was also essentially a peace-loving nation whose considerable weight had always been cast on the side of justice, regardless of the odds and the material cost. The second – whether or not it included an exalted view of Britain's previous foreign policy role – argued that on this occasion the material cost had been unsustainable for a nation with realistic prospects of being regarded as a great power in future. Underlying these sharply contrasting perspectives were two different analyses of a nation's strength. On the first view, this is chiefly a reflection of spiritual attributes which can only be appreciated when sorely tested; for specially favoured nations, adversity cannot quench this spirit but rather confirms and even augments it. On the second interpretation, a nation's reputation for choosing the right course rather than the expedient one, and the qualities of its citizens, are certainly relevant considerations; but they can never compensate for a paucity of more tangible resources. From this vantage point, while Britain might have gained considerable moral credit from its isolated defiance of Nazi Germany and its allies, the inescapable fact was that the conflict had accelerated an economic decline which had been apparent to acute observers since the late nineteenth century, cruelly exposing its pretensions to great-power status.

Winston Churchill was the laureate of the first narrative. His evocation of British spirit came naturally to a politician whose personality exemplified (and even exceeded) this ideal. In a more cynical age it is possible to question whether

his magnificent oratory made much difference to those who were actually fighting. Publicly, at least, Churchill downplayed his contribution, saying as he approached retirement in November 1954 that:

I have never accepted what many people have kindly said, namely that I inspired the nation. It was the nation and the race dwelling around the globe that had the lion heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar.

(quoted in Gilbert, 1988, 1075)

It is, though, instructive that Churchill's best-remembered leonine effusions took place in the first half of the war, encompassing the near-calamity of Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and the fall of France. After Britain's first significant victory, in the battle of El Alamein (October–November 1942), Churchill hailed an event which was not the end, or even the beginning of the end, but perhaps the end of the beginning of the war. In this speech, delivered in front of an adoring audience at London's Mansion House, he went on to proclaim that:

We have not entered this war for profit or expansion. Let, me, however, make this clear: we mean to hold our own. I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire.

Churchill was right in stressing that El Alamein was not even the beginning of the end of the war; but it was certainly the beginning of the end of his great wartime oratory. Churchill's 'roars' in the period between November 1942 and the unconditional German surrender of May 1945 are far less celebrated today; whether or not they were necessary for national survival when things were going badly, his phrases, however vivid, found a less ecstatic reception after the tide of war had turned. Churchill, in short, was a great leader in adversity; his attractions were less obvious when people began to think about a return to 'normality'. Once the war was over, Churchill's 'luck' ran out; he turned the 'lion's roar' against the Labour Party in the 1945 general election campaign, but his attempt to associate his former coalition colleagues with the Nazi Gestapo in the public mind was a predictable failure.

## Labour in office

In theory, Labour's landslide victory of 1945 brought to office a party whose vision of Britain's destiny could hardly have been more different from Churchill's. In practice, though, despite all the changes which were enforced by the circumstances of the immediate post-war period, there was a remarkable degree of continuity. This elite foreign policy 'consensus' can best be described as an

attempt to reconcile the competing narratives outlined above: Britain had indeed suffered serious damage during its heroic fight against the dictators, but it would soon recover thanks to the dauntless spirit of its citizens. In a debate of May 1947 Labour's Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin gave perfect expression to this new consensus approach shared by front-bench politicians on both sides of the House, when he declared that:

His Majesty's Government do not accept the view . . . that we have ceased to be a Great Power, or the contention that we have ceased to play that role. We regard ourselves as one of the Powers most vital to the peace of the world and we still have our historic part to play. The very fact that we have fought so hard for liberty, and paid such a price, warrants our retaining such a position; and indeed it places a duty upon us to continue to retain it. I am not aware of any suggestion, seriously advanced, that by a sudden stroke of fate, as it were, we have overnight ceased to be a Great Power.

*(Hansard, House of Commons Debates,  
16 May 1947, Vol. 437, col. 1965)*

### **Timeline of domestic political developments**

- 1945 Landslide Labour victory in general election; Clement Attlee becomes Prime Minister
- 1949 Enforced devaluation of sterling from \$4.03 to \$2.80 (30 per cent)
- 1950 General election: Labour holds on, with overall majority of just five
- 1951 General election: Conservatives under Churchill win an overall majority of 16 (though Labour won more votes)

For those who doubted Bevin's optimistic 'spin' on Britain's post-war situation, the giveaway phrase here would have been 'sudden stroke of fate'. The 'alternative' narrative suggested that, far from ceasing to be a great power 'overnight', in 1945, the country had been slipping against its international rivals for decades, since before the First World War. In presenting the upbeat narrative so starkly, Bevin was inviting those who questioned it to advance their own argument in full or to keep quiet. In the circumstances of 1947, so soon after a struggle which had cost their country so much, it is understandable that the overwhelming majority of potential critics chose to remain silent. After all, such an analysis ran the risk of looking unpatriotic and even defeatist, and it was unwise to discount the possibility that a genuine 'sudden stroke of fate' might turn up to make Bevin's optimistic view seem well founded.

## The economic cost

Despite the political rhetoric, however, the reality was that while the First World War marked a serious setback to a country which was already beginning to lag behind its major competitors, the second global conflict brought Britain to the verge of bankruptcy. In order to maintain the struggle it had liquidated more than half of its overseas assets. Despite this sacrifice, it was left with debts of around £3 billion; its creditors included not just countries like Canada and South Africa, which had been self-governing for many years, but imperial possessions such as India. In August 1945, abruptly and without consultation, the US ended the 'lend-lease' agreement which had been crucial in maintaining Britain's military contribution to the war in Europe.

In the following year a loan agreement was negotiated between Britain, the US and Canada. The interest on repayments (2 per cent) was reasonably generous – though not excessively altruistic, since Britain's understandable focus on war production since 1939 had left its established overseas markets exposed to North American penetration, so that to an extent it was bailed out by the profits which it had been forced to forego. More controversially, the terms of the loan also stipulated that sterling should be freely convertible into dollars within a year. When convertibility duly occurred, in July 1947, international holders of sterling were quick to take advantage; the ensuing dash to convert pounds into dollars forced the British government to suspend convertibility within a few weeks. In 1949, after considerable resistance, the government bowed to the inevitable and the pound was devalued against the dollar, from \$4.03 to \$2.80. While politicians who accepted the Churchillian narrative saw this decision as a massive blow to national prestige, the drastic devaluation began to take the pressure off an economy which had been switched from war production to an 'export or die' basis in order to preserve the value of sterling. The wartime system which subjected domestic consumption to rationing was actually tightened for some items after the war and only came to an end in 1954.

To some critics – notably, Correlli Barnett – Britain's post-war plight was accentuated by a failure to equip the country for future economic challenges. This verdict is ironic, given that the 1945 election manifesto of the victorious Labour Party was entitled *Let Us Face the Future*. The manifesto did foreshadow a much more dynamic and interventionist economic role for the state; and, of course, Labour fulfilled its promise to take 'the commanding heights' of the economy into public ownership. However, as if to signal the limits of its interventionist ambitions – or, more likely, to underline the scarcity of resources – in office after 1945 the Labour Party seemed to assume that the remaining private sector of the economy would revive of its own accord, rather than stepping in with the kind of support and direction which proved so successful

in other Western European countries, like France and West Germany. Before the war even the government of free-market America had devoted significant sums to research and development; Britain's corresponding effort had been puny in comparison, and this remained the case after the war (Barnett, 1986, 266–7).

### Case Study 4.1 Projecting Britain

In 1851 the Great Exhibition held in London had been (among other things) a lavish demonstration of Britain's industrial prowess. To mark the centenary, a Festival of Britain was held, showcasing British achievements, particularly in architecture, design and the arts. Although the main site was on the South Bank of the River Thames, events were held in numerous British cities. The Festival was thus an attempt to reaffirm the wartime feeling of national unity as well as to show the world that Britain was a forward-looking nation which was still capable of creativity.

Winston Churchill rather sourly criticised the event as a festival of 'socialism', although (like so many developments under the 1945–51 Labour governments) the idea had originated when Churchill's own wartime coalition was in office. Churchill had fewer reservations about another opportunity to project a favourable image of Britain – the coronation of Elizabeth II, on 2 June 1953. Typically, Churchill was against broadcasting the event live on television, but his Head of State overruled him (and the Archbishop of Canterbury, who disliked the idea that the ceremony would be watched in pubs). If the objectors had prevailed, an estimated 277 million people across the world would have been deprived of a spectacle which easily eclipsed the Festival of Britain as a means of conveying a positive image. In particular, although the Queen was unable to emulate Victoria as Empress of India, she seemed more than happy with her role as Head of the Commonwealth. Britain's aptitude for ceremonial pomp, which had once been just one facet of its great-power status, was beginning to be regarded as a tolerable substitute for it. Richard Dimbleby, for example, who provided the solemn television commentary, opined that overseas visitors 'were envious of everything they saw, and none more so than the Americans – a race of such vitality but so lacking in tradition'. From this condescending perspective, it was convenient that the coronation was held as Britain's costly contribution to the Korean War – undertaken to appease the 'envious' Americans – was coming to an end (Hennessy, 2006, 242–3, 271, 245).

## Churchill's concentric circles

At the 1948 Conservative Party conference Churchill (then Leader of the Opposition) laid out his vision of Britain's future role as a power which enjoyed a unique place 'at the very point of junction' between three 'co-existent' circles – the Commonwealth and Empire, the English-speaking world and 'United Europe'. According to Churchill, if the three circles were linked together 'there is no force or combination which could overthrow them or even challenge them'. Britain was ideally placed to facilitate the crucial coupling:

If we rise to the occasion in the years that are to come it may be found that once again we hold the key to opening a safe and happy future to humanity, and will gain for ourselves gratitude and fame.

(Churchill, 1950, 417–18)

Churchill's circles have rightly attracted much comment in discussions of Britain's post-war foreign policy, and, for the purposes of this chapter, they provide a convenient basis for analysis. However, at the outset it is worth considering Churchill's implicit evaluation of Britain's situation in 1948. For someone who had been accounted a Realist in his approach to international politics before the Second World War, it was striking that Churchill should allude (even in a speech to a partisan audience) to the prospect of 'a safe and happy future' for the human race. As we have seen (Chapter 1), it is far more characteristic of Realists to invoke a nation's independent strength as the best guarantor of 'safety'. While membership of the three circles could indeed make Britain a powerful international actor, on Churchill's presentation this would derive from various combinations, rather than Britain's independent strength. Indeed, if Britain's global influence were to rest on its ability to act as a facilitator or catalyst rather than as a state capable of independent initiative – what would later be called soft power – in theory it could gain 'gratitude and fame' even if it decided to dispense with its own armed forces. In any event, although 'gratitude and fame' were very meaningful to Churchill himself, he could not be sure that they would be regarded by his fellow Britons as sufficiently tangible rewards in future.

## The Empire: a saga of selective retreat

In the brief period between 1945 – Churchill's year of international triumph and domestic disaster – and his 1948 speech there already had been several crucial developments which affected Britain's position in the first two circles. In those years Britain also faced challenges which related to wider commitments. While Britain had been awarded League of Nations 'mandates' after the First World

War, Churchill accepted a more informal allocation of 'spheres of influence' in a meeting with Stalin in October 1944. As a result, the British took on the primary responsibility for Greece, whose occupation by Germany and its allies between 1941 and 1944 had ended in a power vacuum which communist insurgents were eager to fill. The Soviet Union, however, held aloof from the struggle, and the revolt was suppressed. In a 1946 election boycotted by the communists, right-wing parties won a comfortable overall majority, and a subsequent referendum approved the return of the exiled pro-British King. However, the British could no longer afford their military presence in Greece or the assistance they were giving to Turkey. The burden in both cases was swiftly assumed by the US.

Humiliating as it was for a nation which had recently acted as one of the 'Big Three' powers, helping to oversee the settlement of a second global conflict, the withdrawal from Greece was soon overshadowed by a setback with even more disturbing implications. In Palestine Britain reaped the indigestible crops which Balfour had cultivated through his ill-advised promise of a Middle Eastern homeland for the Jewish people. As we have seen, Balfour's Declaration (1917) was promulgated despite the near certainty of conflict between incoming Jewish settlers and Arabs who were living in Palestine. By 1945 it looked as if Palestine might become the source of serious contention between Britain and another of the 'Big Three', the US. Britain had sponsored the formation in 1945 of the Arab League, whose members were naturally hostile to the idea of a Jewish homeland. The US, by contrast, had no official role in Palestine, and (despite its obvious material interests in the Middle East) it lacked Britain's reasons for sensitivity to Arab opinion. As a result, US politicians were far more susceptible to the arguments of Zionist lobbyists who sought greatly accelerated Jewish migration to the area. In Palestine itself Jewish militants began a campaign of terror in the hope of driving out the British. In February 1947, as non-essential British personnel were being evacuated from Palestine, the Labour government decided to refer the issue to the newly formed UN. At the UN both the Americans and the Soviet Union supported a plan to partition Palestine, despite British warnings that it would not ask its troops to impose this. Subsequently, Britain announced that its mandate would be terminated in May 1948. The withdrawal was followed, predictably, by a sanguinary conflict between the Jews and a coalition of Arab nations. For the British, the only surprising thing was the outcome – a resounding defeat for the Arab forces, leading to the establishment of the state of Israel and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs. During the conflict several British planes on reconnaissance missions were shot down by the Zionists.

These unmistakable signs that Britain was intent on cutting its global responsibilities to suit its reduced resources were matched by developments within the Empire. In February 1947 – when the government passed the problem of Palestine to the UN – a new Viceroy of India was appointed. The plan was that Lord Louis Mountbatten would preside over an orderly handover of power,

scheduled for June 1948. However, during the war the Indian desire for self-government had been augmented to a point where the British position could not be sustained without savage repression. In addition, Mountbatten quickly decided that the preferred solution, of an independent India which retained its unity in a federal structure, was unworkable. Partition along religious lines, he deemed, was inevitable; furthermore, amid growing inter-communal violence, the timetable for British withdrawal would have to be accelerated, to August 1947.

Up to a million people died and more than 14 million were displaced in the genocidal butchery which attended the birth of independent India and Pakistan. Yet from the response of the British press (and, by all accounts, of most members of the public), this abrupt excision of 'The Jewel in the Crown' was something which their country had always been hoping to arrange at an early opportunity. Had India been prised from Britain's grasp by any hostile power, the very same politicians would have lined up to swear unyielding resistance to India's removal from British rule. As it was, the veneer of voluntarism allowed them to indulge in an orgy of self-congratulation when the Indian Independence Bill was debated in the summer of 1947. The loss of a single portion of the British Empire was transformed into a gain of two new members of the British Commonwealth. Thanks to Britain's wise guidance, India and Pakistan knew all about the benefits of freedom, democracy and justice; and if they did not take advantage of these lessons, it would be their own fault. This view had been sketched out by Stanley Baldwin as he approached retirement in 1937, when (in defiance of the facts) he claimed that the British Empire could provide 'spiritual leadership' in a benighted world because it was animated by democratic ideals and held together by a belief in 'the free development of the individual' (Baldwin, 1937, 120, 160, 164). It was given eloquent expression in the House of Lords by Lord Templewood, who as Secretary of State for India from 1931 to 1935 had overseen the introduction of limited self-government to India:

The two new Governments [of India and Pakistan are] pioneers of a great experiment in Asia. They are pioneers also of a great experiment in the British Commonwealth of free peoples. We, to-day, an ancient and historic people, hand to them well-tried political principles – freedom of speech, toleration of minorities, government by discussion. And, greater even than those political principles and institutions, the two invaluable gifts of peace and justice. Let them take those two treasures which we have ensured over more than a century. Let them maintain them in their own country, and let them help to spread them over the whole world. It is peace and justice that the world chiefly needs to-day. Let the two new Governments of India take their share in spreading the fruits of these gifts from one end of the world to the other.

*(Hansard, House of Lords Debates,  
16 July 1947, Vol. 150, col. 825)*



Independence for Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) came in February 1948, just a few weeks after the same status was awarded to Burma (which declined membership of the Commonwealth). In Malaya, by contrast, the British chose to resist nationalist forces, partly because these were ostensibly communist in inspiration but also because the islands were of considerable strategic value and produced vital dollar-earning exports (notably, rubber). The High Commissioner, Gerald Templar, spoke of the need to base a successful campaign on winning 'hearts and minds'. In practice, though, the British strategy was more about lives and limbs, with forced resettlement programmes and the visitation of 'collective punishment' on villages which were suspected of collaborating with insurgents (Curtis, 2003, 340–2). Singapore, which was not included within the Malayan Federation, was another important source of raw materials; in addition, the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in February 1942 (a month after Malaya had suffered the same fate) had been a crushing blow to British prestige, so the preferred option in this case was a period of restored rule leading gradually to self-government and Commonwealth membership (1958).

Britain's old imperialist logic would have suggested that a retreat from the Far East rendered its presence in the Middle East redundant, allowing it to cut its losses in the area once it had abandoned its mandate in Palestine. However, vast oil reserves had made the Middle East crucially important in itself. In particular, while the Suez Canal had once been prized because it furnished a relatively speedy 'Passage to India', by 1950 Britain's partial ownership of the canal had become arguably the country's most valuable overseas asset. Certainly, British politicians could not contemplate the prospect of the canal falling under the control of a hostile power, which would have the potential to choke off its oil supplies. Unfortunately, there was every chance that Egypt itself would become a hostile power of considerable significance, not least because of resentment against British troops stationed in the canal zone in accordance with a treaty which had been signed (in very different circumstances) back in 1936, but also because Egypt had ambitions to take on a leadership role in the Middle East. In October 1954 Britain (with Churchill restored as Prime Minister) struck a deal under which it agreed to withdraw from the canal base within 20 months; in return, among other things, Egypt promised to uphold the principle of free navigation through the canal itself. Dissident Conservatives alarmed by the implications of Britain's weak negotiating position had already formed a small but determined 'Suez Group' to resist future concessions to Arab nationalism.

In North Africa Britain had taken over the administration of former Italian possessions – notably, Libya. However, this was never intended to be more than a temporary measure, and although Britain encouraged the formation of a separate emirate in the eastern coastal region of Cyrenaica, this was absorbed back into Libya when the latter became an independent kingdom in 1951. Britain's Empire in other parts of Africa remained substantially intact in the decade after the war, but there were abundant signs of impending change. The general rule

was for the countries with the fewest European settlers to progress fastest on the road to self-government. The Gold Coast, which became independent Ghana in 1957, had a black prime minister (in all but name) as early as 1951. In 1954 neighbouring Nigeria was given a new, decentralised constitution, which the British presented as a kind of trial run for full self-governing status (Brendon, 2008, 535).

By contrast, the adoption of democratic procedures seemed implausible (even outrageous) in countries where self-government would take power out of the hands of a substantial British-born minority. Even if one accepts the ‘official’ British view that it had been preparing Asians to ‘take up the white man’s burden’ for many years prior to independence, in its Empire in Africa it is indisputable that the ‘preparation’ had been of brief duration or non-existent. For many future leaders of independence movements, the British had only offered ‘training’ for future responsible roles in the form of frequent prison sentences, like those bestowed on Gandhi and Nehru in India. Discrimination on racial grounds was particularly flagrant in Kenya, where the situation bore more than a passing resemblance to that of South Africa after 1948, when that country adopted a system of apartheid, which translated the European assumption of racial superiority into law. It was unlikely that apartheid offended the sensibility of the average Briton in the late 1940s – or, indeed, for many decades afterwards – but if the moral arguments on behalf of a continuing connection between Britain and its former colonies were to withstand even cursory scrutiny, it was difficult to see how the Commonwealth could accommodate any country which practised apartheid. In Kenya the emergence of a ferocious ‘liberation’ movement known as Mau Mau was met by an equally brutal response from the British, so that ‘by the mid-1950s it was an open secret that Kenya had become a police state that dispensed racist terror’ (Brendon, 2008, 560). In the post-war climate repression of this kind could not continue indefinitely; and although the Mau Mau uprising was eventually quelled, even by 1955 it was only a matter of time before Kenya was given its independence.

While South Africa remained a Commonwealth member (which it did until 1961), the poisonous effects of its apartheid system continued to hamper British attempts to salvage something lasting and positive from its imperialist project on ‘the Dark Continent’. Thus in 1953 the British established a Central African Federation, which yoked Nyasaland (now Malawi) with Northern and Southern Rhodesia (now Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively). Optimists saw this as a potential test bed for racial cooperation, in an area with considerable potential for economic development. Yet Southern Rhodesia, which was always likely to be the dominant partner within the Federation, was dominated by a minuscule European minority, including some who were attracted rather than repulsed by the South African system. The Federation might have had a future of sorts had it been instituted between the wars; but in the new atmosphere after 1945 the only surprise was that it took a few years to die.

While the Central African Federation was probably the best example of an imperial development which might have worked if British imperialists had been sufficiently enlightened at the most propitious time, in hindsight other initiatives between 1945 and 1955 create the irresistible impression of desperate attempts to derive economic benefits from Africa before the British agreed to an inevitable and enforced departure. In 1946, for example, the Labour government decided to back a scheme to cultivate groundnuts, as a source of vegetable oil, in Tanganyika – part of what had formerly been German East Africa and was later to become independent Tanzania. Despite heavy expenditure, the scheme suffered numerous foreseeable setbacks and was abandoned in 1951, having no positive results to set against the considerable environmental damage it had caused.

Although Britain's disengagement from its Empire gathered pace after 1955, the impetus was already present by that year, so this is an appropriate place to evaluate its effect on domestic opinion. As in any disorientating development, there was a natural desire among Britain's leaders to furnish a rationale which bolstered their own self-image, as well as promising to mollify the misgivings of voters who might wonder why their country had divested itself of overseas possessions so rapidly after what Churchill had acclaimed as 'its finest hour'. Since the Second World War had demanded so much sacrifice from so many, voters proved receptive to the idea of *national* self-denial – that if Britain was taking measures which flatly contradicted what had previously been proclaimed as its manifest destiny, this was attributable to a punctilious sense of duty, in keeping with the tenor of Bevin's speech quoted above.

The success of this moral rationalisation of Britain's imperial retreat effectively neutered the arguments of those (like the Conservative 'Suez Group') who protested either that it was all happening too quickly, or that it should not have happened at all. In its 1955 manifesto the Conservative Party promised that '[w]e shall work to raise living standards and to guide Colonial peoples along the road to self-government within the framework of the Commonwealth and Empire'. Labour's document devoted just two paragraphs to the subject, inviting voters to applaud the role played by the 1945–51 governments in working 'to transform the British Empire into a Commonwealth of free and equal peoples'. Former Prime Minister Clement Attlee was lauded as 'the man who freed India', as if he had liberated that country, without significant bloodshed, from the grasp of some merciless (and unnamed) tyranny. Labour was clearly hoping for some electoral benefit from its proud record, and its stress on racial equality and the need for further Commonwealth development suggested that it did indeed recognise a continuing obligation which the Conservatives were less keen to advertise. Nevertheless, the overall impression is that the two main parties regarded this as an issue on which consensus had been established to a degree which removed it from electoral contention. They were not far apart in their attitudes

towards the Cold War, but they obviously regarded that subject as a much more promising source of electoral dividends.

## Britain and the Cold War

At Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, on 5 March 1946 former Prime Minister Winston Churchill delivered a speech which is often cited as the opening salvo of a conflict which was to last more than 40 years – the Cold War. He was introduced to his audience by Harry Truman, the US President, who had been happy to accompany him on the journey to Missouri. Truman and his officials had approved the text of the speech, including a phrase which Churchill had tried out before – ‘From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent’.

Connoisseurs of political rhetoric who concentrate on the immortal ‘iron curtain’ phrase to the exclusion of the rest of the speech will overlook a riotous display of verbal dexterity. For one thing, Churchill was hoping to beguile his US audience into a much more positive view of British imperialism. Thus he referred to ‘the liberties enjoyed by individual citizens throughout the British Empire’, as if all citizens under British rule enjoyed equal rights. Of course, in terms of racial equality, ‘The Land of the Free’ had very little to boast about either, as Churchill knew very well, so he could feel safe from criticism on that score. He also included a tribute to the Soviet contribution to victory in the Second World War, accepting (in true Realist style) that Stalin had good reason to seek a buffer zone against Germany on the western frontiers of the USSR. Yet he also referred to the ‘expansive and proselytising tendencies’ of the USSR and claimed that although the Soviets did not seek a renewal of conflict, they wanted ‘the fruits of war and the indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines’. There could be a peaceful settlement of emerging differences, but Britain and its allies must avoid appeasement at all costs and could only hope for a satisfactory deal if they negotiated from a position of strength.

It was no surprise that Stalin reacted strongly against the speech. For his part, Truman instantly regretted his apparent endorsement of Churchill’s uncompromising rhetoric, which was denounced by senior Democrat Senators as well as respected press commentators in the US. In Britain, however, Attlee and Bevin refused to second the criticisms of left-wing Labour backbenchers, and their muted response betrayed their substantial agreement with Churchill’s sentiments.

As an outspoken opponent of ‘Bolshevism’ since its first manifestations, Churchill could be accused of trying to turn a dispute between states into an ideological crusade. However, he had dealt with Stalin quite amicably during the war – not least in 1944, when he and the Soviet leader rapidly reached agreement over spheres of influence. In fact, while Churchill’s position was

partly derived from his distaste for Communism, it chiefly reflected the Realist fear of Russia which had been prevalent among British policy makers long before his birth. The best explanation of his view can be found in his 1947 account of what he claimed had been a dream. The somnolent Churchill was visited by his late father, Lord Randolph, who posed a series of pertinent questions. When asked if Russia was still dangerous, Churchill replied that 'we are all very worried about her'. Lord Randolph followed up by inquiring whether there was still a tsar, and Churchill said that there was, 'but he is not a Romanoff. It's another family. He is much more powerful, and much more despotic' (Gilbert, 1988, 371).

Attlee and Bevin had good reason to welcome Churchill's 'iron curtain' intervention, since their main objective was to coax the US into a lasting commitment to Western European security without openly contradicting their claim in the 1945 general election campaign that a left-wing British government would be better placed than the Conservatives to reach an accommodation with the Soviet Union. In fact, as believers in the non-violent, Parliamentary road to what they called 'socialism', in 1946 Attlee and Bevin were actually more concerned than Churchill about Soviet proselytisation, which might inspire revolutionary thoughts among the British working classes. By mentioning, without overstressing, his own ideological opposition to the Stalinist brand of communism, Churchill had injected into the American consciousness the feeling that freedom was under threat, while allowing Attlee and Bevin to distance themselves from any negative domestic fallout from the Fulton speech.

Apart from the danger of Soviet-inspired ideological infiltration of their own party, the Labour government also had good evidence by 1946 that Stalin had embraced the strategic ambitions of his tsarist predecessors. As Churchill noted in the Fulton speech, both Turkey and Iran were targets for Soviet intervention; the old Russian ambition to make waves in the Mediterranean seemed to have been reactivated; India might fall under direct Soviet influence; and, according to some Foreign Office alarmists, the collapse of Britain's position in the Middle East might open the road for Stalinist expansion in Africa. As Sellar and Yeatman might have put it, Soviet Russia was pointing in more than one 'wrong direction': it still threatened to expand its influence eastwards but was now a potential threat to Western Europe. While the fate of Britain's African empire might previously have seemed a matter of indifference to US policy makers, by an exquisite coincidence Churchill's Fulton speech – which could easily be read as a warning to American anti-imperialists that the British Empire could be replaced by something even less benign – was delivered less than a fortnight after the despatch of a telegram written by the American diplomat George Kennan. This document argued that the Soviets would be eager to exploit the 'vacuum' left when European states abandoned colonial possessions which were populated by 'backward or dependent peoples' (Kennan, 1946).

If in March 1946 US opinion was still divided over the best attitude to take towards the Soviet Union, in the next few months the situation began to change. Not unexpectedly, Germany was the focus of contention. After that country's capitulation it had been divided into three zones of occupation, for the US, USSR and Britain (which later created a fourth area for France from within its own zone). The Soviets, seeking reparations for the economic devastation wrought by the Third Reich, requested payments drawn from the British and American zones, which included Germany's most productive industrial areas. In May 1946 the US halted reparations payments from its zone, and in January 1947 the British and American zones were merged. The transatlantic allies agreed on the need to establish a reunified, Western-oriented Germany; the Soviets, for understandable reasons, balked at this prospect and wanted to ensure that the restored Germany would be a friendly power. These incompatible visions of Germany's future made for sterile discussions at the Council of Foreign Ministers, which had been established to coordinate the occupation of Germany. When the Council's meeting in late 1947 ended without agreement, the Western powers effectively accepted the partition of Germany and set about making their respective zones into a federal state, though it was not until 1949 that the separate states of West and East Germany officially came into existence.

In the meantime other key features of the Cold War landscape were becoming discernible. In March 1947, prompted mainly by Britain's inability to sustain the struggle against communism in Greece, President Truman felt able to supersede his ambiguous response to Churchill's Fulton speech and pledged his support for 'free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities and by outside pressures'. It was impossible to mistake the implied source of these 'outside pressures'. Taken literally, the Truman Doctrine meant that the old, isolationist American outlook had been exchanged for an interventionist approach framed around ideological conflict with the Soviet Union. However, the doctrine was clearly based on a presumption that, in countries which were not yet under Communist control, the majority of the population consisted of freedom lovers who would welcome 'outside pressure' – so long as it emanated from America. Since Western Europe (including Britain itself) was struggling to recover economically from the devastation of war, and communist parties were attracting considerable support in countries like Italy and France, something tangible was needed to reinforce the ideological case for freedom.

Thus, on 5 June 1947, the US Secretary of State George Marshall announced that if European countries could collaborate on a plan for economic reconstruction, the American government would provide the necessary financial support. Marshall's speech was a rare and brilliant manifestation of enlightened self-interest. Whether or not it was explicitly designed to put Stalin on the spot and dare him to draw a dividing line between 'free peoples' and countries which were fated to remain, for the indefinite future, behind an Iron Curtain of totalitarianism,

it certainly had that effect. In July 1947 a meeting was held in Paris to which all major European states (with the exception of Franco's Spain) were invited to send representatives. As expected, the Soviet Union was unable to accept the terms on which the financial aid had been offered and refused to attend; its East European 'satellite states', like Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, followed suit.

With the economic division of Europe now firmly established, it only remained to provide a military dimension. In March 1947 Britain had signed the Treaty of Dunkirk with France, guaranteeing the latter against attack from a resurgent Germany. Whatever the French might have thought – and, for understandable reasons, they continued to oppose a reunified Germany, whether allied to the West or the East – from the British point of view the agreement was also valuable as a potential stepping stone towards the organised defence of Western Europe against the Soviet Union. The next step was the agreement of the Brussels Defence Pact of March 1948, which brought Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg into the existing arrangement between Britain and France. In addition, Britain agreed to station troops in Germany for 50 years. This is not to say that British policy makers really feared that the Red Army was an unstoppable instrument which could be wielded against Western Europe at short notice; rather, it was an admission that Britain was now too weak to act alone if the delicate post-war arrangement with the USSR should break down and lead to hostilities. Just a few days earlier a Soviet-inspired coup in Czechoslovakia helped to persuade the Americans of the need for a transatlantic military alliance.

Thanks to the infamous Munich agreement of 1938, aggression against Czechoslovakia was bound to be regarded as a key test of Western resolve. Although the country had been liberated from the Nazis by the Red Army and was thus clearly going to be under Soviet influence, the 1948 coup provided adequate proof to any doubters that Stalin was only prepared to tolerate democratic procedures when they resulted in victories for his favoured parties. However, probably an equally significant factor in Washington's calculations was a deterioration in relations with the Soviet Union in respect of Germany. In the battle for future control of the country, Stalin's trump card was the fact that Berlin (which like Germany as a whole had been divided into four sectors) was located about 100 miles inside the Soviet zone. In January 1948 the Soviets started to hamper the access of its erstwhile allies to Berlin, starting with unnecessary and intrusive 'security checks', followed in April 1948 by more blatant provocations which threatened to cut off the Western zones of Berlin from the rest of non-Communist Germany. In response the Americans and the British began to supply West Berlin by air. In June they decided to proceed with the issue of a new currency, the Deutschmark, in all the areas of Germany which were free from Soviet control. The Soviets replied by introducing a rival Ostmark in their own areas and by extending the existing restrictions on access to West Berlin, so that the new situation was rightly characterised as a blockade.

It was the first occasion on which the Cold War very nearly resulted in open conflict between the Western powers and the Soviet Union. The airlift was a considerable gamble, given the vast superiority of Soviet forces in the Berlin area. The avoidance of open hostilities proved that neither side was ready to risk the outbreak of all-out war, which might easily have involved the use of nuclear weapons, of which the US enjoyed a monopoly. By the time that the Soviets conducted a successful test of their own atomic capacity (August 1949) they had accepted that, as things stood, they would never be able to control a united Germany, and that half of that country was much preferable to none. The Soviet blockade was lifted in May 1949. By that time more than a million and a half tons of supplies had been delivered, in 200,000 flights (Northedge, 1974, 89). Despite the serious economic problems which afflicted Britain in the immediate post-war years, it made a significant contribution to the airlift in terms of the tonnage of delivered supplies; 39 British airmen lost their lives during the operation, compared to 31 Americans.

The Berlin blockade undoubtedly helped to clear the remaining obstacles to a transatlantic military pact. In June 1948 the almost unanimous passage of the Vandenberg Resolution showed that Congressional fear of Soviet intentions had finally surpassed US aversion to European entanglements. On 6 July formal negotiations for a defensive treaty against the USSR got underway in Washington, involving the US and Canada as well as the Brussels partners. In the same month long-range US bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons as far as Moscow, were stationed in East Anglia. After his unexpected re-election in November 1948 President Truman announced that he would soon be offering a transatlantic treaty for Congressional approval. However, detailed diplomatic negotiations over the final text were still necessary. It was not until 4 April 1949 that the North Atlantic Treaty was signed in Washington, by twelve countries (Denmark, Iceland, Italy, Norway and Portugal were added to the European signatories).

The 14 articles of the North Atlantic Treaty represented a revolution in foreign and defence policy, for Britain as well as the US. The final wording stopped short of an automatic *military* response if any signatory was attacked, but still contained an obligation to offer assistance of some kind in such circumstances. The sense of obligation was sure to be strengthened by the Council established by the treaty; although there was no stipulation that this body should assemble on a regular basis, it should 'be so organised as to be able to meet promptly at any time', implying frequent gatherings. The Council was also empowered to establish 'subsidiary bodies', which could be expected to convene for regular discussions. As such, the North Atlantic Treaty was different from the strictly intergovernmental deals which Britain had previously preferred to strike (when it felt constrained to reach agreements of any kind). Entailing lasting commitments of some kind, and creating decision-making institutions of indefinite duration, it sat on the indistinct boundary – between the intergovernmental and



the supranational – which many politicians and other interested observers tend to regard as crucial in terms of the preservation of ‘national sovereignty’. From the British perspective, it seems fair to conclude that the traditional definition of ‘sovereignty’, implying complete freedom of action in foreign relations, was perceived as less important in 1948–9 than the apparent requirements of national *survival*. The overriding priority at the time was the negotiation of a deal which would commit the US to the defence of Western Europe – and in this respect the North Atlantic Treaty certainly fulfilled the hopes of the British government. In the short term the establishment of NATO was probably a factor in the Soviet decision to end its blockade of Berlin, ending the aerial relief operation which had been a considerable drain on Britain’s financial resources.

## The ‘special relationship’

The signature of the North Atlantic Treaty is often presented as a triumph for British diplomacy, casting Labour’s Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin as the hero of the hour. One historian has written that:

The period between Marshall’s Harvard Speech on 5 June 1947 and the coming into being of NATO in April 1949 is a period of sustained creativity such as few, if any, British Foreign Secretaries have produced since the time of the Elder Pitt.

(Morgan, 1984, 275)

This verdict overlooks the inadvertent contribution of Josef Stalin to the creation of NATO. Nevertheless, Bevin certainly possessed abundant negotiating skills and an opportunist instinct, which allowed him to take advantage of the circumstances that Stalin’s policy created.

Above all, as we have seen, unlike his most illustrious predecessors as Foreign Secretary, Bevin was anxious to maintain Britain’s reputation as a great power, while taking decisions which were not readily reconciled with that status. While others quickly understood that Britain might continue to claim to be a great power because of its close friendship with the US, Bevin persisted in a fruitless search for alternative global roles, on the optimistic view that Britain’s relative decline was temporary, rather than a lasting phenomenon which had been apparent for half a century and still had some way to go. Thus, for him, NATO was essentially a transatlantic marriage of convenience, whereas someone like the half-American Churchill was bound to regard it as a permanent union of a quasi-spiritual kind. Both of these attitudes, however, were based on a neglect of inconvenient evidence. Churchill was unrealistic because although American priorities might coincide with those of Britain in some respects, there could

never be a true unity of purpose between such different countries; Bevin's error was to suppose that a marriage of convenience with America might turn out to be more advantageous for the junior rather than the senior partner.

Certainly, by 1949 it was possible to perceive that the occasional interludes of generosity in the American treatment of Britain were at least partly inspired by self-interested considerations. The abrupt cancellation of lend-lease had been followed by the unsentimental conditions attached by the US and Canada to Britain's post-war loan. The McMahon Act of 1946 established procedures for the management of nuclear technology, ending US cooperation with Britain and Canada which had led to the development of America's atomic weapons. This could be seen as a prudent measure, since a Soviet defector had recently warned about the extent of nuclear espionage, and the British physicist Alan Nunn May was revealed as a Soviet informant. However, the act breached the terms of an agreement struck by Roosevelt and Churchill in 1944. As Peter Hennessy has plausibly argued, rather than the Soviet threat it was the McMahon Act – and Bevin's feeling that Foreign Secretaries would never be taken seriously by their American counterparts unless the country could pack a nuclear punch – which provided the main impetus for the development of a British bomb. Lack of US cooperation inevitably added to the financial outlay – £100 million – but in the Cabinet subcommittee Bevin insisted that 'we've got to have this thing over here, whatever it costs' (Hennessy, 1992, 268–9).

It would be misleading to claim that antipathy towards Britain was the primary motivation for these US decisions, but it was certainly a key contextual factor. While Churchill and others tried to persuade themselves and their fellow Britons that the 'special relationship' was a reality, it is tempting to argue that the only unusual thing about the relationship even at this early stage was the underlying existence of so much friction between politicians who spoke the same language and shared a large number of global objectives. While British ambivalence towards America emanated almost entirely from jealousy and cultural condescension, for their transatlantic 'cousins' the sticking point was obviously the Empire. The most poignant comment on Churchill's inexhaustible courtship of President Roosevelt is the note of a conversation with the latter's Secretary of State, Edward Stettinius, in February 1945. Having heard Roosevelt attacking the British for their imperialistic tendencies, Stettinius concluded that '[i]t is very apparent that he distrusts the British and dislikes them immensely' (quoted in Beloff, 1986, 252).

Significantly, Roosevelt's comments echoed recent criticism of Britain in the American press and were made in the aftermath of the Yalta conference, during which the British position within the 'Big Three' global powers had begun to seem anomalous (Orde, 1996, 156). During one of the Yalta sessions Churchill had evidently (and probably rightly) sensed that Roosevelt and Stalin were using their mutual dislike of the British Empire as a means to establish warmer

personal relations: as in the familiar playground scenario, the two big bullies who felt the need to come to terms were cementing their friendship by picking on someone palpably weaker than themselves. Instinctively grasping what was going on, Churchill launched into a passionate denial of anyone's right to put Britain 'into the dock' because of its conduct of imperial matters and ask us 'to justify our right to live in a world we have tried to save' (quoted in Louis, 1977, 458–9). One can easily imagine the knowing glances that Roosevelt and Stalin must have exchanged during this tirade; it must have been difficult for Stalin to conceal his glee while witnessing such vivid symptoms of division between his two supposed allies. Unsurprisingly, it was at Yalta that Roosevelt accepted Soviet promises about the future of Poland, which very quickly proved to be false; but it fell to Churchill to defend this regrettable American-inspired deal in a subsequent House of Commons vote of confidence.

The vehemence of American anti-imperialism, which could be detected even in initiatives which seemed to promise full-hearted cooperation with Britain, helps to explain why elements within the Labour Party continued, even after the Berlin blockade and the advent of NATO, to hanker after the role of a 'third force' in global politics, allied neither to Washington nor Moscow. In January 1950 these dissidents were cheered by the British decision to recognise the Maoist People's Republic of China, rather than the nationalist regime led by Chiang Kai-Shek, as that country's official government. This implied that, notwithstanding NATO, Britain could still take decisions based on its perceived national interest, rather than trailing in America's wake; while Britain prioritised the survival of its Hong Kong colony over any ideological considerations, the US felt that it had to back Chiang, even though his anti-Communist forces had been compelled to take refuge on the island of Taiwan. Britain's pragmatic outlook led it so far as to dissent from the American view that Chiang's representative, rather than Mao's, should attend the UN. The message seemed clear – whatever British policy makers thought about communism as an ideology, they would only stir themselves to oppose its advance when it infiltrated territories for which they bore responsibility, or when it seemed to be giving new impetus to the Russian ambitions which had haunted the Foreign Office since before the Crimean War.

## Korea

Superficially, Britain's posture towards China presents a jarring contrast to its unstinting support for the US response to the invasion of South Korea by the Communist North in June 1950. No essential British interests were at stake: the fate of Korea was certainly less relevant to British interests than Mao's victory in China had been. Perhaps, then, Britain had belatedly accepted the Truman

Doctrine and was now ready to oppose Communism wherever it threatened ‘free peoples’? In reality, the same pragmatic impulses were at work, associated with, but not driven by, an aversion to communist ideology.

At the outset the Foreign Office view was that the Korean crisis offered a marvellous opportunity to demonstrate ‘the United Kingdom’s capacity to act as a world power with the support of the Commonwealth’. Sir Oliver Franks, Britain’s Ambassador to the US, urged that Britain should send ground forces to Korea as well as the naval assets which had already been despatched. Franks told Attlee that this would provide a vivid demonstration of Britain’s loyalty to the US; it would also serve British interests by boosting the prestige of the UN, which had passed resolutions in favour of armed action against North Korea thanks to a timely Soviet boycott of the UN (in protest against the failure to give a Security Council seat to Communist China) (Morgan, 1984, 422).

If British participation in the Korean War of 1950–3 showed that it was prepared to join the US in a systematic attempt to extirpate Communism, from the Whitehall perspective it was a pretty cynical crusade. This is not to say, however, that a fundamentally pragmatic outlook was proof against the kind of mistake which might have arisen from ideological fervour. For example, the British Chiefs of Staff initially advised against sending ground troops to Korea, but they changed their minds once they realised that their political masters wanted to make this gesture (or, in Tony Blair’s later parlance, to ‘pay the blood price’). More seriously, amid the narrow political calculations which inspired the Labour government to pledge complete allegiance to the US over Korea, the likely economic cost was underestimated, despite warnings from the Chancellor Sir Stafford Cripps (Bennett, 2013, 24–31). Under Cripps’ successor, Hugh Gaitskell, planned defence expenditure of £3.4 billion for the four years between 1950 and 1954 had to be upgraded to £4.7 billion for 1951–4. As Kenneth Morgan has written, in Cabinet on 25 January 1951 Gaitskell ‘spelt out the economic problems that the new rearmament programme would cause in such remorseless detail that he might almost have been an opponent of it’ (Morgan, 1984, 433–4).

This was a pivotal episode in the post-war history of the Labour Party, since Gaitskell’s determination to drive the increased defence expenditure through Cabinet resulted in the imposition of charges on certain items which had previously been provided freely by the National Health Service (NHS), leading to the resignations from the Cabinet of Aneurin Bevan, the architect of the NHS, and the future Prime Minister Harold Wilson. However, this controversy (and the Korean War as a whole) deserves closer attention than it has received from scholars of post-war British foreign policy in general. The first thing to strike any well-informed observer is that while Cabinet crises usually arise when a Chancellor tries to trim ministerial budgets, on this occasion Gaitskell enraged his critics because of a request for *additional* expenditure in a specific area. Second, Bevan’s most substantial charge against Gaitskell – that the surge in

### Case Study 4.2 Britain and the UN

Britain was, along with the US, the main architect of the UN, whose first meetings took place in London (January 1946) before transferring to New York. The initial impetus for the UN can be traced to a meeting between US President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, resulting in a statement of principles known as the Atlantic Charter (August 1941). This document bore some kinship to Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, not least because it pledged the signatories to 'respect the rights of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they live' – but Churchill was ready to accept abstract commitments like this so long as Roosevelt reciprocated with a more concrete commitment to the war effort.

For the British, the UN which took shape after negotiations between the US, the Soviet Union, Britain and China at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC in Autumn 1944 was far preferable to the earlier League of Nations, because American participation was much more likely this time. Britain would also be a permanent member of the UN Security Council, along with the US, the Soviet Union, China and France. As such, it could veto resolutions passed by the UN Assembly, consisting of the representatives of other member states (initially, the overall membership was 51 states). This was helpful, because from the outset it was possible that such resolutions would be hostile to British interests, particularly in relation to its remaining imperial possessions. Britain's support for the UN also reflected the fact that its main mission of peacekeeping was based on a respect for state sovereignty – its operations were supposed to prevent conflict *between* states, rather than intervening *within* a state to uphold (or impose) its interpretation of human rights. Yet Britain had learned the obvious lesson of the inter-war era and ultimately trusted its security to regional pacts like NATO, rather than to a global organisation which owed so much to idealism.

defence expenditure would result in serious problems for Britain's balance of trade and would take much needed resources away from other priority areas (notably, housebuilding) – proved to be substantially correct. Third, while these considerations might not be felt by individual voters for some time – and, with luck, might not result in a serious loss of electoral support for the government – other consequences were bound to be damaging. For example, the term of compulsory National Service was increased from 18 months to two years, which was hardly likely to endear the Labour government to young citizens who had been brought up to expect that the defeat of Hitler would be followed by the creation of a 'New Jerusalem' in 'socialist' Britain.

Gaitskell is still remembered fondly by British social democrats, despite his chequered record as Labour Party leader (see below). But his conduct over Korea is difficult to defend from any point of view. He might have been trying to precipitate a Cabinet crisis which would force his rival, Bevan, into resignation. If so, he was successful in the short term, and public opinion polls suggested that a significant majority of voters supported the increased spending on defence (Snyder, 1964, 56). Yet even before Bevan's resignation it was apparent that Korea, and the associated defence expenditure, had opened fissures within the Labour Party which contributed to its defeat in the 1951 general election.

The emerging British foreign policy consensus between 1945 and 1950 had implied that good relations with the US were important enough to become in themselves a major factor in considerations of the national interest, i.e. if British policy makers were faced with finely balanced decisions, they should normally take the option which happened to be preferred by the US. Gaitskell, by contrast, seems to have thought that the maintenance of the 'special relationship' was so vital that, in itself, it outweighed more traditional calculations of the national interest – that standing shoulder to shoulder with the Americans constituted *the* national interest, whatever the implications of a particular course of action for Britain, even in terms of its economic prospects or the fortunes of Gaitskell's own party. The conclusive symptom of this arresting perspective was a tendency to brand one's opponents as 'anti-American', even when the basis of their objection was self-evidently a contrasting perception of British interests rather than ideological subservience to the Soviet Union. Gaitskell was quite willing to castigate his opponents in this way, and at a party meeting at the beginning of February 1951 even Attlee had referred to 'a lot of anti-American feeling', adding, with a mixture of pragmatism and condescension, that 'they [the Americans] do talk too much – but they are essential for European defence' (Dell, 1996, 145; Benn, 1994, 135). Overall, it is likely that this furore contributed to Labour's defeat in the 1951 general election, but whatever damage was done to the party, Gaitskell's personal ambition was unhindered – he went on to succeed Attlee as party leader in 1955.

Participation in the Korean War, inevitably, had momentous consequences for Britain aside from its significance as the first occasion when backing for the US was equated with the national interest. Britain ranked second behind the US in the number of troops it sent to Korea, and the exploits of units like the 'glorious' Gloucestershire Regiment were deservedly celebrated. Even so, the American contribution to the UN operation dwarfed that of Britain and other Commonwealth countries; the overall tally of British combatants (about 90,000) was easily exceeded by the number of US personnel who were killed or wounded. It was thus inevitable that the key decisions were taken by US commanders – notably, the controversial General Douglas MacArthur. After UN forces had repelled the North Korean attack and driven up towards the Chinese border, China

(with Soviet encouragement) launched a vigorous and successful counter-attack. With MacArthur's troops now in retreat, Truman hinted at a press conference in November 1950 that the US might resort to a nuclear strike on Chinese territory. By this time Britain had agreed (without any public announcement, let alone a formal treaty) that American atomic weapons could be stored on its soil. In view of Truman's comments, and the cavalier attitude that the US had shown towards previous pledges in respect of nuclear weapons, the British Cabinet was understandably alarmed at the possibility that such weapons might be used without any consultation. Clement Attlee flew to Washington to seek clarification. Truman provided what Attlee considered to be adequate reassurance, but, thanks to the intervention of his Secretary of State Dean Acheson, the US President stopped short of a binding written promise.

As Kenneth Morgan has written, on his return 'Attlee was hailed in parliament and in the press as the bringer of peace, who had calmed down impulsive and ideological Americans, and pulled the world back from the brink of a wider war in the Far East' (Morgan, 1984, 429). Although Morgan argues that the praise was justified to some extent, other evidence suggests that Attlee's flight was hardly more fruitful than Neville Chamberlain's airborne excursion to Munich in 1938. Indeed, the parallels with Munich extend as far as the production of a hastily written document expressing pious hopes rather than concrete pledges (Hennessy, 1992, 408). In return for Truman's verbal pledges, Attlee felt compelled to offer substantive concessions to his American hosts, particularly in terms of Britain's future defence spending (precipitating the Cabinet resignations described above). Thus an incident which British historians usually cite as an example of UK influence over American policy is susceptible to a more nuanced interpretation. Tellingly, while Truman himself discussed Attlee's visit in lavish detail in his memoir, a voluminous 1992 biography of the President dismisses the supposedly decisive intervention in less than one page (Truman, 1965, 451–69; McCullough, 1992, 825–6).

The question, then, is how a mission which was induced by serious British suspicions about American intentions managed to be translated into a triumphant affirmation of the 'special relationship'? The most plausible answer is that Attlee had inadvertently added a new element to the 'meta-myth' which was beginning to dominate the British world view. It now appeared that although Britain could not hope (or even want) to compete with the US in terms of 'brawn', it brought an essential element of 'brain' to the alliance. This offered the British public the best chance to accept a fact which had become abundantly clear since 1945 – that what they had presumed to be a relationship of (roughly) equal powers was unmistakably asymmetrical. Indeed, the new version of the British post-war narrative could convince even some well-informed observers that the 'special relationship' was rendered *more* special by its very inequality. On this view, without the injection of common sense from the less powerful

partner, the superpower would be fated to blunder from one disaster to the next. Britain's new mission was thus no less than the salvation of the world from atomic oblivion – and, thanks to the stature of its statesmen and its unimpeachable moral conduct, it was the only power which possessed sufficient soft power to attempt, let alone perform, this role. Attlee's mission was thus the direct antecedent of Harold Macmillan's view that Britain's world role was to act as wise Greeks to the virile Romans of the US (Chapter 6).

Whatever the real efficacy of Attlee's intervention, the Romans showed a remarkable lack of deference towards the Greeks when, in September 1951, they signed a defensive pact (ANZUS) with Australia and New Zealand from which the British were excluded. Since the fall of Singapore in 1942 it had been obvious that these former colonies would depend on America rather than Britain for their defence; but it was not surprising that the British were 'deeply wounded' by the snub, given their historic links with the area (Frankel, 1975, 216). Indeed, the ANZUS pact – which was agreed while Attlee was Prime Minister, but came into effect after Churchill had resumed his old office in 1951 – could hardly have been better calculated to expose the wishful thinking which lay behind the latter's concentric-circles idea and to make him switch his focus to the circle which he had obviously regarded as the least important.

## Europe

On 8 July 1950 the junior Foreign Office Minister Kenneth Younger recorded in his diary that '[t]he Korean situation has . . . knocked Schuman right into the background of public consciousness' (quoted in Hennessy, 1992, 407). Younger was alluding to the announcement on 9 May 1950 by the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman of a plan to create a European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), in the hope of building on previous initiatives to foster European cooperation. If Younger had not been a passionate advocate of the Schuman Plan, he would have been less surprised at its failure to retain the attention of the British public.

In 1950 the leadership of Europe was Britain's for the asking: indeed, it was available even if the British did not ask for it. Whatever damage the 1939–45 war had done to Britain, it was the only Western European country whose prestige had not been seriously tarnished. Six months after his 1946 'iron curtain' speech, and still Leader of the Opposition, Winston Churchill seemingly endorsed the cause of European unity in another memorable oration, this time delivered in Zurich. However, while Churchill was obviously sincere in his hopes for European integration as a general principle, on this occasion his resonant phrases were amenable to different interpretations. The Zurich speech could mean that Churchill wanted Britain to be a key player at the heart of the new Europe – or that it would offer encouragement from the outside. The latter interpretation of



Churchill's attitude was supported by previous speeches. For example, in 1930 he had argued that although unity for the rest of Europe was a very good idea, 'we have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not compromised. We are interested and associated but not absorbed' (Churchill, 1930).

By 1945 even Churchill must have accepted that Britain's pre-war 'dream' had faded at least to some extent, and the 'task' – presumably, on Churchill's usual form, an imperial one – lacked the clarity of 1930 – so enthusiasts in the cause of a united Europe had plausible reasons for taking Churchill at his apparent word and embracing him as one of their own. Yet this interpretation overlooked the post-war narrative which Churchill himself had done so much to foster among the British public, i.e. that the Second World War had just been a temporary setback for Britain, which still had every reason to 'dream' of a 'task' which was global rather than parochial. Oddly enough, from this perspective Churchill's warm words about European integration can be read as a radical variant of the usual British Euroscepticism. He seemed to be taking for granted that European cooperation would take the form of a quasi-federal 'United States' of Europe, which was perfectly acceptable for the peoples of mainland Europe but unthinkable for Britons who had inherited broader horizons and a right to govern themselves without having to cooperate with others.

Developments between the Zurich speech and the promulgation of the Schuman Plan made close European cooperation more urgent but also suggested that Britain would have to take a more active role in continental affairs. The terms on which the US Congress had endorsed the Marshall Plan implied much closer integration between democratic European states, and in response the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation and Development (OEECD) was established in April 1948. Britain was a prominent member of this organisation and of the European Payments Union (EPU), which followed in 1950. A Congress of Europe, held at The Hague in May 1948 with an impressive cast of political heavyweights, including Churchill, led to the creation of a Council of Europe. Significantly, this body would have its headquarters at Strasbourg, in the Alsace-Lorraine region, whose annexation by Germany in 1871 had triggered so much subsequent conflict; but the agreement to establish the Council was signed in London, on 5 May 1949.

For Attlee's Labour government, the Council of Europe and the OEECD were adequate responses to the American desire for post-war European amity. The OEECD answered the immediate practical need for some kind of economic organisation to administer Marshall Aid; for its part, the Council of Europe provided a venue for the discussion of political issues. The British government ensured that neither body could be seen as a direct infringement of national sovereignty; and if this meant that the Council of Europe (in particular) was regarded as a toothless 'talking shop', that was a price worth paying so long as it

gave the Americans the impression that European politicians had learned the lessons of two world wars and were now prepared at least to engage in regular dialogue.

However, the idea of Britain as a 'benevolent bystander' in Europe was no longer realistic. The country had committed itself to European cooperation in some form, and the remaining question was whether other European states were satisfied with the strictly intergovernmental institutions in which Britain was prepared to participate. Ironically, Britain itself helped to make this question more complicated by taking a leading role in the process of drafting a European Convention on Human Rights, which began in the summer of 1949. The initial intention was to reinforce the lessons learned since 1914 and to advertise the impression that Europe as a whole would no longer tolerate the barbarities committed in the name of various governments during those years. But in practice the establishment of a European Court of Human Rights to rule on alleged breaches of the Convention introduced an element of supranationality. If the court's decisions were genuinely binding on all member states, then the Council of Europe was capable of infringing traditional understandings of 'national sovereignty'; if not, it would seem that despite all their fine-sounding phrases, the states of the new Europe regarded human rights with the same insouciance shown by their pre-war predecessors.

The discussions which led to the establishment of the Council of Europe should have alerted the British government to the strength of support for some supranational element to European institutions. France and the Benelux countries had argued that the Council should be elected (albeit indirectly) to give it greater credibility, while the British, keen to keep credibility within limits, insisted on an appointed membership. For the British, Schuman's initiative of May 1950 was deeply unwelcome, not least because Schuman had chosen not to consult Bevin in advance (whereas the US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, seemed well informed). This manoeuvre was probably intended to avoid a repetition of previous discussions, in which Britain had used its considerable influence to water down radical proposals; this time, hopefully, Britain would see that its European neighbours were in earnest and either accept the principle of supranational institutions or reject it decisively, leaving the architects of 'United Europe' to get on with their self-appointed task without obstruction. If the promoters of unity really hoped for a positive British response, the precise nature of Schuman's scheme – to place the coal, iron and steel industries under supranational supervision – was ill chosen. Having just brought all of these industries into state ownership as key elements in the creation of a 'democratic socialist' Britain, the Attlee government was most unlikely to relinquish control to institutions with incompatible ideological visions.

If the Conservatives had been in office in May 1950, the British response might have been different – Churchill and many of his colleagues asserted as

much in the House of Commons debate subsequent to Labour's rejection of the Schuman Plan. Almost certainly, the Conservatives would not have been deterred by a sentimental attachment to the Commonwealth, which weighed heavily with the Labour Party, thanks to its promotion of a retreat from Empire. However, Churchill would have committed Britain to Schuman's project with the intention of changing its nature – basically, repeating Bevin's approach to the Council of Europe and weakening the supranational elements of the original proposal.

In essence, the Conservatives agreed with Labour in deploring the impact of supranational institutions on Britain's 'national sovereignty', and in 1950 both major parties accepted the definition of this term, which had become common currency in Britain's Victorian heyday, i.e. that a nation is 'sovereign' insofar as no outside body can overrule the outcome of its domestic decision-making process. Arguably, though, by its enthusiastic sponsorship of what became the NATO alliance, the Labour government had already signalled that sovereignty, in that sense, was not absolute. NATO, after all, very seriously circumscribed Britain's freedom of action in a crucial area – so long as the alliance persisted, the country was obligated to lend assistance if one of its partners was attacked; and if a constitutional purist insisted that this obligation would cease if Parliament chose to terminate the alliance, exactly the same thing would be true of Britain's membership of any supranational European arrangement. Unwittingly, Labour's claim that the Schuman Plan would act as a distraction from the Atlantic alliance lends support to this argument – it implied that commitments like NATO and the Marshall Plan had already become immovable landmarks within the British constitution, and that the British were not prepared to accord the same importance to European agreements. According to taste, one could either retort that an acceptance of European unity was wholly compatible with the Atlantic alliance – indeed, the Americans were warm supporters of the enterprise and of British involvement – or that NATO membership embodied a permanent revision of the traditional British definition of 'sovereignty', making an acceptance of Schuman's proposals much less difficult than it would have been had NATO never existed.

Britain's refusal to commit itself to a primarily European role was less fraught with consequences in respect to plans for military cooperation. In October 1950 the Schuman Plan was supplemented by the proposal of another senior French politician, René Pleven, for a European Army with a single European Defence Budget and a European Minister of Defence responsible to a European Assembly. While Schuman's proposal was designed to ensure French influence over German production of the sinews of war – coal, iron and steel – the Pleven Plan was designed to subject a revived German army to supranational supervision, as well as offering a basis for a coordinated European response should the Soviet military threat ever materialise.

Although in opposition Churchill himself had spoken out in favour of a European Army and a European Minister of Defence, in November 1951 Anthony Eden, restored to his old berth as Foreign Secretary in a new Conservative government, signalled that, as in the case of the Schuman Plan, Britain favoured European cooperation in this area but would not itself join the proposed European Defence Community (EDC). Although the treaty was signed in May 1952, the French were unwilling to ratify it without British participation. Significantly, French Gaullists who had been prepared to accept the ECSC were much more troubled by the possible implications for their own national sovereignty of a supranational organisation in the areas of defence and foreign policy – unlike the British, who had flung themselves into NATO without contemplating the full range of possible implications.

In September 1954 the French Assembly decisively declined to ratify the EDC. This presented a serious dilemma even to politicians who harboured misgivings about the abortive Community, since it left unanswered the problem of finding a basis on which West German rearmament could proceed. It was Anthony Eden who came up with the idea of strengthening the existing Brussels Treaty (itself based on the Anglo-French Dunkirk Treaty of 1947), incorporating West Germany, which would be admitted to NATO at the same time. Unusually for a post-war British initiative, Eden's suggestion was well timed; apart from the warm response of the relevant European governments, the scheme promised to satisfy the Americans, who continued to favour West German rearmament. Nevertheless, Eden's skilful personal diplomacy was needed to secure an agreement. At a London meeting of EDC signatories (with the US and Canada as observers) Eden announced the commitment to European defence of four British army divisions, with tactical air support, unless and until other EDC members decided that they were no longer wanted or if 'an acute overseas emergency' meant that the UK forces were required for service elsewhere. Thus, even when taking a leading role in the resolution of a key European question, Britain's leaders contrived to slip in a quiet reminder of its extra-European interests. However, this was accompanied by an admission of Britain's reduced economic status; the situation would be reviewed '[i]f the maintenance of UK forces on the mainland throws too heavy a strain on the external finances of the UK' (quoted in Northedge, 1974, 169).

These mixed messages were consistent with the nature of the settlement itself, which was agreed in London on 3 October 1954. It established a Western European Union (WEU), with its headquarters in Brussels. The fearful supranational features of the Pleven Plan – the European Minister of Defence, etc. – were gone. Instead, the key decision-making institution would be an intergovernmental Council of Ministers; the associated assembly would be purely consultative. At the same time, the terms of WEU genuflected towards the principle of European cooperation in economic and cultural matters as well as defence. Finally, while

WEU foreshadowed a much more amicable relationship with West Germany, it also embodied some old suspicions: the troops on German soil were no longer strictly speaking an 'army of occupation', but their presence was at least in part a guarantee to France and Poland against a revival of aggressive intentions.

## The importance of individuals: Anthony Eden as Foreign Secretary

Since Sir Anthony Eden exercised considerable appeal over Conservative supporters thanks to his aristocratic demeanour and pleasing appearance as well as his record of opposition to Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, he seemed the ideal person to build on Ernest Bevin's achievements. According to Robert Rhodes James, Eden 'realised – few better – how circumscribed British power was, but at heart he did not accept the implication of Britain as an inferior nation, devoid of influence' (Rhodes James, 1986, 353). In short, like Bevin he was an exemplar of the view that the 1939–45 conflict had been a temporary setback for Britain rather than a pulverising blow. In particular, Eden took an unsentimental view of the Anglo-American relationship, recognising that the interests of the two countries coincided in many respects but could also diverge over specific issues. Significantly, while Eden echoed Churchill's notion of three concentric circles, he differed from his chief in mentioning the Commonwealth *before* the Atlantic alliance (Shlaim *et al.*, 1997, 91). This order of allegiances was underpinned by Eden's assessment of the Soviet challenge as a manifestation of 'traditional' great-power politics, rather than the ideological threat perceived by his American opposite number, John Foster Dulles.

The contrasting perspectives were illustrated vividly by respective attitudes to Iran. In 1951 Mohammed Mossadegh had been appointed Iranian Prime Minister on a progressive platform of social reforms, which would be financed by oil revenues. To this end Mossadegh approved the nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (the forerunner of British Petroleum (BP)), which had exploited Iranian reserves on very favourable terms: its revenues were greater than those enjoyed by the Iranian government itself (Curtis, 2003, 304). The British were not prepared to accept this expensive rebuff meekly and began to work out ways in which Mossadegh could be removed from office.

Since Mossadegh seemed strongly opposed to Communism, the Truman administration had taken a favourable view of his rise to power. Restored to the Foreign Office by the Conservative victory in the 1951 general election, Anthony Eden had sought to cajole the Americans into a more hostile stance. Truman's successor, the Republican Dwight D Eisenhower, proved more receptive to these arguments. Mossadegh, it was now alleged, was a secret Soviet stooge.

Eden's initial public reaction to the nationalisation had been cautious, mixing a tacit acceptance of Mossadegh's move with demands for compensation which could be made as unreasonable as the occasion required. Others were inclined to resent the incipient blow to the British economy less than the affront to the country's prestige. Before the Conservatives returned to office the former Permanent Under-Secretary to the Foreign Office (and vociferous anti-German) Lord Vanssittart used a House of Lords debate to 'point out that a good many of us are getting not only uneasy but angry at the disrespect with which we and our interests are now so often treated' (*Hansard, House of Lords Debates*, 21 March 1951, Vol. 170, col. 248).

Vanssittart could rest assured that his message was heeded in the relevant quarters. As soon as the American enthusiasm for the Mossadegh regime began to cool the Soviets adopted a warmer attitude towards Iran. The threat of Soviet influence provided the trigger for intervention by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), who (in collaboration with the British secret services) financed a political coup in Iran. Mossadegh was seized in August 1953 and placed under house arrest; the more reliably pro-Western hereditary monarch, the Shah, who had fled into exile, was restored to his throne.

Although the most footling adherent of the '*cui bono?*' school of detection would have identified the culprits behind the 1953 Iran coup in an instant, it took six decades for the US government to own up to their responsibility, whereupon the former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw admitted the Churchill government's guilt. By that time the events of 1953 had been forgotten (in Britain, at least) by all except a handful of activists and scholars. Back in 1954 the re-division of oil spoils benefited the US partially at British expense, but, overall, Eden could be satisfied with the result of this neo-colonial transaction. Indeed, it set a dangerous precedent – an incident in which Eden seemed to have been proved right in his negative assessment of an ambitious Middle Eastern politician, while the Americans could be accused of dangerous naïvety until brute reality had demonstrated the need to defer to British experience and to take action on the spot regardless of the democratic will of the people.

Eden's hostility to Mossadegh, prompted by sensitivity over the security of British oil supplies, contrasted sharply with his initial attitude to nationalist politicians in Egypt. In 1952 the Egyptian monarchy was overthrown in a military coup. Britain's base in the Suez Canal was a key focus for unrest, and even before the coup the Egyptian government had denounced the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty, which had permitted the British to retain their base until 1956. After concerted British efforts to reach a rapprochement with the new regime in Egypt (now led by Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser), in October 1954 the two countries agreed a phased British withdrawal from the canal zone.

However, Eden's plan for a graceful disengagement from Suez was endangered within a few months by his decision to commit Britain to the Baghdad

Pact – an agreement which also provided a further illustration of the less than ‘special’ UK–US relationship. In February 1955 Turkey and Iraq agreed a military pact and were joined by Pakistan, Iran (newly liberated from democratic government) and Britain. The idea of a pact between these countries, creating a defensive line against possible Soviet expansion to the south-west, held obvious attractions for Britain and the US. The latter, however, chose to be a benevolent non-participant in the Baghdad Pact, partly because its adherence would not have been welcome to Israel, but also because it preferred not to taint itself by association with ‘imperialist’ Britain in this area. Unlike the US, Britain had a practical reason for joining; the terms of the pact could be interpreted as a tacit renewal of a 1930 treaty which had allowed the RAF to use Iraqi facilities (Northedge, 1974, 124–5). However, Iraq’s newly installed Prime Minister, Nuri As-Said, was already regarded as a rival to Egypt’s Colonel Nasser for political leadership in the Middle East. Britain’s apparent championship of Nuri was bound to incur Nasser’s displeasure, undoing at a stroke the careful diplomatic work of the previous two years. A personal meeting between Eden and Nasser before the signing of the treaty seems to have resulted merely in the confirmation of existing suspicions (Rhodes James, 1986, 397–8).

While Britain’s diplomatic activity in the Middle East was clearly – perhaps *too* clearly – inspired by a consideration of its perceived national interest, Eden also played a considerable part in attempts to settle the growing problems of Indochina. As Douglas Hurd has written, although Britain ‘had no direct involvement’ in this area, ‘Eden, like Churchill, believed that as Britain was a first-class power, she [sic] had a role in defining the world’s direction’ (Hurd, 2010, 354). After Japan’s defeat in 1945 France had resumed its colonial role in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia; but its restored position was on the point of collapse in the face of a Chinese-backed Communist insurgency. In February 1954 a conference was convened in Geneva, comprising representatives of the US, the Soviet Union, Britain and France; it would discuss the end of the conflict in Korea before moving on to address the situation in Indochina along with representatives of the Chinese government, whose involvement in the negotiations had been supported by the British. Since the US continued to withhold official recognition from Mao’s government, Dulles refused to talk to the Chinese.

This left Eden as, effectively, the major spokesperson of the Western democracies at Geneva. With no British vested interests at stake – and no ideological axe to grind – Eden was in his element. The result was a partition of Vietnam, but one which was intended to be temporary, to be followed two years later by a nationwide democratic election. Ultimately, the Geneva Accords did nothing to prevent the developing tragedy in Indochina; the US government, which did not sign the accords, stepped into the vacuum left by the withdrawing French forces and began to build an anti-Communist South Vietnam, with well-known

consequences. However, Hurd is surely right to praise Eden for his attempt to create a context for a more rational settlement, if other, more interested parties had been wise enough to pursue one. The US initiative in Vietnam was followed by the signature in September 1954 of the Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty, leading to the creation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Britain was a founder member but doubted the efficacy of a body which was clearly intended to provide cover for aggressive US action in Indochina.

Eden's anxiety about US policy towards Indochina was greatly increased by developments in nuclear weaponry. By 1954 both of the superpowers had tested hydrogen bombs with far greater destructive capacity than the devices dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Hampered by the restrictions on cooperation with the US, Britain was lagging behind. The decision to develop a British hydrogen bomb was, true to form, taken without a full discussion in Cabinet, let alone a public debate. However, the new prospect of imminent destruction for the human race had a profound effect on Winston Churchill, whose preference for 'jaw-jaw' over 'war-war' was now given additional piquancy.

In his eightieth year, Churchill was convinced that his personal style of diplomacy could engineer some kind of *modus vivendi* between the US and the Soviet Union. This notion was not entirely implausible; since the death of Stalin in 1952 the Soviets had seemed more amenable to constructive discussions, and President Eisenhower offered Churchill encouragement. In fact, by 1954 the main opposition to Churchill came from within his own Cabinet, which was sceptical of the value of any meeting between the Prime Minister and the current Soviet leader, Malenkov. It would be easy to dismiss Churchill's talk of a high-level summit which reunited the wartime 'Big Three' in the shadow of the hydrogen bomb as merely a ruse to delay his retirement from office; Eden, his anointed successor, certainly seems to have formed that view and was obviously irritated that the Prime Minister had begun to communicate with world leaders without prior consultation, as Chamberlain had done in the late 1930s. But the stakes were so high, and the supportive hints from Washington so tangible, that a more positive interpretation is possible. After all, Churchill knew Eden well enough to have good reasons for doubting that he could play an equally effective role at such a meeting. Only when Eisenhower, in March 1955, decided against holding a summit in the near future did Churchill reluctantly agree to relinquish the reins, resigning on 5 April.

The substitution of Eden for Churchill meant that a great, flawed statesman, who finally had to accept that he was too old and ill to occupy Downing Street, was replaced by a younger man who did not appreciate the extent of his own infirmities. In the interests of Britain's international reputation, this did not turn out to be a change for the better.



### Case Study 4.3 Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*

For an insight into the differences between Anglo-American attitudes in the early post-war period, particularly in relation to Indochina, Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* (1955) is a thought-provoking source. Greene knew the area well, having worked there as a journalist. His experiences, along with his appreciation of the wider political context, enabled him to create a human drama which also stands as an allegorical critique of the 'special relationship' in the mid 1950s.

Greene's main protagonists are Thomas Fowler, a British journalist, and Alden Pyle, who is covertly working for the CIA in the Vietnamese capital, Saigon. Although he is a complex character, Fowler is a cynic who knows the real world only too well; Pyle, by contrast, is an idealist whose views are derived from books. Fowler is living in Saigon with a young dancer, Phuong, but her family disapproves of the relationship, because he is already married. Pyle falls in love with Phuong and assumes that she will leave Fowler for him.

At first it looks as if Phuong will choose Fowler, and he writes to ask his wife for a divorce; predictably, Mrs Fowler refuses to comply, but her deceitful husband tells Phuong that she has agreed. Pyle then saves Fowler's life during a firefight in the war zone; when they return to Saigon Pyle tells Phuong that Fowler has lied to her about the divorce, and she seems set to transfer her affections to 'The Quiet American'. However, Fowler discovers that Pyle's undercover activities include active collaboration with terrorists, inspired by the theoretical hope that the ensuing atrocities will help promote the establishment of a pro-American government in Vietnam. For all his cynicism, Fowler is disgusted by this evidence that an apparent idealist can participate in the slaughter of innocent civilians in pursuit of abstract aims; on a more mundane level, he is jealous of Pyle's relationship with Phuong. In combination, these considerations overcome Fowler's gratitude to the man who saved his life, and he agrees to cooperate with a plan to assassinate Pyle. Once this has been accomplished, Phuong returns to Fowler and his long-suffering wife agrees to a divorce. On the personal level, this might approximate to a happy ending, but in 1955 Greene's readers would be well aware that there was unlikely to be such a satisfactory resolution for Indochina as a whole.

Greene's novel was well received in the UK, but in the US it was attacked as 'anti-American'. This response is highly instructive. Fowler, after all, is an ageing and impecunious drug addict, while his transatlantic rival is young

and resourceful. If Fowler represents post-war Britain, it is not a very endearing portrait. Nevertheless, the novel seems to argue that in moral terms Britain is (just) preferable to America: Fowler (Britain) might commit serious offences for bad reasons, but Pyle (America) is capable of indiscriminate killing in the name of superficially attractive abstract values.

## Conclusions

Foreign policy issues were unusually prominent in the 1955 general election campaign but offered limited scope for party conflict, since Labour and the Conservatives agreed on the key questions of the time. Both parties favoured multi-lateral nuclear disarmament – a cause given fresh urgency by the recent advent of the hydrogen bomb. They both wanted, as the Conservative manifesto put it, ‘to guide Colonial peoples along the road to self-government’, backed by British economic assistance.

This foreign policy consensus between the dominant factions within the two main parties was not surprising, since they had been coalition partners for most of the Second World War. However, it also reflected the constraints of the international arena, which left British politicians with little choice but to indulge in wishful thinking about the future intentions of the superpowers. These constraints fostered the development of a decision-making mentality which prevailed under governments of both parties for most of the period reviewed by this book. Indeed, even in 2017 many key elements of policy were still being made along lines first laid down by the 1945–51 Attlee governments.

In particular, these comments are pertinent in relation to the ‘special relationship’ and to ‘Europe’. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War policy makers hoped that America would continue to help Britain through its difficulties on favourable terms. Failing that, circumstances demanded a willingness to accept US assistance on *any* terms, since Britain desperately needed help, and the US was the only country which could give it. Senior figures like Bevin hoped that the period of enforced obsequiousness would be of short duration; but although the British economy recovered to some extent from the devastating consequences of the Second World War, by 1955 the habit of deferring to the Americans in the field of foreign policy had taken root. As Chapter 5 will show, Anthony Eden’s attempt to think and act independently merely resulted in a reaffirmation of the previous arrangement.

If the UK had been *entirely* subservient to America during these years, the history of its involvement with ‘Europe’ would have been very different. The US strongly recommended British participation in any serious plan for cooperation,

partly because this would implant an anti-federalist cuckoo in the European nest but also because it would confirm Britain's abandonment of its pre-war colonial visions. In the early 1950s, however, the British were not prepared to contemplate such a drastic step, even at the risk of displeasing their American paymasters. At this stage, at least, decision-makers tended to echo Bevin by assuming that their country's decline would shortly be arrested and at least partly reversed, allowing it to maintain a global role. Subsequent events showed that Britain's relations with the fledgling EEC would have been impaired even if it had behaved in a way which hedged its bets in respect of European cooperation; instead, it evinced a mixture of contempt and unease which ensured that if and when it finally 'joined Europe', it would have trapped itself in the role of 'awkward partner'.

In short – provided that mankind did not annihilate itself, which seemed more possible in 1955 than ever before – Britain's foreign policy decisions over the decade after the end of the Second World War gave shrewd observers a very good chance of predicting the country's long-term future. The only surprising thing was the zeal with which senior British policy makers applied themselves to the verification of those predictions, almost as soon as the 1955 general election results were announced.