To what extent did the United States precipitate the dissolution of the British Empire after 1939?

"Great Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role."

- Dean Acheson, former U.S. Secretary of State

When viewed in retrospect, it might seem difficult to discern how the speech containing these words caused such bitter indignation in the United Kingdom when it was made on 3rd December 1962, by the former Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, to cadets at West Point. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that Mr Acheson was 'more immaculate in dress than in judgement', whilst the *Daily Express* grumbled of a 'stab in the back'[1]. Although *The Spectator* was more measured, opining that the offending statement was 'a plain truth which anyone who has studied British policy since the war must admit'[2], the pervading sense of general outrage was such that Whitehall requested that the State Department issue a statement distancing itself from Mr Acheson, which they duly did on 6th December. But the damage had already been done; Acheson had sent an arrow aimed squarely at the widespread popular myth that Britain was, going into the 1960s, still a great power. It was, too, an implicit rebuke of the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's attachment to the 'Special Relationship', in which Britain was the Ancient Greece to America's Rome, offering to the new superpower the counsel of a more cultivated and time-served elder, as Macmillan felt he himself did to President Kennedy. However, the 'Special Relationship', then as now, implied mutual amity between the two countries, evidence for which was not always readily apparent. Moreover, behind the façade of the Anglophone, democratic brotherhood between the two nations during the Second World War, a transfer of power of immense proportions was taking place between Britain and America. The grudging assistance rendered by the United States to Britain during that war came at the ultimate price of Britain giving up her empire, thus fulfilling a longstanding, if ill-defined, objective of U.S. foreign policy which culminated in the Atlantic Charter of 1941. But the realities of great power *realpolitik* after 1945 increasingly exposed the discordant nature of a U.S. foreign policy that attempted to straddle the divide between the idealistic promotion of self-determination and the exigencies of Cold War containment. Nevertheless, by the time these inconsistencies became too great to ignore, the British Empire was dead and buried - a feat largely, and silently, accomplished by the United States.

It is easy to generalise American sentiments towards the Britain and her empire, and yet their complexity deserves some consideration. There had always been, since the War of Independence, an influential strand of Anglophile feelings in the United States. Perhaps 20% of those in the Thirteen Colonies remained loyal to the Crown during the War of Independence, and there has remained since that time a small but important group, particularly among the Protestant establishment of New England, for whom Britain and her empire represented a significant part of their cultural and political patrimony. It was in this vein that General MacArthur commended the imperial troops under his command to Clement Attlee as 'fully worthy of the immortal tradition of our race'[3]. Ties of kin and culture ran deep, not least typified by Churchill's own Anglo-American parentage. However

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[1] Douglas Brinkley, *Dean Acheson and the 'Special Relationship': The West Point Speech of December 1962* (1990)
[2] *The Spectator*, 'New Power Arising' (14th December 1962)
[3] Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat* (p. 463)

reverence for the English did not extend to their empire[4]. The notion of even well-meaning, paternalistic colonial government, in opposition to democratic self-determination, was antithetical to the premises of American political tradition. In the U.S. Constitution, the foundational text of this tradition, this attitude is apparent: in the Bill of Rights, there is clear continuity with its 1689 English ancestor; indeed, such is the esteem in which the Magna Carta is held in the United States that it was the American Bar Association that, in 1957, erected the memorial at Runnymede. And yet the foundation of the American Republic was a reaction to the injustice of imperial government. This latent hostility to imperialism was captured in October 1942 in an 'Open letter to the people of England' published in *Life* magazine[5]:

> '[O]ne thing we are sure we are *not* fighting for is to hold the British Empire together. We don't like to put the matter so bluntly, but we don't want you to have any illusions. If your strategists are planning a war to hold the British Empire together they will sooner or later find themselves strategizing all alone [...] In the light of what you are doing in India, how do you expect us to talk about 'principles' and look our soldiers in the eye?'

The tone of quite genuine moral indignation might seem peculiar given that the United States at this time laid claim to sovereignty over the Philippines, their control in abeyance only due to Japan's conquest of the islands by May of that year. Even though Congress had committed itself to independence through the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934, when independence did come in 1946, it came only on the condition that America maintain very substantial commercial advantages and the possession of military bases – an arrangement not altogether different from the sort of relationship that existed between Britain and the Kingdom of Egypt. It is often difficult to know whether such inconsistencies were the result of ignorance or hypocrisy. After all, the U.S. State Department was quite capable of either: for instance, so common was the misconception that Canada was ruled from London that in September 1939, Cordell Hull, the longest serving Secretary of State in history, found it necessary to ask the Canadian Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, by telephone if the British declaration of war meant that Canada was at war with Germany too. Nevertheless, it would ultimately be a combination of ideological opposition to imperialism and the possibly contradictory imperative to extend America's influence that would shape Washington's attitude to the British Empire during the Second World War. It is evident that the ideological opposition to imperialism, however hypocritical it might seem in light of America's behaviour in areas deemed within their sphere of influence (Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines etc.), was genuine: Roosevelt told his son that 'the colonial system means war', and described the British colony of the Gambia, which he briefly visited on his way to the Casablanca conference as a 'hell-hole [...] the most horrible thing I have ever seen in my life'[6]. As America's economy and military power grew during the Second World War to eclipse that of Britain, it became suddenly possible to move towards realising the lofty ideals of self-determination, liberty and democracy which Woodrow Wilson had tried and failed to do after Versailles. In this sense, Roosevelt represented the triumphant return of Wilsonian interventionism – a development which would be in the short term a blessing for Britain, straining under the pressure of her lonely fight against the Axis Powers, but in the long term would be the ultimate curse to her global pre-eminence.

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[5] William Roger Louis, *American Anti-Colonialism and the Dissolution of the British Empire*, from *International Affairs* Vol. 61, No. 3 (Summer 1985)

[6] Niall Ferguson, *Empire* (p. 350)

The Destroyers for Bases Agreement, on September 2nd 1940, was the first instance of American policy directed towards the goal of ensuring Britain's victory, but her empire's defeat. The deal stipulated the exchange of fifty obsolete American destroyers for the Royal Navy in return for 99-year leases for various military bases in British territory in the Americas. Churchill had asked Roosevelt in May 1940 for "the loan of forty of fifty of your older destroyers" in order to protect English shores from an anticipated German invasion[7]. The harsh terms upon which the destroyers, for which the U.S. Navy itself could not find any use, were finally granted was largely a consequence of the powerful isolationist lobby in Congress, against which Roosevelt would struggle in the provision of assistance to Britain until the events at Pearl Harbour in December 1941. The bases allowed Roosevelt to present the agreement in strictly self-interested terms, describing it to Congress as 'an epochal and far-reaching act of preparation for continental defense in the face of grave danger.' Although Destroyers for Bases was more a means of Roosevelt rendering what assistance he could considering a difficult political situation in Washington than an attempt at profiteering from British desperation, it laid down a template for the nature of American assistance for the rest of the war.

This template was to be most importantly applied in the Lend Lease Act of March 11th 1941 (formally, and tellingly, titled 'An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States'), and the wider structure of American financial assistance. To judge the severity of its terms for Britain, comparison with similar aid packages is illuminating. After the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, an agreement between the British and Soviet government was swiftly drawn up which would form the basis of the Allied coalition which America would later join in December. The aid which followed this agreement, carried by the Atlantic Convoys from Britain to Russia, was rendered at no cost, and by the end of 1941 had delivered 25% of Soviet medium and heavy tanks in service. In contrast, it took Washington so long to agree to send aid to Britain that by the time Lend Lease had consented to by Congress, the equivalent of £120bn in gold and bonds had been sent in convoys to Canada in order to pay for American armaments, the largest movement of physical wealth in history[8]. In September 1940, in an overture intended to create goodwill, a British delegation led by Sir Henry Tizard travelled to the United States in order to share the details of British technological advances including the cavity magnetron, the use of which was necessary for radar, and Frank Whittle's work on the jet engine, both of which would have a transformative effect on U.S. military equipment, though this did little to warm hearts on Capitol Hill. It was only in March of the following year, after Britain's wealth, public and private, had been almost totally depleted by war, that an aid programme became inevitable if Roosevelt wished for Britain to keep fighting. But when aid finally came, it was generous – in the order of £300bn in total, with no repayment obligations. But it was not so generous that Britain's industry could deviate at all from wartime production, a penalty that would become apparent in 1945. Further, Article Seven of the Treaty stipulated that Britain eliminate 'discrimination'; that is to say, the system of imperial preference which permitted low tariff trade throughout the Empire[9]. Leo Amery, Secretary of State for India, lamented the giving up of 'a natural political right of the British Commonwealth'[10]. Certainly, any notions of the Empire suriviving the war in its 1939 form were deeply misguided. The State Department had by this time resolved to impose upon Britain and whomever else they could an new economic system of Washington's choosing; one which would take shape through the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 with respect to currency and the General

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[7] Council on Foreign Relations, *The Destroyers for Bases Deal*
[8] Bank of Canada, converted to 2022 GBP
[9] William Roger Louis, *see above*
[10] Mansergh *et al.*, *The transfer of power*, Vol. 3, p. 37

Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1947, with respect to the lowering of tariff barriers and – importantly for Britain and any other empires – the elimination of preferential tariffs. During the Napoleonic Wars, Britain had, as the wealthiest and least militarily exposed member of the Coalitions, made such enormous efforts to secure finances that even after the introduction of an income tax, indebtedness exceeded 200% of GDP. With the tables now turned, American financial assistance was of such a kind that British government debt by 1945 reached 270% of GDP, much of which was owed to American creditors. Lend Lease was, in isolation, generous. In reality, it was so delayed that by the time of its implementation, the alternative was the disintegration of the British war effort, which would have catastrophic consequences for the United States. This delay was, however, not the result of deliberate policy by the American government; it was because of an obstructionist legislative branch far more isolationist and insistent upon neutrality than the White House. What was deliberate was the insistence on the end of imperial preference and the implicit imposition of a new world economic system in America's favour after the war. Much like the alliance of necessity with the Soviet Union, common ground on Britain's place in the world largely ended with the conclusion of hostilities in 1945. Roosevelt personally, his government and the country he led were too opposed, at the level of political philosophy, to the inherent injustice of empire to allow this opportunity for redress to be wasted.

If, by the passage of the Lend Lease Act, the new material relationship between Britain and America was settled, and loss of Britain's superpower status confirmed – as she was no longer able to survive without the friendship of a foreign power – the Atlantic Charter represented the ceremonial handover of power. In an event rich in symbolism, Churchill and Roosevelt converged on Placentia Bay, Newfoundland – the site of a U.S. Naval Base bestowed as part of the Destroyers for Bases Agreement – aboard HMS Prince of Wales and USS Augusta respectively, where they stayed for three days in August 1941. The resultant joint statement contained eight clauses – mostly uncontroversial injunctions to improve the post-war world. But one would prove particularly problematic for British imperialism: in addition to a repeated call to lower trade barriers, the Charter's third clause stated that '[the respective parties] respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.' The implications for the Empire, with the Charter unaffected by Churchill's vain attempts to write Britain out of this commitment, were clear. The Prime Minister lamented that the Empire was being 'jockeyed out or edged near the abyss'[11]. Moreover, State Department officials were mooting the notion of 'trusteeships' which would provide a framework to guide colonies towards independence. The British surmised that this was no more than yet another attempt by Washington to exert economic, if not political, dominion over the colonies in question; the Colonial Office judged of America's own territories that they were 'quite ready to make their dependencies politically "independent" while economically bound hand and foot to them.' Alan Watt, of the Australian Legation in Washington, noted in January 1944 that 'there are signs in this country of the development of a somewhat ruthless Imperialist attitude.' Nor were these sentiments limited to embittered disciples of Britannia; the exiled German-Jewish economist, Moritz Bonn, also noticed the contradictory position of America as the 'cradle of modern Anti-Imperialism and at the same time the founding of a mighty empire.' [12] Were it not for the financial dependency that had by then arisen, Britain could easily have wriggled out of these commitments. But this dependency did exist, and was only going to greaten. In August 1945, Lend Lease was abruptly terminated, causing a shortfall

[11] Ferguson (p. 352)
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basic goods such as food which the wartime economy struggled to provide. With the twin liabilities of a loss-making empire to garrison and a new welfare state to build, the new Labour government could see no alternative but to dispatch a delegation led by J.M. Keynes to Washington, with begging bowl in hand. Hopes of a goodwill grant soon evaporated, and the £57bn[13] loan that did come was made only grudgingly in 1946. Its conditions required that sterling be convertible into dollars, resulting in even greater pressure on the pound. At the war's end, Keynes calculated the loss of British overseas assets as thirty-five times that of the United States[14]. With imperial preference no longer possible, and British largesse no longer existent, the threads which bound the Empire together were rapidly unravelling.

This is not to say that nationalist movements were not significant in the process of decolonisation. But the awakening of national consciousness, most notably in India, was not a new phenomenon: the Indian National Congress first gathered in 1885, and smaller avowedly Indian nationalist organisations had existed for some years before that. Nevertheless, the nonviolent campaigns of the INC under the leadership of Gandhi in 1920s and 1930s had gathered immense popular support, and during the 1930s it was becoming clear that some degree of Indian self-government was necessary. Attlee himself had been committed to self-government for some time, having been a member of the Simon Commission on constitutional reform in India over a decade earlier. But it was the rapidly dwindling capacity of Britain to control events on the subcontinent, not least because of the financial pressures exerted upon her, that caused the government to alter its plans; rather than granting dominion status in 1948, full independence would be granted in 1947. With tensions between Muslims and Hindus becoming impossible to control, prior hopes of a united India were also abandoned. The resulting partition was a fiasco: hundreds of thousands died in the chaos, victims just as much of political expedience and short-sightedness as of malicious interethnic strife. But for America, Indian independence was a triumph of their policy towards the Empire[15]. Roosevelt had, during the war, unsuccessfully lobbied Churchill for Indian self-government, and the achievement of independence by Britain's most prized possession, even if delayed, represented the fruition of the late President's anti-imperial ideals.

There were, however, certain instances in which the realities of cold war *realpolitik* forced the United States to adopt a more pragmatic approach to British decolonisation. Libya had fallen into British hands following its victory over Italy in the Western Desert campaign. In the late 1940s, Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, had come to the view that maintaining Libya as a British client state would provide a secure foothold in the region sufficient to substantiate the claim still being made into the 1950s that Britain was a great power – as the prime guarantor of Middle Eastern security against the Soviet threat, Britain's standing with America would be on a better footing. Meanwhile, the Americans pressed for immediate independence, not least in order to stoke nationalism in the French territories to the west, in the hope that they too achieved independence, pushing France out from the region. But on this occasion, the British view won out. Largely on account of the influence of Loy Henderson, the State Department chief for the Near East, it was agreed that Libya would be federalised – in effect, split into the eastern region of Tripolitania and the western region of Cyrenaica. The former, troubled much more by political agitation, would fall under American influence while the latter would fall under British influence. Moreover, the British were able to insist to both Washington and the United Nations administrator, Adriaan Pelt, that the independent Libya would belong to the sterling area – a modest but

[13] Adjusted to 2022 GBP
[14] Morris (p. 466)
[15] Roger Louis (p. 403)

evident victory against a backdrop of fading British influence. Henderson's approach might have been the exception, but it exemplified the growing difficulties faced by the United States in reconciling decolonisation with containment. This problem was most pronounced, and most badly handled, in Indochina, where America waged a bloody, futile war in place of their French predecessors. But it occurred to some degree in British territories. Washington leant on Whitehall to prevent Cheddi Jagan from attaining power in British Guiana, since President Kennedy harboured largely unfounded fears concerning suspected communist sympathies. In Iran, in 1953, the CIA and MI6 cooperated in the instigation of a coup against Mohammed Mossadegh, who sought to nationalise British oil holdings. In South America, self-interest was all: Kennedy feared a 'second Cuba' in independent Guyana. In Iran, American motivation is less clear: Acheson admitted that the claimed Communist threat was a diversion[16], and there was little pressure at the time from American oil companies to secure new supplies. It likely that a combination of two factors was most important: first of all, success would give America a useful ally in the region, in the shape of an emboldened Shah (this objective was accomplished handsomely, if temporarily, with Persia proving a close ally until the Shah's deposition in 1979); secondly, as Churchill had reminded Truman the previous year, British assistance in the Cold War – most of all in Korea – surely earned some rewards, and this was such a gesture of goodwill. But whatever the original motivation, the preponderant influence the United States would go on to acquire in the Shah's court would suggest that America's own interests were amply served by the operation. Further, these operations were peripheral to the British Empire – in the case of Iran, unrelated. In Malaya, where Britain faced a fierce and genuine communist insurgency, America sent armaments generously, though took no active part in the counterinsurgency operation. After its completion, Malaya was granted independence swiftly. In that case, anticommunism and decolonisation were in fact aligned: the sooner the insurgency was resolved, the sooner independence would come. But more generally, America was willing to prolong colonisation, *de jure* or *de facto*, where it was necessary for the purposes of containment; but even then, the irreversible direction of decolonisation in the long term was not altered.

It would be mistaken to give the impression that a positive Anglo-American relationship did not exist during the period of Britain's decline as a great power and the loss of her empire. But beneath the broad brushstrokes of the Atlantic Charter, and Lend Lease, lie not only the basis for an enduring military alliance, but also a transfer of immense wealth and power from the Old World to the New. The pressures of total war are such that intolerable alliances and unimaginable sacrifices become suddenly necessary. Given that Britain found itself in 1941 allied to the Soviet Union, a country whose existence it had tried to extinguish by military force barely two decades earlier and which still called for international socialist revolution, the stretch to America was quite moderate. But its true implications cannot be underestimated. The dependency of Britain upon America, for the necessities to live and wage a war of national survival, which emerged in 1940 and 1941 was used to establish a post-war settlement which irrevocably relegated Britain's position in the world, and made the maintenance of the British Empire unfeasible. It would take some decades for the process of decolonisation to be completed, and Britain had a good deal of control over its pace and nature. But the enormous cost of purchasing American materiel prior to Lend Lease meant that generous subsidies for unprofitable colonies could no longer continue. The obligations to abandon imperial preference, contained within both the Lend Lease Act and the Atlantic Charter, untied the economic bonds which had kept politically independent dominions, such as Canada and Australia, associated with Britain. Shrewd observers in 1956 should have felt no great sense of betrayal when President Eisenhower forced the British

[16] Ervand Abrahamian, *The 1953 Coup in Iran*

withdrawal from Suez. At least since the fateful meeting at Placentia Bay in August 1941, Britain's freedom to assert her interests virtually without obstacle overseas was terminated. America had dismantled the foundations upon which Britain's Empire was built, and it was only a matter of time before the dawning consciousness of new nations and the fading energy of an exhausted power conspired to bring down the imperial edifice for good. Not only was this the replacement of one great power by another, but an attempt, at least, to institute an entirely novel world order, in which free peoples formed nations of their own choosing, by means of self-determination rather than conquest. Whether Franklin Roosevelt's new *Pax Americana* was any more realistic than Wilson's ill-fated designs of eternal peace or any less muscular and, even, imperialist than Theodore Roosevelt's big stick is a different question. But in the palliative mythology of Britain since 1945, it has been easier to consider America's friendship in the depths of war as an unalloyed expression of English-speaking brotherhood and democracy in the face of tyranny. For, as Churchill, the author of so much of this mythology observed, 'Defeat is one thing, disgrace is another.'[17]

[17] Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume IV: The Hinge of Fate,* Chapter XII, in reference to the Fall of Tobruk