Ian McLaine

A Korean Conflict

The Tensions between Britain and America

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Ian McLaine taught history and the philosophy of history at the University of Melbourne and the University of Wollongong. He held a DPhil from the University of Oxford and was the author of *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II*.

‘This is an extremely well-written and important book on a major episode in international relations. Given the problems that most of America’s friends and allies have had in working with different administrations during the Cold War and more recently, it is valuable and stimulating to study this penetrating and accurate examination of the British–US relationship during the first year of the Korean War.

The book gives a salutary picture of how difficult it is for any of the US’s allies to have any real influence over US military policies, so they tend to be dragged into conflicts that they would rather not have been involved in, and often have to tolerate measures and means that they feel to be inappropriate or even counter-productive. The differences between the United States and Britain, its major ally, during the first year of the Korean War are perfect cases in point.’

Robert O’Neill,
former Chichele Professor of the History of War, University of Oxford,
and official historian for Australia’s role in the Korean War

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CHAPTER ONE

A halfway house between capitalism and totalitarianism

In the years preceding the outbreak of the Korean War, the Americans expressed serious doubts as to the efficacy and the desirability of the special relationship. While it was never explicitly stated by administration officials, the Americans harboured an ineradicable conviction that the British economy and therefore its defence potential were enfeebled by the Labour government's socialist experiment. However, Britain's economic problems were due not so much to domestic reform and nationalisation, as to the maintenance of substantial military forces on overseas duties. The Americans were almost temperamentally incapable of judging the British economy as healthy, except in terms of bigger armies and more weapons. At the same time, they considered the special relationship to be essential to their very survival, which left them with no choice but to tolerate their eccentric and wilful cousins.

American officials rarely acknowledged the importance to the Labour government and, indeed, to the mass of the British people, of a healthy, decently housed, well-educated and fully employed nation. At the same time, the extent to which American commentators and officials believed that under the Conservatives things would have been little different reveals an implicit awareness of the commitment of the whole of the British people to the enactment and preservation of social principles. After all, the foundations of these principles had been laid before World War I by Asquith's government – a leading and reforming member of which had been the young Winston Churchill. However, Washington could neither acknowledge nor, perhaps, understand the tenacious legacy of the miserable interwar period. The demand for social justice had grown stronger after the experience of total war between 1939 and 1945, and it was this rising tide

which compelled the administration under Clement Attlee, as it would have a Churchill government, to create the welfare state.

Expressions of anxiety by the Americans about the condition of the West's defences came to be, *inter alia*, stealthy attacks on British socialism. Washington secretly doubted the martial will of a nation which shared elements of the enemy's ideology. American officials observed that at least Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin had no illusions about the true nature of international communism, unlike their colleagues Richard Crossman, Denis Pritt, Konni Zilliacus and, in the Ministry, Hugh Dalton, Sir Stafford Cripps and Bevan. The fact that the moral and practical demands of domestic socialism shaped trade and economic policies thought to be inimical to American interests was a further source of irritation. So too was the disinclination, felt by Britons across the political spectrum, to join an American-sponsored European political federation.

It is little wonder, then, that the Americans should have spoken of strains in the alliance with Britain. As early as August 1947, a Foreign Office intelligence summary reported on the widespread attention that Great Britain's financial worries were receiving in America. Referring to the United States, the report identified

> the inevitable recriminations and Schadenfreude regarding the supposed shortcomings of the British 'socialist experiment'. Even the otherwise friendly New York Herald Tribune asserts that 'the United States would look upon Britain's plight a good deal more sympathetically if the Labour Government would subordinate its party program for the needs of production'. It also remarks that 'the Marshall Plan, upon which Britain so clearly counts, has been designed to help foreign nations to their feet, not to cradle them forever in friendly arms'.

Sir Oliver Franks, the British ambassador in Washington, took a more sanguine view of American perceptions of Labour's socialism in 1949, when he looked back on the experiences of the year before. Franks observed that the rapid improvement in Britain's economic position had largely dispelled 'the allegation that the nationalisation of basic industries and the expansion

of the social services were retarding British recovery and wasting American aid'. Curiously, after Truman's unexpected victory in November 1948, the 'reported ill effects of socialism on the freedom, purse and moral fibre of the individual in Britain were cited not so much in criticism of British domestic policy as in an effort to dissuade the American voter from demanding or acquiescing in similar projects here'. The political and military relationship between the two countries continued to be 'intimate', which, in Franks' estimation, was exhibited no more hearteningly than in the Berlin air lift, and in the measures undertaken by Britain 'to reinforce our military establishment'. Nevertheless, two years later American suspicions remained fundamentally undimmed. A Foreign Office official, in a paper on 'Co-operation between the UK and the US', with whose contents Franks expressed agreement, wrote that 'we must still reckon with the lingering prejudices about Britain, about "entangling alliances" and, now above all, about socialism'.

* * *

Although these suspicions were framed in terms of concern for Western security, in reality they were largely ideological in origin. Britain under Clement Attlee, with Ernest Bevin as his Foreign Secretary, could hardly have been described as friendly to communism, particularly after the Berlin air lift, but also in the wake of the signing of the NATO Pact and the vigorous anti-insurgency action in Malaya. However, although they were aware of the historical causes of Britain's economic difficulties, American observers found it easier and more congenial to assert that the economy was weak and therefore the security of the West was endangered, because Britain's socialist masters were spending too much money on the poor.

One such observer was Lewis Douglas. The American ambassador to the United Kingdom, Douglas' influence was all the weightier owing to his closeness to the US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, to Ernest Bevin and also to British Conservative leaders. In August 1949 Douglas sent a personal message to Acheson, warning that 'the present crisis represents probably the most serious international development that has occurred since 1945'. The situation was compounded, in his view, by the sheer difficulty that the British government was experiencing as it tried to explain what Douglas described

as 'the organic and pathological changes that have taken place in the course of the last thirty years in the sterling area' to the British people. Yet, having adopted this historical perspective, the ambassador was sharply critical of British socialism. At a meeting of Western European and American ambassadors in March 1950, he observed that 'US/UK relations were at a very low ebb' and that the British were failing to co-operate in the 'prosecution of the cold war'. He attributed the problem to 'the basic conflict between the requirements of a Socialist society and of an international society as we conceived it'. The socialist, he elaborated, 'was a planner and could not tolerate any external influences ... Their principal motivation was their pursuit of a form of society they believed to be good.' Averell Harriman, also present at the meeting, agreed with Douglas and 'commented on the ruthlessness of British trade policy on the continent'. Even the liberal Charles ('Chip') Bohlen took up the theme: 'Cripps and the doctrinaire socialist group of the Labour Party are primarily interested in the social experiment,' he stated. 'They fear the effect of trade liberalization on their own doctrinaire concept of planning.' British social policies and trade practices, and a reluctance to participate fully in Europe, were together assumed to represent a possibly fatal weakness in what Bohlen called the prosecution of 'total cold war'.

A long CIA report of December 1949 provided a rather cooler analysis of Britain's shortcomings. The authors of this report, who remain, unfortunately, anonymous, took as their starting point the following premises: first, that British diplomatic, military and economic support was the *sine qua non* of the American policy of containing communism throughout the world; and second, that for the foreseeable future Britain 'must adjust to the role of subordinates in the partnership with the United States' and 'can pursue few courses to which the US may have strong objections'. Such a happy state of affairs was, however, threatened by Britain's economic febrility: 'Serious economic decline – unchecked by US aid – would result in a reduction of the British will and ability to support not only present defense efforts but important overseas commitments and a vigorous anti-Communist policy abroad.' Therefore, given the fact that Britain was by a great margin the most valuable and dependable of allies,

the cost to the United States of ensuring its internal stability and overseas commitments was 'considered to be low'. The authors of the report derived comfort from the high standards of the British armed forces, which, though small in relation to the breadth of their obligations, were reported to be 'qualitatively comparable to those of the USA'. Reassuring, too, was the knowledge that the Labour government did not intend to reduce the size of the military establishment, despite 'the voices on the left' calling for defence cuts in favour of social services and food subsidies, and the 'almost invisible' reduction in the standard of living that would flow from the faltering economy. Nor to be expected was an 'appreciable increase of Communist or other subversive influences', but anti-American feeling – though 'certainly less strong than anti-British feeling in the United States' – did oblige the government 'to avoid appearances of subservience to US influence'. To that extent, the left was not entirely impotent.

The existence of the left excited keen interest, if not anxiety, within the CIA. The popular social and industrial programmes in place in Britain were, to the authors of the 1949 CIA report, an 'experiment in democratic Socialism, which appears to offer a half-way house between the capitalism of the United States and the totalitarianism of Soviet Russia'. It is not surprising that the CIA should have looked askance at political developments in the United Kingdom at this time. After all, a number of Britain's political leaders would not have been permitted to play a role in public life in the United States, let alone sit in the legislature and occupy positions of executive authority. The Prime Minister Clement Attlee, of the 'intellectualist, middle-class wing of Laborites', was considered to be safely moderate. Similarly, his most likely successor, Herbert Morrison, gave no cause for concern. Ernest Bevin, though 'blunt and occasionally over-emotional', was close to heroic in American eyes for 'his policies of firm resistance to Soviet expansion and … close collaboration with the United States'. Sir Stafford Cripps, who was 'probably the most brilliant and able man in British public life', seems not to have aroused in the CIA the enmity felt towards him by other US agencies and officers, perhaps because of the strict orthodoxy of his economic policies at the Treasury and his 'almost legendary' integrity and austerity. A 'left-winger', Hugh Dalton was judged

to be without much influence in government, but not so Aneurin Bevan. The 'anti-capitalist warrior of the Cabinet', Bevan was 'looked upon by some as a dangerous demagogue'. From an American perspective, when allied with his reputation as 'a capable administrator and a man of marked political talent', this was disturbing indeed. Bevan was regarded as a likely candidate for leadership in the event of the party moving towards the left.

Outside the Ministry, Richard Crossman attracted the attention of the CIA, because as a former leading 'dissident on the left' he was thought, accurately and comfortingly, to have modified his views:

> In 1946 he led a rather abortive revolt of some hundred members of the House of Commons against the policy of Mr Bevin; they charged the government with subservience to the United States and hostility to the true interests of the workers and intellectuals of Europe. Crossman believed strongly in Britain's becoming the leader of a European 'Third Force', removed from both the Soviet and US camps. Since the end of 1947, however, Crossman and most of his associates have gradually modified their views; although they are now critical of Bevin, they are not hostile, and their opinion of the United States seems to have become more favorable. They are Labor members in good standing.

Other back-benchers further to the left, such as John Platts-Mills, Konni Zilliacus and D.N. Pritt (the latter 'indistinguishable from a Communist'), were virtually isolated in their extremism and as a consequence were considered to be of little concern.

What, then, of Douglas' fears that domestic socialism was incompatible with a responsible – that is to say, pro-American – foreign, trade and defence policy? The CIA could come to no such conclusion. The constitutional stability of Britain, the sanity and calmness of its people, and the unlikelihood of 'polarization around extremes of left and right' would overcome any temporary political disturbance brought on by economic stringency. This judgement was presumably all the more firmly held since a few months earlier Britain had passed peacefully through a period in which, as the CIA then observed, the country was 'strained as nearly to capacity as any great

democratic nation has ever been in peacetime'. The British under either party would 'remain fundamentally friendly' and ultimately, the report concluded, '[i]f war should come Britain would unquestionably side with us'. The fact remained, however, that in the estimation of the CIA the chief, and certainly the only reliable, ally of the USA was disturbingly ill-prepared and poorly armed for war.

Julius Holmes, from the vantage point of the American embassy in London, added his voice to that of the CIA, to agree that the socialism of the Labour government was not inherently destructive of the special relationship. The basic cause of the growing friction between the two countries, he said in a cable to Acheson, was economic in nature:

> Brit[ish] leaders feel they are now fighting a last-stand battle for survival as a world power. They see themselves confronted by a host of life and death problems. They are trying simultaneously to maintain their Commonwealth and Empire and military commitments, balance their trade, modernize their industry, balance their budget, fight off inflation, and prevent a fall in their standard of living. Since there are no margins, even trivial things such as a battalion dispatched to Eritrea; a million pounds expenditure on this or that item; a million pounds gained or lost in overseas trade; a penny rise in the price of bread or a dime on the price of domestic coal become critical problems of major dimensions that require Cabinet attention.

Although a Labour government 'committed to planning and nationalization imposes certain additional strains on our mutual relations', the important thing to remember, Holmes advised, was that 'it would be a mistake for us to believe that our differences would disappear if [the] Conservatives come to power'. In matters of international concern any British government 'would adopt much the same policies'.

Holmes' allusion to the forthcoming British elections of February 1950 was designed to placate any fears should Labour be returned to office. In the event, according to a Foreign Office assessment made in March, little alarm was occasioned by their victory. True, the narrowness of the

government's majority gave rise to some wishful thinking that the policies of the welfare state might be repudiated and the nationalisation and control of industry slackened, but it was understood in America 'that there is little difference of principle between the two parties in the United Kingdom over foreign affairs'.

There were, however, some misgivings in official American circles after the election about the appointment of Manny Shinwell to the Defence portfolio and, more particularly, of John Strachey to the War Ministry. These misgivings were no doubt fuelled by the *Evening Standard*'s charge that Strachey had 'never repudiated his belief in Communism'. The appointments were announced just as the Fuchs affair was unfolding and the Americans were facing their own spy and loyalty investigations. Shinwell, despite having served as a Minister since 1945, had made little effort to hide his hostility towards American foreign policy.

Truman and Acheson had to be very careful indeed in this matter. Touching as it did on the highly sensitive issues of defence and espionage, the issue might well have caused a major breach between the two countries if mishandled. On 9 April, Acheson raised the subject with the President:

> I mentioned to the President that our Military people appeared to be getting very disturbed about the exchange of military information … in view of the presence of Mr Shinwell as Minister of Defense and Mr Strachey as Minister of War in the Attlee Cabinet. I said that this was a matter which required pretty careful judgment. Nobody wished them [the Pentagon] to run into real dangers on matters of important military secrets. Similarly, we did not wish to get into major trouble with such an important ally by taking a position which might be interpreted as dictation on our part as to who should be in the British Cabinet.

Truman agreed that they should be 'extremely cautious', observing delphically that 'the British might solve the problem for us'. Shinwell and Strachey remained in the government, so whatever Truman had in mind does not appear to have come to pass. When the issue trickled into the American press in April, Sir Oliver Franks felt obliged to warn the Foreign

Office. An Associated Press story originating in The Hague carried an allegation that the Americans were pressuring the British government to ‘deny certain military information to Mr Strachey’. Franks simply declared in response that ‘no official or semi-official clarification will come from this end’, and nothing more was heard of the matter. Certainly, for Attlee to have ordered that the two men be denied access to security-sensitive documents is scarcely credible. However, the presence in the Labour government of Ministers whose past and, in some cases, as aforementioned, existing political views and associations would have disbarred them from office in the United States, continued to act as an irritant in relations between the allies.

In April 1950, a briefing paper was prepared in the State Department for use by officials and Acheson at the tripartite Foreign Ministers’ talks to be held in London in May. Again, the Americans revealed their nervousness about Labour’s domestic social policy and its corrosive effect on the international economy and Western defence. A ‘working relationship’ between the two countries, it was stated, had been ‘a basic, if usually unspoken, premise of US foreign policy’ since, remarkably enough, the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine. In the years after World War II the association had become one of the very foundations of US foreign relations. However, in recent months, the paper continued, a ‘number of stresses and strains’ had become apparent which threatened ‘to develop into major cracks in the structure of US–UK relations’ – developments which, in turn, would require a drastic reorientation of American foreign policy. According to the paper, a change in the relationship along these lines would be ‘a major disaster involving the decline and eclipse of the whole Eastern Hemisphere and a policy of isolation for the Western Hemisphere or even perhaps for North America alone’.

As financial limitations were, in the view of the State Department, the reason most frequently advanced by the British for their inability to co-operate fully with the United States, these were closely examined in the Department’s briefing paper. Certain difficulties, such as the dollar and sterling position, were almost beyond immediate or even medium-term solution. Other problems, though, were the results of policy decisions, chief

among which was Labour's commitment to 'dedicating a large part of the budgetary income to domestic welfare and social services'. Clearly the State Department felt something must be done, for it was their conviction that this form of expenditure should be limited in some fashion or other if Britain was to attend to 'its external responsibilities'. There is more than a faint echo here of Lew Douglas' strictures. Despite protestations by London to the contrary, Britain's efforts to maintain a socialist state had undoubtedly led 'to attempts to insulate the economy from outside competitive forces, thus limiting the ability of the British economy to adapt itself to changing world conditions'. Worse still, 'the more doctrinaire of the British socialists', antagonistic as they were to the philosophy of capitalism, distrusted American motives and insisted on 'insulating British economic planning from any chance of intervention by Americans'.

But intervene America must:

> A failure to keep domestic welfare expenditure in a reasonable relation to total commitment might very well defeat the very objectives which the British seek domestically. They cannot transfer external responsibilities to us without limitation. We cannot quarrel with the objective of becoming independent of US aid nor with the objective of reestablishing sterling as a strong currency … We believe that the urgency of taking the actions necessary to prevent deterioration in the situation of the Western world is greater than the urgency of terminating dependence upon US aid and the reestablishment of sterling. This belief forces us to face the fact that we may well have to do some or all of the following: (a) continue US aid in some form after 1952, (b) take a variety of domestically unattractive actions which will in themselves decrease the necessity for US aid, and (c) contribute to a solution of the sterling balance problem.

In the last resort, especially as there was 'no future for the British apart from close collaboration with the US', Washington would have to get tough:

> While we cannot deny the right of the British, or of any country, to follow whatever social or economic doctrine they choose democratically,

> we do have a right and duty to see that the large amount of assistance we are giving is used in a way to promote the objectives for which it is given. We have the right and duty to protest if we really believe that the pursuit of dogma is prejudicing the creation of those conditions which are necessary to recovery and peace.

Or, in other words, like Siamese twins, one must be dominant in all things lest the two perish. There were, alas, differences in temperament between the twins. 'We are apt to be impatient', it was observed, 'urging fast action, specific commitments and definite plans. The British are much more cautious and favor the gradual approach which has traditionally been known as "muddling through" … the pressure of events and the tempo of the cold war are not such as to permit leisure.'

While the Americans might plead that their critical attitude towards Britain's policy priorities was amply justified by the exigencies of the cold war, they seem nevertheless to have felt no great enthusiasm for the prospect of Britain reaching economic independence. Noting that Britain was giving 'over-riding priority' to achieving freedom from outside aid and to re-establishing the strength of sterling by mid-1952, the State Department asked whether these goals were 'seriously prejudicing other more important world objectives'. Presumably, the fight against communism and the prevention of a putative World War III should have been more important to London, assuming the former would not bring on the latter. What the State Department called the 'economic facts of life', wedded indissolubly to the survival of the Western powers, might have been to the British a euphemism for a world made safe for American trade.

What, then, did his advisers suggest that Acheson say to Ernest Bevin in the May 1950 talks – apart, that is, from the habitual incantation that 'collaboration and common action between the two countries' were 'essential to the security, prosperity and expansion of the free world'? First, the Secretary of State was to point out that the economic health and safety of the free world would be beyond reach if the British continued to insulate themselves from the 'competition of outside economic forces'. They would therefore have to accept the postponement of self-support until after 1952. Second, 'suggestions

as to their internal problems and actions will have to be accepted' if the extensive financial aid from the United States was to achieve its ends. Or, to put it another way, if the West was to survive, the British had no choice but to continue receiving American money, and it would be an indispensable condition of these payments that Labour curtail its economic ambitions, and more particularly its social welfare programmes.

The Foreign Office anticipated the general line of the State Department, and opposed it. In discussions between officials from the two Departments preliminary to the May meeting, it was pleasingly apparent to the Foreign Office that the United States regarded British strength, prosperity and, not least, advice as essential to the security of America itself. But, the British insisted, in order 'to maintain our position as a World Power', the Americans should forbear from interference:

> We have our own ideas about the basis on which our internal strength can best be developed. The Americans may not always agree with them or like them. We ourselves have serious reservations about some aspects of American internal policy and in particular their unemployment policy and the apparent absence of means to counteract industrial recessions and slumps which may have a grave effect on the Western economy as a whole. But so far as these are purely internal matters, they are for each of us our own affairs.

Whether or not the Foreign Office apprehended the connection between US aid and the claim to have a say in British domestic policy, they emphatically rejected further help: 'We do not want any further grants or direct aid for ourselves.' All that was asked was that the Americans 'should really adopt policies consonant with their creditor position' by allowing Britain 'to sell a sufficient amount of goods in the American market'. Further, they should also refrain from weakening 'the position of sterling and the sterling area, and the position in our Colonies'.

Early in May, Bevin presented a progress report to Cabinet on the officials' talks. He noted that the Americans had questioned Britain's concentration on 'attaining viability at all costs in 1952', since it was

'prejudicing the development of wider European interests and in some cases American policy, owing to the hostility which some … actions arouse in the United States'. The British team, he observed with some satisfaction, had 'strongly pressed our own point of view on this and the Americans have shown an understanding on the need for changes in their own economic policy'. Clearly, in the Foreign Secretary's view the Americans had got nowhere and, indeed, were forced onto the back foot during the course of the discussions. Further, he assured his colleagues that he would press for an undertaking on the part of Washington that 'in the context of collaboration in foreign policy and defence no pressure would be put on us which might impair the strength of our economic and financial position'. Over lunch with Acheson and Attlee on 9 May, Bevin 'emphasised the great desire of the British people to reach a stage when they were no longer receiving aid, but were fully independent economically and financially'. Acheson could hardly object and asked only that the British should not take their attempt to achieve independence to the point at which 'it ran counter to the general good of the Western world'.

* * *

At the core of all the talk about the special relationship and the strains to which it was being subjected lay the question of the Soviet threat. To the United States the threat was real and pressing. To Britain it was a rumbling volcano, disquieting but not about to erupt, and certainly not requiring emergency action which might jeopardise economic recovery and the welfare state. Even those in government who could not share Nye Bevan's view that the Russians were in no condition to fight a major war believed that the Western powers had a few years' breathing space yet.

The Americans, however, continually insisted that the sky was falling in. When asked to produce evidence they would point to Czechoslovakia, the Berlin crisis and, in 1949, to Russia's possession of the atomic bomb. Almost everything that was uncongenial to the Americans, including Britain's economic and welfare policies, was represented as ultimately weakening Western defences and inviting Soviet military aggression. The language employed by American officials, in internal discussions as well as in their

public statements, was apocalyptic in tone and rejected as alien the sort of analysis normally to be expected in the examination of such grave matters. In public and private debate on the intentions and strategies of allegedly hostile dictatorships – whether that of Hitler or, later, Khrushchev – attention was given to the personalities of the leaders in question, factional disputes and conflicting aims within the regimes, and a host of other factors. However, as far as Stalin's Russia was concerned, this seems to have occurred only rarely. In the millions of words produced in this period by the State Department, the CIA, the National Security Council and other agencies, one looks almost in vain for Stalin's name, let alone those of his subordinates (except, of course, for those with whom American and British officials had direct dealings, such as Vyacheslav Molotov, Andrey Vyshinsky and Andrei Gromyko). The virtually unmentioned Stalin therefore merged in the writings, and doubtless in the imaginations, of American officials with what has latterly been termed 'the evil empire'. The result was that the USSR became a sort of malicious demon capable of materialising anywhere and everywhere in order to do his damage. The flat-earth philosophy of international relations developed by the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s was founded on an unfalsifiable assertion: Moscow's overriding desire was 'to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world'. Nothing could be rejected as proof, and analysis had no place.

While panicky and unsubstantiated reports from the cold war front served to nourish the fears of the Americans, these fears began in turn to have a perceptible influence on the views of certain key British officials. In March 1950 Sir David Kelly, the British ambassador in Moscow, reported without qualification the anxieties of his American counterpart, Admiral Alan G. Kirk, who had recently returned from a conference of US ambassadors in Europe:

> His two chief points were the following. First, he found all his colleagues in an anxious mood about the possibility of a Russian military offensive almost at any time … they asked him whether he could guarantee a static situation for six months. He had answered that he could not guarantee anything owing to the possibility of accidents but that he

> thought that the general considerations and data as far as known to him were about the same as last year.

In response to a query about who would do the actual fighting if it came to war, Kirk stated unequivocally, '[t]he United States and Britain'. Commenting on Kelly's message, Strang quoted with approval the opinion of one of his officers that 'the *safety* both of the United Kingdom and of the United States depends upon the evolution of a special relationship between our two countries'.[1]

The unfolding of the fearful attitude (which by the middle of 1950 bordered on panic) was also evident in Sir Oliver Franks' annual reviews of political developments in the United States for 1948 and 1949. By June, it was this attitude of incipient panic that underpinned the Americans' readiness to blame the Soviet Union for the North Korean aggression.

* * *

Even though it was a presidential election year, Franks noted that the conduct of foreign affairs 'dominated' Congress and public opinion in 1948 to an extent that was unprecedented in the peacetime history of the United States. Thanks to the prestige of George Marshall as Secretary of State and the common sense of Senator Vandenberg and John Foster Dulles, America's foreign policy was bipartisan in nature, and all in all, Franks seems to have been pleased with the mature way in which the Americans had assumed the 'leading world role' so recently thrust upon them. Two events in 1948 shaped and finally hardened attitudes towards the Soviet Union: the coup in Czechoslovakia, and the blockade of Berlin. The coup as such did not come as a surprise to the American people. They regarded it 'merely as proof that the appetite of the Russian bear had not been sated and that more aggression was in prospect'. However, the death of the dissident Jan Masaryk shortly after the coup was a different matter.

Masaryk's tragic suicide (some called, and many thought, it murder) came as a profound emotional shock, the effect of which on the American public and on Congress was of great consequence. It dispelled, as no less dramatic event could have done so quickly and thoroughly, the persistent

illusion of that minority of Americans which had been unwilling to give full credence to the ruthless ambitions of the Kremlin and which therefore continued to believe in the feasibility of reaching a modus vivendi with communism … The death of Masaryk convinced the vast majority of the American public that the chasm between their political ideology and way of life and that of the Communists was virtually unbridgeable.

The Berlin blockade confirmed 'the conclusion derived from the fate of Czechoslovakia', but ignoring the 'violent Russiphobes' who urged the despatch of armed convoys to Berlin, the public was content with the air lift as 'a more sensible and less explosive retort'. According to Franks, the American public in 1948 tended to regard the cold war as 'not so much a prelude to a hot one as an accelerated modern version of the game of power politics which the United States, in its new role, is likely to have to play for a long time to come'. Truman too, Franks observed, had acted soberly by repeatedly offering to talk to the Russians and thereby exhibiting a willingness to conclude a rapprochement should the Kremlin display good faith. If Franks was correct in his general assessment, then in 1948 the Americans did not yet regard the USSR with bitter and implacable enmity.

By 1949, however, the mood had altered. In that year Americans, both inside and outside government, dwelt on the course of Western relations with the USSR 'to the virtual exclusion of everything else'. In particular, the explosion of the first Soviet atomic bomb 'shattered the belief, which had begun to gain ground as the result of the success of the Berlin air lift and the deviation of Marshal Tito, that the Western democracies were beginning to win the cold war'. Franks attributed the absence of public hysteria in part to the President's calm public face, but this could not hide the fact that the administration's 'political and military strategy had been seriously upset'. A critical change in the general mood was caused by the erosion of the bipartisan approach to foreign affairs. Governor Thomas Dewey's unexpected defeat in 1948 discredited the liberal wing of the Republican Party, while the 'loss of China' precipitated the first real split between the parties over foreign policy since World War II. In Franks' judgement, Truman's post-victory behaviour had not helped the darkening situation:

> [T]he leadership was cocky and independent. Having snatched victory from the very jaws of defeat Mr Truman and his immediate entourage seemed to feel that they had a popular mandate for whatever they wished to do and they were thus, for some months, in no mood to consult with, or even to take into their confidence, any Republican leader. More importantly so far as Britain was concerned, the air of tension and anxiety in the United States pervaded Anglo–American relations in the realms of economic, foreign and defence policies, and led to widely shared 'dismay'.

The sense of urgency was unfocused and all-embracing. The State Department declared: 'Our major antagonist presses us relentlessly in all fields, military, political, economic, cultural, etc., and forces us to the realization that alone we do not have the power or resources necessary to achieve our objectives. We must mobilize our allies and friends, expanding their number and assuring their collaboration and help.' However, displaying all the phlegm for which the British were infamous in American eyes, Sir Gladwyn Jebb told US officials in April 1950 that, while the Soviets had made a 'slight gain' by producing the atomic bomb and helping the Communists to success in China, their provocative behaviour did not betoken a readiness to 'risk action which might result in hostilities'. In his estimation the critical period was unlikely to come before 1955 or 1956. In this, Jebb was speaking for the Foreign Office and indeed for the British Chiefs of Staff. However, the fact that they were willing to hazard such a prediction suggests that the British also believed the Russians were operating to some sort of timetable for the accomplishment of European, perhaps world, domination. The difference between the two allies lay only in their views on the question of timing, although given the awful nature of the expected 'hostilities', the Americans doubtlessly regarded the British estimate as impossibly complacent.

Of course, it might have been that the British were merely humouring the Americans by seeming to agree that the Kremlin intended to engage in general war at a more or less predictable time in the future, but in light of the tenor of the discussion of the problem in the Cabinet and Whitehall,

the view appears to have been sincere. London, as well as Washington, had begun to see the USSR as a doomsday machine, primed and ticking inexorably towards the moment of detonation. Thus, for London too, the Soviet leaders had ceased to be mere mortals whose motives and very ways of thinking could be analysed rationally. This was an extraordinary transformation in the few years since World War II, when the – admittedly ludicrous – creation by British propagandists of the Uncle Joe cult had at least depicted the Russian people and their leaders as human beings. Though committed to a cranky and distasteful ideology, they were depicted as differing from British people in only a few superficial respects.

Early in May 1950, Bevin told the Cabinet that he and the Americans were in broad agreement that 'the trend of power in the last twelve months had been, on balance, unfavourable to the West, and that the present situation is one of danger'. Unlike the Americans, though, the Foreign Secretary thought 'it was not likely that they [the Soviets] would be prepared to run a serious risk of war for several years'. In this case, he implied, elimination of the 'weak spots in the Western system' could proceed at a steady rather than a frantic pace. In reply to questions in Cabinet about Britain being made to appear an obstacle to talks with the Russians, Bevin said that he was 'entirely clear that … general negotiations are unlikely to succeed until such time as we have built up a "situation of strength" in the West'. The situation-of-strength philosophy was very much the formulation of the American Secretary of State: Acheson was speaking through Bevin. In the middle of 1950 NATO was largely without teeth, and it was with this in mind that Bevin warned his colleagues of the military dangers confronting Western Europe from the East. He urged the replacement of the original idea of the Western Union with 'the wider conception of the Atlantic community'.

During the May talks Bevin developed his thesis concerning the nature of the Russian threat. There was indeed a contest 'between Soviet philosophy and western civilization' and, as in the case of Greece, the Soviets might well exploit the technique of fomenting civil war in susceptible areas such as Germany and Southeast Asia. But Bevin went on to discount an immediate threat to Western Europe. While agreeing with Acheson that NATO must be strengthened, he emphasised the necessity for what was to the Americans

a dangerous illusion, namely building Europe's defences without simultaneously jeopardising the 'standard of living'. As Acheson knew, he meant the welfare state in Britain.

As the Americans approached a state of mind indistinguishable from that of a people at war, a further strain in the relationship emerged over the issue of British integration with the rest of Western Europe. In Washington's view, the military integration of Europe, and indeed of Europe and the United States, rested ultimately on some form of European economic and political federation. While the details of this structure were far from clear, the fulfilment of such a scheme would also carry the advantage to the United States of a reconstructed and open market for US goods. Julius Holmes' description of American 'prodding, pressure and criticism' was no better illustrated than with respect to this issue:

> The principal source of friction in this connection is our continuing demand that they 'integrate' their economy with Europe … they are fearful that American opinion may not be satisfied with such prosaic objectives as multilateral trade and convertible currencies in Europe, and may insist on a more ambitious form of unification that would undermine Brit[ain's] position in relation to the Commonwealth … Moreover Brit[ain] resents a common American attitude that they are just another European power. They see Brit[ain] as the hub of a vast and complicated political, military and economic mechanism, occupying a position in the world and a relationship with us which is quite different from the other European powers. There is a constant wonder here that we should think it in American interests for them completely to integrate with Europe.

* * *

Holmes' shrewd assessment identified a bundle of twitching British nerves: fear that closer formal ties to Europe would endanger the cohesion of the Commonwealth – and further, that the USA would not be sorry to see this happen; refusal to be regarded as simply another European supplicant; and, of course, the age-old, near-ineradicable conviction that Britain was not and never would be part of Europe.

Lew Douglas expanded on one of these fears at the meeting of US European ambassadors in March. Although the Commonwealth had changed in character profoundly since the war – with the addition of members of 'different race, religion and philosophic outlook' – and London could no longer automatically claim leadership, the organisation remained important to her. It seems it was also important to America. It was observed at the same meeting that 'there was discussion in Washington as to what extent the US could replace the UK in the Commonwealth', and though 'there was considerable doubt' about the proposition, Harriman remarked that at the very least the United States should not allow the British to use the Commonwealth as an exclusive instrument of their foreign policy. Douglas, ever mindful of the political complexion of the British government, added that 'if Socialism became permanently fastened to the UK the Commonwealth would disintegrate in any event and we would be confronted with the decision as to what role the US should play in such circumstances'. Probably no more than idle speculation, these remarks nonetheless serve to validate the nagging fear felt in London that the Americans had begun to cast covetous glances at the Commonwealth. The assurance given to Strang by Philip Jessup, US ambassador at large, that 'we do not want to break up the Commonwealth', certainly betrayed an awareness of British suspicions if it was not a case of protesting too much.

In the opinion of the State Department, the Commonwealth was 'of greater importance, economically, strategically and politically, than any other existing grouping'. To be sure, the body was intimately associated with the sterling system as a whole. This was of paramount importance, according to the State Department, at a time when the 'internal economy [of the United Kingdom] is kept going ... only through detailed manipulation of price and wage controls, subsidies and other forms of government direction'. For Britain, the Commonwealth was of vital concern also for reasons of sentiment and prestige. Moreover, it was intrinsic to the general problem of the Anglo–American relationship:

> Our principal difficulty has related to the reluctance of the British to indicate, in making defense plans, what forces they would be prepared to commit on the Continent. It is probably an academic matter to discuss

> whether we do or do not favor real political union between the UK and Europe … There is no reason to believe that a strictly Western European political union is within the realm of practical politics in the foreseeable future. It is also far from clear that, if we faced up to all the implications, we would favor political merger to such a degree as to mean the end of the Commonwealth system and of the special relationship which exists between the British and us.

At the same time, the State Department suspected that the British were making rather too much of the Commonwealth connection. For, although it was in America's interest to help maintain the strength and cohesiveness of the Commonwealth, its welfare was 'in the long run dependent upon a strong Western Europe with which the UK is closely associated'. Fundamentally, then, while the British had historically wished to exercise political power on the Continent, they believed that 'political merger with Continental countries would be fatal to their position as a world power'. It was clear to the State Department that Britain 'did not have much respect for the political maturity, resoluteness or discipline of the Continental countries', close association with whom could only damage their 'stable political system and type of society'.

Washington was careful, however, to leave the British guessing about the special relationship, even to the extent of allowing them to think it might not exist at all. As Bevin informed Cabinet with some disappointment, the United States was insistent that 'so far as European affairs are concerned we must not expect them to regard us as entirely different from the other European Powers'. This was certainly the view of David Bruce, the US ambassador in Paris, who cabled Jessup in early May 1950:

> If the special relationship in a world-wide basis becomes established US policy, I believe the consequences in regard to our partners in the Atlantic community will be extremely harmful … it would be regarded on the continent as the abandonment by the US of any serious attempt at European or even Atlantic community integration in favor of an Anglo–American world alliance as the cornerstone of US foreign policy.

As if in anticipation of President de Gaulle's misgivings, Bruce added that the British would be certain to use the special relationship in order to act as an intermediary between the United States and the other European powers.

Adopting a no-nonsense approach, Lew Douglas responded by saying that in the first instance, no amount of 'dialectical argument' could wish away the central importance of Britain and the Commonwealth to the United States. The problem was not whether the special relationship should be denied but rather, how the US should acknowledge it without injuring the North Atlantic community. As to the possibility of Britain introducing herself as a sort of Atlantic go-between, Douglas asked what harm could that do:

> In fact our major criticism of HM Govt has been that she has not exerted leadership on the Continent and has in fact refused to be an American intermediary. The issue is not whether the UK would attempt to be Mr Bones in a minstrel show but whether the UK would be a good Mr Bones … I do not for a moment imply that the UK's desire to have a special relationship with the US is as pure as Castile Soap and as clean as Snow White. Her motives are often no worse than ours, and no better, but I do not agree with the view that the primary reason which moves her to attempt to establish a special US–UK relationship is because of her unwillingness to join in molding a more closely knit Western Europe. Her principal motive is to buy insurance.

Coming from a man who had been calling for a tougher policy towards Britain and who had castigated its socialism, this clear-eyed appraisal was surprisingly sympathetic. In the event, the two countries agreed to disagree, at least for the interim. After a conference of officials, a joint paper was issued in which it was rather wearily stated that the problem of the United Kingdom's 'full union with the continent … will be a continuing source of irritation, but is an inevitable one'. Bevin, however, felt able to announce to Cabinet, perhaps a touch too confidently, that the Americans 'have definitely stated that they do not think we should accept any form of organic union with Europe'.

Douglas' benign frame of mind was shattered when, on 13 June, the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party produced a statement entitled 'European Unity'. It was drafted by Denis Healey under Hugh Dalton's supervision, and was meant to set out the party's policy on Britain's place in Europe. Unfortunately for its purposes, the statement included some last-minute and less than enthusiastic remarks about the Schuman Plan for the pooling of the coal and steel industries of France and Germany. The plan had been more or less sprung on Bevin and had quickly become the subject of vigorous debate and speculation within the party. The National Executive Committee's pamphlet seemed to the Americans to confirm the darkest suspicions that they had entertained about the British attitude towards Europe.

'Every now and then,' Douglas cabled Acheson, 'the British drop a brick and when they do it's a classic.' The document, something of a patchwork job according to Douglas, had not been seen before publication by Bevin, Cripps, Gaitskell 'or anyone, in fact, in government who speaks with authority on economic matters'. Presumably Dalton, a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, was not regarded by the ambassador as possessing such authority. Although the pamphlet was intended as a discussion and not as a firm policy paper, Douglas claimed to know that 'parts … are completely unacceptable to certain responsible members of the Government' and that it had caused 'grave disquiet in top government circles'.

In essence, the statement alarmed the Americans because it seemed to consolidate hitherto fragmentary evidence for British reluctance to fall into line with the United States' vision of Europe. Moreover, it 'stood out as a baldly expressed reaffirmation of party belief in a cautious approach to political or economic European unity and opposition to supranational authority. It also goes further than past statements in insistence on necessity for acceptance of socialist doctrine.' Though not wholly bad – it rejected the notion of Europe as a third force between the USA and the USSR and praised America's progressive foreign programme – its publication revealed 'irresponsibility by Party and government leaders'. Since Douglas concluded that the document would not fundamentally alter relations between the two countries nor make the solution of difficulties 'more prickly', its chief impact

appears to have been symbolic. That is to say, it signified Britain's unwillingness 'to enter upon any international commitments which might conceivably restrict their ability to plan their internal economic life and to maintain full employment and fair shares at home'.

On 16 June, the day after this message was sent to Washington, Douglas called on Attlee if not to upbraid the Prime Minister then certainly to make it clear that the Americans were not pleased: 'I … explained to him my very deep worry about the violence of the response of the Senate and the House, and throughout the US generally, to the Labor Party program and wondered what could be done to abate the tidal wave of criticism and the havoc that it might produce.' The ambassador went on to suggest, no doubt as delicately as possible, that while the British might have good reasons for refusing to participate in discussions shortly to take place in Paris about the Schuman Plan, it might be as well for Attlee to state publicly that London had no wish to say anything which might interfere with the discussions, and would 'be prepared to make constructive suggestions'. Attlee undertook to explore this suggestion with one or two of his colleagues. 'At no time, however,' observed Douglas, did the Prime Minister 'indicate that there was anything in the Labor party pamphlet with which he disagreed.' Attlee could hardly have done so since, as Dalton had had to remind him, he had agreed to the draft at a meeting of the National Executive Committee.[2] In fact, he defended it 'quite vigorously' to Douglas, thus confirming the ambassador's diagnosis of Britain's economic and, indeed, moral position:

> My own interpretation of the pamphlet and my conversation with Attlee is that at last there has been brought out into the open the real inconsistency between socialism as a part of an internationalist order, except as it may be wholely [sic] and completely socialist, and the socialist state as an instrument for internal planning of the economic life of a nation.

The predicted storm of protest in the United States was, to judge by the reports of the Washington embassy, less of a storm than a brief squall. Acheson took refuge in the obvious explanation that the pamphlet was strictly a party statement and did not represent official government policy,

while press and radio comment had been 'one of disappointment and irritation' rather than of anger. Further, according to the embassy, a statement by Attlee in the House, possibly influenced in part by Douglas' urgent representations, helped to damp down American hostility. A week later it was reported that comment 'still ranges from the acerbity of the anglophobes to the restrained amalgam of understanding and disappointment of intelligent and friendly observers [friendly observers were by definition intelligent in the despatches of Franks and his staff], but, on the whole there is now a more rational approach to the matter'. Some commentators had been kind enough to point out that Britain's caution towards the Schuman Plan was 'a natural corollary of … foreign policy rather than of socialist theory' and also that those Congressmen calling for punitive measures 'would be the most strongly opposed to American participation in any such scheme or to the sacrifice of one jot of national sovereignty'.

The Labour government's defence of British economic interests and of their own domestic achievements signalled neither an unwillingness to contribute a greater proportion of resources to NATO, as Washington feared, nor a rejection of cautious engagement with the Continent at some time in the future. What they did signify was a determination not to be browbeaten by the impatient Americans, lest in attempting to regain the status of a great power Britain should lose the autonomy and freedom of action consonant with greatness. In such circumstances, the special relationship would purchase for the nation little more than power without glory.

In one crucial matter – rearmament – the Labour government did succumb to American pressure. The rearmament programme put into abeyance the achievement of economic independence, severely disrupted the structure of the British economy, slowed down progress in welfare reforms, and, with the departure of Nye Bevan from the Cabinet in April 1951, contributed to a split in the Labour Party which lasted until the 1960s. Given the reluctance of Britain right up to the eve of the war in Korea to disturb its economy for the sake of accommodating herself to the Americans, the question is, why did the government make the decision to rearm massively?

The answer is inescapable: the British contracted the virus of war hysteria incubated across the Atlantic. This is remarkable, even allowing for the

painfulness of memories associated with World War II, concluded only five years earlier, and for the ready manner in which Attlee was willing from the late 1940s to cast Stalin in the role of Hitler. The apprehension created by a small war in faraway Korea greatly exceeded that aroused by the Czech coup or the Berlin blockade, neither of which had been interpreted as proof of Russia's intention to immediately march westwards towards the Channel. Furthermore, it should be recalled that the drastic prognosis derived from the North Korean attack was not confined to the right and centre of British politics.

It is true that there were a few – mostly timorous – voices raised against the prevailing wisdom about Soviet intentions, but those on the left whose views were represented by Bevan and the *New Statesman* questioned the sheer magnitude of the rearmament programme, not its need. Bevan himself, in asking whether the Soviet Union was capable of launching a war, did not rule out the medium or longer-term possibility. Indeed, his advocacy of resisting communism by means of raising living standards in susceptible areas of the world of necessity implied that the USSR was a foe. What he and others objected to was the damaging effect of placing the British economy on a semi-war footing when no real threat existed.

Just how widespread and genuine was the fear in Britain and the United States of a general war, or of a military conflict in Europe which might easily become a general war? There appear to have been two main strands of thinking. First, it was thought that the Korean War was designed to confuse and dissipate the concentration of the West's forces preparatory to a Soviet attack somewhere in Europe, probably against Germany or Yugoslavia. Second, it was thought that the Far Eastern adventure sought to test the resolution of the non-Communist world, which, if found lacking, would be followed by all-out Soviet aggression. Either or both of these logically entailed a rapid and large increase in defence preparedness. Opinion in official US circles as to Soviet plans varied considerably immediately after the onset of hostilities in Korea, but one thing seemed clear to all: the risk of general war had been sharply enhanced.

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In an assessment noteworthy for its length and for having been produced on the day the war broke out, the State Department's Office of Intelligence Research unequivocally stated that the North Korean government 'is completely under Kremlin control and … the move against South Korea must therefore be considered a Soviet move'. According to the paper, it followed that though the Soviet leaders were probably discounting the risk of general war, they must have been aware that the United States might involve itself militarily in Korea. The advantages to the Soviet Union of the 'liquidation' of South Korea were said to be considerable. The resolve of the United States 'on ground militarily most favorable' to Russia would be sorely tested; a blow would be dealt to American prestige in Asia and to the encouragement in the whole region of anti-Communist forces; the USSR would secure its eastern approaches; and finally, Japan's alignment with the United States would be weakened. In Europe, the success of a Soviet-inspired invasion of South Korea might well lead to serious questioning of 'the might and will of the US', especially in occupied Germany where it would be feared that the East German paramilitary police might be used as the North Koreans had been used.

The one major figure who disagreed with this sort of analysis, though it made no difference to his conduct of the Korean campaign, was General MacArthur. In November 1950 he told James Plimsoll, an Australian diplomat, that if they had 'really inspired the North Korean aggression, the Soviet Union would not have abandoned the North Koreans so completely, giving them no assistance whatsoever'. This, he added, 'would have been the greatest betrayal since Judas accepted his 30 pieces of silver'. The only evidence of complicity had been the North Korean use of Russian equipment. Evidence to the contrary, which was far more compelling in MacArthur's view, was the failure of the UN forces to capture or identify Russian officers and advisers, the meek response by Moscow to the accidental bombing of Soviet territory by an American plane, and the complete absence of protest when his forces cut off one of the Siberian power sources after the capture of a generating plant in north-east Korea.

However, this judgement was made five months after the onset of the war. MacArthur certainly didn't express these opinions in June, and

Washington, in the mood then prevailing, could only assume the worst. If a crisis were to break out in Europe, the United States would scarcely be in a position to be of much use, according to a National Security Council memorandum for the President dated 6 July – a memorandum which bore all the signs of incipient panic. Even if no more threatening an outbreak than Korea were to occur in the coming months, it warned that 'we are already being forced to seriously weaken the defenses of the United States'. Were the Russians to reimpose the Berlin blockade, for example, 'there are not enough airplanes available to handle simultaneously another Berlin air lift, the Korean campaign and the absolute minimum necessary for the military defense of the United States. This is still true even if we commandeered the planes of all our airlines, which action would of course seriously cripple the domestic economy.' As for defence production, 'nobody knows what to make, or how much to make, or when, or why'. Indeed, a long-range strategic defence plan – 'essential to our survival' – requested by the President in 1945 had not been produced. The resulting chaos in the event of general war, when 'everybody will want everything yesterday', would be compounded by the necessity to counter major acts of sabotage and devastating atomic attacks. The memorandum concluded by reminding the President grimly: 'The British refused to face up squarely to the menace of Nazism until the invasion of Poland.' However, given Truman's frame of mind after the North Korean attack, he hardly needed the benefit of this kind of instructive lesson from the past.

A memorandum submitted to the President by the CIA drew less alarming conclusions. Of a number of possible developments, the one most to be feared, namely a Soviet instigation of global war, was the least likely to occur. Although the gains to be made by the USSR by actions short of general war, such as that in Korea, might be considerable, general war simply could not be hazarded in view of the potential industrial-military strength of the West and the actual atomic superiority enjoyed by the United States. However, the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued that policy should be based on at least the possibility that Korea was a Russian feint meant to disguise a larger purpose, and they warned against 'excessive commitments of … military forces and resources in those areas of operations which would