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HISTORY

Pursuing pole position

How Whitehall and Westminster planned for a new world order

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SUPERPOWER BRITAIN
The 1945 vision and why it failed
ASHLEY JACKSON AND ANDREW STEWART
480pp. Oxford University Press. £35 (US $45).

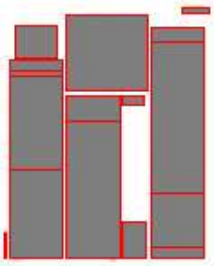
No sooner had VE Day arrived in May 1945 than work on Operation Unthinkable began. Though the Allies had been triumphant against Hitler and were confident that victory in the Pacific would soon follow, new threats were emerging. Foremost among them for Britain were the advent of atomic weapons and the prospect of Soviet domination of Europe. In the time between Germany's surrender and his emphatic defeat in the July general election, Winston Churchill was presented with a top-secret plan to deliver a knockout blow to the Red Army, to check its dominance in central and eastern Europe.

In an assessment so sensitive that it was not released to public view until 1998, the military hierarchy judged that a rapid victory would be impossible. The most likely outcome was another protracted campaign in which the odds would be stacked against Britain, the US and their western European partners. Confronted with this stark reality, Operation Unthinkable morphed into planning for another nightmare scenario. Should the Americans withdraw their forces from the Continent, how might Britain and its European allies slow the Soviet advance to Europe's Atlantic coast?

Such was the sense of relief and vindication that followed victory in the Second World War, it is easy to forget just how fragile Britain's position was in 1945. There was an almost uniform consensus that the country had ultimately had "a good war", after a very bad start. Through deft and imaginative diplomacy, it was carving out a privileged place in the postwar international and collective security architecture. It played a leading role in the formation of the United Nations Organization at a conference in San Francisco that concluded in June, and clung on to its position as one of the "Big Three" at Potsdam (where Clement Attlee replaced Churchill after Labour's victory in the general election). By the autumn of 1945, however, it was clear that Britain was overstretched strategically and overheated economically as a result of wartime mobilization, with a manpower shortage and crippling debt. According to John Maynard Keynes, it was facing a "financial Dunkirk" following the abrupt ending of Lend-Lease by the Truman administration in August, with further cracks appearing in the US relationship and growing fears about Soviet threat.

Thus begins a well-trodden story in which the greatest of victories gave way to the rapid fragmentation of Britain's once great empire and steady geopolitical decline, accompanied by the dead weight of sluggish growth. Western Europe had been devastated by war, but was soon on a faster path to recovery. By 1962, in the famous verdict of the former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Britain had lost its empire, but not yet found a role - bereft of purpose and damagingly hesitant as to where to place its strategic or industrial bets. Another thirty years would pass before the nation was content to comfort itself with the consolation of "punching above our weight", as Douglas Hurd put it. How Churchill would have winced at the homily.

Yet, as the authors of *Superpower Britain: The 1945 vision and why it failed* argue, the tendency to look at the postwar period through the prism of decolonization and decline does not do justice to the complexity of the challenges, or to the sophistication



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of strategic thinking and decision-making. In some ways, this was a golden age of strategic, military and diplomatic ingenuity – bolstered by the mobilization of patriotic intellectuals who put their shoulders to the wheel, as if stung by the criticism of their snootiness in George Orwell's 1941 essay "The Lion and the Unicorn".

Given the circumstances, was the record of British statecraft so bad? Britain had avoided ruination after two successive world wars, standing temporarily alone and straining all its sinews to vanquish an existential threat. Its military and technological achievements were considerable and it came out of the war with less damage to its industrial base than almost any other European state. Within a few years of 1945, despite mountains of debt, it remade its social contract radically through peaceful democratic process, under a suburban socialist leader, without a hint of revolution or tumult. The standard of living for most working people was far better in the second half of the twentieth century than it had been in the first, with national insurance and healthcare universally available after the war, along with opportunities for social mobility under Rab Butler's Education Act 1944. Yes, there were humiliations to come, including Suez, but Britain had the softest landing of almost any declining empire in history – perhaps more remarkable when one considers the black hole-like pace at which it imploded. Over the long term, the country even came out on the winning side in the Cold War, closely aligned to the pre-eminent superpower. Were the political classes and mandarinate really as dunderheaded and delusional – beholden to arcane views on empire, blinded by unrealistic ambitions to remain a superpower, making fundamental missteps on Europe or becoming unthinking supplicants to the US – as their armchair critics made out? If so, what was the alternative path?

Ashley Jackson and Andrew Stewart are two esteemed experts on British imperial grand strategy. Their combined life works tell a story about just how important the empire and dominions were to the British effort in the Second World War. In the period from 1939 to 1945, they note that the metropole had asserted more control of the periphery than for many years, creating a new sense of imperial consciousness in Whitehall. The empire's lack of contiguity presented huge organizational challenges and acute vulnerabilities, demonstrated vividly by the loss of Singapore in 1942, which threw its whole Asian empire into doubt. The demands of war meant trying to hold a variegated global structure together, maintaining trade and communications links, and utilizing these routes to transfer raw materials and sustain millions of overseas personnel via a large navy and the deployment of airpower in different theatres. The dominions chose to align for their own security and economic interests, but were increasingly finding their own voices in the counsels of war and peace. Bringing this all together, as Churchill put it, required a "prodigy of skill and organisation".

In *Superpower Britain*, Jackson and Stewart build on that story for the postwar era, explaining how the empire and dominions remained essential to British aspirations to be a world power after 1945. While the fate of India was understood to be increasingly outside British control, the governing elite – on the left and right – sought to reinvigorate and reimagine the wider imperial system, albeit in altered form. They did so with a genuine belief that this was not only good for Britain, but for the world order. Attlee hoped that the Commonwealth could become a "United Nations in miniature" – a multi-ethnic group of nations that enjoyed self-determination, but also saw the benefits of voluntary association. His more realist foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, viewed the empire as essential to Britain's productive power – not least in the access that it provided to cheap Persian oil – in a race of advanced industrialized economies. That said, the ending of imperial preference and acquiescence in dollar dominance soon put an end to the more ambitious idea of creating a co-operative economic union that could rival its American or Soviet counterparts.

This outlook amounted to what the authors see as a tenaciously held "force of habit, an empire state of mind" across the British political, diplomatic and military elite. Even those on the left "clung to it while whispering sweet words of freedom". In this environment, they are right to observe, Churchill was less of a dinosaur than is sometimes presumed. For just a moment in 1944–5, Labour had flirted with the idea of Britain as a "third force" in international affairs – a social-democratic mixed economy that could be a pole for a global middle ground otherwise forced to choose between capitalist America and Communist Russia. But that notion was soon abandoned as Anglo-Soviet relations nosedived. By November 1945, in language that alarmed the Americans for its bellicosity, Bevin was accusing Moscow of "reaching across the throat" of the empire in the eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Old habits died hard. To buttress these concerns, a "World Strategy Review" by the military hierarchy outlined the domestic vulnerability that Britain would face if an enemy effectively cut the empire in two by seizing the Suez Canal.

Superpower Britain is a study of the thinking of

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political elites and the official mind. It is the world – and Britain's place within it – viewed through Whitehall memoranda, diaries and contemporary journals such as the relentlessly boosterish liberal imperialist *Round Table*. This is interwoven with the historiography of empire and the UK-US relationship by historians such as John Darwin and David Reynolds. The result is an accomplished and well-judged piece of scholarship that does not seek to flip too many tables. But in a book that purports to wrestle with ideas of the future, one is left feeling that the parameters might have been expanded still further beyond those areas in which the authors have existing expertise.

The practitioners of British statecraft dealt in the postwar era with the problems before them on the immediate horizon, moderating or postponing their idealism to an unspecified future date. But they were highly conscious that they lived in a period of immense historical, scientific and technological change. The world order would not be static; nor did they seek restoration of the old system. They understood that the range of possible futures was immense.

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"Peace", part of the Victoria Memorial, London

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The war had brought about an explosion of futurology, fuelling radical new forms of political economy. Keynes had struggled to get a hearing with Labour or any of the other main parties in 1939, but Keynesianism and economic planning found a political home in war. In 1940, H. G. Wells published his influential book *The New World Order*, which envisaged a march towards scientific world government. In 1941, the Royal Institution hosted a conference on "Science and World Order" in London, at which Julian Huxley played a leading role before becoming director general of Unesco, imbued with a particular form of "one world" idealism. In 1942 came the Beveridge Report, which advocated the embrace of "a revolutionary moment" in domestic and world affairs. As the tide turned towards the Allies, the most prestigious historians and philosophers of the age, including Arnold Toynbee and Isaiah Berlin, wrote memorandums for government on the future of the international system. World-class physicists such as Patrick Blackett discoursed on technology, military strategy and international development. Retrospective reasoning was also used. The American economist Robert Brady snottily suggested that the British elite needed to read Edward Gibbon on the decline of the Roman Empire; in fact, when he was prime minister, Attlee devoured all seven volumes on his visits to Chequers.

When one considers this broader hinterland, the debates over policy take on a different light. Of course, there was a "needs must" imperative that meant longer-term idealism was often diluted. The power game had not stopped in 1945. Debt and currency crises, the threat of Soviet expansionism and the fear of American retreat from world responsibilities tightened the decision-making tourniquet even more. There were constant reminders of the fragility and contingent nature of victory. More than anything, to an extent not fully explored in *Superpower Britain*, every British policymaker remembered the failed hopes of 1918 and the litany of broken promises at home and abroad. The lessons weighed heavily on their minds.

As prime minister, Attlee was in some respects the most idealistic about the potential for a rapid transition to a new type of liberal world order – in which old imperial structures would fade away and it would be left to the United Nations Organization to keep open the sea lanes and arbitrate disputes. Indeed, bringing this about seemed even more urgent to him when confronted with a crisis of manpower at home and the doom-laden predictions of Keynes that Britain was no longer able to pay for vast overseas military establishments in Asia and the Middle East. He also believed that the creation of the atomic bomb had changed the nature of warfare for ever, and that the old "great game" – the battle for waterways and control of chokepoints – would no longer be as decisive as it once had been. In political terms, he thought it was preferable that Soviet designs be confronted with the demands of the UN rather than the needs of the British Empire. But in his efforts to draw down forces in the Middle East, he was met with outright rebellion from the military chiefs and, crucially, his foreign secretary. "We have had enough experience of the League of Nations to be quite clear that, whilst backing this essentially idealistic organisation, something more practical is required", observed the brusque Ulsterman Field Marshal Alanbrooke. He had a point.

Notwithstanding his contempt for gradualist parliamentary socialism, the communist historian Eric Hobsbawm gave Attlee his due for trying to break the mould, only to be frustrated by the top brass and "the Etonians" at the Foreign Office. But, given the surfeit of idealism after 1918 and the catastrophe that had subsequently befallen the world, Attlee knew that the stuffed shirts had a point. Short-term horizons needed careful consideration in the pursuit of long-term strategic goals. That was not to abandon a higher purpose. It was to recognize that a seat at the table had to be won.

Critics of British foreign policy in this and other eras often presume that the many flaws and missteps must be down to some sort of pathology of the mind, sometimes borrowing from the American tradition of "realist" international relations theory. There are those who focus their critique on the key decision points, wrong turns and blunders, and those who see the root cause as deriving from a more fundamental hubris and imprudence. Yet they miss more fundamental structural problems such as the

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long tail of failed energy policies, the eroding of a competitive edge in computing and technical education, deindustrialization and the undercutting of social mobility via genuine meritocracy.

To an extent not fully appreciated, learning the lessons of past mistakes is something that current British policymakers try genuinely to do, referring not infrequently to the "Chilcot checklist" that accompanied the publication of the Iraq Inquiry's report in 2016. As we enter the second quarter of the twenty-first century, the challenges of governance in many ways seem to be getting more acute for the British state. Yet if one steps aside from the internal monologue about the decision-making processes and takes a broader view of the British story in the past 100 years, one can also see the dangers of the cautious managerialism and genteel constitutionalism that has come to predominate in the official, and to a certain extent political, mind.

The struggle for national survival from 1939 to 1945 bequeaths us with brutalist realities that are harder to confront in more peaceful times. Compelling visions of the future, of new forms of political economy, are central to the maintenance of democratic legitimacy. The zeitgeist cannot be left to its own devices. Prosperity and security are contingent on a country's grasp of modernity. International politics is ultimately a power game in which diplomatic skill – vital as it is – will struggle to find fertile ground unless a space is created for it by productive, military and scientific force. ■

> **"Britain had the softest landing of almost any empire in history**