



Harold Wilson contemplates the burdens of premiership, 1964

Six Moments of Crisis

Inside British Foreign Policy

GILL BENNETT

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**Events take place everywhere but the crux
is at the centre.**

Han Fei: Chinese philosopher, c.280–233 BC
(*The Art of Attainment*, trans. Tony Blishen)

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Abbreviations

BAOR	British Army of the Rhine
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff
CDS	Chief of the Defence Staff (from 1958)
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization (formerly the Baghdad Pact)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency, US overseas intelligence organization
CIGS/CGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff/Chief of the General Staff (after 1963)
CNS	Chief of the Naval Staff
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
EEC	European Economic Community
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
FBI/CBI	Federation of British Industry/Confederation of British Industry (from 1965)
FO/FCO	Foreign Office/Foreign and Commonwealth Office (after 1968)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)
GCHQ	Government Communications Headquarters
GDR	German Democratic Republic (East Germany)
GRU	Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye, Soviet military intelligence
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRA	Irish Republican Army
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopastnosti, Soviet security and intelligence service
MI5	Security Service, Britain's domestic intelligence organization
MI6	Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), Britain's overseas intelligence organization
MOD	Ministry of Defence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NFU	National Farmers Union
OEEC	Organization for European Economic Cooperation
PUS	Permanent Under-Secretary
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SEATO	South East Asia Treaty Organization
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UN	United Nations Organization
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WEU	Western European Union

List of Principal Ministers Featured, and their Ministerial Posts since the Second World War*

Clement Attlee (1883–1967)

- Lord Privy Seal, 1940–2
- Secretary of State for the Dominions, 1942–3
- Lord President of the Council, 1943–5
- Deputy Prime Minister, 1942–5
- Prime Minister, 1945–51, Minister of Defence, 1945–6

Aneurin Bevan (1897–1960)

- Minister of Health, 1945–51
- Minister of Labour and National Service, 1951

Ernest Bevin (1881–1951)

- Minister of Labour and National Service, 1940–5
- Foreign Secretary, 1945–51
- Lord Privy Seal, 1951

George Brown (1914–85)

- Parliamentary Private Secretary to Minister of Labour and National Service, 1945–7, and to Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1947
- Joint Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 1947–51
- Minister of Works, 1951
- First Secretary of State and Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, 1964–6
- Foreign Secretary, 1966–8

R. A. Butler (1902–82)

- Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Foreign Office, 1938–41
- President of the Board of Education, 1941–4
- Minister of Education, 1944–5
- Minister of Labour and National Service, 1945
- Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1951–5
- Lord Privy Seal, 1955–9
- Home Secretary, 1957–62
- First Secretary of State and Deputy Prime Minister, 1962–3
- Foreign Secretary, 1963–4

James Callaghan (1912–2005)

- Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Transport, 1947–50
- Parliamentary and Financial Secretary to the Admiralty, 1950–1

- Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1964–7
 - ~~Home Secretary, 1967–70~~
 - Foreign Secretary, 1974–6
 - Prime Minister, 1976–9
-

Lord Carrington (1919–)

- Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 1951–4
- Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Defence, 1954–6
- First Lord of the Admiralty, 1959–63
- Secretary of State for Defence, 1970–4
- Secretary of State for Energy, 1974
- Foreign Secretary, 1979–82

Sir Stafford Cripps (1889–1952)

- Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons, 1942
- Minister of Aircraft Production, 1942–5
- President of the Board of Trade, 1945–7
- Minister for Economic Affairs, 1947
- Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1947–50

Sir Alec Douglas-Home (1903–95) (*Lord Dunglass, 1918–51; 14th Earl of Home, 1951–63*)

- Minister of State for the Scottish Office, 1951–5
- Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, 1955–60, Lord President of the Council, 1957 and 1959–60
- Foreign Secretary, 1960–3
- Prime Minister, 1963–4
- Foreign Secretary, 1970–4

Anthony Eden (1897–1977)

- Secretary of State for the Dominions, 1939–40
- Secretary of State for War, 1940
- Foreign Secretary, 1940–5, and Leader of the House of Commons, 1942–5
- Foreign Secretary, 1951–5
- Prime Minister, 1955–7

Denis Healey (1917–)

- Secretary of State for Defence, 1964–70
- Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1974–9

Edward Heath (1916–2005)

- Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury and Chief Whip, 1955–9
- Minister of Labour, 1959–60
- Lord Privy Seal, 1960–3

- Secretary of State for Trade and Regional Development, 1963–4
 - Prime Minister, 1970–4
-

Sir Geoffrey Howe (1926–)

- Solicitor-General, 1970–2
- Minister for Trade and Consumer Affairs, 1972–4
- Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1979–83
- Foreign Secretary, 1983–9
- Lord President of the Council and Deputy Prime Minister, 1989–90

Roy Jenkins (1920–2003)

- Parliamentary Private Secretary, Commonwealth Relations Office, 1949–50
- Minister of Aviation, 1964–5
- Home Secretary, 1965–7
- Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1967–70
- Home Secretary, 1974–6
- (President of European Commission, 1977–81)

Lord Kilmuir (1900–67) (*Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe, 1942–54*)

- Solicitor-General, 1942–5
- Attorney-General, 1945
- Home Secretary, 1951–4
- Lord Chancellor, 1954–62

Selwyn Lloyd (1904–78)

- Minister of State for the Foreign Office, 1951–4
- Minister of Supply, 1954–5
- Minister of Defence, 1955
- Foreign Secretary, 1955–60
- Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1960–2
- Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons, 1963–4
- (Speaker of the House of Commons, 1971–6)

Harold Macmillan (1894–1986)

- Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Supply, 1940–2
- Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Colonial Office, 1942
- Secretary of State for Air, 1945
- Minister of Housing and Local Government, 1951–4
- Minister of Defence, 1954–5
- Foreign Secretary, 1955
- Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1955–7
- Prime Minister, 1957–63

Reginald Maudling (1917–79)

- Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Civil Aviation, 1952
- Economic Secretary to the Treasury, 1952–5
- Minister of Supply, 1955–7
- Paymaster-General, 1957–9
- President of the Board of Trade, 1959–61
- Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1961–2
- Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1962–4
- Home Secretary, 1970–2

John Nott (1932–)

- Secretary of State for Trade, 1979–81
- Secretary of State for Defence, 1981–3

Emanuel Shinwell (1884–1986)

- Minister of Fuel and Power, 1945–7
- Secretary of State for War, 1947–50
- Minister of Defence, 1950–1

Margaret Thatcher (1925–)

- Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance, 1961–4
- Secretary of State for Education and Science, 1970–4
- Prime Minister, 1979–90

William Whitelaw (1918–99)

- Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Labour and National Service, 1962–4
- Lord President of the Council, 1970–2
- Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, 1972–3
- Secretary of State for Employment, 1973–4
- Home Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister, 1979–83
- Lord President of the Council and Deputy Prime Minister, 1983–6

Harold Wilson (1916–95)

- Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Works, 1945–7
- Secretary for Overseas Trade, 1947
- President of the Board of Trade, 1947–51
- Prime Minister, 1964–70
- Prime Minister, 1974–6

Within the text, the names of these and other ministers appear in bold type when they first intervene in a discussion and biographical information is given.

Introduction

Everyone has a view on what the foreigners are up to.*

It has become increasingly fashionable to invoke history on both sides of any argument about why the British government should or should not have taken certain foreign policy decisions. Politicians seeking to justify their actions (or inaction), in retrospect or in real time, point to historical analogies to show why they took a certain course of action. Experts of all persuasions and special interest groups accuse governments of ignoring, manipulating, or foolishly repeating history. (They are rarely praised for learning from it.) Media commentators pick up and rehearse all these arguments, with the danger that in becoming newsworthy they become distorted or meaningless. How often are ‘Munich’ and ‘Suez’ invoked, for example, even when there is little or no comparison between those episodes and current events? As former Foreign Secretary Douglas (now Lord) Hurd says, ignorance of history is foolishness, but the false analogy can be more disastrous than the blank mind.¹

This book is based on the experience of a long career (well over thirty years) spent as a professional historian working for the British government within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The FCO is now the only major department of state to employ a cadre of full-time in-house historians, whose task is partly to document the official history of British foreign policy, and partly to offer ‘historical advice’—happily, a very flexible concept—to ministers and senior officials. The job offers a wonderful opportunity to observe, and to some extent participate in, the workings of government: to get inside history, in fact. It is, as one of my academic colleagues puts it, ‘applied’ as opposed to ‘pure’ history, and I was lucky enough to engage in it under six different Prime Ministers and twelve Foreign Secretaries before retiring from the post of Chief Historian in 2005.

If my experience as a historian working in government has shown me anything, it is that foreign policy decisions are *always* difficult and complicated, even if that does not appear to be the case from the outside. Quite apart from the complexity of the issue on which the decision is to be taken, those who have to take it are influenced by a wide range of pressures: domestic, economic, electoral, legal, international, parliamentary, party political, personal, and more. They may then be criticized, by their political opponents, by the media, and by the general public for taking decisions that seem hasty, ill-informed, short-sighted, or just plain wrong. It seems to me that such criticism often arises because people do not understand fully the context in which the decision was taken. Of course, governments can make bad decisions, and it is not (nor has it ever been) my job to defend them. But government ministers do a difficult, important, and responsible job that affects all of us. If we are going to criticize their decisions, it should be on the basis of an informed judgement. That is where history comes in.

This book is in no sense official, and any views expressed are purely personal. But I am drawing on my experience as a government historian to try and explain to those who may be interested—particularly those who may have had little or no contact with policy-making—how British foreign policy is made. To do this I have chosen six decisions taken by British governments since the end of the Second World War. Some will be familiar, such as Suez and the Falklands conflict; others, such as the decision to withdraw British forces from East of the Suez Canal in 1968, or the expulsion of 105 Soviet intelligence officers in 1971, may be less so. But they were all controversial at the time

they were taken, and they all had a profound effect on British policy and Britain's relations with other countries. My aim is to show how and why they were taken, not to judge whether they were good or bad. Understanding those decisions better can help a good deal with understanding how others were taken. Although none of the episodes I have chosen happened less than thirty years ago, the reader will soon realize that each has a resonance in more recent events.

All the chapters in this book have the word 'challenging' in their title, for three reasons. The first is that because foreign policy decisions are always complex, they are challenging to understand. We have to work at it. The second is that looking at those decisions from the inside out, studying both the decision-makers and the context of each decision in its broadest sense can produce results that challenge existing interpretations. We may need to change our minds. The third meaning refers to the examples I have chosen, which all involved a challenge by the British government, whether to a person (like the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser), an institution (like the KGB), or a concept (like Britain's world role).

If we want to understand how and why a decision was taken, the first thing we have to do is to try and forget what we know about its consequences. Of course it is impossible to eliminate hindsight entirely. Most people will have heard of, and may have read about, some or all of the decisions examined in this book. But if we really want to get to the root of things, we have to look at them from the inside: that is, on the basis of what the decision-makers knew, or could have known, at the time, not from the viewpoint of what we now know, or in the knowledge of how things turned out. For example, when Mrs Thatcher's government took the decision on 2 April 1982 to send a naval task force to the Falkland Islands, they did not know yet that they were going to be fighting a war, still less that it would end in victory. Of course, they considered the possibility of fighting and hoped in that case to be successful. But they could not see into the future, and it is important not to let our assessment of the decision be coloured by our knowledge of what happened afterwards.

The second key element to every decision is the context, in the broadest sense. Books, sometimes a great many of them, have been written about the subject of most of the decisions considered here. But nearly all of them focus—naturally enough—on the episode or crisis itself, and few take full account of the broadest context in which decisions were taken. Yet without that context, it is impossible to understand fully how ministers arrived at their conclusions. For example, both the Suez and the Falklands crises need to be set against the background of European federalism; the Korean War against events in central Europe; Britain's application to the European Economic Community against decolonization in Africa; the decision to withdraw from East of Suez in 1968 against American involvement in the Vietnam War; and Operation FOOT against quadripartite agreements on Berlin. At the same time, domestic factors such as the state of the British economy (which encompasses everything from unemployment to globalized commerce), the size of the government's parliamentary majority, and likely media reaction are equally important.

This means that a lot of questions have to be asked about every decision, no matter what its subject. Here are just a few of them. How long is it to the next significant elections in the United Kingdom *and* in the United States? How unified is the governing political party, and is there a powerful interest group involved? What is the current economic situation, and future prospects? Are any of the key ministers under particular pressure from personal factors such as newness to the job, health, or personal relationships? Who is talking to whom on this issue, and how are their views being fed in? What is the likely media, parliamentary, and public reaction to alternative courses of action? What do government officials, the military, and coordinating bodies (like the Joint Intelligence Committee) make of the available intelligence? And most importantly, in foreign

policy: what is going on in Europe and in the rest of the world that may have a bearing on the issue at hand, even if it is apparently unconnected? It is not always possible to discover the answers to all the questions, but it is important to ask them.

Decisions are taken by people, and to understand how foreign policy is made we need to look closely at those who took them. In each of the six decisions examined in this book, the focus is on a specific meeting, usually of the full Cabinet but always of Cabinet ministers (in 1968 there are several linked meetings). The choice of meeting is inevitably somewhat arbitrary, and doubtless some will argue with my selection. I am also well aware that in choosing meetings of Cabinet ministers I lay myself open to criticism from the school of thought (a very large one) that believes ministers are not the ones who take the decisions. The real decisions, this argument goes, are made elsewhere, by a combination of officials, advisers, and other more shadowy interest groups. I do not accept this. After long years of going through the archives, as well as dealing professionally with officials, advisers, and ministers, I believe firmly in two golden rules of governmental decision-making.

The first is that government policy is made by government ministers, not by officials, special advisers, Brussels, or Washington, though all these, and many more, have an input. Only ministers, for example, have the authority to mobilize the armed forces. Politicians, civil servants, military commanders, intelligence agencies, industrial leaders, special advisers, and trade unionists may, and do, have views on policy, which may be fed in to the decision and may be very influential. But ministers are ultimately, and collectively, responsible for policy and therefore they are the decision makers, whether it is in full Cabinet or in Cabinet Committee. The Cabinet, in Walter Bagehot's words, is 'a *hyphen* which joins, a *buckle* which fastens the legislative part of the State to the executive part of the State'.² Cabinet ministers, not their advisers, take the decision and the responsibility. Naturally, a great deal of preparatory work is involved, and in the examples chosen here I have tried to reflect the range of opinion and advice on which ministers based their approach to the question in hand. But to reflect it comprehensively would require a book-length study of each decision, so it must be taken as read that I understand that the advice of officials and others will have played an important part.

My second golden rule is that even in times of crisis, ministers always think about more than one thing at a time, even if at the meeting in question they discuss a single issue. This may seem obvious, but most people writing about foreign policy focus on a particular issue, and tend to assume that ministers do the same. Of course most ministers have a particular departmental responsibility and, with their officials and advisers, are to an extent preoccupied with that area. And in times of crisis, ministers focus on the urgent matter in hand. But at Cabinet level, no decision is taken in a vacuum. Even in cases where a foreign policy issue is handled by a small group of ministers, they must bear in mind other considerations, whether it be the views of their constituency and party, or the current electoral position or budgetary restrictions on their department, not to mention what might be going on elsewhere in Britain or in the world. And despite what a lot of people think, it is impossible for ministers to be unaware, in one way or another, of history.

What is true for ministers is doubly so for Prime Ministers. By nature of their office they are responsible for the whole spectrum of policy, domestic and foreign, for the security of the realm, and for the reputation of the government they lead. Whether they took over from a member of the same party or from a political opponent, they are aware of precedent and the need to do better than before. And in the end, the final responsibility for the government rests with them: as Tony Blair wrote, the difference between everyone else and the final decision-taker is that everyone else can debate and assume, but only one person can decide.³ While they rely on their ministers to carry

specific policies forward, they have to be sufficiently on top of every one of the Cabinet portfolios in order to assess the national interest, the relative merits of the policy proposed, and its potential effect on the government as a whole. As the doyen of historians of government, Peter (now Lord) Hennessy, puts it, ‘The dilemma of the job of Prime Minister is that its holders must be selective in their detailed interventions yet constantly sensitive to virtually the whole range of government activity.’⁴

Not surprisingly, Prime Ministers tend to be exceptional people. The former diplomat and Downing Street adviser Sir Stephen Wall, who has worked closely with a number of Prime Ministers, writes that those who make it to the top in politics are ‘almost invariably extremely bright, exceptionally hard-working and of superhuman stamina ... I do not believe that anyone who has not experienced the life of a top politician at first hand can appreciate the relentless pressure and the constant stress which those politicians endure, in the midst of which they are expected to perform at the top of their game and to make good judgements based on careful and wise thought.’⁵ Another distinguished foreign policy adviser with personal experience in Downing Street, Sir David Manning, points to the influence of ‘decision fatigue’: by the time decisions reach the Prime Minister, they are by definition very difficult, or they would already have been taken by someone else. All Prime Ministers have to take too many decisions on too many things.⁶

Each of the six Prime Ministers featured in this book, from Clement Attlee to Margaret Thatcher, was bright and hard-working with exceptional stamina, though each was quite different. Some were, of course, more successful than others. All had their own way of dealing with the pressures of the job, of managing their Cabinets, and of safeguarding both their personal position and the authority of their governments. But all government ministers are under a lot of pressure, some of it subconscious. Patrick Gordon Walker, briefly Foreign Secretary in the Wilson government 1964–5, wrote that ‘ministers are very conscious of the interconnection between issues one reason why they may not clearly detect the interconnection between various factors affecting an isolated issue is that they connect them all together in a living and continuous nexus.’⁷ I would go further: to understand why a decision was taken, it is necessary to look *outside* the interconnections that ministers themselves make, and take into account the connections made by others, as well as the things that do not look as if they are connected at all. For in foreign policy the world is truly a global village, and was so before the term ‘globalization’ was thought of.

My starting point for each of the decisions has been the formal Cabinet minutes, which at the time of writing are all in the public domain except for the 1982 decision on the Falklands. These minutes are written by the Cabinet Secretary and his team, and are not a verbatim record of the proceedings. The Cabinet Secretary may write part of the record and other members of the Secretariat the rest; but he (so far it has always been a he) signs them off, and they are then circulated to ministers who do not see them in draft. Lord Armstrong, who as Sir Robert Armstrong was Cabinet Secretary 1979–87, says that he tried to write his minutes in sonata form, with an exposition, development section, recapitulation, and coda. They should, he said, be a tool of government, not just the record of a meeting.⁸ Cabinet minutes do not include every element of a discussion, do not normally ascribe remarks to individual ministers, and summarize much of the argument under the name of the Prime Minister. But they are still the right place to start. It is also important to look at what else was on the agenda at the meeting, and at other meetings leading up to the one at which the particular decision was taken.

For the first three of my decisions, taken in 1950, 1956, and 1961, the Cabinet Secretary’s Notebooks are also available. A rolling programme has been under way since 2006 to transfer to The National Archives these bound volumes of handwritten notes by the Cabinet Secretary.

Although they are not complete, can be difficult to decipher, and vary considerably according to the identity of the Cabinet Secretary, they are tremendously interesting for the historian of government. They tell us who said what on what subject, and give a flavour of the discussion in a way that the formal Cabinet minutes cannot. The detail they include can be significant: for example, the discussion of 'unseating' Nasser at the beginning of the Suez crisis is included in the Cabinet Secretary's notebook, but is not mentioned in the formal minutes. They have to be treated with some caution—we cannot know if the Cabinet Secretary was interrupted, or left the room at any point, for example—but they are still extremely useful.

I have also made extensive use of the published diaries and memoirs of ministers. The former have been particularly helpful. One has to be careful with them, since they are a personal, and possibly prejudiced account. Clement Attlee, in retirement, was scathing about the historical value of a diary. By its nature, he said, it represents 'a point of view limited by time, place and emotion, i not by knowledge ... If a diary is to enable tense minds to let off steam in private, it cannot be regarded as a safe historical source; and if it is written for use as a future historical document, it is suspect for the opposite reason. One cannot have it both ways.'⁹ Of course, he was right. But diaries have a value just by being written at the time. Even if what a minister wrote was biased, or wrong, it represents a point of view. And in cases where a number of ministers kept diaries covering the same period, as was the case in January 1968 when the decision was taken to withdraw British forces from East of Suez, it is particularly valuable to be able to compare their recollections and opinions.

Memoirs are rather different. If written shortly after being in office, they tend to be self-exculpatory; if written much later, they tend to be forgetful. But they are still a valuable source, particularly when based on a minister's contemporary notes and diaries. Memoirs by officials, too, are valuable, as are the memoirs of foreign statesmen and officials who have a different perspective on their British counterparts. The best memoirs can be extremely perceptive and informative. But it is unwise to rely on them for factual information. No matter how clear a former minister's recollection, it may well be inaccurate. There is a natural tendency for ministers (and officials) to inflate their own role in any given incident or decision. If the subject matter is sensitive, as in the case of Operation FOOT in 1971, then it may not be mentioned in memoirs at all, or only in passing. Biographies of key figures, especially if written with the cooperation of the subject and/or access to their papers, are also an important source.

Finally, there is the archival record, in the form of departmental files kept at The National Archives and elsewhere. This is a huge resource, and an essential component of any study of foreign policy-making. But as Peter Hennessy says, the archive is 'frozen history': it needs historians to 'make it twitch and warm it up a bit'.¹⁰ It would have been impossible, and indeed undesirable, to give extensive archival references for all the decisions featured in this book. Again, I must ask the reader to take it on trust that those archives have been consulted, selectively if not comprehensively, and references given where appropriate. Anyone wanting to look further must delve into the archives themselves, or read the scholarly works based on them. In my comments on the decisions and the people who took them, I make no claim for infallibility. My aim was to twitch back the curtain to reveal the backstage apparatus of policy-making, not to reveal the whole plot. Foreign policy is one of the most tightly controlled areas of government activity, never delegated and rarely subject to consultation. Yet it is one of the least well understood by those in whose name the decisions are taken. In the twenty-first century people are more aware of what is happening in the world than they have ever been: much of it seems frightening, confusing, or even inexplicable. What is British foreign policy, and why? People want, and need, to know: and looking inside history is a good way to find out.



Clement Attlee (*right*) and Ernest Bevin (*left*), 1945

1

Challenging Communism Britain Sends Land Forces to Korea, July 1950

Militarily not very desirable. Psychologically inevitable.*

On the morning of Tuesday, 25 July 1950, the British government led by Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee agreed to send a Brigade Group (about 9,000 men) to serve under American command in the war that had broken out when Soviet-backed North Korean forces invaded US-backed South Korea on 25 June.¹ The significance of the decision was political rather than military. Taken at the very beginning of a conflict that was to escalate considerably and last until 1953, the decision was of minor importance in the overall context of the war (except, of course, to those who did the fighting). But it was of considerable symbolic significance, and provides an illuminating snapshot of Britain's national and international position five years after the end of the Second World War. It is also a very good example of the complexities of foreign policy-making. Many of the issues raised still have resonance sixty years later.

On 6 July 1950 the Defence Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, had accepted the Chiefs of Staff's advice that it would be 'militarily unsound to make available any land or air forces for the Korean campaign'.² Most of Britain's armed forces were already deployed overseas, in the Middle East and in the British Zone of Germany as well as in Asia, fighting a communist insurgency in British-administered Malaya, and protecting Hong Kong. But American pressure to announce that land reinforcements would be sent had become irresistible. The British Ambassador in Washington, Sir Oliver Franks, warned that failure to offer troops would cause long-term damage to transatlantic relations. The Americans, he said, needed to feel they could count on Britain, seeking a reassurance as much psychological as practical: 'The Americans in Korea will be in a tough spot for a long time. They look round for their partner.'³

None of the ministers present at the Cabinet meeting on 25 July was in any doubt that the United Kingdom was the partner the Americans sought. And the British needed the Americans, whose support was fundamental to their defence, their prosperity, and their position in Europe and the world. Relations in the previous few months had been prickly, with the US reluctant to allow Britain the place at the atomic top table she felt was rightly hers, and some resentment on both sides at Britain's failure to respond positively to the Schuman Plan for a European coal and steel organization.⁴ But in global strategy, as the Chiefs of Staff had stated in June, 'Full collaboration with the United States in policy and method is vital.'⁵ So despite doubts about US policy in the Far East; despite warnings that military resources could ill be spared; despite fears that higher defence spending would derail social programmes; ministers in a government best known for establishing the welfare state acknowledged the centrality of the Anglo-American relationship and agreed to reverse their previous decision and send troops to Korea.⁶

Yet this was no knee-jerk response to an American demand. Rather, it reflected a complex set of domestic and foreign policy issues. Attlee, a deceptively mild-mannered but terse and decisive

Cabinet chairman, was well aware that July morning of the conflicting pressures on his ministers, a number of whom were newly appointed following a general election on 23 February when the Labour majority had been reduced to five. Although Attlee had determined to continue in office, there was a general perception—encouraged by a resurgent Conservative Party, still led by the ageing Winston Churchill but with a promising new intake of MPs—that Labour was in decline. Exhausted by five years of reconstruction and a major legislative programme, the government sought a second term to consolidate its achievements, but instead was faced with the need to increase defence spending at a time when the British people were looking for a long-delayed improvement in their standard of living.

The Korean peninsula, occupied by the Japanese since 1910 and divided at the 38th parallel when Soviet and American troops drove them out at the end of the Second World War, was not a foreign policy priority for the United States in 1950, let alone for the United Kingdom. The government of North Korea, led by Marshal Kim Il-Sung,⁷ was seen as little more than a Soviet puppet.⁸ South Korea, led by the ageing and autocratic President Syngman Rhee, received US support as a bulwark against communism. Though relations between North and South were fractious, the North Korean attack had taken the West by surprise, despite reports that something was brewing. The attack was assumed to be Soviet inspired.⁹ Neither the British nor the American government thought that the Soviet Union wanted a general war (yet). But the Korean conflict seemed to be symbolic of the power struggle that had developed since the Soviet Union had metamorphosed from a wartime ally into a post-war threat to the West. The swiftness of the US response, securing within three days a UN Security Council Resolution to support South Korea and moving forces to the area, seems equally to have surprised the Soviet leader, Josef Stalin. The Soviet Union had walked out of the United Nations in January 1950 in protest at the exclusion of Communist China, and so could not use its veto. The British government was quick to support the resolution, and agreed to place British naval forces in Japanese waters at the disposal of the US Commander.¹⁰ The stage was set for an East–West power struggle by proxy in which neither side was quite sure what the other intended, producing global instability and uncertainty that led directly to the Cabinet’s decision on 25 July.

No one at the meeting on 25 July argued against the decision to send troops to Korea. A number of ministers resented diverting money to defence that should be used to continue and consolidate the government’s welfare and nationalization programmes. This feeling was certainly prevalent in the wider Labour Party, where the Korean War was a deeply contentious issue. Some thought that the United Nations was being misused by the US to intervene in a civil war.¹¹ After five years in office, however, government ministers had developed an understanding of the constraints of national security and geopolitical realities. They knew that an exhausted and bankrupt Britain needed support both to ensure domestic recovery and to fulfil worldwide obligations; that peace had brought an end to hostilities but not to danger. An increasingly threatening Soviet Union, made powerful by victory in the Second World War and vengeful by the scale of its suffering, now dominated Eastern Europe. It must be balanced by a strong Western bloc; and the only power with the necessary economic and military muscle to create that strength was the United States of America.

This was certainly the view of Attlee and his Foreign Secretary, the formidable but now ailing Ernest Bevin (represented in Cabinet by Minister of State Kenneth Younger while issuing instruction from his hospital bed). Together, Attlee and Bevin dominated defence and foreign policy. Their service in Churchill’s wartime Cabinet and a series of testing post-war crises had turned them into accomplished cold warriors. Both were convinced of the importance of Anglo-

American solidarity in a world threatened by a newly atomic Soviet Union and a newly communist China.¹² Though the Cold War front line lay in Europe, it had a global dimension, and East Asia was one of the fault seams. A Soviet-backed attack on South Korea provoked worrying memories of Hitler before 1939—memories still very fresh in 1950, when another world war did not seem unlikely. Bitter experience of early Cold War incidents in Iran, Czechoslovakia, and Berlin suggested Korea might be the thin end of the wedge.¹³ The Chiefs of Staff drew a parallel—as did US President Harry S. Truman—between Hitler’s challenges to the League of Nations in the 1930s and Stalin’s to the UN since 1945.¹⁴ For Bevin, the telling analogy was the Berlin airlift crisis of 1948–9 when Anglo-American solidarity had forced the Soviets to back down.¹⁵ What if this were not a local crisis, but a curtain-raiser to further Soviet aggression, perhaps in the Middle East or Berlin? At worst, the Korean conflict might, as the President of the UN Security Council warned, mark the prelude to ‘a third world war, with all its horrors’—a war in which both sides now possessed atomic weapons.¹⁶

In Britain, the last week in July 1950 was unseasonably wet and windy: on the 23rd, torrential rain and gale force winds had brought lifeboats into action round the south and east coasts and forced the cancellation of a naval exercise, codenamed ‘Seaweed’, in Portsmouth Harbour. On the 25th, however, bad weather did not prevent the West Indies from beating England by ten wickets in the third Test Match at Trent Bridge, with the legendary Ramadhin and Valentine bowling a record 1,040 balls and taking eight wickets between them. (The Prime Minister, very keen on cricket, would check on the score, rather gloomily, throughout the day.) At 11.30 that morning, seventeen ministers, together with Cabinet Secretary Sir Norman Brook, sat round the Cabinet table in Downing Street to tackle a potentially divisive agenda. Before Korea, they were to discuss an increase in defence expenditure, another issue that aroused strong feelings in the Labour Party as a whole as well as in the Cabinet. After Korea came another potentially tricky agenda item, ‘Interference with Military Supplies’, a discussion on how to respond to a series of communist-inspired strikes and sabotage incidents designed to prevent the dispatch of supplies to British forces overseas.

The weather was bad on 25 July 1950 in Korea as well as in London, at least if you were an American pilot trying to fly a B29 bomber through thick cloud over mountainous territory to identify targets. A month into the war, victory over North Korean forces who were familiar with the terrain and were led by well-trained officers was proving much more difficult than President Truman or his Supreme Commander General Douglas MacArthur had anticipated. At least 75 per cent of US troops in Korea had no previous battle experience, and though they fought well they were heavily outnumbered and their anti-tank weapons made little impression on the heavy Russian tanks used by the North Koreans.¹⁷ Indeed, as the Cabinet met in Whitehall, MacArthur was reporting to the Security Council that North Korea had ‘resources far in excess of their internal capabilities’, by which he meant they had help from the Russians and possibly the Chinese. A few days earlier General Omar Bradley, chairman of the US Chiefs of Staff, had made clear during Anglo-American staff talks that land reinforcements were needed in Korea to support US forces.¹⁸

The Americans certainly welcomed military assistance, but they wanted moral support even more. Technically, the campaign to support the South Koreans was a United Nations operation, and the Americans were anxious that it should look like a coalition effort rather than a US crusade. As Franks told the Foreign Office on 23 July, ‘the United Nations character of American action is essential to their relations with the new nations of Asia and as a refutation of imperialism’. He also warned that a British refusal to send troops was likely to produce a ‘deep and prolonged reaction’. ‘believe’, the Ambassador wrote, ‘that because of the rational and irrational elements in the

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