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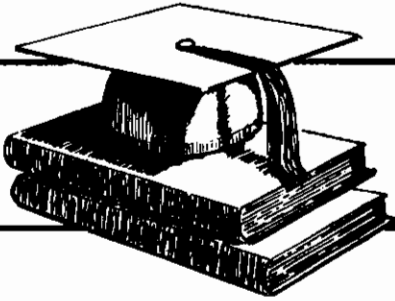
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PROFESSIONAL READING

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE UNITED STATES, GREAT BRITAIN, AND THE COLD WAR 1944-1947*

by

Richard A. Best, Jr.#

In discussing the cold war, which set in almost as soon as the guns of World War II were stilled, historians have tended to focus almost exclusively on the incipient rivalry of a democratic, capitalist America and a communist Russia. Although the origins of the superpower relationship of today have been the subject of numerous treatises and spirited controversy, most writers have failed to acknowledge sufficiently the major role played by Great Britain in world politics during the years immediately after the end of World War II. Even in the midst of the struggle against Germany, British leaders had seen the dangers of expansive Soviet influence and soon began to develop policies to counter Moscow's ambitions; this was at a time when Americans—including principal government officials—still believed that the end of hostilities would inaugurate a peaceful world based on an effective United Nations.

British pessimism regarding the likely nature of the postwar world may have been realistic, but as the war ended British capabilities were being rapidly undermined by a host of domestic, imperial and foreign difficulties. That

eventually the United States came to share British assumptions and align both its policies and its vast resources with those of the United Kingdom is one of the unheralded triumphs of British foreign policy.

The chief merit of Terry Anderson's recently published work, *The United States, Great Britain, and the Cold War 1944-1947*, is its patient examination of the recently opened documentary records of the years when the United States finally foreswore its isolationist proclivities and accepted global engagement as permanent policy. The period 1944-1947 was a crucial time of transition and the close attention Anderson devotes to this topic is long overdue. Although his is a large and complicated story and many of its aspects require further investigation, Anderson nevertheless documents the major stages in the evolving relationship.

In 1944 President Roosevelt seemed to be convinced that he could play the "honest broker" between Churchill and

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Stalin and at the same time avoid post-war entanglements in Europe. He had, after all, the Pacific War to consider as well as the unwillingness of the American populace to envision a permanent U.S. presence in Europe. However, after witnessing continued Soviet intransigence over Poland and related topics, FDR began to work more closely with the British after the Yalta Conference, at least on Central European issues. Anderson suggests that this policy was carried forth by President Truman after Roosevelt died in April 1945, but only for the first month or so of his administration. The new President, receiving divergent counsel from FDR's various advisers, soon shifted towards a more cautious and independent line that was reflected in Harry Hopkins' trip to Moscow and in Truman's efforts at the Potsdam Conference to keep his distance from the British and mediate a compromise peace. The British leaders, the new Labor Government as much as Churchill and Eden, well knew that U.S. support for their policies was essential and that they could not maintain the European balance of power alone. Despite Truman's reservations and hostility in some American quarters, the British did have some major assets. There was vast good feeling for the ally who had fought so long and hard and who shared many American values; furthermore, habits of close military and diplomatic collaboration had developed during the war. The problem for London was how to continue the relationship into the postwar world when the overarching goal of defeating Nazi Germany no longer existed.

Anderson makes a particularly useful contribution by highlighting British efforts to make their concerns known not only to U.S. policymakers but also to the American public. The British "undertook a virtual propaganda campaign in the United States" (p. 32); embassy officials traveled throughout the United States to explain British views and to

attempt to influence American policy. As one Whitehall official perceptively observed, "sooner or later American opinion and foreign policy prove to be the same thing. If we are to bring Administration policy with us, we must bring majority opinion with us as well." (p. 33) Foreign Minister Bevin's firm line at the United Nations in early 1946, as well as former Prime Minister Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech in March, provided the American public with vivid examples of resolute leadership at a time when the Truman administration appeared to be confused and vacillating.

Anderson sees the year 1946 as the crucial turning point in East-West relations. Changing American perceptions about the postwar world evolved into more assertive policies. Concern over Russian pressure on Turkey led to the dispatch of the U.S.S. *Missouri* to the eastern Mediterranean—a milestone towards the eventual creation of the 6th Fleet. At the Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in Paris in April 1946, the United States announced its willingness to guarantee a disarmed Germany for 25 years—a major shift from previous U.S. intentions to withdraw from European commitments. Difficulties with the Soviets over Iran persisted and, as the year progressed, U.S. leaders became disturbed about the possible victory of a communist insurgency in Greece.

Anderson touches briefly on the beginnings of peacetime U.S.-U.K. and Canadian military cooperation which emerged from the wartime Combined Chiefs of Staff organization and the U.S.-Canada Permanent Joint Board on Defense. These ties would eventually lead to the establishment of integrated military planning within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Anderson's discussion of the relationship of military planning to diplomacy is well done especially in view of the banal treatment of this problem by some historians.

Throughout 1946 Britain's economic difficulties became more serious. A \$3.75 billion American loan did not suffice to restore the U.K. economy. The moment of truth arrived in early 1947 when it became obvious that support of the anticommunist Greek Government had become an impossible burden. The British well appreciated how a victory by communist insurgents would endanger the Western position in the eastern Mediterranean but were powerless to do more. However, American policymakers had come to share these concerns about Greece, in large measure as a result of careful British coaching. The United States officially and publicly took over Britain's role in aiding the Greek Government and in supporting "free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation" as proclaimed by the President in announcing the Truman Doctrine in March 1947. Both the Congress and the American public were by now in a mood to support the President, and from the commitment to Greece would flow the policies by which the United States

would eventually become the leader of a Western alliance and maintain military forces on a global scale.

Anderson does not argue that the United States was gulled into globalism by crafty British diplomacy. The American assessment of Soviet intentions was the key factor: "Washington officials finally accepted London's evaluation because it seemed accurate—Soviet behavior was incompatible with the aims of the West." (p. 180) Nonetheless Anderson demonstrates that British influence was a decisive factor. The evidence Anderson presents suggests that if the British had not been determined to resist Moscow's efforts to expand its influence in 1945-1947, the cold war would have occurred on rather different terrain—indeed, it might have seen a Soviet Union, dominating a subservient Europe, versus a hostile but isolated America. There can be little question that British diplomacy made a big difference and that only with Anderson's cogent study has it begun to be systematically analyzed by historians.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In our review of Geoffrey Best's *Humanity in Warfare* that appeared in our September-October issue, the first full paragraph on page 123 stated that Best writes in a controversial style. The word "controversial" should have read "conversational."