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1-1-1996

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Occasional Paper No. 9604  
July, 1996

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The Forgotten Reappraisal:  
British Grand Strategy in the Wake of Suez

Jeffrey Pickering

THE FORGOTTEN REAPPRAISAL:  
BRITISH GRAND STRATEGY IN THE WAKE OF SUEZ

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Note: I would like to thank William R. Thompson, James B. Christoph, Norman Furniss, Jeffrey Hart, John Lovell, and Robert A. Baumann for comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. This essay has evolved from a chapter in my Ph.D. thesis, completed at Indiana University, Bloomington. It has been revised to cast new light on a critical transition period in Britain's gradual post-1945 withdrawal from world power.

## THE FORGOTTEN REAPPRAISAL: BRITISH GRAND STRATEGY IN THE WAKE OF SUEZ

The Suez crisis of 1956 was perhaps Britain's most severe diplomatic humiliation of the twentieth century. It is commonly viewed as a watershed in twentieth century British history, when the country took a decisive step away from world power. However, as with many crises said to usher in a new era, the reverberations of Suez were thought to be felt only with the passing of time. Despite the tremendous shock which the Suez affair represented, the post-World War II consensus around the welfare state at home and continued great power status abroad held firm in the late 1950s.

It is commonly assumed that as long as this consensus remained unchallenged, larger questions about Britain's future role in the world could not be put forward. Consensus set definite parameters around policy, and since these parameters were accepted as a given, a far-reaching reevaluation of Britain's overseas interests was improbable. "It might have been expected," as David Sanders asserts, "that Britain's most serious diplomatic humiliation in modern times would have occasioned . . . a thorough-going formal reconsideration of Britain's world role. Yet, no such review takes place."<sup>1</sup> In this regard, it was difficult for British policymakers, much less the British public, to view the Suez crisis as a manifestation of Britain's broader decline in the world, and perhaps even a permanent blow to the country's great power status. They preferred to believe, as Harold Macmillan told his conservative colleagues while vying for the party's leadership in the wake of Suez, that the diplomatic humiliation in the Sinai desert was only a tactical defeat, which like "the retreats from Mons and Dunkirk . . . should prove the prelude to a strategic victory."<sup>2</sup>

In general, then, despite the initial trauma of the Suez crisis, "the British ship of state sailed on" in the late 1950s, as Bernard Porter has observed, "unaltered and unadapted."<sup>3</sup> The imperial illusion, as some would later call it, remained tightly intertwined with the fabric of British politics in the late 1950s. Upon taking office in January 1957, Harold Macmillan appeared to unblinkingly guide Britain back to a position of international prominence, all the while clinging to the multiple symbols of Britain's great power status: sterling's position as a reserve currency, nuclear weapons, and an extensive overseas military presence.<sup>4</sup>

Although it is correct in its broad outline, this standard image of the post-Suez period is flawed in the details. These details are enlightening, for they cast considerable light on Britain's gradual adjustment to a less prominent international role in the post-1945 era. Contrary to conventional wisdom, a series of sweeping reviews of Britain's role in the world were commissioned in the wake of the Suez affair, and one of the most well-entrenched and potent symbols of Britain's great power status was earnestly questioned: the country's overseas military network. With these reviews, the wall of certainty which had for so long surrounded the country's world role began to show its first cracks. And, when a deeply-rooted policy paradigm which has guided a nation's policy course for decades and even centuries begins to crumble, it is crucial that the first fissures be both uncovered and emphasized.

Interestingly, despite the fact that these reviews were the first major attempt to reevaluate Britain's world role since the Second World War, this reevaluation process has scarcely been documented, much less stressed, in the literature on British foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> This may be partly explained by the tight secrecy which surrounded the enterprise.

Knowledge of this rethink of British global strategy was not only kept from the country's closest allies, including the United States, it was also withheld from the full Cabinet.<sup>6</sup> In the pages that follow, a more exhaustive account of the secret reviews of Britain's world role which followed Suez is presented.

Yet, more than simply shedding new light on an important episode in post-1945 British history, this study also goes far in shattering a more general myth on Britain's post-1945 adaptation to international decline. Although British policymakers surely did benefit from a smooth-running foreign policy machine at the bureaucratic level in the post 1945 period, the common image of cool and level-headed foreign-policy mandarins accurately gauging the extent of Britain's international decline and then easing their political chiefs into timely and sensible foreign policy adjustments is misleading. Despite the fact that they were often a portrait of consistency and uniformity, the "managers of orderly decline" within the foreign policy bureaucracy, as aptly described by Sir William Armstrong, former permanent secretary to the Treasury, were not of one voice when considering the future shape of Britain's broader role in the world.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the prevailing image, Whitehall did not move in lock-step fashion toward the placid waters of continuity and consensus in the late 1950s.

Before analyzing the series of secret reviews of Britain's world role which followed the Suez crisis, it is first necessary to describe the paradigm which in large part guided British foreign policy in the first decades following the Second World War. After this, the reasons why the defense reviews prior to the Suez debacle did not consider, much less scathe, this paradigm, while the secret reviews initiated after 1956 placed it under direct scrutiny, must be outlined. Finally, turning to the secret reviews themselves demonstrates that the

standard image of a relatively smooth return to the politics of consensus and world power after the Suez debacle requires amendment.

The Paradigm of "World Role" and the Overseas Military Network:  
Sacrosanct Prior to the Secret Reviews

In the period after 1945, if not long before, one predominant policy paradigm helped to guide British foreign policymakers--the paradigm of "world role."<sup>8</sup> A policy paradigm is an unquestioned assumption which frames decision-makers' perceptions and sets parameters around their policy calculations.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, British policymakers in the 1950s had been weaned on world power, and politicians and the public alike could envision no role for the country other than that of a great power, with its influence felt across the globe. Since the paradigm of world role was the initial lens through which most, if not all, British leaders viewed the international environment at this time, and which allowed them to make sense of the world around them, it was itself rarely questioned. In 1954, Sir Oliver Franks, the British Ambassador to Washington from 1948 to 1952, provided what is perhaps the best characterization of this paradigm:

. . . we assume that our future will be of one piece with our past and that we shall continue as a Great Power. What is noteworthy is the way that we take this for granted. It is not a belief arrived at after reflection by a conscious decision. It is part of the habit and furniture of our minds: a principle so much one with our outlook and character that it determines the way we act without emerging itself into clear consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

Although it is rarely acknowledged, the first serious challenge to this habit of mind within the government followed on the heels of the Suez crisis, and it is this challenge which is the focus of this study.

Yet, Britain's world role was, and perhaps still is, a multifarious entity. Its three fundamental planks in the post-1945 period were sterling's status as a reserve currency, the nuclear deterrent, and the country's extensive overseas military role. The British were also dealt an unusually rich hand in other areas important to the "Great Game" of international diplomacy, such as seasoned diplomats, a first-rate intelligence apparatus, and a moral authority in the world which perhaps exceeded the country's true material power. As might be expected, British policymakers' perceptions of which of these different ingredients of international power were most vital to the country's world role varied over time.

Only one of these ingredients was called into serious question in the secret reviews following the Suez affair. It was, however, the longest-standing and perhaps the most deeply ingrained plank of Britain's world role at this time, the country's military role in the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. Commonly called the east of Suez network, the heart of this role consisted of a great chain of bases stretching east from the Suez Canal (and later Aden) through the Indian Ocean and on to Singapore and Hong Kong in the Far East.<sup>11</sup> To many Britons in the first decade following the Second World War, both in the public and in the foreign policy establishment, it seemed that an inexorable link existed between Britain's overseas military network and the country's wealth, its security, and ultimately, its greatness.<sup>12</sup> The country's rise to world power in prior centuries had, after all, been built on the mutually beneficial relationship between industry and overseas trade on the one hand and a strategic chain of bases on the other.<sup>13</sup> Although it was recognized after the Suez crisis that pressures such as Third World nationalism and chiding world opinion were placing British bases in an increasingly precarious position, it was still widely felt that Britain's



military presence in the Middle East and Asia was part of the natural state of world affairs, and would remain so indefinitely.

At first glance, the fact that Britain's military role abroad was subject to a sweeping re-examination after the Suez affair may not seem a novel observation, despite the fact that the imperial illusion is widely accepted to have lingered on in the late 1950s. The country's overseas military network had come under criticism as early as 1952, when R.A. Butler, the Chancellor, argued that the "whole field of our overseas commitments" must be reviewed and brought into closer relation with Britain's economic capacity to fulfill them.<sup>14</sup> Anthony Eden, the Foreign Minister, agreed, conceding that overseas commitments, particularly military commitments, were "placing a burden on the country's economy which is beyond the resources of the country to meet."<sup>15</sup> Yet, significantly, although defense economies became a consistent concern of Conservative Cabinets, a fundamental reappraisal of the country's world role never occurred in the early 1950s. From year to year, small savings were found in defense, but the underlying paradigm of world role, buttressed as it was by an extensive overseas military presence, was never seriously questioned.

By far the most far-reaching of these pre-Suez reappraisals, the Policy Review Committee established in June 1956 by then Prime Minister Anthony Eden, offers the best illustration of this point. Comprised of ministers from overseas departments, the committee was to reconsider the entirety of Britain's global strategy given recent transformations in the international environment, particularly the advent of thermo-nuclear technology and Britain's diminishing economic clout. Eden was keenly aware that the country's global military posture was becoming an undue strain on its economy. He neatly summarized the impetus

for the review, which was the need to reduce overseas commitments, when he declared: "We must now cut our coat according to our cloth. There is not much cloth."<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, this presumably exhaustive review took as its starting point two central foreign policy objectives: to avoid a global war and to protect Britain's vital overseas interests, particularly access to oil.<sup>17</sup> By framing the inquiry in this way, Eden ensured that the chief military components of Britain's world role, the nuclear deterrent and an overseas military network, would remain above reproach. Britain's greatest contribution to the prevention of global war was, after all, widely thought to be the possession of an atomic arsenal, while maintaining a string of military bases abroad was the surest way to safeguard the flow of oil and other vital resources to the British Isles.

Although Eden's Policy Review Committee was eventually overtaken by the events of winter 1956, the scrutiny of Britain's overseas military network only intensified in the wake of the Suez affair. The infamous 1957 Defense White Paper was a public pronouncement that the country's overseas military presence would be streamlined because of its straightened economic circumstances. Commonly known as the Sandys Doctrine, the 1957 White Paper consummated the evolution of strategic thought in Britain since the Korean War by anchoring the country's military presence abroad on nuclear weapons, thus allowing smaller, more mobile conventional force structures than in the past.

Yet, the Sandys reforms did not alter the broad conception of Britain's role in the world, particularly its military role. Even after the substantial defense cuts of 1957, military commitments and large numbers of troops and bases would remain scattered across the globe. Less than a year after the announcement of the 1957 White Paper, the Defense Minister

himself, Duncan Sandys, underscored this point, stating that the country's increased reliance on atomic weapons "does not obviate the need for maintaining a substantial shield of land forces, with air and naval support, to defend the frontiers of the free world."<sup>18</sup> As it had during Eden's review of global strategy, the underlying paradigm of British foreign policy, a world role undergirded by an extensive overseas military presence, remained inviolate.

### The Secret Reviews of Britain's World Role

In contrast, the secret reviews initiated shortly after the Sandys reforms cut deeper. Instead of merely searching for ways to maintain the country's overseas military presence on the cheap, these reviews scrutinized the central, underlying assumptions of British foreign policy. The entire apparatus of Britain's overseas policy was critically reexamined, including the long-ingrained notion that Britain must, inevitably, maintain a world role, with a respectable military presence overseas. Even if it was a surreptitious process, concealed from the wider world and even the full Cabinet, the fact that the country's broader world role was now on the policy agenda, open for scrutiny, was a significant event. It marked a notable, perhaps even critical, step in Britain's long progression away from global power in the twentieth century.

Concerns similar to earlier defense reviews prompted the secret reviews, namely Britain's deteriorating economic situation and the mounting costs of the country's defense apparatus. Apprehension over Britain's weakening international position was, of course, heightened after the humiliation of the Suez operation. A fairly potent mood of neutralism swept the country in early 1957, with major newspapers such *The Economist*, the *Financial*

*Times*, *The Times*, and the *Observer* beginning to question the benefits Britain derived from an extensive overseas military role.<sup>19</sup> A prominent Royal Institute of International Affairs study of the time on *British Interests in the Mediterranean and Middle East* argued that Britain should rely less on force and more on commercial, technical, and cultural influences to promote her interests east of the Suez.<sup>20</sup> Slightly later Sir Basil Liddell-Hart, Britain's foremost military strategist, went even further by asserting that Britain should concentrate solely on a regional military role in Europe, since Britain's military bases abroad had become little more than "crumbling sand castles" in the face of rising Arab and African nationalism.<sup>21</sup>

To many in the articulate public, the Suez episode seemed to underscore the fact that, in the world of the 1950s, international influence could not be gained through the use of force. And worse still, even if it could, the Suez affair demonstrated that Britain was incapable of brandishing its military sword independently of the superpowers, particularly the United States. Given these apparently stark facts of the post-Suez world order, many in the press and the Parliament began to call for a fundamental reexamination of Britain's foreign policy. Despite his repeated, almost habitual, declarations of Britain's greatness, Harold Macmillan agreed with these critics and it seems that key officials did as well.<sup>22</sup> The basis of Britain's overseas policy did require reevaluation. But no matter how much they seemed to correspond with the domestic mood, the existence of committees set up to reappraise Britain's world role could not be made public. News that the British were contemplating potentially dramatic changes in their overseas presence would have caused concern among allied governments. British statesmen had also long understood the importance of intangibles

in world affairs. It was, as they undoubtedly recognized, likely that Britain's international prestige would be damaged if the existence of these secret reviews became known to the wider world.

There was one further reason the secret reviews were initiated. They were an attempt to overcome the fragmentation and biases inherent in Britain's foreign policy apparatus which up to this point had made a comprehensive, objective reevaluation of Britain's foreign and defense policy impossible. A plethora of rival departments had long characterized Britain's foreign policy machinery. The few overarching institutions which existed, such as the Defense Committee, had proven incapable of providing a coherent overview of British foreign policy in the whole.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, as Cabinet Secretary Norman Brook complained to Eden shortly before Macmillan took office, past attempts to reach "agreement on long-term [foreign and defense] policy . . . merely resulted in short-term compromises . . . [and] wasteful expenditure."<sup>24</sup> A long-time critic of the inefficiencies in the defense apparatus, Macmillan desired a forum which would allow mandarins to transcend narrow departmental views and provide a more objective assessment of Britain's position in the world and its foreign policy prospects. The result was a series of reviews which marked a departure from the norm not only with regard to the scope of their inquiry, but also in terms of their organization.<sup>25</sup>

The first secret review of Britain's global role was commissioned by Macmillan in November 1957, with the strong support of Cabinet Secretary Brook. The Cabinet committee assembled for this ambitious project was chaired by Brook and consisted of the Permanent Secretaries of the overseas departments--the Foreign Office, the Commonwealth Relations

Office, the Colonial Office, and the Minister of Defense, along with, of course, the Treasury. Each of these departments drew up position papers on Britain's world role to provide the initial basis of discussion.<sup>26</sup> After reviewing these papers, the senior officials involved were given the mandate to challenge all aspects of British foreign policy, and it seems they took up the task with zeal.

Interestingly, given the gamut of the inquiry, the greatest controversy arose over the east of Suez role. In early sessions, a number of officials questioned whether Britain derived any positive benefits from its overseas military positions. One participant asked, "Would, for example, our influence in the world be better assured by building up our economic strength rather than maintaining a world-wide military presence?"<sup>27</sup> Another reminded his colleagues that "the present strong economic position of Germany and America in the course of the 19th century were not built upon world power."<sup>28</sup> British officials thus seemed to recognize that the basis of international influence was beginning to change in the mid-twentieth century. Military might alone was not sufficient; a thriving economy was also necessary both to support a military presence abroad and to ensure that a country's influence would be felt in the decades ahead. It seems clear from the discussions in early meetings that an embryonic consensus was forming among these powerful mandarins for withdrawal from the military network east of the Suez. Ideas of disengagement were carried so far that the delicate question of timing was even considered, as withdrawal had to be done in a way that would minimize the inevitable damage to Britain's prestige.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, before the committee completed its work, opinion, however gradual in some quarters, swung back to favor maintaining the overseas military role. The outcome was a

final report entitled "The Position of the United Kingdom in World Affairs" which vigorously defended the country's military presence east of the Suez. But in its tone and its language, the report also confirmed the fact that a heated debate over Britain's overseas military role had taken place. It stated that given the country's long history of world power and its far-flung trading interests, it was now impossible for Britain to retreat into the "neutrality and comparative isolation of purely commercial powers such as Sweden and Switzerland."<sup>30</sup> Such a retreat from overseas military burdens was precisely what had been advocated by a sizable minority on the committee. The report went on to further confute such isolationist tendencies, arguing that despite the country's balance of payments problems, it was in the nation's interest to increase spending on Britain's overseas military positions. Since the defense budget had assumably been slashed to the bone with the Sandys Doctrine, the report concluded that if any economies were to be found, they would have to be in domestic expenditure.

In essence, members of the secret review were grappling with a fundamental dilemma in any powerful state's grand strategy, the balance between economic solvency and disposable military might.<sup>31</sup> Only months before this review, Frederick Bishop, Macmillan's Principal Private Secretary, pithily summarized the quandary which British policymakers faced:

If we disregard the economic effects, we could take every possible defence assurance. Then we might be safe from the military threat, but we would succumb economically. At the other extreme, we could take the risk of dispensing with virtually all of our defences, which would be economically safe, but militarily suicidal. No one can say at what point either of these extremes would become a certain danger.<sup>32</sup>

Poised on the horn of this dilemma, the mandarins in the first secret review raised fundamental questions akin to those put forward by Bishop, but they did not go so far as to

advocate the removal of one of the fundamental military pillars of Britain's world role: the east of Suez network. Perhaps because the lenses in which they viewed the world were still colored by the long-standing paradigm of world role, they ultimately opted for the *status quo*.

However, their conclusions ran counter to the prescriptions of Whitehall's senior department, and consequently led to considerable friction over the issue in the government. The standard Treasury line throughout the 1950s was the need to cut, or at least hold constant, overseas expenditure in order to achieve a positive balance of payments. Not doing so, in the Treasury's view, would weaken foreign confidence in sterling and increase pressure on the reserves, with the ultimate result being the erosion of Britain's status in the world.<sup>33</sup> In two inner Cabinet meetings on the secret review's report, in June and July 1958, Chancellor Heathcoat Amory argued forcefully against its conclusions.<sup>34</sup> He insisted that there was no room for further domestic cuts, a view which resonated with a number of senior ministers, including the Prime Minister. It was Macmillan, after all, who just two years earlier as Chancellor bluntly told the Prime Minister that it was not domestic spending, but "defence expenditure which has broken our backs."<sup>35</sup> Having reached an impasse in the military might vs. economic soundness debate, an even more ambitious review of Britain's role in the world and its future policy options was authorized. As before, the project was shrouded in secrecy, but its parameters were much broader.

Commissioned in June 1959, the "Study of Future Policy" was essentially a continuation of the review process began in 1957. There were two stages in this review process.<sup>36</sup> The first consisted of a working group overseen by Sir Patrick Dean, the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, which included the Deputy Under Secretaries



from the foreign policy departments as well as the Treasury and the Ministry of Fuel and Power (which was included to help determine how vital Middle Eastern oil was for the British economy). Several subcommittees were set up under this working group to report on functional problems, like nuclear proliferation and regional issues. Again, Macmillan instructed that these committees be as objective as possible and, subsequently, discussions in the working groups tended to be relatively unhindered by departmental biases.<sup>37</sup> However, the relevant Permanent Secretaries and the Chiefs of Staff were less than enamored with this departure from normal procedure, and they were therefore organized into a steering committee which was interposed between the working group and ministers. Chaired by Norman Brook, the steering committee represented the second stage of the review process, which was to produce the final report for the Cabinet.

The purpose of this elaborate committee machinery was to ascertain potential global transformations over the coming decade and their probable impact on Britain's international position. Using their interpretation of such changes, the committee would then be able to make recommendations on the country's foreign policy path through the 1960s. It was originally hoped that such policy recommendations would be ready for whichever party won the 1959 general election, but the review process took longer than expected, with discussions continuing well into 1960.<sup>38</sup>

The first task of the working group was to ascertain where Britain would stand in the world over the coming decade. This aspect of the review is important because it demonstrates not only that British policymakers were concerned about the country's international status, but that they had a lucid understanding of the extent of Britain's decline

in the late 1950s. For example, the working group concluded that economically "even if the United Kingdom's economy expands at the rate required to double national income in 25 years (2.8% [annual GDP]), we shall be left far behind, and our relative position *vis-a-vis* both the U.S.A. and Western Europe will have declined."<sup>39</sup> In terms of military might, it was argued that "only the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. . . . have the strength to provide and sustain a complete global power apparatus. The United Kingdom, with its ageing population and dwindling possessions overseas, cannot even approach this status."<sup>40</sup> The measures used to produce these estimates were uncomplicated. Gross steel production and electrical output were used to provide a general measure of economic strength, while GNP per capita, population growth, and the proportion of national income channeled into defense were analyzed for military strength. Overall, it was accepted that Britain's "relative power and status in the world [would] probably decline" throughout the 1960s.<sup>41</sup>

Using these estimates of Britain's weakening international position, the working group split into two polar factions over the policy course Britain should take in the future. One faction supported the maintenance of an active world-wide military role based on the Anglo-American alliance. The other argued that Britain's overseas military positions had become superfluous in the post-World War II era, particularly when Britain was dwarfed by the superpowers in terms of economic and military capability. This latter group also suggested that Britain's ties with the U.S. might actually be strengthened if Britain withdrew into a regional role within Europe, since America had long supported closer European political cooperation.<sup>42</sup> All of the fundamental issues concerning Britain's overseas military role were discussed in detail, and were often the source of considerable contention. Arguments

about Britain's commitment to contain communism, the true worth of the Commonwealth, and the country's obligation to assist in the development of former colonies swirled round and round in the working group.

The great difficulty members of the group had in attempting to appraise and prioritize long-standing planks of British foreign policy was underscored by its chairman, Sir Patrick Dean, in a note to the Treasury in August 1959. Of the three "circles" which had been a persistent theme of British foreign policy since 1945--the Commonwealth, the Atlantic Alliance, and Europe--Dean discusses the latter two:

The present position is that we have achieved very close association with the U.S.A. and it seems to me that in spite of temporary setbacks, sometimes very serious ones like Suez, the association steadily becomes closer. Logically, as our relative power in the world declines and the advantages which we presently enjoy as the centre of the Commonwealth become less obvious and perhaps disappear, the Americans may feel less attraction for us and tend to put their weight, money, and influence behind a united Europe or some other grouping. But logic is not decisive so long as we can maintain our reputation for good sense, produce really first-class brains and ideas, particularly in the scientific and technical field, I think the Americans will tend to look more to us and not less. Again, logically, this might lead to our passing from a position of interdependence with the U.S.A. to a dependent, and it is certainly for consideration whether this is the fate which is best for this country. In such a case it might well be better to merge ourselves more into the continental European group and to assert our influence as part of that grouping, maintaining as far as possible, a special association with the Americans. I do not think, however, that one can be sure . . . <sup>43</sup>

As can be seen, the process of attempting to determine how Britain's shrinking resources could best be utilized to maintain the country's international influence was, at least for many of the individuals involved, an arduous one.

At the end of the day, though, if Michael Carver, who observed the working group for the War Office, is to be believed, the two most powerful departments in Britain's foreign policy establishment, the Foreign Office and the Treasury, argued forcefully for

disengagement from the overseas military role.<sup>44</sup> Representatives from the Colonial Office were split on this issue, while the other members present favored the *status quo*. Not surprisingly given this breakdown, those advocating a dramatic restructuring of Britain's overseas role carried the day during the initial stages of the review process. A number of stark proposals for withdrawal from the east of Suez area were included in the working group's conclusions. But perhaps because the Chiefs of Staff were also included in the steering committee, the final report was considerably watered down.<sup>45</sup>

Similar to the first secret review's gradual change in tone, the steering committee's conclusions were nearly the reverse of what might have been expected given the discussions in earlier meetings. Consistent with military thinking of the time, the final "Future Policy" report stated that war in Europe had become improbable and that subsequently Britain should focus on winning small-scale conflicts in the Middle East and Far East. While it was admitted that swelling nationalism was beginning to turn some of Britain's overseas facilities into liabilities, the steering group asserted that this did not mean that Britain's overseas commitments should be reined in. Instead, the report suggested that Britain should produce an even more mobile force structure than that proposed by the Sandys Doctrine. To support overseas commitments and to bring this more mobile force structure into being, the report concluded that defense spending should remain at roughly the same level, around 7-8% of GNP.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the painstaking work which had gone into the "Future Policy" review, it never actually served as any form of blueprint for Britain's foreign policy. The Cabinet considered the conclusions of the review at a single weekend meeting at Chequers, with the fate of the

report being sealed when the Prime Minister was unable to attend at the last moment. In his absence, it is unlikely that ministers read the report seriously and, as a consequence, the meeting was much less productive than had been anticipated.<sup>47</sup> No policy decisions were taken on the country's overseas role at this meeting, and as is the case for all non-decisions, this was in effect a vote of confidence for the extant policy course.

Thus, any hope of a substantial redirection of policy, already limited given the diluted nature of the "Future Policy" review's final report, gradually slipped away in an atmosphere of political indifference. In this regard, it is important to note that by the time the second secret review was completed in 1960, the political environment in Britain had been transformed. The acute sense of decline which was so prevalent at the time of the Suez crisis seemed to have drifted away, and for good reason.<sup>48</sup> Britain's international prestige had by this time largely recovered from the blow dealt by Suez. Perhaps more important, the country's economy after 1958 was buoyant, so much so that *The Economist* even proclaimed in January 1960 that the country's slow postwar "recovery was turning into a boom."<sup>49</sup> The economic upswing and the renewed sense of confidence helped to sweep the Conservatives back into office in 1959 with a convincing victory at the polls. Although this feeling of economic well-being and security would be relatively short-lived, it nevertheless helps to explain why Britain's overseas military role remained largely intact in the years immediately following the Suez debacle.

Serious questions about the utility of military positions overseas and Britain's proper role in the world were thus raised in the secret reviews, but they were soon engulfed in the tranquil politics of affluence and consensus which characterized the Macmillan regime at the

peak of its power, in 1959-1960. All things considered, it should not be surprising that the more radical propositions in the secret reviews, such as complete disengagement from the overseas military role, never influenced policy. Political thought on all points of the political spectrum, including that of Labour Party intellectuals such as Anthony Crosland and John Strachey, tended to accept the political and economic assumptions behind Britain's world role in the late 1950s.<sup>50</sup> William Wallace summarizes well the mood pervading Britain at this time: ". . . in the wake of the Suez campaign and in the long-awaited flush of post-war prosperity, . . . the vast majority [of Britons], politicians and public alike, . . . demanded a reassertion of Britain's traditional position."<sup>51</sup> Britain of the late 1950s was enjoying what might be termed an Indian Summer of world power. With what seemed on the surface to be excellent economic prospects and the continued appearance of greatness, there seemed to be no reason to scrutinize the country's changing position in the world.<sup>52</sup> The national crisis of confidence brought on by the Suez venture faded in the resurgent atmosphere of the late 1950s. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to state that the crisis was postponed.

Nor was Whitehall immune to this renascent mood. The opposition to the east of Suez role expressed in the secret reviews was not at all common in the foreign policy bureaucracy at this time. There is little evidence, for instance, to suggest that either the Foreign Office or the Treasury ever consistently opposed the overseas military role in normal interdepartmental intercourse. Representatives from these departments who argued for a withdrawal from the east of Suez role during the secret reviews were either advancing a single strain of opinion within their respective ministries or they took Macmillan's directive to transcend departmental views to heart.

For example, in outlining Britain's essential interests east of the Suez for the Prime Minister's Commonwealth Tour in early 1958, the Foreign Office concluded that "in the Persian Gulf our position has withstood with welcome resilience the shock of the Suez crisis" and consequently "there is no reason to believe that the essentials of our position [in this area] will become less tenable or valuable in the future."<sup>53</sup> Although the events of 1956 undermined the British position in the "Northern Tier" states of the Baghdad Pact, the Foreign Office continued to claim that Britain's interests in the Middle East were essentially the same as they had been since the Second World War: "to maintain the free flow of oil and freedom of communications and to oppose the spread of communism in the area."<sup>54</sup> A continued presence in South Asia and the Far East was advocated by the Foreign Office at this time as well, although it was recognized that America's role, and in many areas its predominance, would continue to grow in both of these areas.<sup>55</sup>

In the Treasury, lower-level officials were beginning to question the burden that overseas military spending placed on the British economy in the late 1950s. But the senior department has never been in the habit of making specific policy recommendations, and lower-level dissent over defense costs was consistently smothered by senior department officials at this time.<sup>56</sup> In fact, at one point during the "Future Policy" review, the Treasury even accepted that the economy might benefit from increased military spending overseas if foreign aid and other incidentals were simultaneously cut.<sup>57</sup>

In addition, one is hard pressed to find opposition to the east of Suez role from other departments in the foreign policy bureaucracy during this period. At this time, it was generally accepted that the overseas military network was in the interest of foreign policy

departments. Commonwealth and colonial ties were reinforced by a British military presence in the Indian Ocean area and the armed services were bestowed with the budgets and the array of weaponry necessary to support a global military role. In sum, it seems that outside of the unique forum of the secret reviews, opposition to the east of Suez network was rare in Whitehall.

Thus, Britain's overseas military presence weathered the shock of the Suez crisis and the questions about Britain's role in the world which necessarily followed. The paradigm of world role, centered in part on the east of Suez military network, somehow persisted, even though by this time the formerly great chain of bases was thinning out. In part because of a surge in anti-British sentiment after the Suez invasion, the British military was forced to leave the Trincomalee naval base in Ceylon in 1957, Jordan in 1957, and two air bases in Iraq in 1958.<sup>58</sup> In 1960 Britain also decided to abandon a newly-built base in Kenya which had cost nearly £7.5 million.<sup>59</sup> Whether it was related to the Suez episode or not, a sweeping transfer of power in Africa was initiated in the late 1950s and early 1960s, of which the withdrawal from Kenya was merely a small part. By 1960 it had become evident that the last bastion of British colonialism would soon disappear.<sup>60</sup> With it an important argument for the continuation of the east of Suez role, which was particularly potent in the early post-World War II period, evaporated. If it could logically be said that the east of Suez role provided for imperial defense in the late 1940s, which may have been a somewhat dubious proposition after Indian independence, it certainly was no longer the case in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

But the winding down of Britain's colonial empire and the gradual winnowing of the



country's military network overseas did not cause leaders to suspect that the network itself was becoming untenable. Instead, the Macmillan government concluded that the foundations of Britain's greatness, including the east of Suez network, were too sturdy to be seriously disturbed by the Suez debacle. The British ship of state would thus sail on in the late 1950s, and the politics of consensus continued to reign supreme. As we have seen, however, this steady course was not achieved without serious questions being raised by some of the country's most able lieutenants.

### Conclusions

It is widely accepted that dramatic redirections of policy tend to only occur in the wake of significant political shocks such as crises or wars.<sup>61</sup> By demonstrating that the current policy course is seriously flawed, such shocks shake the very foundations of a policy paradigm. But the window of opportunity for dramatic policy change opened by a crisis is inevitably short-lived, as the fluid period when fundamental policy assumptions and institutions are called into question eventually steadies. The politics of normalcy then return, with incremental policy change, rather than bold policy innovation, again becoming the rule.<sup>62</sup> Once the political environment stabilizes, the parameters of policy set by a policy paradigm again become the underlying, unquestioned bedrock of policy.

As is uniformly recognized, the Suez debacle was a tremendous blow to Britain's great power aspirations in the post-World War II period. But its effects are only thought to have been gradual. Vernon Bogdanor and Robert Skidelsky summarize this widely held view well, stating that, "In the late 1950s the politics of consensus reigned supreme . . . [which

subsequently] . . . imposed a moratorium on the raising of new and vital issues."<sup>63</sup> It is commonly thought that it was only in the mid-1960s, when Britain's economic situation began to deteriorate more rapidly, that the lessons of Suez were finally grasped by British policymakers and the public alike.

This study demonstrates, however, that the impact of the Suez crisis was more immediate. Contrary to conventional wisdom, new and vital issues were raised about Britain's world role in a series of thorough, critical reviews commissioned in the aftermath of the crisis. These reviews called into question the foundation stone of British foreign policy following the Second World War, the policy paradigm centering on the country's world role. Although the policy window opened by the Suez debacle was eventually closed in the resurgent political atmosphere of late 1950s Britain, it is nevertheless important that emphasis be placed on this scarcely-documented episode. Not only do the secret reviews of Britain's world role in the late 1950s represent the first cracks in what had by that time become the hallowed policy paradigm of Britain's world role. The doubts that were raised about Britain's overseas military network in Whitehall in the late 1950s also surely lingered into the next decade. Reinforced by events in the 1960s, it is plausible, and indeed probable, that they slowly grew into a potent force supporting British policymakers' eventual decision to withdraw from the east of Suez network.

## Notes

1. David Sanders, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: An Introduction to British Foreign Policy since 1945*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1990), pp. 100-101. Three other sources which explicitly state that there was no formal review of Britain's world role following the Suez crisis are: Vernon Bogdanor and Robert Skidelsky, "Introduction," Vernon Bogdanor and Robert Skidelsky (eds), *The Age of Affluence*, (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 8; William Wallace, *The Foreign Policy Process in Britain*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), p. 82; Paul Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy: Background Influences on British External Policy*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 331.
2. Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History 1945-1989*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 158.
3. Bernard Porter, *Britannia's Burden: The Political Evolution of Modern Britain 1851-1990*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 294.
4. The commonly held view that the imperial illusion remained firmly embedded in the fabric of British politics in the late 1950s and that Harold Macmillan quickly restored the country's international prestige in the wake of the Suez debacle can be found in numerous works. They include: Bogdanor and Skidelsky, pp. 9-12; Kennedy, *Realities Behind Diplomacy*, p. 375; Morgan, p. 159; Anthony Sampson, *Macmillan: A Study in Ambiguity*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1967), p. 125; William Wallace, "World Status Without Tears," Vernon Bogdanor and Robert Skidelsky (eds), *The Age of Affluence 1951-1964* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 206, 213; Bernard Porter, *Britain, Europe, and the World 1850-1986*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987), p. 115; John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), p. 223; James Barber, *The Prime Minister since 1945*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 17; Robert F. Holland, *The Pursuit of Greatness: Britain and the World Role 1900-1970*, (London: Fontana, 1991), p. 304; Alan Sked and Chris Cook, *Post-War Britain: A Political History*, (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 143; Richard Aldous and Sabine Lee, "Staying the Game: Harold Macmillan and Britain's World Role," Richard Aldous and Sabine Lee (eds), *Harold Macmillan and Britain's World Role*, (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 152.
5. To the author's knowledge, only four sources directly comment on these secret reviews. All focus on the second of the two reviews: Phillip Darby provides a two page overview of the second secret review, "Future Policy 1960-1970," see Phillip Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 143-144; a participant in the second secret review discusses it in a single paragraph, see Michael Carver, *Out of Step: Memoirs of a Field Marshall* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), pp. 288-289; and two other treatments briefly summarize the perspectives of Darby and Carver, see John Barnes, "From Eden to Macmillan, 1955-1959," Peter Hennessy and Anthony Seldon (eds), *Ruling Performance: British Governments from Attlee to Thatcher*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 131-132; Simon J. Ball, "Macmillan and British Defence Policy," Richard Aldous and Sabine Lee (eds), *Harold Macmillan and Britain's World Role*, (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 74.

6. Peter Hennessy, "The Intellectual Consequences of the Peace: British Foreign and Defence Policymaking in the 1990s," *Strathclyde Papers on Government and Politics*, No. 70, (Department of Government, University of Strathclyde, 1990), pp. 27-28. See also: Public Records Office, Kew [henceforward PRO]: FO 371/143702, Sir Patrick Dean, Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee and of the working group on "Future Policy 1960-1970," to Sir Harold Gaccia, Ambassador to Washington, 24 June 1959. In this memorandum, Dean instructs Gaccia not to let the Americans know that a reevaluation of Britain's role in the world was being undertaken.

7. On the conventional wisdom that Britain's foreign policy bureaucracy calmly and rationally adjusted policies in accord with Britain's international decline in the post-1945 period, see in particular: Peter Hennessy, "The Whitehall Model: Career Staff Support for Cabinet in Foreign Affairs," Colin Campbell and Margaret Jane Wyszomirski (eds), *Executive Leadership in Anglo-American Systems*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), pp. 296-297, 308. Sir William Armstrong's depiction of the British foreign policy bureaucracy as the "managers of orderly decline" is found in Peter Hennessy, *Whitehall*, (New York: Free Press, 1990), p. 76.

8. The "paradigm of world role" is the nomenclature of David Vital. See David Vital, "The Making of British Foreign Policy," *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (July-September 1968), p. 265. A plethora of studies beyond Vital's discuss how the paradigm of world role helped to guide British foreign policymakers, and consequently British foreign policy, after 1945. Particularly noteworthy are: Holland, especially pp. 18-19, and Michael Blackwell, *Clinging to Grandeur: British Attitudes and Foreign Policy in the Aftermath of the Second World War*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1993).

9. For a description of policy paradigms, or the closely-related concepts of operational codes or belief-systems, see Michael D. Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); Ole R. Holsti, "The Belief System and National Images: A Case Study," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 6, (1962), pp. 242-263; Alexander George, "The 'Operational Code': A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making," G. John Ikenberry (ed), *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays*, (Boston: Scott, Foresman, 1989), pp. 483-505.

10. Sir Oliver Franks, "Britain and the Tide of World Affairs," *Listener*, 11 November 1954, p. 788. Quoted in Darby, p. 22.

11. It was the 1960s before the label "east of Suez role" became common currency in British politics. But since this label is frequently used to describe Britain's overseas military network throughout the post-1945 period, it provides a useful label for Britain's overseas military presence in the late 1950s.

The fact that this military network lay at the core of many policymakers' conceptions of Britain's world role is illustrated by the statements of decision-makers active in the mid-1960s. For example, in 1964 Prime Minister Harold Wilson argued that "we cannot afford to relinquish our world role, which for shorthand purposes is sometimes called our 'east of Suez' role . . ." (*House of Commons Debates*, vol. 704, coll. 423-24, 16 December 1964). Three decades later,

in a witness seminar on the east of Suez decision, Sir Christopher Mayhew, a Junior Minister in the Ministry of Defence in the mid-1960s, similarly stated that the world role was commonly "for short-hand purposes . . . called our east of Suez role" (quoted in Peter Catterall, "The East of Suez Decision," *Contemporary Record*, vol. 7, No. 3, Winter 1993, p. 622). Considering that notions of world power and overseas military might were deeply ingrained among Conservative governmental leaders in the late 1950s, perhaps even more so than their Labour counterparts in the 1960s, it can be safely assumed that Britain's overseas military network must, at the very least, have been considered among the most critical components of the nation's "world role" in the years following the Suez crisis.

12. De Witt C. Armstrong, "The Changing Strategy of British Bases," (Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Politics, Princeton University, 1960), pp. 36, 168, 199-203.

13. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 2nd ed., (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Ashfield, 1983), pp. 4, 67, 267.

14. David Goldsworthy (ed), *The Conservative Government and the End of Empire 1951-1957*, Part I, International Relations (London: HMSO), p. xxxvi.

15. Idem

16. Ibid., p. xxix.

17. Ibid., p. 67.

18. Ritchie Ovendale (ed), *British Defence Policy Since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 119.

19. Darby, p. 100-103.

20. *British Interests in the Mediterranean and the Middle East*, (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs and Oxford University Press, 1958).

21. Sir Basil Liddell Hart, *Deterrent or Defence, A Fresh Look at the West's Military Position*, (New York: Praeger, 1960).

22. Particularly Norman Brooks, for it is difficult to discern from the record whether the first impetus for the secret reviews came from the Cabinet Secretary or the Prime Minister. It may be a moot point, since it is likely that the two were of like minds on this point.

With regard to Macmillan's recurrent proclamations of Britain's greatness, it is useful to recall his first radio address as Prime Minister, when he called for an end to defeatist talk of Britain being a second-rank power: "What nonsense. This is a great country and do not let us be ashamed so . . . there is no reason to quiver before temporary difficulties" (quoted in Sampson, p. 121).

23. See Darby, p.18-20; David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Longman, 1991), p. 44-49.

24. PRO, PREM 11/1778, Brook to Eden, 17 December 1956.

25. On the uncommonly broad scope of the secret reviews, see Hennessy, "The Intellectual Consequences of the Peace," pp. 27-28. Evidence of the unusual organization of the second secret review (i.e., that its working group was relatively unhindered by departmental guidelines) is found in: PRO, FO 371/143705, Sir Patrick Dean's opening comments to the "Future Policy Study" Steering Committee, autumn 1959 (exact date uncertain). See also Darby (p. 143) and Barnes (p. 131) on the structure of the second secret review. I could find no firm evidence that the first secret review, from 1957-1958, had a similar organizing principle. But its open atmosphere and the critical remarks made during its proceedings suggest that it probably did.

26. PRO, PREM 11/2321, Brook to Macmillan, 25 November 1957; Frederick A. Bishop, Macmillan's Principal Private Secretary, to D. Hunt, Assistant Under-Secretary, Commonwealth Relations Office, 28 November 1957.

27. PRO, CAB 130/139, Future Policy Committee, Second Meeting, 4 February 1958.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. PRO, PREM 11/2321, "The Position of the United Kingdom in World Affairs," report by officials, June 1958.

31. See Paul Kennedy (ed), *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991) and Richard N. Rosecrance and Arthur Stein (eds), *Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

32. PRO, PREM 11/1773, Bishop to Macmillan, 1 August 1957.

33. PRO, CAB 130/139, "External Economic Aims," memorandum by Treasury prepared for the Future Policy Working Group, 12 January 1958. This memorandum asserts that the maintenance of the international value of sterling is "a matter of life and death to us as a country." See also PRO, T225/1222, jkt on Defence Expenditure and Overseas Policy, which begins 1 January 1956 and ends 22 March 1960.

34. PRO, CAB 130/153, Cabinet Meetings on the "Position of the United Kingdom in World Affairs," a report prepared by the Future Policy Cabinet Committee, 9 June 1958, 7 July 1958.

35. PRO, PREM 11/1778, Macmillan to Eden, 23 March 1956.

36. PRO, FO 371/143702-143709, Cabinet Committee on "Future Policy 1960-1970."

37. PRO, FO 371/143705, Dean's address to the steering committee on its opening session, Autumn 1959 (exact date uncertain).
38. Darby, p. 143.
39. PRO, FO 371/143706, draft of the working group's final report, "Future Policy 1960-1970," September 1959; underline theirs.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. See Carver, pp. 288-289. Also see PRO, FO 371/143705, R.W.B. Clarke, Treasury, to Dean, 4 August 1959; Dean to Clarke 15 August 1959.
43. PRO, FO 371/143705, Dean to R.W.B. Clarke, Treasury, 15 August 1959.
44. Carver, pp. 288-289.
45. Darby, p. 144; Carver, p. 289.
46. See PRO, FO 371/14376, draft of the working group's final report "Future Policy 1960-1970," September 1959. On the question of military mobility in particular, examine the draft of "Reply to Second Half of Question 14(iv), Future Policy Working Group." Question 14(iv) reads "How far can we rely on conventional bases or our present methods of supply - and how far might these be replaced by other means?" The working group's conclusions are also summarized in Darby, p. 144 and Carver, pp. 288-89.
47. Darby, p. 144.
48. Morgan, p. 193.
49. Ibid., p. 189.
50. Bogdanor and Skidelsky, p. 11; Holland, p. 348; Leon D. Epstein, *British Politics in the Suez Crisis*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 200.
51. Wallace, "World Status Without Tears," p. 213, 219.
52. See Morgan, p. 159, 193; L.A. Siedentop, "Mr. Macmillan and the Edwardian Style," Vernon Bogdanor and Robert Skidelsky (eds), *The Age of Affluence 1951-1964* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 39.
53. PRO, CAB 134/2340; "United Kingdom's Interest in the Middle East," brief prepared by the Foreign Office for the Prime Minister's Commonwealth Tour, 15 June 1957.
54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.; Anita Inder Singh, *The Limits of British Influence: South Asia and the Anglo-American Relationship, 1947-1956*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), chapter 6.

56. Senior Treasury mandarins argued that the view that some lower officials were pressing, that overseas military expenditure stifled exports, was overly simplistic. They claimed that wide qualitative judgements were necessary to determine the relationship between defense spending and exports, and that this rendered such calculations too vague to be of value. See PRO, T 225/1087, notes from J.M. Forsyth, Principal, Overseas Finance and Planning Division, Treasury, to A.H. Ross, Assistant Under-Secretary, Foreign Office, 19 July 1959; and C.W. Fogarty, Principal, Treasury, to J.M. Forsyth, 21 July 1959. For a broad sample of documents which illustrate that while the Treasury was concerned with the excessive cost of defense spending, they did not specifically call for reductions in Britain's overseas commitments, see Treasury file T. 225/831, entitled "The Future Size and Shape of the Armed Forces." In addition, examine PRO T 225/1087, note from D.R. Serpell, Deputy Under Secretary at the Treasury, to A. Fraser, also of the Treasury, of 29 April, 1959. In this note, Serpell states that the Treasury should continue to push for more overseas economies, but "this does not necessarily mean that proposals for overseas military expenditure ought to be treated more severely than proposals for the same sources of expenditure at home - that would be short-sighted indeed."

57. PRO T 225/1087, D.R. Serpell, Deputy Under-Secretary, Treasury, to A.W. France, Under-Secretary, Treasury, 2 October, 1959.

58. Michael Dockrill, *British Defence since 1945*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 78.

59. Darby, pp. 203-208.

60. Darwin, p. 222; Morgan, p. 161.

61. See Peter Hennessy, "The Whitehall Model," p. 313; Reynolds, p. 58; G. John Ikenberry, "Conclusion: An Institutional Approach to American Foreign Economic Policy," G. John Ikenberry, David A. Lake, and Michael Mastanduno (eds), *The State and American Foreign Economic Policy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), pp. 233-235.

62. Stephen D. Krasner, "Approaches to the State: Alternative Conceptions and Historical Dynamics," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 2, (January 1984), pp. 223-246.

63. Bogdanor and Skidelsky, p. 10, 15.