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Sebastian A. Fernandez
Dartmouth College, Sebastian.a.fernandez.24@dartmouth.edu

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British Involvement in the Korean War: The Special Relationship as a Framework for Involvement

Sebastian A. Fernandez
Dartmouth College

As the Korean War reached the three-year mark in 1953, Winston Churchill was questioned by Bernard Montgomery[1] as to what exactly British aims in Korea were. "If I were in charge, I would withdraw UN troops to the coast and leave Syngman Rhee to the Chinese,"[2] Churchill replied, referencing the Republic of Korea (ROK) President and the broader global implications of the war. "Korea does not matter now. I'd never heard of the bloody place till I was seventy-four." While the quote illustrates Churchill's characteristic wit, the mere inquisition posed by his associate reflects a prevailing lack of certainty regarding Britain's engagement in the Korean War. Churchill's response is even more telling: Korea itself was not an object of concern for him, nor for the British public more generally, until the advent of the war.

The scholarship surrounding British involvement in the Korean War raises similar questions, mainly due to the paucity of work on Britain's involvement. Cold War scholars like Odd Westad have argued that the war was the first application of containment policy as the Cold War mounted and the ideological fight over communism took shape.[3] Others, like Philip Bell, posit the war was an opportunity for Britain to regain prominence on the world stage after World War II.[4] But these arguments overlook an even more pressing motivator: the Anglo-American "special relationship."

To substantiate the argument that Britain entered the war because of their relationship with the United States, a brief outline of the economic context of Britain's decline using the work of several economic historians is useful. The trend of imperial and international decline, expressed through the words of several principle historic actors of the time, is also illustrative.

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[1] Montgomery was a prominent field marshal well known for his success as a commander in World War II.
[2] Winston Churchill quoted in Moran, Charles McMoran Wilson. *Churchill: The Struggle for Survival, 1940-1965*. [1st American ed.]., Houghton Mifflin, 1966 pp 423.
[3] Odd Arne Westad. *The Cold War: A World History*. Hachette UK, 2017 pp 172.
[4] Philip Bell. *Twelve Turning Points of the Second World War*, Yale University Press, 2011 pp 190.

With this context established, the salient elements of Britain's special relationship with the United States will become apparent. These elements will show why Britain's engagement in the Korean War was essential to the solidification and longevity of the special relationship, and more broadly the survival of Britain itself. Together, these sources will bolster the argument that British involvement in the Korean War was based on American interests and highlight how the centering of the interests of Americans—not Koreans—fostered a lack of collective British mythology surrounding the war and contributed to its forgotten nature.

Britain was dealing with a decline on the economic front long before the Korean War, mostly attributed to lagging productivity. Due to their early industrialization in the 19th century, the machinery that propelled Britain to an early lead in the industrial revolution faced early obsolescence just as their global counterparts were catching up. Economic historians detail how this decreased productivity in the early 20th century led the economy to "languish consistently" in the half century that preceded the Korean War as compared to sixteen other industrialized nations.[5] The First and Second World Wars provided brief respites from Britain's productivity woes but did not reverse the continued trend of British economic decline because wartime mobilization did not address underlying weaknesses of the economy. The wars did, however, saddle the British government with enough debt to make them the largest debtor in the world by 1947. [6] The fiscal policy of the wartime coalition governments had "thrown economic caution to the wind" to win the war.[7] This macroeconomic reality coincided with a decrease in the standard of living for Britons. In the period following the war, the lived experience of Britons was

[5] S. N Broadberry. "The Long Run Growth and Productivity Performance of the United Kingdom." *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 44, no. 4, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997, pp. 406.
[6] C. C. S. Newton. "The Sterling Crisis of 1947 and the British Response to the Marshall Plan." *The Economic History Review*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1984, pp 392.
[7] Alan S. Milward. *War, Economy and Society, 1939-1945*. University of California Press, 1977.

characterized by government austerity and food rationing. In spring 1945, rationing applied to a third of consumer spending. [8] This rationing was enacted in conjunction with a sizable increase in taxes aimed at increasing revenue, further illustrating the economic peril faced by the British government.[9] Coupled with the expanding welfare programs and a need for rebuilding after the war, government spending in 1951 swelled to 37.5 percent of GDP as compared to just 11 percent a century earlier.[10]

The economic conditions of Britain were of deep concern to John Maynard Keynes, one of the principle economic actors of the time. He believed that full employment could be reached by government investment in the economy. But Britain was strapped for cash. Keynes and his contemporaries had pulled all the levers in their arsenal, from increased taxation to devaluing of the pound in 1949. In this context, Keynes believed that the longevity of the British economy "depended on the willingness of the United States, which was the world's largest creditor, to provide generous foreign credits."[11] The U.S. did exactly that, with an initial sum of £1 billion through the lend-lease program.[12] But Keynes needed more, so he and Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador at the time, traveled to Washington to secure more money. An additional $3.75 billion eventually came through the Marshall Plan.[13] Ostensibly intended for reconstruction in the post-war landscape, the money proved essential to a British economy that was already in danger. More broadly, the aid received from the U.S. can be seen as an early indicator for the emerging special relationship. A famous doggerel would later recount:

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[8] Martin Daunton. *Wealth and Welfare: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1851-1951*, Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2007 pp 521.
[9] Peter Baldwin. *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases in the European Welfare State, 1875-1975*. Cambridge University Press, 1990 pp 296.
[10] Daunton, pp 190.
[11] Newton, pp 392.
[12] Andrew Shonfield. *British Economic Policy Since the War*. Penguin Books, 1958 pp 252.
[13] Henry Pelling. *Britain and the Marshall Plan*. St. Martin's Press, 1988 pp 4.

In Washington Lord Halifax
Once whispered to Lord Keynes:
It's true *they* have the money bags
But *we* have all the brains.[14]

As the special relationship developed, leaders thought that Britain could exploit the economic and military prowess of the U.S. while guiding the naïve American giant with their imperial wisdom.

But this imperial wisdom was called into question in the 20th century as the British empire declined. The granting of independence to India 1947 (or rather, yielding to India's demands) arguably represents the peak of this decline, when the centerpiece of British colonial rule was rendered free.[15] This momentous change is situated in the years immediately preceding the Korean War, but the singular event was not necessarily preceded by a sudden and precipitous decline of the empire. Rather, this decline had been felt by all British peoples for some time. "A loss of dynamic and purpose, and a general bewilderment, are felt by many people, both at the top and bottom in Britain," one scholar argued as "those acres of red on the map [were] dwindling."[16] Leopold Amery, a conservative imperialist, shared this bewildered sentiment. As early as 1928, he was concerned about the increasing role of the U.S. and Russia. He warned that if Britain was "to drift on, with the certain result that, from a position of ever-increasing relative weakness, Great Britain, on the one side, will eventually have to be absorbed inside the European Economic Union." [17] This would happen in conjunction with new "subordinate economic dependencies, towards the great American Union." [18] Looking forward, there was only one

[14] Robin Edmonds. *Setting the Mould: The United States and Britain 1945-1950.* 1986 pp 100.
[15] Paul M. Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*. Pbk. ed., Humanity Books, 2006.
[16] Jim Tomlinson "The Decline of the Empire and the Economic 'Decline' of Britain." *20 Century British History.*, vol. 14, no. 3, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp 201.
[17] Leopold Amery cited in Bernard Porter. *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850-1970*. Longman, 1975 pp 316.
[18] Ibid.

outcome Amery saw: “the break-up of the Empire.”[19] Amery’s comments, though intended as a warning, would soon prove to be a reality: The British Empire was falling into obsolescence in the face of an increasingly bipolar geopolitical atmosphere.

Winston Churchill’s experience at Yalta in February 1945 highlights this new bipolarity of global geopolitics and the general decline of British relevance in international relations. With World War II waning, a new global paradigm was emerging wherein the United States and Soviet Union embraced their roles as the singular superpowers in the emerging dichotomy. The Americans realized this, and often disregarded British interests during the diplomatic talks at Yalta. Even before the conference, Churchill struggled to convince Roosevelt to meet with him for preliminary discussions, even despondently apologizing “pray forgive my tenacity” after several attempts at correspondence.[20] When the actual plenary meetings at Yalta proceeded, Churchill again found himself as a subordinate to Roosevelt and Stalin. The leaders’ approach in Poland provides an insightful vignette for this subordination. Churchill had agreed with Roosevelt to allow for free and fair elections in Poland. However, it was ignored and overridden following a subsequent private meeting between Stalin and Roosevelt. Then Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden remarked: "The Americans gave us no warning and I don't propose to agree to their action."[21] But the British leaders never got the chance to disagree; on the Polish decision, Churchill would later recall “we were only informed of them at our parting luncheon, when all had been already agreed, and we had no part in making them."[22] The British, unable to assert their dominance on the Polish issue, were facing the reality of the diminished value their voice carried in international relations.

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Winston Churchill quoted in Martin Gilbert. *Churchill and America*. Free Press, 2005 pp 325.
[21] Anthony Eden quoted in Gilbert, pp 331.
[22] Winston Churchill quoted in Gilbert, pp 331.

Despite these instances, Churchill's subsequent reflections on Yalta illustrated his consistently positive views of Anglo-American relations and provide insight into the nature of the developing special relationship. Churchill told his war cabinet that the Americans "tell us repeatedly that they are resolved to see us through after the war till we can get into a normal position," believing that "good spirit [was] prevailing."[23] Such a 'normal position' would not come to fruition for some time. Instead, the newly lopsided special relationship as manifested at Yalta would continue for years to come, including during the Korean War.

The first skirmish in the Korean War occurred the night of June 24, 1950 and would start the first major armed conflict for the U.S. and Britain since the end of World War II. Tracing the remarks of the British Foreign Secretary at the time Ernest Bevin, one can see the lack of interest in the ideological aspects of the war and instead a commitment to appeasing American interests in the name of upholding the burgeoning special relationship. With their military barely recovered from the war, Britain was hesitant to send troops to Korea. But exactly a month after the start of the war, on July 14, Prime Minister Attlee and Bevin authorized an initial brigade to fight on behalf of and at the direction of the U.S. military. Not entirely convinced of why Britain should be involved in the conflict, Bevin commented that they were supporting America as "the well-intentioned but inexperienced colossus on whose cooperation our safety depends," again revealing the misguided conception that Britain could influence the U.S. given the history of the special relationship.[24] Bevin and other British leaders were convinced that supporting U.S. military aims, even when they did not align with British values, was a prerequisite for their continued aid. Paradoxically, this aid was for the rearmament of Britain to combat the Soviets in

[23] Winston Churchill quoted in Gilbert, pp 330.
[24] Ernest Bevin cited in C. A. MacDonald. *Korea, the War before Vietnam*. 1st American ed., Free Press, 1987 pp 85.

Europe, and yet their resources were then being deployed in far eastern theaters with little defensive value to the British Isles themselves.

The absolutist approach to appeasing American interests was briefly challenged in January 1951 when Attlee's Cabinet voted in his absence to break with the U.S. on the issue of sanctioning the Chinese for their role in the conflict. But the break was short lived. London was soon threatened by U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson that "failure to support the US would have grave consequences in the congress on the eve of Eisenhower's crucial report on NATO defense needs."[25] Britain quickly acquiesced, backing away from their brief attempt at independence. This trend continued when Churchill returned to power in October of 1951. Both Churchill and his new Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden were admittedly committed to giving the U.S. a "free hand in Asia" given that the special relationship provided a "fundamental guarantee of British security," both economically and militarily.[26] In a January 1952 meeting in Washington, Churchill and Eden found themselves again playing "second fiddle" to the U.S. as it related to nuclear armament and being forced to accept a hastily made agreement by the preceding Labour government for U.S. base positioning in East Anglia.[27]

Churchill still reported back to his cabinet positively on the status of the bilateral special relationship despite the reality that few concessions were made by the U.S. to Britain. His commitment to the Anglo-American relationship is uncanny, but it is helpfully explained by his initial conceptualization of the relationship in his famed 1946 Iron Curtain speech. In his words, a "fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples" through a "special relationship between

[25] Dean Acheson cited in MacDonald, 1987 pp 86.
[26] C. A. MacDonald. *Britain and the Korean War*. B. Blackwell, 1990 pp 63.
[27] MacDonald, pp 64.

the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States" was called for.[28] Churchill posited several essential elements to this relationship:

> Fraternal association requires not only the growing friendship and mutual understanding between our two vast but kindred systems of society, but the continuance of the intimate relationship between our military advisers ... It should carry with it the continuance of the present facilities for mutual security by the joint use of all naval and air force bases in the possession of either country all over the world.[29]

Churchill's initial vision of the special relationship deemed the U.S. as essential to Britain's security and the ability of Britain to exist as a world power, despite their recent decline. The relationship as envisioned by Churchill tied British survival to four essential tenets, each of which manifested in the Korean War. These were: (1) Britain remains relevant on the global stage; (2) the U.S.'s new power was real, ubiquitous, and undeniable; (3) a determination that closeness with this new superpower served British interests; and (4) that Britain could guide the naïve American giant with their age-old wisdom.[30] What he failed to account for, however, was that this relationship could not be reciprocal given Britain's position of relative economic and international decline as outlined in this paper; Britain needed the U.S. more than the U.S. needed them. In this context, the following framework to explains British involvement in the Korean War.

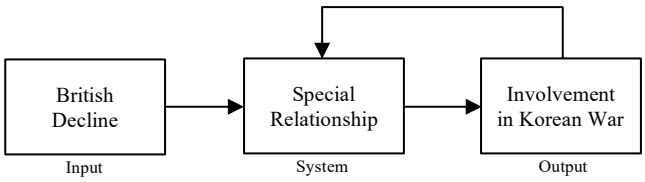

Figure 1: Feedback loop framework for understanding British involvement in the Korean War

[28] Winston Churchill. "The Sinews of Peace" (Westminster College Commencement, March 5, 1946).
[29] Ibid.
[30] William Wallace and Christopher Phillips. "Reassessing the Special Relationship." *International Affairs (London)*, vol. 85, no. 2, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009, pp. 263–84

In this feedback loop, the historic trend of British decline in economic and imperial terms led to the necessity for the Anglo-American special relationship. But the special relationship could only be perpetuated by British subordination to U.S. interests in Korea. Notably, there is nowhere in this framework that highlights a concern for the interests of Koreans themselves. This centering of U.S. interests in the conflict via the special relationship contributed the Korean war becoming a 'forgotten war' in history.

The preeminent Korean War scholar Bruce Cumings argues that the Korean War embodies "less of a presence than an absence," and British conceptions of the war are no different.[31] Ronald Larby, a national service conscript, reflected in his journal after the war that "Korea just simply sank out of sight ... It was as though it—the Korean War—had never happened. A truly forgotten war." [32] That was because, in his view, "there were no books in the library and no films about Korea." His comment is instructive of the role of culture as a custodian of history. Unlike the preceding First and Second World Wars, there was no collective mythology that emerged from the Korean War. And unlike the subsequent Vietnam War, the atrocities of battle were not broadcast on televisions.[33] Even when it did enter popular culture, the war's historic agency was limited. For example, the wartime service of fictional Korean War veteran Basil Fawlty at the center of the famous 1970's British TV sitcom Fawlty Towers was merely the source of jokes. At one point, he tells guests at his hotel "I fought in the Korean War, you know, I killed four men" to which his wife quips "He was in the Catering Corps; he used to poison them."[34] An alleged shrapnel wound from battle flairs up only when Basil wants to get

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[31] Bruce Cumings. *The Korean War: A History*. Modern Library, 2010.
[32] Richard Larby cited in Grace Huxford. *The Korean War in Britain: Citizenship, Selfhood and Forgetting*. Manchester University Press, 2018 pp 157.
[33] Dong Choon Kim. "Forgotten War, Forgotten Massacres-the Korean War (1950-1953) as Licensed Mass Killings." *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 6, no. 4, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2004, pp 540.
[34] *Fawlty Towers*. Created by John Cleese and Connie Booth, BBC Two, 1975–1979.

out of an awkward situation. So, what put the Korean War in the historic and cultural position of being forgotten and diminished? As explained, an obvious explanation comes from the lack of mythology that emerged from the war as had happened with the previous wars of the 20th century. Moreover, the outcome was not as decisive and clear as previous conflicts in the British psyche. But Freud's commentary on memory is instructive here; forgetting is an intentional act.[35] In this case, it is being performed by a society to form a more palatable narrative of their past. Forgetting the war and Britain's embarrassing involvement as a second fiddle to the U.S. can thus be seen an intentional act. Looking forward in history, the special relationship that dictated involvement in the Korean War was tested again—and failed miserably—in the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis. When situated in this historic context, the Korean War is more easily understood as an intentionally forgotten and overlooked aspect of post-war British history.

That history of British subordination to the U.S. continues to be written, even in the 21st century. When Barack Obama assumed office in 2009, British leaders anxiously worried that 10 Downing Street might not be the first contact the new president had with a European counterpart and what that would signal for the special relationship. However, history indicates that the "unambiguous commitment to the United States" pledged by Churchill in his envisioning of the relationship, which was tested during the Korean War, was never completely reciprocal for Britain.[36] It died soon after its birth at Suez, was briefly brought back to life in Lazarus-like fashion under the premierships of Thatcher and Blair but never truly empowered Britain with the independence and self-determination Churchill thought it would. The Korean War was just the first example of this reality. Ultimately, it was the broader trend of post-war British decline on

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[35] Sigmund Freud. "Remembering, repeating, and working-through." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works,* vol. 12 pp 148.
[36] Timothy Garton Ash and Lucian M. Ashworth. "Free World. Why a Crisis of the West Reveals the Opportunity of Our Time." *Round Table*, vol. 95, no. 383, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2006, pp. 161–63.

the economic and international fronts that fostered dependence on American support. This created a self-perpetuating feedback loop wherein Britain was forced to support America in the Korean War as a condition for the continued support on which they had become dependent due to their decline.

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