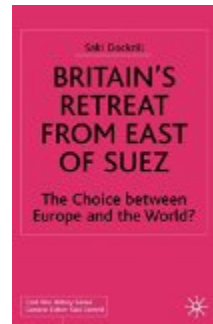




Saki Dockrill. *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice Between Europe and the World?* Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xv + 293 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-73236-6.

Reviewed by James Gump (Department of History, University of San Diego)
Published on H-Levant (December, 2002)



Retreat to a Lesser Britain

Retreat to a Lesser Britain

On the eve of Britain's retreat from India in 1947, the British Cabinet ruminated on the significance of the event and reached the following conclusion: "withdrawal from India need not appear to be forced upon us by our weakness nor to be the first step in the dissolution of the Empire." [1] Britain's decision to "quit India," in the minds of its statesmen, could not be interpreted by others as a sign of weakness nor as a shirking of Britain's global responsibilities. Based on Britain's tradition of global power and influence, British statesmen felt compelled to retain, at the very least, a rhetorical posture of stability and control in the postwar world. Nevertheless, political and economic realities in the aftermath of World War II rendered Britain's global contraction inevitable. Dockrill's carefully documented and thoroughly researched study of Britain's decision to retreat from East of Suez (most notably its military base in Singapore) in the late 1960s, analyzes the forces of contraction as well as the resistance to those realities. As her book makes clear, Britain's "long tradition of global power and influence died hard" (p. 214). Thus for British statesmen, although "there never seemed to be an ideal time for Britain to withdraw" from East of Suez, the decision was reached so that their country could find a "new place on the world stage" (pp. 208, 214).

Dockrill makes use of recently declassified documents in Britain and the United States, as well as interviews, memoirs, and private papers, to provide a more

nuanced understanding of the deliberations that resulted in Prime Minister Harold Wilson's decision to withdraw from Britain's major military bases East of Suez in 1967/68. Unlike conventional approaches to this topic, which link the sterling devaluation of November 1967 to the East of Suez decision, Dockrill argues convincingly that this decision, following several years of protracted Cabinet debates and defense reviews, predated the devaluation by nearly six months. The overall theme of her book is to examine how Britain tried to maintain its power and influence in the postwar world while facing escalating economic and diplomatic pressures, and why British officials came to regard disengagement East of Suez as imperative. She devotes considerable attention to the "American factor"—that is, the various pressures placed upon Britain to maintain its East of Suez role during America's escalating presence in Vietnam. In return for Britain's support, the United States maintained a tacit understanding with the British that it would assist them financially in supporting the pound sterling. Pressures such as the Anglo-American "special relationship" strengthened the hand of Britain's "Old Guard," who supported the validity of an East of Suez role as well as maintaining a global military presence. Critics of this view, led by Chancellor of the Exchequer Roy Jenkins, argued that a military presence in the Third World exacerbated Britain's financial predicament and, like America's role in Vietnam, was increasingly viewed by the global community as morally unjustifiable. The final decision to withdraw from East of Suez resulted from the government's conclusion that Britain was increasingly

becoming a European power, and that its international influence depended more on the soundness of its economy than on Britain's military presence in the rest of the world. However, as Dockrill points out, the decision was wrenchingly difficult, especially for those officials who continued to embrace a nostalgic regard for Britain's imperial past. In the end, British pragmatism prevailed. "The East of Suez decision epitomised Britain's changing relations with the world between 1945 and 1968," Dockrill writes, "and marked the beginning of Britain's transfor-

mation into a modern, medium-sized world power" (pp. 225-26).

Note

[1] Quoted in Wm. Roger Louis, "The Dissolution of the British Empire," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*, eds. Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 329.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-levant>

Citation: James Gump. Review of Dockrill, Saki, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice Between Europe and the World?*. H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. December, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7023>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.