

Nigel Ashton. *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War: The Irony of Interdependence*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 312 S. \$78.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-71605-2.

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The Peculiar Relationship

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Although it is surely coincidental, Nigel Ashton could not have picked a better time to publish his excellent study of Anglo-American relations in the early 1960s. For anyone reading *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War* alongside today's newspapers, the close, but nonetheless occasionally tense, relationship between London and Washington seems to exhibit a certain timelessness. Indeed, in his steadfast support for President George W. Bush's program to disarm Iraq and dethrone Saddam Hussein, Tony Blair, the current British prime minister, is simply mirroring a strategy practiced and perfected by Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, among others. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and President John F. Kennedy, the subjects of Ashton's focus, experienced a similar, and yet more subtle, relationship. In many respects, the situation forty years ago closely resembles that of today. Just as Macmillan's standing at home and abroad rested on American policy toward nuclear weapons, European integration, and crises in Cuba and Berlin, Blair's political fortunes will rise or fall with the progress of Bush's policy toward Iraq. And just as Anglo-American solidarity today contrasts sharply with the dissonance of French and German antiwar diplomacy, the crisis years of 1961 to 1963 witnessed an analogous fraying of the Western Alliance due, in part, to Franco-German fears over Anglo-American collusion.

The apparent timelessness of the "special relationship" has made it a popular ground for historians, particularly for the incredibly busy Macmillan-Kennedy era.[1]

As Ashton himself points out, "There was, put simply, in the years 1961-3, hardly any significant international issue that did not have some form of Anglo-American dimension to it" (p. 222). Moreover, many of the issues in question, such as the Berlin Crisis or the Cuban Missile Crisis, were some of the most dramatic and dangerous of the entire Cold War. As a consequence, one might worry that historical inquiry into Anglo-American relations in this period has nearly reached a point of saturation and diminishing returns.

Thankfully, Ashton does a splendid job of allaying such concerns. He brings a fresh perspective and thus makes a useful contribution to our understanding of such well-worn subjects as the 1961 Laos crisis and the 1962 Skybolt imbroglio. Moreover, the two topics of potentially enormous value in assessing Anglo-Americans which Ashton does not discuss—namely, attitudes toward the conflict in Vietnam and the contrasting approaches to trade with communist countries—are not likely to have changed Ashton's argument.[2] Aside from the introduction and conclusion, each chapter focuses on a particular issue or crisis. Ashton's skill in using this case-study method allows him to cover a large amount of material with a considerable amount of incisiveness and insight. Often such an approach can result in a disjointed narrative and analysis, but each chapter closely follows the overall theme, as expressed in the book's subtitle, *The Irony of Interdependence*.

The historiography of Anglo-American relations in general has been dominated by a "functional approach"

that places great emphasis on national interest (p. 5). Cooperation between Great Britain and the United States, in other words, was predicated primarily, if not exclusively, upon a simple convergence of objectives. As he concedes in the introduction, Ashton's goal "is not to seek a reversal of this orthodoxy but rather to refine it" (p. 6). He attempts to do so by placing emphasis on other factors such as ideology, culture, public opinion, personality, bureaucracies, and domestic politics. Each of these factors, Ashton argues, did not by themselves exert a predominant influence upon Anglo-American relations; rather, it was a varying combination of them that determined the level of harmony or discord. To understand both the intimacy and the rancor of Anglo-American relations, "one needs to grasp the differences in perception between London and Washington—not simply by diverging conceptions of national interest" (p. 27). For example, Ashton pays great attention both to the extraordinarily successful personal influence the British ambassador to Washington, David Ormsby-Gore, had with Kennedy in several crises, and to the importance to the British of commercial and old colonial ties in formulating a policy toward the 1961-62 crisis in the Congo.

"The irony of interdependence" constitutes both the book's subtitle and its connecting theme. According to Ashton, there was no true interdependence between the United States and Great Britain at all, and so the book's subtitle could just as easily have been "The Myth of Interdependence." During the Cold War, the imbalance between British and American resources and power was so large it made any notion of interdependence a mere pretense. But this neglects Ashton's more subtle, and intriguing, point about the ironic nature of the Anglo-American relationship. In its strict adherence to the principle of interdependence, Britain often pursued a line of policy that turned out to be inimical to its own national interests. Had the British realized that interdependence did not actually exist, and thus had they pursued an independent foreign policy, their interests and objectives would have been much better served. The British, in other words, lost much more by pursuing interdependence than they could ever gain, a very cruel irony indeed. Interdependence was not only mythical; it was also counter-productive.

This tone is established in the introduction, where Ashton takes issue with Macmillan's famous analogy, espoused during World War II, that the British were latter-day Greeks to the Americans' latter-day Romans; just as the Romans superseded the Greeks but still relied on their culture, wisdom, and knowledge, the Americans would

in turn surpass the British Empire but still come to depend on the British to administer their newfound hegemony. Using his own analogy to a modern multinational corporation, Ashton claims that Macmillan rarely, if ever, was able to manipulate the Kennedy administration in this fashion: "one could infer that the Anglo-American relationship was in fact a headquarters-subsidiary relationship" (p. 10). The various case studies then proceed to buttress this argument. Over Laos, the British wound up committing themselves to a U.S. military contingency plan they thought unnecessary and unwise and then found themselves in the awkward position of working with the Soviets to constrain American ambitions; in Berlin, only the construction of the Wall in August 1961 prevented a potentially serious rupture between London and Washington over Macmillan's push for a negotiated solution with Moscow; over Yemen and the Congo, when the vestiges of Britain's imperial interests clashed sharply with America's purely Cold War concerns, London could never quite get Washington to view events through British eyes. When detailing the French rejection of the British application to join the European Economic Community because London was seen as being too intimate with and reliant upon Washington, Ashton wryly observes of a beleaguered Macmillan: "It was as though the Greek who had thought himself to be quietly running the Roman Empire had for the first time realised that the governing characteristic of his condition was slavery" (p. 132).

The nadir, both for Macmillan and for the inflated concept of interdependence, came at the Nassau summit in December 1962, at which the Kennedy team made painfully clear to the British their total reliance on the United States. As a concept, interdependence came into being with the 1957 Anglo-American "Declaration of Common Purpose" on the sharing of nuclear technology, research, development, and weaponry. It is thus difficult to quibble with Ashton's assertion that "in the Kennedy years the nuclear relationship between Britain and America came to be seen as something of a litmus test of interdependence" (p. 152). When Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara scuttled the Skybolt nuclear missile program, which the United States had already promised to the British, and the Kennedy administration subsequently hesitated to replace Skybolt with submarine-based Polaris missiles, Macmillan realized just how unequal the relationship was and how superficial the concept of interdependence had become. Ashton's conclusions about the Skybolt controversy and the decline of the British strategic deterrent also nicely describe the

broader dynamic of Anglo-American relations during the Cold War:

“At heart, the whole concept of Anglo-American interdependence was ironic. The American defence research and development budget dwarfed that of Britain by a factor of about ten to one. Yet British concepts of interdependence were founded on notions of partnership and equality. In terms of the simple balance of the power relationship between the two countries these notions were unrealistic and were doomed to disappointment. For the US administration, interdependence meant greater coordination in the Western defence effort and, effectively, the greater centralisation of control in Washington. As Kennedy himself saw matters, ‘there had to be control by somebody. One man had to make the decision—and as things stood that had to be the American President.’” (p. 191)

No amount of maneuvering or manipulation by the British could compensate for the gulf between themselves and the Americans.

Ashton leaves only one stone unturned: he never sufficiently explains exactly why the Macmillan government so aggressively pursued the ironic, counter-productive relationship with the Kennedy administration. He is certainly correct to argue that a combination of factors—including domestic politics, history, ideology, national interest, and personalities—shaped the relationship, but it would be helpful to know specifically which of them impelled Macmillan to tie his fortunes so tightly to U.S. policy. But this omission should not detract from what is overall an outstanding and original contribution, both to the study of Anglo-American relations and to the history of the Cold War.

Finally, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War* further highlights that it was the British who put much more effort than the Americans into maintaining the relationship as “special.”^[3] But the absence of interdependence should not obscure the fact that the Anglo-American alliance was, and remains, one of the most trustworthy and, despite its counter-productiveness for the British, effective in international relations. This seems to be an implicit corollary to Ashton’s conclusion. For every instance of crisis and trans-Atlantic discord there is a counter-example of cooperation; for Laos and the Congo there is the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Limited Test Ban Treaty. Indeed, the crises only help to demonstrate how

impressive and resilient the Anglo-American relationship really was. Few other Cold War alliances have been able to withstand such pressure and occasional fissure. This is not to differ with Ashton’s argument that “neither the glib dismissal of the Anglo-American relationship as mythical, nor its rosy presentation as special will do” (p. 222); but a close reading of his deeply researched and elegantly written monograph reveals that while interdependence may have been mythical and the relationship may not have been quite so special, the Anglo-American alliance was nonetheless uniquely complicated and intimate.

Notes

[1]. This has been particularly the case with the study of nuclear weapons. For recent examples, see Ian Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship: Britain’s Deterrent and America, 1957-1962* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Kendrick Oliver, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Nuclear Test Ban Debate, 1961-3* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); Richard E. Neustadt, *Report to JFK: The Skybolt Crisis in Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); L. V. Scott, *Macmillan, Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Donette Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); and Michael Middeke, “Anglo-American Nuclear Weapons Cooperation After the Nassau Conference: The British Policy of Interdependence,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 69-96.

[2]. For British policy toward Vietnam during the Kennedy era, see Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK? Britain and Kennedy’s War in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For the tensions between London and Washington over technology, export controls, economic warfare, and trade with the communist world, see Jeffrey A. Engel, “Of Fat and Thin Communists: Diplomacy and Philosophy in Western Economic Warfare Strategies and the Modernization of China,” *Diplomatic History*, forthcoming.

[3]. Fittingly, with a few notable exceptions, the study of Anglo-American relations has been dominated by British historians. Most of the influential figures in the field—for example, David Reynolds, Christopher Thorne, D. C. Watt, Alan Dobson, among many others—are British. Ashton, a lecturer at the London School of Economics, continues the trend with his book.

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