



Derek Leebaert. *Grand Improvisation: America Confronts the British Superpower, 1945-1957.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. 624 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-374-25072-0.

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With his 2018 book, *Grand Improvisation*, historian Derek Leebaert has written a lively and engaging account of US-British relations from the end of the Second World War to the late 1950s. He argues that while the United States was undoubtedly the most powerful nation in the world at the end of World War II, it did not immediately seize the mantle of global leadership. Instead, it stepped tentatively and haphazardly in that direction over the next twelve years, all while negotiating a complex and often contentious relationship with its wartime ally, Great Britain. Britain in 1945 was not an exhausted and depleted empire but rather, in the author's words, "a shrewd, high-tech, deeply entrenched, Anglo-Saxon colossus whose war-hardened leaders had no intention of stepping aside or of serving as junior partners to anyone" (p. 4). According to Leebaert, it was only after the Suez Crisis of 1956 that the United States truly declared its independence from British influence and stepped up its involvement in regions around the world, from Asia and the Middle East to Africa. Besides his argument about this important transition in US-British relations, Leebaert also posits that this shift in the global balance of power set the stage for American foreign policy for the remainder of the Cold War and into the twenty-first century.

Drawing on British and American archives, published sources, and a wide range of secondary literature, Leebaert explores this history across twenty chronological chapters, beginning with the end of World War II in Europe. The Second World War transformed both the United States and Great Britain, but in late 1945 it was not clear that one was about to usurp the other on the world stage. Instead, leaders of both countries believed that their relationship would remain unchanged for the foreseeable future. For their part, British governments under Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill, and Anthony Eden had no intention of abandoning Britain's empire and hoped that an alliance with the United States would preserve British influence for decades to come. The Americans on the other hand saw the British Empire as essential to their foreign policy, an ally that could complement and expand their influence around the world, especially in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. This was the central conclusion of a major report by the National Security Council (NSC), NSC-75, an "audit" of the British Empire. This document has received far less attention but is, in Leebaert's view, far more important than the more-famous NSC study from the same period, NSC-68.

The relationship between Great Britain and the United States shifted decisively and perman-

ently in late 1956 following the Suez Crisis. Outraged at the coordinated efforts by France and Britain, two North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, and Israel to cripple the Egyptian government of Gamal Abdel Nasser and seize control of the Suez Canal, President Dwight Eisenhower demanded that all three cease military operations and withdraw their forces. This was the beginning of a new phase in US foreign policy, one where the United States would be less reliant on its British allies.

With its focus on senior policymakers in the United States and Great Britain, *Grand Improvisation* is very much a work of traditional diplomatic history. Leebaert's narrative contains many colorful portraits of officials on both sides of the Atlantic, from familiar faces like Harry Truman and Winston Churchill to officials whose names are not well known. Of the latter, the best example is Leebaert's discussion of the secretary of the Treasury under Truman, John Wesley Snyder, the longest-serving member of the Truman administration and, in Leebaert's words, "the most influential figure of the Truman administration" (p. 87). Leebaert also explores how both countries' military strengths shaped their respective foreign policies. With the Americans demobilizing their forces rapidly after World War II, the British retained a large military presence around the world, and US policy counted on British forces and facilities in the event of conflict with the Soviet Union during the early Cold War.

By arguing that the United States did not emerge as a true global superpower until more than a decade after World War II and saying very little about US foreign policy before the 1940s, Leebaert overlooks just how significant a departure post-1945 US foreign policy was from what came before. Perhaps then the greatest strength of *Grand Improvisation* is that it pushes historians to recall the importance of contingency during this critical period in recent history. While the rise of the United States to superpower status and the de-

cline of British influence around the world may appear inevitable in retrospect, Leebaert's account reminds us that there was nothing inevitable about how these developments came about. This book should be of great interest to historians of US and British foreign policy in the twentieth century.

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