

Grand Improvisation: America Confronts the British Superpower, 1945–1957

Derek Leebaert (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2018), 612 pp., illustrations, maps, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Leslie C.

In *Grand Improvisation*, Derek Leebaert has produced a beautifully written example of what one could call “in-your-face” revisionist history. While not everyone will agree with his conclusions, his road to them is engagingly presented, thoroughly documented, and sumptuously decorated with studies of the drama’s players, many of whom are familiar, but some of whom the field has overlooked. His premise is simple: the accepted notion that the United States emerged from World War II as a superpower while Great Britain, mortally wounded by global conflict, could not maintain its great power status, is a myth. As the title suggests, the author argues another decade was necessary for the United States to supplant Great Britain’s preeminence in the West, a decade marked by amateurish reaction in Washington and shrewd calculation in London.

The book’s thematic thrust may strike a chord with intelligence officers familiar with the notion—dating to the fraught wartime relationship between the OSS and SIS—of wise Brits patiently mentoring the junior service. The idea extends beyond intelligence to diplomacy and economics, though Leebaert is careful to distinguish among British leaders. Winston Churchill, for example, “never shared the British establishment’s nervous patronizing of America,” but “the two Conservative prime ministers who would follow him, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, were seeing themselves as ancient Greeks who needed to instruct the rising imperial presence in the subtleties of worldly ways.” (21) Perhaps unfortunately for President Harry Truman, British voters rejected Churchill before Japan’s surrender, leaving Washington to face a Labour Party whose leaders were conditioned by war and decades of trade union politicking.

Is the idea that Americans were amateurs in need of British instruction valid? Remember the United States had isolated itself from old world power politics for much of its history. It had engaged in coalition warfare, but was immediately thereafter faced with a series of challenges as the world adjusted to post-conflict realities. It was clear at Yalta and Potsdam that the alliance of convenience with the Soviet Union would not long survive the

Third Reich’s demise, but what of the emerging “Special Relationship”? America’s economic heft, manifested in Washington’s attempt to impose a global trade regime to benefit American producers, and lingering hostility toward Britain’s empire, obliged London to play a gradually weakening hand. There are numerous instances in this narrative of artful British manipulation of Washington through the practice of identifying nationalist movements as communist, or backed by Moscow.

Sir Gladwyn Jebb, Britain’s Ambassador to the UN who became a celebrity in the United States during his tenure in New York, told King George VI that Americans were too emotional and allowed Korea to distract them from other important issues. “Only the British . . . he believed, could think dispassionately and strategically at the level necessary to defend Western interests.” (266) Jebb subtly advocated for Truman’s removal of General Douglas MacArthur by having British Embassy officials approach senior US officials indirectly to “avoid confronting Secretary of Defense Marshall and an unpredictable [Secretary of State] Dean Acheson. Better to raise questions about MacArthur’s sanity via their trusted advisers and to do so at the right moment, as opinions in the capital wavered over how to face MacArthur’s affronts to civil authority.” (284)

More provocative is Leebaert’s thesis about the depth of American amateurism. He dismisses a slew of well-regarded early Cold War initiatives, including the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and Containment, as “desperate improvisations.” Regarding US reaction to the 1947 British request for assistance in Greece, the author writes, “Truman’s speech was heavily improvised, as shown by its having to garb U.S. involvement in a democratic crusade without pausing to ask, And then what? . . . Whitehall officials . . . also recognized the unformed thinking.” (87) He dismisses the idea that American policy resembled the product of strategic thought, much less grand strategy: “Significantly, it takes time and knowledge to formulate a grand strategy, or at least it takes being aware of the many steps under way.

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In the spring of 1947 there wasn't an opportunity for all this, or so beleaguered U.S. decision makers had reason to believe. Instead, the sequence of Truman Doctrine-Marshall Plan-Containment was just shy of winging it." (101–02) Neither does Leebaert spare George Kennan, the "Father of Containment, writing: ". . . he came to define many of his country's worst habits of policy making. He was emotional, often careless and impulsive, and frequently amateurish." (251–52)

The narrative traces interactions between British and US officials over a menu of foreign and economic policy issues, from Stalin's intransigence in Eastern Europe, to the end of the mandate in Palestine and Israel's birth, to the reverberations emanating from the ebb of empire in East Asia, to lingering Soviet efforts to extend Moscow's influence in the Persian Gulf. This last is notable, because the British remained sensitive about their Middle East position, from the Suez Canal to the Iranian oilfields. Across all of these, the British stubbornly retained a grip on their prerogatives against what they perceived as the dangerous enthusiasms of American neophytes. In 1952, British diplomat Oliver Franks told the Foreign Office, "Americans . . . never have grand strategies. What passes for considered policy . . . is instead a twisting sequence of ad hoc decisions hammered out under the stresses of domestic politics." (352)

It was in drafting the review more than reading the book that I came to realize this theme's pervasiveness. Leebaert is less an Anglophile than a Jeremiah decrying unfortunate tendencies in American foreign policy, and it is here I would offer a criticism. As skillfully as the British played a diminishing hand, they were not without responsibility in some of the decisions their troublesome ally made. On the edges of the 1954 Geneva Conference, Anthony Eden observed, "They want to run the world. . . . They want to replace us in Egypt too." Leebaert comments, "He might have been correct about U.S. impulsiveness in Vietnam, but here he was wrong. The Americans weren't that calculating; they didn't want to 'replace' anyone, let alone 'run' anything. They were still reacting crisis to crisis. And what they intended at this early date in Vietnam was another Truman-like emergency response to Communist aggression, implemented only with allies." (414)

While British unease with US policy in Vietnam is well-known, less recognized is Malcolm MacDonald, Governor General of Malaya and Singapore. Leebaert

writes, "MacDonald was the only senior Western official who was on the scene in Southeast Asia for nearly ten critical years, from 1946 until 1955, and his influence on the Americans became profound. As we'll see, no French politician or general, no American congressman or admiral, comes close to having his impact on the U.S. decisions that led America step by step into Vietnam." (128–29) It seems the British carry some weight for the Domino Theory, ex post facto moralizing notwithstanding.

Similarly, Leebaert writes of October 1951, when Churchill and the Conservatives returned to power, "Acheson likened them to 'people who have been asleep for five years.' The problem went deeper, however, than Acheson recognized. Churchill, Eden, and the war-hardened men around them had been out of office since the summer of 1945. They hadn't directly been responsible for any of the arduous dealings with Washington thereafter. Nor had they been on the front lines of global conflict since defeating the Reich. The notion of serving as anyone's junior partner was not in their experience." (327) As evocative as this is, it flies in the face of well-documented British recognition as the Second World War progressed that the United States was increasingly calling the shots, a reality even more evident during the war on the Korean Peninsula.

By 1956 and the Suez Crisis this was incontrovertible, as President Eisenhower intervened decisively to end an Anglo-French-Israeli filibuster in Egypt. Leebaert concludes Suez revealed "how extensively Britain's postwar greatness rested on memory and bluff." (481) Developments in the superpower sweepstakes confirmed it: while the British developed both atomic and hydrogen bombs to demonstrate their relevance, the Sputnik shock of 1957 and subsequent ICBM race promised "the faintest tremor in the world could be expected to bring direct U.S.-Russian confrontation, with every showdown having the potential to go nuclear. Any pretense of three superpowers existing on the planet was laid to rest: only the United States and Russia could compete indefinitely at this level." (496)

Leebaert concludes that while the United States may have succeeded Britain as *primus inter pares* among the Western allies by the end of the Eisenhower administration, the sense that British foreign policy manifested superior expertise and technique was reinforced during Kennedy's. The Americans learned little from the experience, as

“A level of excitement and incaution followed that, with few interruptions, has characterized U.S. foreign policy making ever since.” Why? Because of a foreign policy and national security apparatus filled from the top down with what Leebaert styles “emergency men,” a concept he first introduced in his 2002 book, *The Fifty-Year Wound*.^a “These are the clever, energetic, self-assured, well-schooled men, and now women, who seize on the opportunities intrinsic to the American system of political appointments to juggle enormous risk and are drawn to national security policy by its atmosphere of secrecy, decisiveness, and apocalyptic stakes.” (501)

Leebaert’s reinterpretations aside, the other great pleasure is the quality of his writing. I noticed just one

a. *The Fifty-Year Wound: The True Price of America’s Cold War Victory* (Little Brown, 2002).

avoidable error, when he identified SOE as “Strategic Operations Executive”; it was in fact “Special Operations Executive.” The author has a talent for pithy description of the personalities populating the narrative. We learn, for example, that Acheson was not the Anglophile of sainted memory; that John Foster Dulles was not the humorless Puritan of common caricature; and much else besides. I will offer one example here, where Leebaert writes of Harry Vaughan, friend and military advisor of Harry Truman, and alumnus of Westminster College (where Churchill delivered his Iron Curtain speech): “He exemplified the random talents thrown into high office by political patronage.” (43) This is of a piece with the book’s theme—that the United States ultimately eclipsed Great Britain and its professional civil servant class not because of patronage and its encouragement of “emergency men,” but despite them.



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