

A 'special relationship'?

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A 'special relationship'?

Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson and Anglo-American relations 'at the summit', 1964–68

Jonathan Colman

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Abbreviations

ANF	Atlantic Nuclear Force
BAOR	British Army of the Rhine
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
EEC	European Economic Community
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FO	Foreign Office
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GCHQ	Government Communications Headquarters
GNP	Gross National Product
HMG	Her Majesty's Government
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MLF	Multilateral Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NHS	National Health Service
NORAD	North American Air Defence Command
NSA	National Security Agency (US)
NSC	National Security Council
NSF	National Security File
SEATO	South East Asia Treaty Organisation
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
UN	United Nations

Introduction

In the years 1964–68, the Labour government of Harold Wilson coincided with the Democratic presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson. David Bruce, US Ambassador to London 1961–69, regarded the relationship between Wilson and Johnson as an especially interesting one, because ‘seldom if ever have two heads of state been such long-time master politicians in the domestic sense as those two’.¹ Many writers have commented on the Wilson–Johnson relationship, usually highlighting the undoubted strains therein. Ritchie Ovendale, for example, argues that although they were ‘initially effusive in their reciprocal praise’, the two leaders soon ‘viewed each other with some suspicion’. The President ‘thought that Wilson was too keen to cross the Atlantic to bolster his domestic position’, and believed ‘that the British Prime Minister was too clever by half’.² British Ambassador to Washington in the 1980s, Robin Renwick, states that ‘no personal rapport developed between Johnson and Wilson, hard as Wilson tried to cultivate the impression that there was one’.³ According to Raymond Seitz, US Ambassador to London during the 1990s, Johnson ‘could barely conceal his disdain for Harold Wilson. He once referred to him as “a little creep”.’ Yet Wilson ‘thought his friendship with Johnson was harmony itself’.⁴ John Dickie maintains that ‘Even the most ardent Atlanticists were surprised at the sudden cooling of the Special Relationship so soon after the end of the Kennedy–Macmillan era’. In particular, Wilson’s prime ministership ‘set the scene for a decline which continued for fifteen years until Margaret Thatcher rekindled the special warmth of the partnership with Ronald Reagan’.⁵

The literature of the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’

For the purpose of this work the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’ is defined as unusually close institutional bonds, frequent consultation and concerted policies between the governments of Britain and the United States, and, in the most rarefied sense, to regular, cordial and productive mutual dealings between prime ministers and presidents. The field of Anglo-American relations has attracted much attention from academics, among whom it is accepted that the world wars, especially the second, enabled the United States to displace Britain

as the leading 'great power'. David Dimbleby and David Reynolds note that in both conflicts Britain was among the first to become involved, and both times 'at the point of exhaustion she [was] saved by the United States ... although undefeated, Britain's power [was] diminished and her economy weakened'.⁶ There is some uncertainty about the precise origin of the term 'special relationship' as a reference to Anglo-American bonds, but Winston Churchill certainly used the expression in February 1944 when he wrote that it was his 'deepest conviction that unless Britain and the United States are joined in a Special Relationship including Combined Staff Organisation and a wide measure of reciprocity in the use of bases – all within the ambit of a world organisation – another destructive war will come to pass'.⁷ The expression entered the public domain as a result of Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech of March 1946, when it was used as a 'prescriptive' reference to close cooperation between Britain and the United States.⁸ In their coverage of the relationship over first two post-war decades, most writers do tend to regard the adjective 'special' as at least partially warranted. The American academic and foreign policy practitioner Henry Kissinger, for example, notes how effectively British diplomats brought their influence to bear upon American policymakers. There were 'meetings so regular that autonomous American action somehow came to violate club rules'.⁹ John Baylis argues that the US–UK 'partnership became so close, intimate and informal in such a wide spectrum of political, economic and especially military fields that terms like "exceptional", "unique", or "different from the ordinary" can be applied'. The relationship was exceptional 'because of the degree of intimacy and informality which was developed during the war' and endured well beyond 1945.¹⁰ Anglo-American ties had a number of distinctive features. Firstly, notes Reynolds, there were the consultative ties between the two bureaucracies, which expressed themselves in regular and informal consultations between Washington and London. Secondly, there was the intelligence axis created during the Second World War and revived under the UKUSA agreements of 1947–48. There was a global division of labour in signals intelligence between the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Thirdly, there was the especially close contact between the two navies, centred on their shared interest in the security of the north Atlantic. Finally, the relationship also featured cooperation on atomic and nuclear matters. This cooperation emerged in 1940–41, declined in 1945–46, and was revived by Eisenhower and Macmillan in the late 1950s in response to the Soviet Union's development of intercontinental missiles.¹¹

Scholars have reflected upon the role of shared political, strategic and economic interests on one hand and that of sentiment, history and culture on the other in shaping Anglo-American bonds. Churchill, who was half-American and who in his lengthy career played the roles both of historian and of statesman, saw the relationship foremost as a matter of culture and sentiment, a 'fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples'; he regarded Britain and the United States as essentially two halves of the same community.¹² In 1966

Raymond Dawson and Richard Rosecrance invoked alliance theory to reach the conclusion that the apparent closeness of the diplomatic ties between Britain and the United States derived in large part from history, tradition and mutual affinity.¹³ It was around this time, however, that Churchillian notions of an implicit Anglo-American harmony of interests and personalities were beginning to wane, not least because of the advent of President Johnson and the prominence of various policy differences between London and Washington. One reason for this was that, as Kissinger pointed out in 1965, the memory of Britain's wartime effort was fading. More and more 'influential Americans have come to believe that Britain has been claiming influence out of proportion to its power'.¹⁴

New, documentary based interpretations of the Anglo-American relationship underlining the unifying impact of culture and sentiment are less common than those emphasising shared political interests, periodic crises and frequent compromise – what Alex Danchev calls the 'functionalist' model. He points out that the British have been inclined to 'sentimentalise' and 'mythologise' Anglo-American bonds for reasons of self-interest.¹⁵ The relationship was primarily the outcome of a coincidence of self-interest on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁶ Although John Dumbrell stresses the importance of cultural ties, he contends nonetheless that 'the cultural interpretation of the "special relationship" should not be pushed too far. The ebbs and flows in transatlantic closeness tend to reflect interests rather than sentiment.'¹⁷ Nigel Ashton hones the functionalist orthodoxy by emphasising the importance not only of national interest but also of factors such as 'ideology, culture, bureaucracy, domestic politics and public opinion'. He suggests that the Anglo-American relationship in the early 1960s was highly complex and subtle: 'To understand this relationship one needs to grasp the differences in perception between London and Washington, differences that were informed by all of the factors listed above, not simply by diverging concepts of national interest.'¹⁸ Cultural affinity and calculations of national self-interest are not mutually exclusive, because bonds deriving from political calculation can be supported by the influence of history, language, and sentiment.¹⁹ While institutional ties are the foundation of the Anglo-American alliance, it must be remembered that they are not automatic and self-creating; they are the products of human agency and intervention, and therefore individual personalities can frequently exert a considerable degree of influence.

Harold Wilson noted in 1970 that Britain could not 'compete with American power, whether in defence terms, nuclear and conventional, or in military and industrial terms'.²⁰ By most material measures the United States has for decades greatly overshadowed Britain, but nonetheless historians have differed in their views of how far the relationship may be regarded as a partnership of equals. Dickie writes that 'the phrase "special relationship" from the outset has been almost entirely in English accents', implying that the connections are of far greater import to London than to Washington.²¹ Mark Curtis's recent analysis describes Britain crudely as 'largely a US client state' whose 'military has become

an effective US proxy force'.²² Few writers would support such an unvariegated view. While accepting American predominance, most scholarship emphasises – quite rightly – the extent to which the two countries were linked in balanced connections of mutual benefit. London sought close bonds with Washington in order to retain a place at the 'top table' of world affairs and because of the belief that Britain's foreign policy aims could best be fulfilled as chief ally of the United States. For its part, Washington needed a reliable and powerful partner to further the interests of the western alliance as the Cold War developed. British leaders shared the American commitment to upholding democracy and capitalism, and containing the spread of communism.²³ Crucial links in the fields of defence and economics ensured the interdependence of the Anglo-American relationship.²⁴ Speaking of the late 1950s, D. Cameron Watt notes Britain's importance to the United States. The country was:

still the only power solidly established in the Indian Ocean. Britain still guarded physically the oil of the Gulf. Britain was one of the powers occupying Berlin. Britain was a nuclear power soon to explode her own thermonuclear device. The Foreign Office could still produce a remarkable array of negotiating skills. Britain still had a very considerable fund of know-how. The sterling area still played a major role in world trade.²⁵

Ashton provides a more nuanced angle on interdependence, arguing in his study of the Kennedy–Macmillan years that 'the whole concept of Anglo-American interdependence was ironic' because:

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 decisions – and as things stood that had to be the American President'.²⁶

In this scenario, the more the British sought interdependence by aligning themselves with American designs the less freedom they would have to pursue independent policies in the wider world. Although the United States was clearly the senior partner, Britain was still an important ally with much to offer, with the result that the relationship is more accurately gauged in terms of interdependence and mutuality instead of the mere domination of a weaker power by a much stronger one. A further dimension to these issues is provided by Harold Macmillan's famous Greeks and Romans analogy developed during the Second World War. In an oft-quoted comment of 1942, Macmillan is supposed to have said that 'These Americans represent the new Roman Empire and we Britons, like the Greeks of old, must teach them how to make it go'.²⁷ The thinking is that the weaker but wiler British could exploit the diplomatically inexperienced

Americans, but most historians do not regard this as a persuasive image of Anglo-American relations. The strategy underestimates the political sophistication of American leaders, and if Macmillan had ever believed in its efficacy then it would hardly have been prudent to broadcast the strategy.²⁸ Owendale comments of the Macmillan–Kennedy years that to accept the idea of ‘an elder statesman educating a younger politician is to underestimate Macmillan’s sophistication in handling the Americans, and to denigrate what appears to have been a sincere friendship which guaranteed the nuclear alliance between Britain and the United States that endured for three decades’.²⁹ There is little to commend the Greeks and Romans model, as much as British leaders, confident in their diplomatic ingenuity, might find it appealing.

The institutional bonds between Britain and the United States

A 1968 State Department analysis reflected that Britain and the United States were linked ‘in an unparalleled [number] of spheres – nuclear strategy, disarmament, multilateral alliance, weapons technology, intelligence, and arms sales and purchases’. The connections were closest ‘in the fields of nuclear weaponry and intelligence. Each government provides the other with material and information that it makes available to no-one else.’³⁰ During the Second World War, Britain and the United States collaborated on the production of the atomic bomb, but while in an isolationist mood in 1946 Congress passed the McMahon Act prohibiting all further collaboration. There was an agreement in 1948 known as the *Modus Vivendi* providing for a limited renewal of cooperation which prevailed until 1957, when the connections were reinvigorated by Macmillan’s consent to the siting in Britain of sixty American ‘Thor’ intermediate range ballistic nuclear missiles. In 1958, Congress, growing concerned that the United States was losing its nuclear lead to the Soviet Union, amended the McMahon Act to permit the pooling of additional nuclear data with the British. That year, under the terms of the new legislation, Britain gained preferential access to the data, and in 1959 a further arrangement enabled the country to buy from the United States component parts of nuclear weapons systems and to exchange plutonium for enriched uranium. In 1960, when Macmillan offered Eisenhower base facilities at Holy Loch in Scotland for the new Polaris missile submarines, the President responded by offering in exchange to sell Britain the land-based Skybolt missile, after Britain’s own Blue Streak programme ran into difficulties. In 1962, in a meeting on the island of Nassau in the Bahamas, after the cancellation of Skybolt, President Kennedy agreed to provide Britain with Polaris. The State Department analysis of 1968 summarised the degree of US–UK nuclear cooperation by noting that as well as Polaris the United States had sold Britain:

fissionable materials and non-nuclear equipment to be used in nuclear weapons; and a power plant and fuel load for a nuclear powered submarine of the Skipjack class. It has furnished the UK information on the design of certain nuclear warheads and

selected data on underground nuclear tests. While the UK has undoubtedly benefited more than has the US from cooperation in this field, it has nonetheless provided the US with numerous benefits. Among these have been various contributions to weapons technology, notably an improved high explosive atomic weapons trigger, independent analyses of new weapons designs, and the use of Christmas Island as a base for certain atmospheric tests.³²

The same assessment noted that in the field of intelligence relations 'the US and UK give each other a greater volume and wider variety of information than either does to any of its other allies'. The arrangements provided for the 'exchange of information gathered from both overt and covert sources; for the swapping of estimates; and for the preparation of joint estimates', and a 'division of labour in certain geographic and functional fields, and on some areas and subjects, each nation is dependent for its intelligence mainly on the other'.³³ The 1948 UKUSA agreements, which Dickie describes as 'the most fruitful joint venture of the Anglo-American partnership, with extraordinary dividends for both sides',³⁴ coordinated the signals intelligence (SIGINT) apparatus of Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. There was extensive cooperation in this field between Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in Cheltenham and America's National Security Agency (NSA) at Fort Meade in Maryland, with officers of the NSA working alongside their British counterparts in Cheltenham, as well as at SIGINT facilities at Menwith Hill in Yorkshire. In addition, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) worked with British intelligence operatives and mounted operations from the US embassy in London.³⁵ Britain also provided the United States with 'diplomatic reports from capitals where it has no representation. In the intelligence field, as in the field of nuclear weaponry, the UK gets more than it gives, but what it gives is not insubstantial.'³⁶

There were numerous bilateral defence links between Britain and the United States remaining from the Second World War, and many were expanded later. These included an Agreement on Security Classifications in 1948, an agreement establishing a US–UK Military Information Board in 1949, and a series of five agreements reached in Washington in 1950. There were also numerous informal arrangements from 1950 onwards providing for the exchange of technical information on weapons systems.³⁷ Britain and the United States were leading members of the NATO alliance, centred on the defence of Western Europe. In 1962, Britain had over 50,000 troops stationed in Germany in the form of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR). It has been pointed out that London had resisted making major cutbacks to the BAOR partly on the grounds that to do so would undermine British influence both within NATO and in relation to the United States.³⁸ In 1964, Britain's armed forces of around 400,000 personnel were deployed all over the world as well as in Europe, including at numerous bases described loosely as 'East of Suez' – in locations as widespread as Gibraltar, Malta, Cyprus, Aden, Bahrain, Gan in the Indian Ocean, Labuan in Borneo,

Singapore and Hong Kong.³⁹ The Foreign Office noted that in Asia ‘The Americans are anxious not to appear as the only western power in the area (apart from Australia) and thus particularly value our support for SEATO’ (Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation).⁴⁰ Britain had some twenty-four formal defence commitments, involving nearly one hundred countries and dependent territories.⁴¹ There was consequently an appreciation in Washington of the British position as ‘the only Western power beside the US that had worldwide responsibilities’ – numerous ‘far-flung dependencies and Commonwealth affiliates’ providing ‘an unrivalled network of bases and other military facilities that served US foreign policy interests’. The bonds were further cemented by the UK’s ‘provision of extensive real estate for US military forces. Airfields in England accommodate the US squadrons that had to be moved from France when the latter withdrew from NATO. Holy Loch in Scotland provides a base for our Polaris submarines. The Fylingdales early warning station is directly linked to NORAD [North American Air Defence Command] ... only the UK provides all three types of installation.’⁴²

Economic connections also strengthened the Anglo-American relationship.⁴³ Cooperation between the two countries at the Bretton Woods conference of 1944 devised the framework for the operation of the Western international financial system, including a scheme of fixed exchange rates. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) was established to maintain international liquidity, to lend to governments in economic difficulties and, through various sub-groups and separate meetings of the most powerful countries (including Britain), help to integrate the international economic policies of countries concerned. Trade policy was discussed in the context of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which sought to expand free trade.⁴⁴ There was also cooperation through the World Bank. In the years after Bretton Woods both Labour and Conservative governments were committed to retaining a strong pound and to preserving the sterling area as symbols of continued preeminence, despite having only limited reserves. However, maintaining a sterling parity of \$2.80 and preserving the sterling area and relatively high domestic spending frequently required financial bailouts from the United States and other international sources. Until around 1960, when it became clear that the economies of West Germany and France were overtaking that of Britain, the pound was the leading currency for international transactions. A devaluation of sterling would disrupt the entire global economic system and, in turn, the international trading patterns of the United States.⁴⁵ Economic links between London and Washington were also strengthened, as the Foreign Office noted in 1964, by ‘important and close’ trade relations: the United States was ‘the most important single customer and supplier of the United Kingdom while the United Kingdom is the United States’ fourth best customer and fourth biggest supplier’.⁴⁶

Although there was interdependence in the various fields of cooperation, there was a distinct imbalance of power between Britain and the United States. The

Foreign Office noted in 1962 that 'Seen from the United States, Britain looks fairly small in the world and will look smaller as her capacity to influence events declines.'⁴⁷ Another Foreign Office analysis noted that Britain's standing in the United States depended ultimately on 'our practical contribution to the Western Alliance rather than on any particular feeling of United Kingdom/United States interdependence'.⁴⁸ It was commented in 1964 that the 'alliance with the United States' was 'the most important single factor' in British foreign policy: 'As much the weaker partner, dependent on overseas trade and with world-wide responsibilities, we find American support for our overseas policies virtually indispensable, while they find our support for theirs useful and sometimes valuable.'⁴⁹ A State Department paper that year commented that whereas the 'close US-UK association [was] the most important single factor in British foreign policy', for the Americans it was enough simply to assert the value of the 'association'.⁵⁰ In February 1964 the Conservative prime minister Alec Douglas-Home managed to antagonise Johnson over the question of British trade with communist Cuba,⁵¹ but at the elite level the UK-US partnership had flourished under Harold Macmillan and John F. Kennedy. Dickie, for example, argues that the 'Kennedy-Macmillan days of the transatlantic partnership revived a relationship between the two leaders which was underpinned by a degree of personal friendship such as had not existed since Roosevelt and Churchill forged the original bond'.⁵² David Nunnerley adds that Kennedy trusted the British Ambassador to Washington, Lord Harlech, 'as much as the members of his own Cabinet'. As a result, Harlech enjoyed 'almost unlimited access to the President'.⁵³ This view is confirmed by Ashton's more recent research, which confirms that Harlech 'enjoyed remarkable access to the president'.⁵⁴ Such intimacy led the Foreign Office to conclude that the Anglo-American 'association goes so deep, is felt at so many levels and yet is so intangible that neither are fully conscious of it ... Though there are German, Irish, and Scandinavian lobbies in the United States, there is scarcely more need for a British lobby than an American one'.⁵⁵ Anglo-American ties were also facilitated by the activities of US Ambassador Bruce, who, according to the Foreign Office in 1965, was a figure 'much respected' both in London and Washington and with whom it was 'always worth talking'.⁵⁶

Harold Wilson

Harold Wilson has provoked a range of feelings among his biographers. Of the most recent works about him,⁵⁷ Austen Morgan is the least sympathetic. He notes that the Labour Party:

secured a healthy mandate in 1966, and it looked as if Wilson's government might go from strength to strength. He had more administrative experience than any of his colleagues, but it was precisely in the area of public policy, both domestic and foreign, that he failed so disastrously. There were considerable setbacks in foreign and domestic affairs – Vietnam, Rhodesia and, especially, devaluation in 1967.⁵⁸

According to Morgan, Wilson was 'a careerist in the main, his opportunism being apparent in his failed attempt to modernise Britain through the archaic institutions of the state'.⁵⁹ Ben Pimlott's assessment is more favourable. Wilson was not unprincipled; far from it, 'he had principles which often incited consensual fury because they were unfashionable ones ... This was true of his attitude to sterling; and later of his position on trade union reform.'⁶⁰ Moreover, the Labour government 'had come to office with serious national and international problems unresolved, and it left with a number of difficult decisions taken'. These included the devaluation of sterling, and, furthermore, by 1970:

the 'East of Suez' posture had largely been given up; and critical steps had been taken to prepare Britain for EEC entry. Wilson had failed to prevent an escalation of the American military operation in Vietnam but he had avoided committing British troops to the conflict without losing US financial support. No new British wars or military entanglements – no Korea, Suez, Falklands or Gulf adventure had been initiated.⁶¹

Philip Ziegler also presents a broadly positive verdict of the Labour governments of the 1960s, and waxes lyrical about Wilson himself: 'it can fairly be said of him that he strove to render less the sum of human wretchedness. He did not always succeed, sometimes he did not seem even to push his efforts to the uttermost, but it was a worthy and consistent goal. For holding to it he can be counted as being on the side of the angels, if never quite a champion in the angelic host'.⁶²

In 1964, the State Department provided a cooler assessment of Wilson. 'An economics don at twenty-one, a junior minister at twenty-nine, President of the Board of Trade at thirty-one, Wilson is today at 48 above all a pro ... a first-rate administrator and a brilliant debater'. At the same time, he had 'gained a reputation among some observers for being a scheming opportunist and an egocentric ... a consummate politician'. Throughout the 1950s, Wilson 'shifted and temporised on a host of issues'. He 'followed Nye Bevan out of the Attlee government in 1951 in disapproval over its rearmament policies, but when Bevan resigned from the Shadow Cabinet in 1954 because of foreign and defence policy differences, it was Wilson who took his place'. In 1955, Wilson supported Hugh Gaitskell in the contest for the Party leadership, but after the 1959 general election, 'when the fundamentalists and the unilateralists went after Gaitskell's scalp in the bitter intra-party fight over nationalisation and defence policies, Wilson not only did nothing to help Gaitskell but gave aid and comfort to his enemies'. In 1960 Wilson 'ran against Gaitskell for the Party leadership, the first such challenge in nearly 40 years, but was defeated'. Nonetheless, when Gaitskell died in January 1963, 'the centre and right-wing members of the Parliamentary Labour Party eventually elected Wilson, whom they disliked and distrusted, as Leader'. They believed that 'he, more than another Labour MP, had the qualities necessary to lead the party – and possibly the country'. Wilson then 'astounded one and all by his ability to hold the party together'. He did so by disregarding 'the extreme leftists and conciliated the centre and right-wing

Labourites'. He succeeded 'in finding the highest common factor uniting the diverse elements in the party and the trade union movement'. Within months Wilson was 'firmly and indisputably in control of his party, and there he has remained', presenting 'the impression that he is businesslike and moderate, a man who understands the necessity of compromising between socialist and egalitarian instincts'. He had demonstrated 'only a minimal commitment to nationalisation, but he has consistently emphasised the importance of NATO'. He had 'talked some unions out of calling strikes, but he is much more trusted than Gaitskell ever was by the powerful left-wing head of Britain's largest union, Frank Cousins'.⁶³ It emerged that Wilson felt a deep-rooted dedication to the United States, as a means of preserving Britain's status as a 'great power', and of bolstering his own political standing by means of conspicuously close ties with Washington. He reflected in March 1964 that as Secretary to two Anglo-American-Canadian combined boards during the Second World War he enjoyed the 'swirl of informality between London and Washington'.⁶⁴

In May 1964, the Labour MP Anthony Wedgwood Benn noted Wilson's belief that a Labour government 'would be able to establish a much more informal relationship with the American President than Home has been able to do'. Wilson 'imagines that he can telephone and fly over as and when necessary, without the usual fuss of top-level meetings. He also hopes to have an Ambassador there who is in and out of the Administration's meetings all the time.'⁶⁵ The Harvard political scientist and White House adviser, Richard Neustadt, commented in 1965 that the Prime Minister felt a strong 'emotional commitment to the US', which he 'personified ... in LBJ'. Indicating the extent of Wilson's self-regard, this commitment 'was a matter of identification with and admiration for' Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy. Furthermore, Neustadt argued, Wilson's attitude derived partly from the loneliness of high office: his position of 'isolation at the apex of ... government, feeling different from his colleagues and having none as confidantes' led him to look to President Johnson as 'one "king" to another'. Britain's economic difficulties and the difficulty in maintaining the country's position in the world meant that the Prime Minister was 'a small king on a tight rope looking towards the big king with the power and the leeway to extend a steadying hand'.⁶⁶

American observers expressed interest in the Labour Party as well as its leader. The State Department commented in October 1964 that Labour was 'a democratic non-Marxist socialist party that aims to bring about a more egalitarian society by evolutionary, constitutional, and practical means', and that some members of the Parliamentary Labour Party did not favour the association with the United States: '50 or more of the roughly 260 Labour MPs in Parliament just dissolved could be described as left-wing, and about a dozen are considered extreme leftists'. Although these 'extremists are noisy and a nuisance ... they have little influence in the party and would probably have even less in a Wilson led government'. Fortunately for Wilson, Washington thus felt no antipathy to

the idea of a Labour government: 'We do not expect a Labour government to make basic changes in Britain's foreign policy. We believe that the foreign policies of a Wilson government, like those of the last Labour administration (1945–1951), will be more British than Labour.'⁶⁷ In a similar vein, Secretary of State Dean Rusk commented soon after Labour's election that 'Great Britain pursues a national foreign policy', evident 'during the previous Labour Government when NATO and the Berlin blockade had been dealt with'.⁶⁸

Lyndon B. Johnson

Not least because the 1960s was a period of social and political tumult, the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson has attracted the attention of numerous historians, most of whom tend to praise his success with regard to the 'Great Society' programme of civil rights, welfare and educational measures.⁶⁹ Paul Conkin, for example, writes that 'For almost two years, from November 1963 to the late summer of 1965, his presidency was an unalloyed success story. No president before or since achieved as many legislative goals or seemed as fully a master of the whole spectrum of tasks that go with such an almost monarchical office.'⁷⁰ Robert Dallek contends from a broader perspective that while 'many of the laws spawned by Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty have either fallen into disrepute or command little support from most Americans ... the spirit and some of the substance behind Johnson's reform programmes maintain a hold on the public imagination that endures'.⁷¹ Yet Johnson's reputation remains blighted by the Vietnam War, inclining many writers to depict him as what Thomas Schwartz describes as the 'ugly American' – crude, provincial and lacking subtlety in his conduct of foreign policy.⁷² Philip Geyelin wrote in 1966 that Johnson was 'a swashbuckling master of the political midstream, but only in the crowded, well-traveled familiar inland waterways of domestic politics. He had no taste or preparation for the deep waters of foreign policy'. He was 'king of the river and a stranger to the open sea'.⁷³ Waldo Heinrichs contends that Johnson's 'appreciation of foreign nations was shallow, circumstantial, and dominated by the personalities of heads of states he had met. Lacking a detached critical perspective, he was culture bound and vulnerable to clichés and stereotypes about world affairs ... this master of domestic politics seemed to lack a sense of power in world politics'. He was 'aware of change but slow to discard early Cold War assumptions and unsure how to deal with new realities'.⁷⁴ According to Dallek, Johnson's expansion of the American commitment in Vietnam rested on 'a combination of noble and ignoble motives that little serve his historical reputation' and led to 'the worst foreign policy disaster' in American history.⁷⁵

In 1963, before Vietnam became such a nightmare, the Foreign Office sketched Johnson's life to date. He had become President on 22 November that year following the assassination of President Kennedy, and was '55 years old ... married, with two daughters, comfortably off, but not wealthy, has qualifications

in law, and is a Presbyterian churchgoer'. As Senate Majority Leader 'for six years during the Eisenhower administration', he 'controlled the Senate and dominated its actions as few legislators ever have'. Unlike most of his predecessors in the vice-presidency, 'he had active political experience during his tenure there. He attended most sessions of the National Security Council, went on diplomatic missions as a negotiator, visited some 27 countries, and was Chairman of the Aeronautics and Space Council and of the Committee on Equal Employment.' He had been 'active and outspoken in President Kennedy's campaign against segregation and poverty, and his first proclamation announced his intention to continue "his work"'. In the light of 'the proximity of the Presidential election [November 1964], and the urgency of the outstanding problems of Civil Rights and taxation, he will have to devote most of his time and energy' to domestic matters. Johnson was 'relatively inexperienced' in foreign affairs. He had 'shown an occasional tendency to go beyond his brief, but he responded in friendly fashion to Mr Khrushchev's message of condolence' at Kennedy's death. Despite his 'desire for social reform', Johnson had 'firm ideas about the pre-excellence [*sic*] of the American Way of Life, and tends to regard it as the only possible form of democracy'. The analysis maintained that 'We cannot expect United Kingdom views to obtain the ready hearing and almost automatic acceptance that the late President gave them.'⁷⁶ Lord Harlech, the British Ambassador to Washington 1961–65, wrote that Johnson 'basically has no feeling for world affairs and no great interest in them except in so far as they come to disturb the domestic scene'. He had 'little sensitivity to the attitude of foreigners, as witness a statement of his that on the basis of his globe-trotting as Vice-President he was convinced that every country he visited the people would prefer to be Americans'. Harlech doubted 'whether we shall be fortunate enough to see the style and intelligence, the gaiety of the Kennedy era reproduced under Mr Johnson'.⁷⁷ Nigel Ashton has suggested that Johnson 'boasted none of the European social or personal connections of his predecessor. Indeed, it is arguable in a broader sense that Kennedy was the last of the "European" presidents.'⁷⁸ There is much truth in these assessments. In May 1965, the Foreign Office noted that Johnson had no 'instinctive feeling for Britain. As a Texan there is nothing in his background that suggests that he should.'⁷⁹ His ideas about the United Kingdom were generally benign but distinctly limited. Referring to himself in the third person, he told a journalist in 1965 that:

the United Kingdom has never had a more genuine friend in the White House than they now have ... The President has known since he entered Congress in the thirties that he thinks the mother country is the rock of Gibraltar, the one great friend we have in sunshine and sorrow, and it was Churchill's voice that kept him from being a slave ... He feels a very deep and compassionate and highly respected [*sic*] interest in the British people and their system.⁸⁰

A 1968 *Times* article by Louis Heren indicated that Johnson was:

a great admirer of the British people. For him it is blood that counts. There is no substitute and naturally he buys his Hereford cattle from England ... He has also

been known to observe that the island race could work a little harder, but as long as there is a United Kingdom and a United States relationship his assumption is that they will be united by a close working relationship. It may be an itty-bitty place, but that is where his mother came from.⁸¹

In practice, Johnson demonstrated scant commitment to a 'close working relationship' with the UK. To him, Britain was but one American ally among many, an assessment based on calculations of utility and relative power. Harlech's successor, Patrick Dean, noted in June 1965 that on the domestic scene Johnson was 'a power politician in the sense that he has worked for ends that he calculates he has the power to achieve', and had transferred this pragmatic concern with relative power 'to the international field'. Hence 'consultation with his allies rates below necessary action with his major potential enemies'. Although Johnson retained most of Kennedy's foreign policy advisers when he entered office, his lack of interest in Britain was likely to shape their thinking, regardless of their respective personal inclinations. Dean commented that as Johnson 'has a very powerful personality, it seems more than likely that those of his entourage who disagree with him either do not speak up or are brusquely overruled'. The Ambassador had been 'interested to learn' since he took up his post 'how much less willing [Robert] McNamara and [McGeorge] Bundy, two very prominent and talkative members of the Kennedy Administration, are now to express views which might be thought to be at variance with the President's views'. McNamara and Bundy were thus 'virtually silenced in policy making meetings at the White House, except insofar as they conform to Mr Johnson's ideas'.⁸² After one of Wilson's frequent visits to Washington he commented that it was not worth spending two days with a British prime minister because Britain 'was not that important anymore'. Given Johnson's outlook and the growing disparity of power between Britain and the United States, the omens did not portend a close relationship between him and Wilson.

The Wilson–Johnson relationship, 1964–68

The release in recent years of British and American government documents has enabled primary research on the Anglo-American relationship under Wilson and Johnson.⁸⁴ The growing literature includes Sylvia Ellis's account of the relationship of the two leaders in the context of the Vietnam War. She argues that 'no country's verbal support was more important' to American policy in Vietnam than that of Britain, which was 'the US's closest ally' and 'a leading social democratic nation whose example was important, not least to the Commonwealth nations and in American liberal circles'. However, the Labour governments of 1964–70 'found it exceedingly difficult to balance the demands of their transatlantic ally, who during a series of sterling crises was also their banker, with the outrage in their party and country at American action in Vietnam'. Wilson's 'hopes for a close working alliance with the Americans, which

he expressed during his first trip to Washington as Prime Minister, soon came under threat'. There was 'no personal chemistry or ideological common ground between Wilson and Johnson ... the relationship was not a happy one'.⁸⁵ Thomas Schwartz confirms that Wilson and Johnson had 'a very testy relationship over Vietnam', but they 'compartmentalised their relationship and learned to live with their differences over Vietnam and work together effectively in matters where they shared a similar outlook'. This period saw 'an extraordinary degree of interaction, involvement, and influence between the US and British governments ... with intense US involvement in such matters as the British budget process and subsequent reciprocal British influence, especially on US approaches to the alliance'.⁸⁶ According to Saki Dockrill, 'the Wilson–Johnson association demonstrated how close Anglo-American interests became as a result of financial considerations and the Vietnam War'.⁸⁷ Dumbrell characterises the mutual dealings of Wilson and Johnson as a 'complex combination of respect and irritation, of occasional British sycophancy and American temper, of subtle acceptance of the unequal power relationship'.⁸⁸ Despite the growing literature, there remains scope for a fuller examination of the Wilson–Johnson relationship, a gap that the present work tries to fill. By exploring the relationship of the two leaders in the years 1964–68 (in 1964 Labour came to power, while 1968 was Johnson's last year in office), it seeks to examine their respective attitudes to the Anglo-American relationship and to one another; how they approached the matters of mutual interest and the extent to which their personal relationship was in any sense a 'special' one; and, finally, to chart broader developments in the Anglo-American relationship. There were several key matters between Britain and the United States in this period: the Vietnam War, British economic weakness and the UK's inability to maintain the traditional 'great power role'. These were substantial issues, with the result that other matters salient to the Anglo-American relationship, such as the question of Rhodesia's UDI from Britain in 1965 and the matter of 'offsetting' the cost of British forces in West Germany, are not addressed.⁸⁹

As well as a contribution to the historiography of Anglo-American relations, the work may also be seen in the context of the literature on summit diplomacy, that is, multilateral or bilateral meetings between international leaders.⁹⁰ The Paris Peace Conference of 1919, attended by David Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau and Woodrow Wilson, was the first summit conference of the twentieth century, and during the Second World War the 'Big Three' conclaves between Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill helped to institutionalise meetings between statesmen. In the early 1950s the process was further consolidated by Churchill's calls for a three-power gathering to ease the tensions of the Cold War, and before long it was the case that bilateral meetings (usually held in Washington) had become integral to the Anglo-American relationship.⁹¹ Summits provide leaders with the opportunity to appraise their foreign counterparts person-to-person and can offer a means of symbolising close bonds between the countries involved,

but the dangers include the possibility that the leaders simply may not get along with one another as well as they might.⁹²

This study is based mainly on government sources, namely material from the White House (including President Johnson's taped telephone conversations), State Department, Foreign Office (FO), Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Prime Minister's Office (PREM) and Cabinet (CAB). Private papers consulted include those of Harold Wilson, Foreign Secretary George Brown and Undersecretary of State George Ball. Memoirs, diaries, including the unpublished diaries of David Bruce, and secondary works are also used. The work is arranged chronologically, with each chapter exploring a period of the Wilson–Johnson relationship, and usually culminating in a summit meeting. Chapter 1 considers the seven weeks from Wilson's election until he went to see Johnson on 7–9 December, a formative period in which Britain cultivated American financial support and which saw pre-summit diplomacy over the NATO Multilateral Force (MLF). Chapter 2 covers the summit in detail, examining the diplomatic exchanges over the Vietnam War, the British commitment East of Suez and the MLF, as well as the interplay of personality between Wilson and Johnson. Chapter 3 spans the months January–April 1965, looking at the impact on the Wilson–Johnson relationship of developments over Vietnam, the reemergence of UK economic difficulties, and Wilson's second trip to Washington since becoming prime minister. Chapter 4, covering May–December 1965, assesses the significance of an alleged Anglo-American strategic-economic 'deal', Wilson's 'Commonwealth Peace Mission' to Vietnam, and another Wilson visit to Washington. Chapter 5 covers January–July 1966, and considers why the personal relationship between Johnson and Wilson suffered such strain when the Labour government 'dissociated' the UK from the latest American measures in Vietnam, and seeks to explain why Johnson's regard for the Prime Minister rose so dramatically with the next summit. Chapter 6 addresses the period from August 1966–September 1967, during which Wilson launched an intense but abortive effort to initiate peace negotiations over Vietnam, and London announced plans to withdraw from military bases East of Suez. Both of these issues exerted a notable influence upon the ties between Wilson and Johnson. Finally, Chapter 7 explores the further impact on these ties of the devaluation of sterling in November 1967, the British announcement of an accelerated withdrawal from East of Suez, and of Wilson's final visit to the White House in February 1968.

Notes

- 1 Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas (LBJL), David Bruce oral history interview conducted by Thomas H. Baker, 9 December 1971, p. 11.
- 2 Ritchie Ovendale, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 136.
- 3 Robin Renwick, *Fighting with Allies: America and Britain in Peace and at War* (New York: Times Books, 1996), p. 178.

- 4 Raymond Seitz, *Over Here* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), p. 316.
- 5 John Dickie, 'Special' No More: *Anglo-American Relations, Rhetoric and Reality* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), pp. 133, 135.
- 6 David Dumbleby and David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: The Relationship Between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. xii.
- 7 Quoted in Dickie, 'Special' No More, p. x.
- 8 *Ibid.* Also see John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After* (London: Macmillan, 2001), p. 7, and David Reynolds, 'Rethinking Anglo-American relations', *International Affairs*, 65 (1989), p. 95.
- 9 Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), p. 90.
- 10 John Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations 1939-1984* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. xvi-xvii.
- 11 Reynolds, 'Rethinking Anglo-American relations', pp. 98-9.
- 12 Michael Howard, 'Afterword: the "Special Relationship"', in Wm. Roger Louis and Hedley Bull (eds), *The Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 387.
- 13 Raymond Dawson and Richard Rosecrance, 'Theory and reality in the Anglo-American Alliance', *World Politics*, 19 (October 1966), pp. 21-51, quoted in C. J. Bartlett, 'The Special Relationship': *A Political History of Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 179.
- 14 Henry Kissinger, *The Troubled Partnership: A Reappraisal of the Atlantic Alliance* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), quoted in Ian S. McDonald, *Anglo-American Relations Since the Second World War* (London: David and Charles, 1974), p. 207.
- 15 Alex Danchev, *On Specialness: Essays in Anglo-American Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1997), preface.
- 16 Dickie, 'Special' No More, pp. 133, 135.
- 17 Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*, p. 12.
- 18 Nigel Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War: The Irony of Interdependence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 27.
- 19 Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations*, p. xviii.
- 20 Quoted in Ian S. McDonald, *Anglo-American Relations*, p. 220.
- 21 Quoted in Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*, p. 8.
- 22 Mark Curtis, *Web of Deceit: Britain's Real Role in the World* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 112.
- 23 Michael David Kandiah and Gillian Staerck, "'Reliable allies": Anglo-American relations', in Wolfram Kaiser and Gillian Staerck, *British Foreign Policy 1955-64: Contracting Options* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 135.
- 24 Saki Dockrill, 'Forging the Anglo-American global defence partnership: Harold Wilson, Lyndon Johnson and the Washington summit, December 1964', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 23: 4 (December 2000), p. 107.
- 25 D. Cameron Watt, *Succeeding John Bull: America in Britain's Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 134.
- 26 Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*, p. 191.
- 27 Quoted in Ovendale, *Anglo-American Relations*, p. 131. The Greeks and Romans analogy is in any case very limited; see Robin Edmonds, *Setting the Mould: The United States and Britain, 1945-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 319.
- 28 Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*, p. 5.
- 29 Ovendale, *Anglo-American Relations*, p. 131.
- 30 US National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (NARA; all NARA references are to Record Group 59, the State Department), Subject-Numeric 1967-69, POL 7 UK, 2.1.68, State Department Research Memorandum, 'What Now For Britain? Wilson's Visit and Britain's Future', 7 February 1968.

- 31 Margaret Gowing, 'Nuclear Weapons and the "Special Relationship"', in Louis and Bull (eds), *The Special Relationship*, p. 124. Skybolt and the Nassau conference have attracted a substantial literature. See, for example, Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*, pp. 152–92; Donette Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 81–104.
- 32 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 7 UK, 2.1.68, State Department Research Memorandum, 'What Now For Britain? Wilson's Visit and Britain's Future', 7 February 1968.
- 33 *Ibid.* Richard Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence* (London: John Murray, 2001), provides a detailed account of Anglo-American intelligence cooperation in the years 1941–63. See also Desmond Ball, *The Ties that Bind: Intelligence Cooperation between the UKUSA Countries* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985).
- 34 Dickie, 'Special' No More, p. 260.
- 35 Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*, pp. 132–3.
- 36 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 7 UK, 2.1.68, State Department Research Memorandum, 'What Now For Britain? Wilson's Visit and Britain's Future', 7 February 1968.
- 37 Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations*, pp. 57–8.
- 38 Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice Between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 37.
- 39 Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 278.
- 40 Public Record Office, London (PRO), FO 371/177830, PLA 24/7, 'Anglo-American Balance Sheet', 25 August 1964.
- 41 Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat*, p. 43.
- 42 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 7 UK, 2.1.68, State Department Research Memorandum, 'What Now For Britain? Wilson's Visit and Britain's Future', 7 February 1968.
- 43 See Alan P. Dobson, *The Politics of the Anglo-American Economic Special Relationship* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1988).
- 44 Clive Ponting, *Breach of Promise: Labour in Power 1964–1970* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), pp. 40–1.
- 45 Diane Kunz, 'Lyndon Johnson's dollar diplomacy', *History Today*, 42 (April 1992), pp. 45–6.
- 46 PRO, FO 371/174282, author unknown, 'Anglo-American Relations: General', 5 February 1964.
- 47 PRO, PREM 11/5192, Planning Section, Western Organisations and Planning Department, 'Britain through American Eyes', 13 February 1962.
- 48 PRO, FO 371/174282, AU 1051/2, author unknown, 'Anglo-American Relations: General', 5 February 1964.
- 49 PRO, FO 371/177830, PLA 27/7 A, Planning Staff, 'An Anglo-American Balance Sheet', 21 August 1964.
- 50 Quoted in C. J. Bartlett, 'The Special Relationship', pp. 107–8.
- 51 See Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*, pp. 60–1.
- 52 Dickie, 'Special' No More, pp. 131–2.
- 53 David Nunnerley, *President Kennedy and Britain* (London: The Bodley Head, 1972), p. 42.
- 54 Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*, p. 220.
- 55 PRO, PREM 11/5192, Planning Section, Western Organisations and Planning Department, 'Britain through American Eyes', 13 February 1962.
- 56 PRO, FO 371/179615, AU 1904/2, Gore-Booth to Dean, 21 July 1965.
- 57 Austen Morgan, *Harold Wilson* (London: Pluto, 1992); Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: Harper Collins, 1992); and Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Life of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993). Previous biographies include Paul Foot, *The Politics of Harold Wilson* (London: Penguin, 1968); Ernest Kay, *Pragmatic Premier: An Intimate Portrait of Harold Wilson* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1967); Andrew

- Roth, *Harold Wilson: Yorkshire Walter Mitty* (London: Macdonald, 1977); Dudley Smith, *Harold Wilson: A Critical Biography* (London: Robert Hale, 1964). See Morgan, *Wilson*, pp. 559–60, for an assessment of these earlier works.
- 58 Morgan, *Wilson*, p. ix.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 Pimlott, *Wilson*, p. 562.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 563.
- 62 Ziegler, *Wilson*, pp. 316–17, 518.
- 63 NARA, Lot Files, Records of the Policy Planning Council, 1963–64 (70 D 199), Great Britain, State Department Research Memorandum, 'The Foreign Policy of a British Labour Government', 8 October 1964.
- 64 Harold Wilson oral history interview conducted by Richard E. Neustadt, 23 March 1964, John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL), Boston, pp. 28, 71–2.
- 65 Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963–1967* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 108, entry for 5 May 1964; Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat*, p. 44.
- 66 LBJL, NSF: Name File, Neustadt Memos Box 7, Neustadt to Bundy, 7 August 1965.
- 67 NARA, Lot Files, Records of the Policy Planning Council 1963–64 (70 D 199), Great Britain, State Department Research Memorandum, 'The Foreign Policy of a British Labour Government', 8 October 1964.
- 68 PRO, FO 371/174282, AU 1051/10, Lord Harlech to Foreign Office, 'US press reactions to the election result', 19 October 1964.
- 69 Biographies of Johnson include Paul K. Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales: Lyndon Baines Johnson* (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1986); Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1971* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).
- 70 Conkin, *Big Daddy*, p. 173.
- 71 Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 626, 627.
- 72 The phrase 'ugly American' is a reference to the 1958 Cold War novel of the same name by William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick. Thomas Alan Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard, 2003), pp. 1–6. In this valuable work Schwartz attempts to provide a more balanced perspective on Johnson's diplomacy.
- 73 Philip Geyelin, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the World* (London: Pall Mall, 1966), p. 15.
- 74 Waldo Heinrichs, 'Lyndon Johnson: Change and Continuity', in Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker (eds), *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963–1968* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 26.
- 75 Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 626, 627. When Johnson assumed power in November 1963, there were 12,000 American 'advisers' in South Vietnam. In August 1964 he secured the 'Gulf of Tonkin' resolution from Congress, thereby expanding his power to wage war in South East Asia, and in February 1965 he authorised 'Rolling Thunder', the sustained American bombing of North Vietnam. In March, the first American combat troops were sent, with 200,000 present by December. The figure would rise to over 500,000 by 1968.
- 76 PRO, FO 371/168409, AU1012/5, J. L. N. O'Loughlin, 'Lyndon Baines Johnson', 4 December 1963.
- 77 PRO, FO 371/179558, AU 1015/18, Lord Harlech's Valedictory Despatch, 15 March 1965. See Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*, pp. 220–1, for Johnson's dismissive reaction towards the first request of Lord Harlech for a meeting after Kennedy's death. Johnson's response is held to illustrate that 'the change in president had produced a difference of attitude both towards Ormsby-Gore [Harlech] as an individual and to the significance of an approach by the British Cabinet. The British Ambassador and Cabinet

- were no more significant than the representatives of other foreign governments.' *Ibid.*
- 78 Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War*, p. 220.
- 79 PRO, FO 371/179573, AU 1051/16, J. A. Thompson, 'Visits by President Johnson and Vice-President Humphrey', 31 May 1965.
- 80 LBJL, tape WH6504.06, citation 7378, Johnson–Robert Spivack telephone conversation, 12.43 p.m., 29 April 1965.
- 81 Louis Heren, 'Anglo-US relationship comes under strain', *The Times*, 23 February 1968.
- 82 PRO, FO 371/179566, AU 1023/26, Dean to Paul Gore-Booth, 'Account of President Johnson's administration of US foreign policy', 5 June 1965.
- 83 Quoted in Henry Brandon, *Special Relationships: A Foreign Correspondent's Memoirs from Roosevelt to Reagan* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 210.
- 84 See, for example, Dockrill, 'Forging the Anglo-American global defence partnership'; John Dumbrell, 'The Johnson administration and the British Labour government: Vietnam, the pound and East of Suez', *Journal of American Studies*, 30 (1996), pp. 211–31; John Dumbrell and Sylvia Ellis, 'British involvement in Vietnam peace initiatives, 1966–1967: Marigolds, Sunflowers, and "Kosygin week"', *Diplomatic History*, 27: 1 (January 2003), pp. 113–49; Jeremy Fielding, 'Coping with decline: US policy toward the British defence reviews of 1966', *Diplomatic History*, 23: 4 (Fall 1999), pp. 633–56; Diane B. Kunz, "'Somewhat mixed up together": Anglo-American defence and financial policy during the 1960s', *Journal of Commonwealth and Imperial History*, 27: 2 (1999), pp. 213–32; Ponting, *Breach of Promise*; Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe*; John W. Young, 'The Wilson government and the Davies peace mission to North Vietnam, July 1965', *Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), pp. 545–62.
- 85 Sylvia Ellis, 'Lyndon B. Johnson, Harold Wilson and the Vietnam War: a not so special relationship?', in Jonathan Hollowell (ed.), *Twentieth Century Anglo-American Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 180–1, 200–1.
- 86 Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe*, pp. 232–3.
- 87 Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat*, p. 6.
- 88 Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*, p. 64.
- 89 For Rhodesia in the context of Anglo-American relations, see Ponting, *Breach of Promise*, pp. 46–7, 155, and *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. XXIV, *Africa* (Washington DC: USGPO, 1999), pp. 788–962. For NATO problems see Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe*.
- 90 For example, George Ball, *Diplomacy for a Crowded World* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1976); G. R. Berridge, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); G. R. Berridge, *International Politics: States, Power and Conflict Since 1945* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1992); David H. Dunn (ed.), *Diplomacy at the Highest Level: The Evolution of International Summitry* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Keith Eubank, *The Summit Conferences 1919–1960* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1966); Keith Hamilton and Richard Langhorne, *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 221–5; Jan Melissen (ed.), *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Elmer Plischke, *Diplomat-in-Chief: The President at the Summit* (New York: Praeger, 1986); D. C. Watt, 'Summits and summitry reconsidered', *International Relations II* (1963), pp. 493–504.
- 91 Berridge, *Diplomacy*, pp. 168–9.
- 92 For an assessment of the pros and cons of the summit conference, see David H. Dunn, 'How useful is summitry?', in Dunn (ed.), *Diplomacy at the Highest Level*, pp. 247–68.

The approach to the summit

On 16 October 1964, Harold Wilson became Britain's new prime minister, when the Labour Party gained power after thirteen years in opposition and by a slim margin.¹ Wilson promptly turned to President Johnson for help in the British economic crisis which occurred soon after Labour assumed power, and he gained American assistance in obtaining a major bail-out for sterling. Labour's handling of the British economic crisis occasioned a great deal of concern on the part of the President, given the possibility that sterling might have to be devalued or that any rise in the Bank of England lending rate could precipitate a run on the dollar. There was also concern about the Multilateral Force (MLF), a matter due to be discussed at the planned summit meeting in Washington early in December. The MLF was a US-sponsored plan to create a mixed-manned NATO fleet of surface vessels armed with Polaris nuclear missiles under an American veto.² The basic idea was to give West Germany a greater sense of integration with the Western alliance, lest it seek a more independent and potentially destabilising course; National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy described the need for a 'civilised way of keeping the Germans from getting more dangerous'.³ However, the project had effectively been on hold until the British general election, and a variety of military and political opposition meant that the MLF had garnered little support in the UK from any quarter, and Wilson expressed the opposition by presenting plans for a diluted version of the project known as the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF). By this means the MLF project might be disabled without antagonising President Johnson. Several emissaries came from Washington to London to try to win Wilson over on the MLF, some of whom tried to exploit his commitment to the White House by asserting that the President was resolutely in favour of the project. However, in a critical meeting the day before he was due to see Wilson, Johnson's growing weariness with the project led him to assert his will over the scheme's supporters in the State Department. This was a formative period in relations between the Labour government and the United States, characterised above all by Wilson's determination to secure his ties with the White House, in keeping with his personal inclinations and his view that close cooperation with Washington was fundamental to British foreign policy.

The Labour victory

President Johnson had never feared a Labour victory in Britain, but he felt it necessary to ease any concern in the world at large (especially in financial markets) about the British 'socialists' entering office. Although the news that China had detonated an atomic bomb and that Khrushchev had been ousted from power stole the international headlines in the United States, Johnson affirmed on television that Labour 'are our friends, as the Conservatives before them are our friends, and as governments of both parties have been our friends for generations'. The response of official Washington to Labour's success, noted a Foreign Office assessment, was 'almost routine and without surprise'. Most US officials had long ago 'conquered their earlier doubts about dealing with socialists on major foreign affairs problems'.⁴ Johnson telephoned his congratulations to Wilson as soon as the results were out, and suggested that they 'would have to meet with each other as soon as possible', to discuss defence issues.⁵ The President had not felt much enthusiasm for contacting the British leader; he was merely following Bundy's suggestion to 'make a phone call suggesting a meeting after the US election, since Harold Wilson couldn't be kept away from the White House anyway and the President might as well take the initiative'.⁶ But Wilson responded effusively: 'my colleagues and I are convinced that close friendship and cooperation between us is just as essential now as it has been in the past'. He looked forward 'to continuing the close and confidential communication which you have already begun and which has existed between successive Presidents of the United States and Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom'.⁷

The Labour victory prompted Bruce to assess Wilson's 'possible attitude towards Anglo-American negotiations'. Washington would find him, Bruce said, 'desirous of personally controlling all important aspects of British policy, foreign and domestic ... The charge during the campaign that Wilson was a "one-man band" was fully justified'. As he was 'intrigued by the manner in which the American President is served by a small personal staff, Mr. Wilson is likely to make a small scale adaptation of it for his own use'. Wilson would have, in the figures of Patrick Gordon Walker (Foreign Secretary), James Callaghan (Chancellor of the Exchequer), and Denis Healey (Minister of Defence), 'appointees on whose judgment in affairs vital to their own departments and to the national security, he will not completely rely'. Washington should prepare itself 'for a greater degree of high-level negotiation with the British than has been our previous experience'. Callaghan, Healey and Gordon Walker 'may eventually be replaced by stronger individuals', said Bruce, 'but for the present their field of manoeuvre will be restricted'.⁸

Towards the summit

Wilson and Johnson had met in March 1964, when the then leader of the opposition had visited Washington partly in order to, as Rusk told the President,

'enhance his public image in Britain'.⁹ During the meeting Johnson tried to browbeat Wilson for the fact that Britain was selling a fleet of British Leyland buses to communist Cuba.¹⁰ The President was never placated on this matter, regarding it almost as a betrayal by the British. As late as February 1968, Michael Palliser, Wilson's Foreign Office Private Secretary, had cause to say that 'The President was obsessional about Cuban buses and in any conversation with anybody about Britain they always came up.'¹¹ But a date had to be set for the next meeting with Johnson, and after negotiation it was finally arranged that Wilson would arrive in Washington on the evening of Sunday 6 December, with the Monday and Tuesday to be spent in talks with Johnson. The US Embassy noted on 4 December that the summit was more important to London than to Washington. The discussions were 'regarded by Labour leaders as of [the] utmost importance to Anglo-American relations and the future of Western strategic planning and cooperation'.¹² In particular, Wilson had long looked forward to meeting Johnson in the capacity of Prime Minister. Early in 1964, for example, he told the academic and White House adviser Richard Neustadt that if Labour won the election:

we assume that the first thing we were to make our numbers one another [*sic*], that we make the first visit to establish broad lines of policy which is always done. It was done very successfully between Macmillan and Eisenhower, for example. And from that stage on, to work out what the other arrangements would be ...¹³

Wilson gave much thought to how he was going to speak to the President. He told Bruce on 19 November that he was interested in discussing the problems of 'political management ... and how the British parliamentary system worked', as a means of opening up cordial discussions. In addition to the MLF, Wilson wanted to discuss with Johnson 'the general question of Britain's role in the world'.¹⁴ Defence talks at Chequers on 19–22 November¹⁵ had 'highlighted the fact that Britain was trying ... to fulfil three roles – the independent nuclear deterrent role, the conventional role in Europe, and a world role East of Suez – without the necessary economic resources'. Knowing how to please the Americans, Wilson indicated that 'the most important role for Britain for the future would be in the defence of Western interests East of Suez'. He thought that 'the President and the Defence Department in Washington would have similar views'.¹⁶ His aims for the meeting were grandiose. He sought to make a plea for US–UK unity which would, he hoped, create an impact like that produced by Winston Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri, in 1946. Burke Trend, Secretary to the Cabinet, for example, suggested to the Prime Minister on 2 December that:

the overriding purpose of your visit ... is to secure a broad meeting of minds between yourself and the President on what the world is going to look like from 1965 onwards and what the United States and United Kingdom jointly should do about it. Your object, as I see it, should be to sell to the President the basic philosophy of the Chequers weekend, your view of the world scene as a whole, both because it is right

and because it is by worldwide collaboration that we shall preserve, unspoken, the 'special relationship'.¹⁷

Wilson was delighted by Trend's arguments: he jotted on the margin of the memorandum that 'This is the best sense I have seen on this.' He would keep the document on the top of his Washington briefs, 'ready for quick reference'.

British economic difficulties

Britain's role in the world would depend in large part on the country's economic health. David Bruce recognised that Wilson would be 'confronted immediately with [the] over-hanging problem of difficult British balance of payment payments'. According to Bruce, these problems 'may assume grave proportions, although much of it now seems suppressed, dealt with by short-term borrowing and hidden from public eye and consciousness'.¹⁹ Bruce also suggested that the slim Labour majority 'may impede swift action aimed at eliminating sectors of the free enterprise system', but, all the same, Labour's 'anticipated proposals for taxation are awaited with fear in the City'. If there were 'radical changes ... in fiscal management, as advocated by some of [Wilson's] advisers, there will be a further diminution of confidence, already impaired by a Labour victory, amongst Britain's creditors'.²⁰ On 24 October, Wilson confided his worries on such matters to Johnson, and in doing so he tried to assuage the President's own concerns for the dollar. Wilson's 'first task on assuming office', he stated, had been 'to undertake ... a thorough review of our present financial and economic situation'. The situation 'is even worse than we had supposed', with a 'probable deficit on external account for this year which may be as high as £800 million'. Wilson was therefore 'determined to take firm remedial measures', and had 'considered and rejected two alternative courses of action'. He would not even refer explicitly to the first alternative, which was to devalue sterling (then set at a parity of \$2.80). Devaluation had been 'rejected ... now, and for all time'. He also opposed the second option, an increase in the Bank of England lending rate, 'in principle both because of its restrictive effect on the economy and because of its impact on your own problems, especially at this time', he told Johnson. The following Monday, Wilson told the President, 'the government will be telling the nation what the situation is and announcing an eight point programme to set the economy moving on the right lines'. The plan's key measures were a surcharge on certain imports and various export rebates, despite the fact that these actions contravened the terms of Britain's membership of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). Wilson 'thought it right' to tell Johnson 'what we propose in advance of any public statement, first, because I set great store by close and continuing co-operation with the American administration over the whole international field, economic and commercial'. Britain's measures were 'essential if we are to have a strong economy as a basis for playing our proper part in international affairs' and retaining close bonds with the United States.²¹

The exigencies of the British economic situation were such that in his letter Wilson was not consulting but informing Johnson of the measures – so that ‘public statements’ by the US Government about them were ‘necessarily somewhat optimistic’ since it was ‘faced by [a] *fait accompli*’.²² Yet the President was pleased that sterling had not been devalued, for the move might cause serious disruption to the world trading system and undermine the United States’s own economic position. He believed that devaluation could ‘easily throw the world economy into the kind of vicious cycle that had been so disastrous between 1929 and 1933’.²³ However, in late 1964 Wilson had overrated Johnson’s ability to help with the British economic crisis, as there was no intimation of any unilateral US government bail-out, which, it can plausibly be suggested, the Prime Minister had sought from the President. Lord Cromer, the Governor of the Bank of England, told Wilson on 18 November that ‘a precipitate appeal to the United States for direct help might prejudice next month’s talks in Washington’.²⁴ In his dealings with Congress, whose consent would be needed for a unilateral US Government loan to the British, Johnson gave priority to his ‘Great Society’ programme of social legislation. But the initial British economic measures did seem to strike the right note in the White House. In a telephone conversation with the President on 24 October, Bundy expressed satisfaction that London had made no move to devalue the pound or to increase the Bank rate, and was pleased that the import surcharge was only a temporary measure: all told, the British were ‘playing ball’.²⁵ Johnson sent Wilson a brief but supportive letter (drafted by Bundy) the same day, regretting ‘the recourse to restrictive measures’ but recognising ‘the need for strong action in defence of sterling’. The success of ‘protecting the pound ... will reinforce the position of the whole free world’.²⁶ Thus fortified, Wilson responded that his economic plan had ‘been very well received both at home and abroad’. Most commentators, he said, regarded it as a ‘sensible start to a vigorous attack on our problems’. Sterling was ‘already strengthening and the stock market is more than steady’. There had been ‘a few squeals from overseas, but these are mostly for the record’.²⁷

Despite Wilson’s optimism, the British economic measures produced only a short-lived improvement. A British analysis noted that ‘the size of the [balance of payments] deficit and the hostile reception abroad of the import surcharge’ worried financial analysts. Various ministerial statements, including one from Gordon Walker on 27 October, indicated that the Government had no plans to raise the Bank rate. This, said the report, ‘seemed to confirm that the Government did not intend to deal with the payments problem by restraining domestic demand’. Reports spread of imminent devaluation, while the budget of 11 November was not deflationary enough to please the bankers.²⁸ Referring to the renewed outflow of sterling, on 22 November Johnson suggested to Gardner Ackley, Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, that the ‘thing that kicked it off’ was ‘a billion dollars worth of expenditure’ in the budget, which ‘just scared everybody’. Ackley responded by saying that the British had ‘handled

it pretty ineptly', including the fact that Wilson had intimated that the Bank rate would be raised but then failed to make an adjustment when expected.²⁹ Two days later, Johnson commented of the Labour government's indiscretions that it 'Looks like we ought to get them to quit talking'.³⁰ Wilson told the President on 19 November that sterling had been 'under strong pressure for several days', and that Britain intended 'to draw at the beginning of next month enough of our IMF standby to repay the short-term credit we have received from the Federal Reserve and the other central banks'. Contrary to the Prime Minister's previous assurance, it was also necessary to raise the Bank rate. He was 'very reluctant to do this since it would run counter to the long-term policies we are developing for dealing with our basic economic problems', and knew that 'an increase in our Bank rate would be as unwelcome to you as it would be to us'.³¹ It would oblige the United States government to do likewise in order to prevent an outflow of dollars – Johnson noted in a telephone conversation a few days later that 'When you agree to pay your investor 7 per cent in England he's not very interested in 4 per cent in America'.³²

In the letter of 19 November, Wilson told Johnson that 'if we are to outmanoeuvre the speculators over the short term and to give our longer term policies the chance to mature, we need substantial reinforcement for sterling as rapidly as possible'. The British government therefore intended to 'approach the IMF for a further standby of \$1,000 million; and we shall greatly value your support'.³³ The Bank rate was duly raised from 5 to 7 per cent on 23 November, and the lending rate in the United States also had to be raised. Johnson complained on 25 November that 'our short-term's gone up from 3.6 to 3.8. Every time you go up a point it costs us many millions and our interest on our debt's going to go way up ... money's going to get tighter and our prosperity's going to dip and our tax money's going to dip, our expenses going up ... we got a real serious thing on our hands'.³⁴ That day Britain took a \$3 billion short-term loan from, as Bruce noted in his diary, 'European central banks, the United States, and others, which should be sufficient to put to rout speculators against the pound'. The United States 'is providing \$1 billion of these credits, a quarter from the Export-Import Bank, the rest from the Federal Reserve'.³⁵ It was the US Treasury and the Federal Reserve that made the running to help Britain obtain the bailout;³⁶ but Wilson bore an exaggerated sense of gratitude to Johnson himself, telling Bruce that 'the support of President Johnson and the whole of the United States Administration ... had been absolutely magnificent'. Britain's financial crisis had 'made clear' just who were Britain's 'friends'. Wilson even invoked the analogy of nuclear war: the prospect of devaluation was like 'look[ing] down into the abyss ... much as President Kennedy had done in the nuclear context at the time of Cuba'.³⁷

Some of Wilson's colleagues disdained his efforts to gain American help for Britain's economic problems. Housing Minister Richard Crossman noted in his diary in January 1965 that 'By getting Lyndon Johnson firmly on his side [Wilson]

has convinced himself at least that we can get through without the devaluation of the pound because we are now built into the American system'.³⁸ Paymaster General George Wigg recorded in his memoirs Wilson's argument that to devalue the pound would transfer Britain's problems 'without warning, to the Americans', an approach which would have 'angered President Johnson and endangered future Anglo-American relations'. Wigg contended that Wilson's solicitude about Johnson's reactions to the British economic measures was a 'misjudgment', as there was 'no sign' that Johnson 'ever regarded Wilson's policies with the respect they were supposed to have earned'. Wilson's continued postponement of the devaluation of sterling until 1967 meant that Britain 'paid a high price, a very high price in economic terms, for nothing'.³⁹ But Wilson was sometimes less confident about the wisdom of refusing to devalue than he tended to appear. Economist Walter Heller told the President on 19 November 1964 that the Prime Minister had stated 'somewhat wistfully' that 'we couldn't devalue on the first day but it was then or never'. Wilson 'sounded as though he wishes he'd done it the first day ... that would have put [Britain] in a stronger competitive position'.⁴⁰ It is clear, though, that Wilson's desire to avoid devaluation was intimately connected with his interest in close Anglo-American relations and a continued major international role for the UK.⁴¹ In August 1965, for example, Wilson 'reminded' Richard Neustadt of his 'concern' for the United States 'last October; [sic] Bank rate and devaluation decisions were influenced, he said, by Johnson's situation politically'.⁴² Francis Bator of the National Security Council told Johnson in June 1967 that Wilson's continued opposition to devaluation 'reflected, in part, 'our repeated warnings during the rough period in 1964–1966 that we regard devaluation as a mortal sin'.⁴³ But while Wilson was keen to bolster his standing in the eyes of American policymakers there were concerns in Washington about the economic competence of the Labour government – in a conversation with Johnson on 24 November Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon questioned whether Wilson and his colleagues 'know what they are doing'.⁴⁴

The MLF

In the early days of his government, Wilson discussed the MLF, the planned mixed-manned NATO fleet of nuclear-armed surface vessels, with Denis Healey and Patrick Gordon Walker.⁴⁵ In his role as Foreign Secretary the unexciting Gordon Walker was not likely to upset the Americans nor was he likely to steal the spotlight from Wilson's own diplomacy. He stressed to Bruce on 19 October that 'The traditional close relationship between the US and the UK would be the cornerstone of British foreign policy'.⁴⁶ While in Washington, on 27 October, the Foreign Secretary outlined the tentative British counterproposal to the MLF, the ANF. The ANF was a diluted version of the MLF, a 'nuclear force consisting of British V-bombers, British Polaris submarines, and in which a mixed manned

element ... which would play a less conspicuous role than originally planned'. The British would 'not participate in the mixed-manned MLF element'.⁴⁷ Later, Richard Neustadt told Johnson of Wilson's problems with the MLF: 'The British separate the principle of mixed-manning from the principle of the surface force'. They 'argue that the force is too vulnerable, expensive, and difficult to man', since the fleet lacks 'popular appeal' among the armed forces. The 'British want the least number of surface ships and the smallest manpower and financial contribution they can get away with'. But despite the technical arguments, the main British inhibitions related to Wilson's domestic position, the analysis noted: the Prime Minister 'has set the highest priority on forging a unified government and a unified party'. So far he had succeeded, but he remained vulnerable: 'the surface ship problem could undo much of what has been accomplished'. There was 'no influential support for the surface ships in the United Kingdom'. In fact, there was 'outright hostility toward the concept from the public (the press), the military, the Tories, and within the Labour Government, with George Brown, the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, being the most vehement opponent'.⁴⁸ The ANF proposal was not badly received in Washington. Bundy told Johnson on 8 November that the UK proposal represented 'a much more flexible and interested posture' than the one that Labour had taken in opposition.⁴⁹ At the defence discussions at Chequers on 21–22 November Wilson soon obtained a mandate for the ANF.⁵⁰ However, on 19 November, Trend had told him of the continued vigorous support in the State Department for the MLF.⁵¹ The main concern was that British failure 'to participate in the mixed-manned element' was effectively a form of national chauvinism which 'could be taken by the Germans as a form of discrimination – [the] MLF was considered good enough for Germany but not good enough for the UK'.⁵² Wilson knew not to disparage the Germans, because Johnson was especially concerned that West Germany must be treated equitably in Atlantic affairs. He made this point in an address at Georgetown University in Washington on 3 December. Oliver Wright, Wilson's Foreign Office Private Secretary, told him on 5 December that 'in this speech the President was probably trying to set the tone for your visit to Washington'.⁵³

In the run-up to the conference the State Department pushed the case for the MLF, not least because Johnson himself had indicated in July that it would be important 'to move ahead promptly with this major undertaking in the last months of 1964'.⁵⁴ On 25 November, Richard Neustadt visited London to speak to Wilson about the MLF. The Prime Minister told Neustadt that as he and the President were 'politicians', they could deal with one another as such about the project, pragmatically and with due consideration to one another's needs. But all the same Wilson expected a clash with Johnson over the MLF: they were on a 'collision course'. At least in the presence of Neustadt, though, he was resolute, saying that he had 'no intention of tearing up my papers and going home if the President should respond with a "no"'. He anticipated a similar posture from the President, who, owing to the United States's previous declarations of

support for the MLF, could not 'tear up what the American government had said before in the past two years'.⁵⁵ Undersecretary of State George Ball, who visited London on 30 November, reinforced Wilson's perception that Johnson was firmly in favour of the MLF. Wilson lamented to him that he faced 'political problems – both domestic, and in the field of foreign affairs', in contrast to Johnson, who had 'smashed' the opposition in his election. Wilson told Ball that 'it was popular to take a Gaullist line in Britain', so he 'had to come back from Washington in a very strong position, not perhaps next week but at least at the end of January'.⁵⁶ The Prime Minister's version of the encounter with Ball is more dramatic than the official State Department record, indicating that, in effect, Ball presented an ultimatum: he must accept the MLF or face a rift with Johnson. This was an attempt to exploit Wilson's personal commitment to the President. According to Wilson, Ball made it clear that if Britain was going to reject the MLF 'it would be better if I cancelled my visit. I said I would begin the negotiations when I reached Washington, not before.'⁵⁷

Wilson's account is overdramatised in order to show his resolution and single-mindedness against Ball's pro-MLF zeal, and to demonstrate his resistance to the implicit threat of damaged relations with Johnson. Yet Wilson's record that Ball indicated that 'it would be better if I cancelled my visit' if Britain was not willing to join the MLF rings true, not least because the Undersecretary was a keen supporter of the mutually reinforcing goals of the MLF and European political unity. Moreover, Wilson was right to doubt that Ball's 'line ... had been authorised by the White House'.⁵⁸ In his tough message to Wilson, the Undersecretary did not represent Johnson's views, who at best saw the discussions of the American emissaries with Wilson as fact-finding missions. George Brown realised that Ball was overstepping the mark. He wrote to Wilson on 30 November to say that Ball had seen him, to 'talk chiefly about the MLF'. According to Brown, Ball said that 'on the authority of the President, he ... did not foresee the possibility of any scheme going forward that did not involve UK participation in a mixed manned nuclear surface fleet'. Ball elaborated to say that Johnson 'would not be interested in any development from your forthcoming talks if the UK did not accept such participation, and that no agreement was likely ... unless this condition was met'. Prompted by David Bruce, who was present, Ball said that 'he had not meant to imply that the talks were conditional on our acceptance of this outcome, but he did not really withdraw from the position he had taken'.⁵⁹ Pressure from Ball and other figures for Wilson to give way on the MLF occasioned some criticism in London. Trend argued to Wilson on 2 December that 'the recent reconnaissance trips of Neustadt and Ball ... have obscured the wood by highlighting particular trees ... advice on how to handle the President, the present rate of his pulse etc. etc. is useful' but 'too much of the recent toing and froing has smacked of lobbying by one interest or another no less insidious for being less fanatical'. It 'should be strenuously resisted'.⁶⁰

Johnson and the MLF

On 13 November Nicholas Henderson, Foreign Office Private Secretary to Gordon Walker, told Oliver Wright of developments in the White House's handling of the MLF. Chester Cooper, 'a member of the CIA, who now works with Mac Bundy in the White House', had indicated that 'from now on the White House staff would be taking a much closer interest than hitherto in the multilateral force, and the responsibility for this subject which [Walt] Rostow and his co-fanatics in the State Department would be correspondingly diminished'. Johnson's 'interests, experience and preoccupations had inevitably lain in the domestic field since he became President, but now that he had secured an overwhelming public mandate it was likely that he would turn his attention to the foreign field'. The President was 'thought to want to make an important move about the Atlantic alliance'. The 'next few weeks would be crucial ones for him in shaping a policy', and Wilson's visit was 'therefore most timely'.⁶¹ In a meeting at the White House on 10 April 1964, Johnson had warned against trying to 'shove' the MLF 'down the throats of the potential participants'⁶² – a warning that seemed to have little impact upon Ball and other State Department advocates of the scheme. In a memorandum of 17 December, Johnson noted the MLF's theoretical benefits:

- 1 ... it will lead the UK out of the field of strategic deterrence and thus reduce by one the number of powers aiming at this kind of nuclear strength.
- 2 ... it will greatly reduce the danger of any separate nuclear adventure by the Germans.
- 3 ... it will advance the principle and practice of collective strategic defence, as against the proliferation of separate nuclear deterrents.⁶³

Although he accepted that the MLF might benefit the Western alliance, the pragmatic Johnson grew less and less convinced that it was worth pursuing. His ambivalence precipitated a power struggle among his advisers to win him over on the best approach. Among those advisers Bundy was the most active in disseminating his views. On 25 November, he wrote to Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, expressing some pragmatic and well-considered views. In an influential paper, Bundy argued that Johnson should be persuaded to let the MLF 'sink out of sight ... we should now ask the President for authority to work toward a future in which the MLF does not come into existence'. It seemed 'increasingly clear', said Bundy, 'that the costs of success would be prohibitive'. Bundy surmised correctly that Johnson 'does not feel the kind of personal Presidential engagement in the MLF itself which would make it difficult for him to strike out on a new course if we can find one which he finds better'.⁶⁴

Later, Johnson asked Bundy why Kennedy had been 'tentative about the MLF'. Bundy responded that 'there were different reasons at different times, but in the last half of 1963 the reasons were, I think, dominated by his feeling that if he could only get the MLF by major and intense US pressure, it was not worth it'.

Bundy told Johnson that he felt 'we have not given you a full, fair statement of the case against pressing hard now for the MLF', and then went on to outline some objections to the MLF similar to those he had presented to Rusk, including the argument that the MLF would 'make very heavy demands on Presidential leadership, and there are better things for the President to do'. It was 'all very well' for people such as Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defence, to talk of 'converting the Senate, but the man who will really have to do it is the President'. Even if Wilson said 'yes' to British membership of the MLF 'there will be further problems of timing and tactics' and 'there will still be quite a political charade to be played out'. Bundy confronted the President with two options: on the one hand, 'If you go full steam ahead, you face a long, hard political fight, a major confrontation with de Gaulle, and the possibility of defeat or delay which would gravely damage the prestige of the President'. On the other hand, 'if you go half speed ahead, there will probably be no MLF, but it will not be your fault alone'. Johnson would have 'kept to the letter and spirit of the Kennedy readiness to move if the Europeans wanted it', rather than simply abandoning the initiative in the face of British intransigence. There will be 'plenty of opportunities for debate, discussion and delay, and for a gradual and ceremonial burial', said Bundy, suggesting this course. The President's 'wisdom, caution and good judgement will have the praise of liberals, of military men, of the British, of the French, and of many Germans – and you will have freedom to make a different choice later if you wish'.⁶⁵

Johnson supported these pragmatic ideas about the MLF more than he did the views of ideologues such as Ball and Rostow. He had never been keen on the MLF; he had told Bundy that 'I don't want to bring any more hands on the [nuclear] button than we already got if we can avoid it'.⁶⁶ The President's political savvy and experience gave him other reasons to question the wisdom of the scheme. On Sunday 6 December, when Wilson was already settled at the British Embassy in Washington, there was a rambling meeting about Wilson and the MLF attended by the President, Ball, McNamara, Rusk, Bundy and Bruce. Ball argued that if the President failed to 'push Wilson hard, this would be a great surprise ... after what the President's emissaries had said in London' (Ball was clearly thinking of his own representations to Wilson). Failure to push Wilson would 'confirm' for the Prime Minister 'a treasured suspicion that Washington was not really intent on a success for [the] MLF'. But Johnson was not persuaded. He had been 'reading and thinking hard' about the MLF, noting that William Fulbright, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had argued that there was 'no need for it'. The MLF 'would command only a minority of votes in the Senate', especially if Britain was 'dragged' into the project. Invoking the analogy of the Senate's rejection of the League of Nations in 1920, Johnson feared that he might end up 'in the position of Woodrow Wilson, and discover that a treaty he had advocated was repudiated by the Congress'. Johnson's election victory over Barry Goldwater was 'a defeat for screw-ballism

and an endorsement of sanity' in foreign relations, but it was not enough to justify pursuing the MLF. He urged his advisers to be more 'prudent about what you press me to go for'.⁶⁷

Johnson certainly had no desire to antagonise Congress over the MLF, as the support of the legislature was essential for his vision of a 'Great Society'. Some leading senators had warned Johnson that:

we are much concerned that instead of cementing the Alliance, the MLF might create further rifts and tensions within it ... the proposal could at best be an Anglo-German-American force. But with the Labour Party in staunch opposition ... British participation is at least uncertain. To coerce Great Britain into participation out of fear of a German-American pact is hardly consistent with an Alliance of sovereign and friendly states sensitive to mutual interests and viewpoints. Alternatively, without British participation, the MLF would become a German-American force whose potential implications would decidedly be drastic.⁶⁸

In the 6 December meeting, Johnson upbraided his advisers, saying that nobody outside the administration 'from right to left' of the political spectrum at home or abroad wanted the MLF: the 'French weren't for it; the Italian position was obscure; and the British weren't for it ... one cannot push a thing if everyone's against it', he said. Johnson did not intend to have 'a showdown' with Wilson because if the Prime Minister and his European counterparts did not support the MLF, 'then to hell with it'. However, the President would at first try to get Wilson to accept: 'He'll say no and then we'll shove him a bit and agree that both have to talk with the Germans', who would not support the British ANF proposals.⁶⁹ Johnson had turned away from the MLF irrevocably, and the meetings with Wilson would surely reflect this.

American reservations towards Wilson

There was little enthusiasm in Washington for Wilson's visit. Richard Neustadt wrote that he expected the Prime Minister to 'arrive ... with recollections of the Anglo-American relationship and hopes for his own personal relationship which are quite different from perceptions of reality held by many American officials',⁷⁰ who regarded the ties between Britain and the United States in purely functional rather than sentimental terms. On 29 November, Neustadt told Derek Mitchell, Wilson's principal private secretary, that 'the Prime Minister should not bank on everything going his way when he got face to face with the President'. Although there was much goodwill in Washington 'towards the UK and its representatives', Johnson was 'not looking forward to the talks with anything approaching the same eagerness as the Prime Minister'. The President had 'many other problems on his mind, for example Southeast Asia and a number of personnel matters. Thus preoccupied he looked forward to next weekend as more of a chore than a major act of policy'.⁷¹ The White House understood, said Neustadt:

that the Prime Minister had received a strong impression from his personal meeting with the President which he had when he was leader of the Opposition; and that he had been moved by the warmth of the message which was sent to him when he took up office. But the President himself had not the same recollection of the earlier meeting and the warm message of greeting was no more than the result of an instruction to officials to draft a warm message of greeting.⁷²

No one in Washington was 'quite sure what kind of treatment the President would offer'. It might be the 'overwhelming friendliness treatment', either 'genuine or simulated'. It could also be the 'arm around the shoulder, talking eyeball-to-eyeball treatment'. In this approach 'the President's gaze usually went through the other persons head'. Alternatively, Johnson could dispense the 'Gary Cooper Treatment', rocking back and forth in his chair and listening 'with such grueling patience that his opponent was usually driven into the sands of silence'. Regardless of Johnson's personal approach, the White House feared that Wilson would "do a Macmillan" on the President; that is to say, that he would lead the President up the garden path in the way that his predecessor had been led up the garden path over Skybolt' in 1962 – the view was that in the run-up to the Nassau conference Macmillan played up the crisis caused by the American cancellation of Skybolt in order to put pressure on the Administration, and there were fears that Wilson might in some comparable way try to exploit the vulnerability of the White House on the matter of the MLE. Mitchell responded to Neustadt by explaining that Wilson 'assumed he had a personal affinity with the President and that if he were disabused of this in too rude or unfeeling a way he might take it very hard'. This could result in 'a disillusionment about Anglo-American relations which would be damaging to both parties'.⁷³

On 5 December, Bundy underlined to Johnson the importance of the visit in the eyes of the Prime Minister. Wilson had 'staked a great deal on having a "successful" visit'. As it had been the 'habit of American Presidents for the last ten years ... to portray all visits of Prime Ministers as "successful" ... if Wilson does not have a success with you, it will be extremely damaging for him' at home, especially with his small majority in the Commons. Personal factors exacerbated the delicacy of the situation: 'both he and his Cabinet are great admirers of your Administration, as exemplified at the Cabinet level by McNamara, and at the political level by your own massive achievement and victory' in the presidential election. Yet despite the Prime Minister's vulnerability, Bundy advised the President that Wilson was not to be disparaged, for he had a number of weapons at his disposal. Remembering the Prime Minister's previous associations with the Labour left, but overrating the extent to which these were authentic convictions, Bundy argued that Wilson was 'a man whose background has made him genuinely hostile to conservatives and to many of the values which Socialists normally attach to our own great industrial society'. When 'you joke about Ivy League types', Bundy told the President, 'at least nowadays – you are playing a game'. But when Wilson 'gets angry at Tories

and bankers, he is not. You are strong and he is weak, and you have a much longer experience of real power'. If Wilson came to 'feel that there was no way for him to get a success, he might choose to exploit failure and to move in an emotionally anti-American way'. Wilson's commitment to Johnson led Bundy to regard this 'as a low probability and one which can be prevented entirely by your own personal dealings with him, but you may want to have it in mind'.⁷⁴

Prior to the visit, Bruce warned Washington that the Prime Minister was 'too steeped in the early fifties, too devoted to outmoded dogmas, too suspicious of the motives of others. It may well be that he believes in the necessity for class warfare to extirpate residual privileges'. 'Certainly,' argued Bruce, 'he detests the Conservative Establishment, and regards bankers, financiers, industrialists and large landowners as leagued in the desire to oppress the commonality'.⁷⁵ Equally misplaced was a bizarre report to Bundy from Richard Helms of the CIA, 'concerning the rumours current in London of the impending divorce of Harold Wilson's personal secretary [Marcia Williams] and its possible political implications'.⁷⁶ One writer indicates that Johnson revelled in this hearsay about Wilson.⁷⁷ Bruce, however, noted that when discussing the Prime Minister's impending visit on 30 November, the President 'made no allusion to what I had been confidentially told was his prejudice against the Prime Minister, largely founded on gossip that he had conducted an irregular connection with his secretary'.⁷⁸ But the salaciousness of the CIA report could only have exacerbated Johnson's reservations towards Wilson.

An aide in the administration, Douglas Cater, was concerned that Johnson should assert himself vigorously over the MLE, otherwise Wilson would exploit the opportunity to claim himself as a victor in the talks. Cater recognised that Wilson was keen to present himself as a statesman as well as a politician, and used as a parallel the alleged opportunism of Harold Macmillan, who:

tried to create an image of himself as mediator and world statesman. He was not particularly successful – as when he tried to claim credit for getting talks going on the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. But he had to compete with President Kennedy, who effectively asserted the natural dominance of the United States in Western affairs. The longer the President delays demonstrating his grasp of the problems of the Alliance ... the greater the chance that Wilson will gain an advantage in the mass media – possibly even making the President look like a 'me-tooer' before he has a chance to get his own initiative going.⁷⁹

On 6 December, Bundy advised Johnson to warn Wilson 'about the destructive effects of painting [it] his way', as did Conservative Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home on the Cuban buses issue earlier that year. The key principle 'on every issue should be that it is a matter of exploration and discussion without decisions'. Thus Wilson could not say that he had torpedoed the MLE, nor would the United States's other European allies gain the impression of an Anglo-Saxon conspiracy to achieve the same end. There was little affection for Wilson in Washington, but how this attitude would influence the summit meeting would soon be revealed.

Notes

- 1 Labour won 317 seats, the Conservatives 304, and the Liberals 9.
- 2 For accounts of the MLF see Philip Geyelin, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the World* (London: Pall Mall, 1966), pp. 159–80; Helga Haftendorn, *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution: A Crisis of Credibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 115–23ff; Donette Murray, *Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 122–43; and John D. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974).
- 3 LBJL, tape WH6411.29, citation 6472, Johnson–Bundy telephone conversation, 9.15 am, 24 November 1964.
- 4 PRO, FO 371/174282, AU 1051/10, 'US Press Reactions to the Election Result', 19 October 1964.
- 5 PRO, PREM 13/110, transcript Johnson–Wilson telephone conversation, 16 October 1964; LBJL, NSF: Subject File, Box 39, Presidential Contacts with Foreign Leaders 1963–67 (3/3), 'Contacts with Prime Minister Harold Wilson of Great Britain', undated.
- 6 NSC Meeting, 16 October 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. XIV, *The Soviet Union* (Washington DC: USGPO, 2001), p. 125.
- 7 PRO, PREM 13/103, Wilson to Johnson, 17 October 1964.
- 8 Embassy to State, 16 October 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. XII, *Western Europe*, pp. 464–7.
- 9 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 214, UK Meetings with Wilson 3/2/64, Rusk to Johnson, 28 February 1964.
- 10 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 214, UK Meetings with Wilson 3/2/64, 'Tour d' Horizon with Harold Wilson', 1 March 1964.
- 11 PRO, PREM 13/2445, Palliser to Wilson, 26 February 1968.
- 12 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 2.1 UK, Joint Weekas UK 12.64, Joint Weeka No. 47, 4 December 1964.
- 13 John F. Kennedy Library, Boston (JFKL), Harold Wilson oral history interview conducted by Richard Neustadt, 23 March 1964, p. 70.
- 14 PRO, PREM 13/103, 'Note for the Record', 27 November 1964.
- 15 For an account of the talks see Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat From East of Suez: The Choice Between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 55–64.
- 16 PRO, PREM 13/103, 'Note for the Record', 27 November 1964.
- 17 PRO, PREM 13/105, 'Strategy for Washington', 2 December 1964.
- 18 *Ibid.* This document is partly reproduced in John Baylis (ed.), *Anglo-American Relations Since 1939: The Enduring Alliance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 150–2.
- 19 Note 2, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, p. 467.
- 20 Embassy to State, *ibid.*
- 21 Wilson to Johnson, 24 October 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. VIII, *International Trade and Monetary Policy* (Washington: USGPO, 1998), pp. 27–8.
- 22 Johnson to Wilson, 24 October 1964, *ibid.*, p. 30.
- 23 Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 316.
- 24 PRO, PREM 13/261, Wilson–Cromer conversation, 18 November 1964; see also Kenneth O. Morgan, *Callaghan: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 215–16.
- 25 LBJL, tape WH6410.14, citation 5962, Johnson–Bundy telephone conversation, 7.00 p.m., 24 October 1964.
- 26 Johnson to Wilson, 24 October 1964, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. VIII, p. 29.

- 27 Wilson to Johnson, 27 October 1964, *ibid.*, pp. 31–2.
- 28 Bodleian Library, Lord George–Brown Papers, Ms. Eng. C. 5009, ‘Enquiry into the Position of Sterling, 1964–1965’, 1 June 1966.
- 29 LBJL, tape WH6411.26, citation 6441, Johnson–Gardner Ackley telephone conversation, 10.41 a.m., 22 November 1964.
- 30 LBJL, tape WH6411.29, citation 6476, Johnson–Douglas Dillon telephone conversation, 11.14 a.m., 24 November 1964. Dillon, Secretary of the Treasury, said that the Labour government was ‘always talking to their election audience’ when they should have been ‘talking for a world-wide audience’. *Ibid.*
- 31 Wilson to Johnson, 19 November 1964, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, pp. 472–3.
- 32 LBJL, tape WH6411.30, citation 6481, Johnson–Jim Wright telephone conversation, 7.29 p.m., 25 November 1964.
- 33 Wilson to Johnson, 19 November 1964, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, pp. 472–3.
- 34 LBJL, tape WH6411.30, citation 6481, Johnson–Jim Wright telephone conversation, 7.29 pm, 25 November 1964.
- 35 Virginia State Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia (VHS), Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, entry for 25 November 1964.
- 36 James Callaghan, *Time and Chance* (London: Collins, 1987), p. 176.
- 37 PRO, PREM 13/103, ‘Note for the Record’, 27 November 1964.
- 38 Richard Crossman, *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, vol. I, *Minister of Housing 1964–1966* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), p. 117, entry for 3 January 1965.
- 39 Lord Wigg, *George Wigg* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972), p. 309.
- 40 LBJL, tape WH6411.24, citation 6419, Johnson–Heller telephone conversation, 7.13 p.m., 19 November 1964.
- 41 Ziegler suggests that as well as concerns about American reactions Wilson was reluctant to devalue sterling because of ‘pride in his own reputation, fears as to the effect it might have on the Labour Party, doubts whether it was needed or would be efficacious’. Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Biography of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), pp. 253–4. See also Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 412.
- 42 LBJL, NSF: Name File, Box 7, Neustadt Memos, ‘Round-up on Trip to England’, 9 August 1965.
- 43 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 216, UK: Visit of Wilson 6/2/67 (2/2), Bator to Johnson, 1 June 1967.
- 44 LBJL, tape WH6411.29, citation 6476, Johnson–Dillon telephone conversation, 11.14 am, 24 November 1964.
- 45 Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964–1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 40.
- 46 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, Embassy to State, 19 October 1964.
- 47 State to Embassy in Bonn, 29 October 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, *Western Europe Region* (Washington: USGPO, 1995), p. 94. For an account of Gordon Walker’s talk with President Johnson, see *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, pp. 469–72.
- 48 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 214, UK Wilson Visit I 12/7–8/64, ‘Wilson’s Problems with the Mixed Manned Surface Fleet’, undated.
- 49 Bundy to Johnson, 8 November 1964, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, p. 104.
- 50 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, pp. 40–1, 44.
- 51 PRO, PREM 13/018, Trend to Wilson, ‘Defence: Chequers Discussion’, 19 November 1964.
- 52 State to Embassy in Bonn, 29 October 1964, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, p. 94.
- 53 PRO, PREM 13/103, ‘Speeches in the United States’, 5 December 1964.
- 54 State to Embassy in Bonn, 29 October 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. XV, *Germany and Berlin* (Washington: USGPO, 1999), p. 139.

- 55 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 2, McGeorge Bundy vol. 7 10/1–12/31/64 (2/3), 'Excerpts from Neustadt Memcon with Wilson', 25 November 1964.
- 56 Ball to State, 2 December 1964, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, p. 94.
- 57 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 46.
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 Bodleian Library, Lord George-Brown Papers, Ms. Eng. C. 5002, Brown to Wilson, 30 November 1964.
- 60 PRO, PREM 13/105, 'Prime Minister: Strategy for Washington', 2 December 1964.
- 61 PRO, PREM 13/106, Henderson to Wright, 13 November 1964.
- 62 'Memorandum of Discussion of the MLF at the White House ... on Friday, April 10 1964', *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, pp. 35–7.
- 63 National Security Action Memorandum No. 322, 17 December 1964, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, p. 167.
- 64 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 2, Bundy vol. 7 10/1–12/31/64 (2/3), Bundy to Rusk, McNamara and Ball, 25 November 1964.
- 65 Bundy to Johnson, 6 December 1964, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, pp. 134–7.
- 66 LBJL, tape WH6411.29, citation 6472, Johnson–Bundy telephone conversation, 9.15 a.m., 24 November 1964.
- 67 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 214, UK Wilson Visit I 12/7–8/64, 'Wilson Visit and the MLF', 6 December 1964. For Bruce's account of this meeting, see *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, pp. 133–4.
- 68 NARA, Lot Files, Office of the Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for MLF Negotiations, (68 D 301), Multilateral Force, Congress, MLF 1 Policy, Plans.
- 69 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 214, UK Wilson Visit I 12/7–8/64, 'Wilson Visit and the MLF', 6 December 1964.
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- 71 PRO, PREM 13/108, Mitchell to Trend (re: conversation with Neustadt), 30 November 1964.
- 72 *Ibid.*
- 73 *Ibid.*
- 74 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 214, Wilson Visit I 12.7/8.64, Bundy to Johnson, 'Harold Wilson's Personal Commitment to this Visit', 5 December 1964.
- 75 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 214, Wilson Visit I 12.7/8.64, 'Prime Minister Wilson', 6 December 1964.
- 76 Stephen Dorrill and Robin Ramsey, *Smear! Wilson and the Secret State* (London: Grafton, 1991), p. 56.
- 77 Anthony Summers, *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (London: Corgi, 1994), pp. 427–8.
- 78 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, entry for 30 November 1964. See also Pimlott, *Wilson*, p. 366.
- 79 LBJL, WHCF, Box 75, CO 305 UK 11/1/64 – 12/31/64, Cater to Hunter, 'Memo #4 on Foreign Policy', 24 November 1964.
- 80 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 2, Bundy vol. 7 10/1–12/31/64 (2/3), 'Last Minute Papers for the Wilson Visit', 6 December 1964. On Douglas-Home and the buses episode, see Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 46.

2

The Washington summit, 7–9 December 1964

On 6 December 1964, Harold Wilson, along with an unusually large entourage, travelled to the United States to see President Johnson for discussions about a number of issues of mutual concern. These included Britain's military role East of Suez, the preservation of which the White House urged in support of the United States's own role in keeping the peace in Asia. For reasons of prestige and to strengthen the Anglo-American relationship, Wilson affirmed Britain's intention to retain its traditional position as a world power. The second main topic of the Wilson–Johnson summit concerned the war in South Vietnam, with Johnson requesting a British troop presence, to support the anti-communist effort of the United States. As there was no constituency in Britain for committing troops, and because he wanted to reserve the option for the UK of trying to initiate peace negotiations, Wilson rejected Johnson's request. Britain's participation or otherwise in the Multilateral Force (MLF) was the final key topic of the summit. The British maintained opposition to the scheme by putting forward the diluted version of the project known as the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF). Johnson, in order to avoid any impression of an Anglo-American 'fix' to kill the scheme, used the summit as the starting point of a new, more passive and low-key approach towards the American initiative. Washington would now leave the matter to be addressed primarily by the Europeans. The Washington summit was useful to Johnson mainly because it allowed him to impress upon the British the need for them to retain their traditional 'great power' role and also to allow him to bring the MLF to a conclusion. For Wilson, however, the gathering had a broader, longer-term purpose beyond pushing the MLF off the agenda: he saw it as an initial means of creating the closest of ties with the White House.

The summit begins

To exert the maximum impact on the Americans, Wilson is said to have considered travelling to Washington by warship as Winston Churchill had during the war, but he realised that such a journey would be too time-consuming, not to say anachronistic, so he flew instead.¹ Upon arrival, Wilson told press reporters that 'this will be the beginning of our fruitful cooperation, the beginning of a

series of discussions which, we hope will lead to the strengthening of the Alliance'.² But American observers had less faith in the importance of the visit. News of Wilson's arrival ranked only second on a major TV news broadcast, with a report of the impending visit of Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko taking first place. Similarly, some of the American journalists in attendance at the White House on 7 December appeared less interested in the Prime Minister's arrival than in the possibility that Johnson might make a speech to commemorate Pearl Harbor Day.³ Though the direct discussions between Wilson and Johnson would occupy centre stage, Wilson had felt it expedient to bring a large troop (at least thirty-five) of supporting ministers, officials and others – mainly for effect. David Bruce, US Ambassador to Britain, wrote in his diary that the British delegation 'consists of almost everyone except hod carriers'.⁴ Wilson had brought this large retinue despite the reservations of Lord Harlech, UK Ambassador to Washington, who had seen the 'rather formidable list of those intending to descend on Washington' and was 'not quite sure what they will all do'.⁵ Duly, Wilson and the President entered the Oval Room for their first discussions. Meantime, Dean Rusk (Secretary of State), Robert McNamara (Secretary of Defence) and other leading members of the Administration entered the Cabinet Room with Patrick Gordon Walker (Foreign Secretary), Denis Healey (Defence Secretary) and other members of the British delegation, to begin 'opening up the various subjects they would want to discuss during the week'.⁶

In contrast to the general fanfare of the summit there was something almost conspiratorial about some of the Wilson–Johnson meetings. Bruce noted in his diary that the principals were 'closeted alone for an hour or more' in Johnson's private office 'before they joined the rest of us in the Cabinet room. What they had said to each other was not disclosed'.⁷ The verbatim content of some of Wilson and Johnson's conversations went unnoted, though there are accounts which capture the substance of their talks. Many of the private discussions concerned the British political system. Johnson was 'intensely interested', as Bruce had told Wilson, 'in the problems of political management'.⁸ Johnson and Wilson also discussed more substantial matters. In a telephone conversation with Bundy at 1.30 p.m. on 7 December, just after he had left the Cabinet Room talks with Wilson, Johnson presented a frank, blow-by-blow account. In essence, he had launched a bullying tirade upon the Prime Minister, to make it clear who was in charge, arguing that 'there were a lot of problems which did not show in the US [electoral] returns, especially with respect to international affairs'. The United States was 'damned tired of being told that it was their business to solve all the world's problems and to do so mainly alone'. So far as the MLF or any other major foreign policy initiatives were concerned, the President was 'very wary of taking any tall dives'.⁹

He also mentioned Britain's economic problems, rebuking Wilson for Labour's apparent profligacy: 'the impression which had been created by the British budget [on 11 November], with its heavy emphasis on social security, and the pressures

created against the pound had combined to make the President's own budgeting process very difficult'. The repercussions for the dollar generated by the British budget were such that although he had 'originally planned on a budget of \$107 or \$108 billion' of public spending 'now he was forced to think in terms of \$101–102 billion, which would make it very difficult to carry out the programmes he wanted'. Labour's budgetary commitments to the welfare state 'had shaken us up some'. The President then complained about Wilson's broken pledge that he would not raise the Bank rate: the British 'had made trouble for themselves and others by sounding as if they did not believe in the instrument of the bank rate and then using it very heavily and suddenly' to try to ease the pressure on sterling.¹⁰ Finally, Johnson 'talked to the Prime Minister about the difficulties created by his speech on Atlantic nuclear defence in the House of Commons' on 23 November, when Wilson had described the MLF as a 'divisive force in Europe'. Johnson told Bundy that by now the Prime Minister 'was almost on the ropes'. Considering that he was himself backing away from the MLF scheme, Johnson's attacks on Wilson over the Commons speech were surprisingly heavy. He also reminded him 'of the difficulties Sir Alec Douglas-Home had given him on commenting on Cuban buses from the White House steps' in February 1964. Drawing a parallel with this and Wilson's Commons speech, Johnson said that this time Wilson 'had given him trouble ten days *before* the visit'. He complained that 'all his best advisers' had 'the temperaments of Rhodes Scholars, dangerously sympathetic to the UK'.¹¹

Britain's global role

After lunch, and in more measured terms, Wilson and Johnson discussed Britain's global defence role, especially the position East of Suez. During the recent crisis of sterling Chancellor James Callaghan had argued that 'There would not have been a sterling crisis if we did not have to bear so much of the burden of defence abroad. We would have restored our balance of payments if we had not had to bear this heavy load.'¹² Britain's defence expenditure was increasing, from £1,596 million in 1960–61 to an estimated £2,141 million in 1965–66 and an estimated £2,400 million by 1969–70.¹³ Wilson had told Bruce that 'The defence talks at Chequers [19–22 November] had highlighted the fact that Britain was at the moment trying to fulfil three roles – the independent nuclear deterrent, the conventional role in Europe, and a world role East of Suez'.¹⁴ Britain spent about the same on defence as did France or Germany, but their military commitments were confined mainly to Europe. The United Kingdom carried 'world-wide commitments on the basis of expenditure which is only one-tenth of that of the only other country (i.e. the USA) which plays a world role'. This also exacerbated Britain's chronic balance of payments problem (£800 million when Labour assumed power), with some £300 million spent overseas each year on 'defence and related activities'.¹⁵

However, given the American commitment to an international 'policing' role, Johnson and his colleagues were concerned that Britain should continue to maintain the world power stance. On the afternoon of 7 December, Rusk informed Wilson that the UK had an important role in the world, complementary to that of the United States. Britain, 'by virtue of both historical and geographical connections fulfilled a strategic function in many parts of the world which the United States could not attempt, and because they could do so, even with relatively small forces, the value of their contribution extended beyond the immediate local impact'. In particular, 'it had a kind of multiplier effect by enabling the greater power of the United States to be deployed in areas which might otherwise be largely inaccessible to it'.¹⁶ Johnson underlined the comments. The importance of Britain's world role, he said:

had been dramatically illustrated by the manner in which the United Kingdom's offer of facilities at Ascension Island had enabled the United States and Belgian Governments to mount an operation to rescue the hostages in the Congo, an operation which they would otherwise have found it difficult, if not impossible, to arrange.¹⁷

Wilson accepted the American view that Britain should preserve its current position in defence, telling the Cabinet on 11 December that 'the most encouraging fact about the conference was America's emphasis on Britain's world wide role'.¹⁸ But Johnson's exhortations that Britain should remain in force East of Suez did not suggest any understanding that Britain's ailing economy could not sustain large global commitments; he criticised the social spending of the Labour government but seemed oblivious to the greater strains imposed on the British economy by UK spending abroad on defence.

Vietnam

Johnson not only wanted Wilson to maintain Britain's defence commitments, but to extend them into South Vietnam. But on 5 December Bundy had told Johnson that Wilson had little freedom of manoeuvre on the Vietnam War: 'the British will find it very, very difficult indeed to increase their commitment in Vietnam'. Although this had not precluded the President 'hit[ting] them hard while Wilson is here,' it did mean that 'we cannot expect a definite and affirmative answer'. There was 'no political base whatever in England, in any party, for an increased British commitment'. For a decade, Bundy explained, Washington had accepted 'a situation in which the British give political support, but avoided any major commitment on the grounds of their other interests and their position of co-Chairman of the Geneva Agreements of 1954'. All Wilson 'could possibly do at this stage would be a slight enlargement of the Thompson advisory mission and of their police training effort, with perhaps a green light to a few bold British officers to get themselves in the line of fire as our men do'. Wilson would have to do this 'quietly', as there was 'no workable basis for a

public change in British policy at a time when there is no public change in ours'. The President 'might press him to go from the current level of seven Britishers to about a hundred, but we would be lucky to get fifty in this first phase'. 'When and if' the United States opened a 'second phase and need to land a mixed force of US and other troops, we might conceivably get a small British contingent along with larger ones from Australia and New Zealand'. The United States's 'own commitment would have gone up and there would be a better case for asking the British to join in'. But there was, conversely, the problem that 'if the British Co-Chairman sends troops in, that might be the trigger, or at least the excuse, for the Soviet Co-Chairman to help Hanoi'. Finally, Bundy underlined to Johnson 'how hard it will be for Wilson to do as much for us in South Vietnam as we need him to do'.¹⁹

On the question of British defence commitments in Asia, Bundy had also noted previously and correctly that Wilson's 'government (or at least its Ministry of Defence) is eager for joint ventures east of Suez, but they have visions of ships steaming around the Indian Ocean, not of men getting killed in Vietnamese jungles'. Yet a 'British sacrifice of men is just what we need most'.²⁰ Bundy was right to argue that the Vietnam War was a matter of growing controversy in Britain and within the Labour Party. Shortly before Wilson had left Britain, a group of Labour backbenchers had written to him, worried about alleged British complicity in the American policy of 'creeping escalation' in Vietnam, and proposing that Britain and Russia should re-convene the Geneva Conference. On his return from Washington the Prime Minister was obliged to 'nail the lie' that he was proposing to send British combat troops to Vietnam, and to draw attention to the summit communiqué of 9 December, which declared, *inter alia*, that 'the President and the Prime Minister recognised the particular importance of the military effort which both their countries are making in support of legitimate governments in South-East Asia, particularly in Malaysia and South Vietnam, which seek to maintain their independence and resist subversion'.²¹

The State Department noted that President Johnson had a 'deep personal concern' to obtain 'increased third country contributions' towards the American effort in Vietnam from US allies.²² Yet advisers such as Bundy ensured that he was not insensitive to political realities in Britain. Consequently, on the afternoon of 7 December he made his request to Wilson for a British troop commitment in Vietnam with relative forbearance: 'a United Kingdom military presence, on however limited a scale, might have a significant effect. A few soldiers in British uniforms in South Vietnam, for example, would have a great psychological and political difference'.²³ The President's restraint was inconsistent with his earlier tirade that the United States was 'damned tired' of trying to solve the world's problems alone, but he was after all seeking a favour from the British. But Wilson was unable to make a commitment, responding that:

we fully recognised the United States interest, particularly since we faced exactly the same problem ourselves in Malaysia. We were already providing some reinforcements

to the United States effort in Vietnam by maintaining the Thompson advisory mission, by training Vietnamese troops in jungle warfare in Malaysian schools and by providing police in Saigon. We might be able to increase our effort in these directions to some extent; but the United States Government must remember that our position as co-chairman of the 1954 Conference implied that we might find ourselves in a very embarrassing international position if United States action in Vietnam compelled us to activate our co-chairman role.²⁴

Wilson noted that Johnson seemed unaware of the extent of the British commitment to the former colony of Malaysia, which Britain was defending against the territorial predations of Indonesia ('Confrontation') – there were some 54,000 British troops there.²⁵ But Confrontation was low in intensity and loss of life compared to the situation in Vietnam.²⁶ Although in general terms Wilson supported the American efforts in the former Indochina, he was never inclined to commit, or 'sacrifice', British troops even for a possible collaborative quid pro quo with the United States East of Suez, because British forces were already overextended and therefore it was not fitting to undertake new commitments, however nominal in scale; because there was no support for doing so in the UK; and due to the UK's position as co-Chairman of the 1954 Geneva Conference. Yet the Americans were persistent in their entreaties: they tried again the next day to obtain a British commitment. Rusk indicated that 'the US was appealing to a number of countries for assistance, both for its practical effect as well as for its political impact, to demonstrate to Hanoi and Saigon the degree of free world solidarity'. But again, the appeal yielded nothing.²⁷ As Wilson later put it to his Cabinet, 'We ... continued to resist [American] pressure for a United Kingdom military presence in Vietnam and had merely undertaken to increase slightly the various types of support facility which we already provided in the form of training facilities for South Vietnamese troops, etc.'²⁸

Moreover, invoking Britain's position as co-Chairman would allow Wilson greater latitude to try to act as an intermediary to help bring peace to Vietnam. The response also fitted in with the Foreign Office line. A document from the Foreign Office noted that as well as 'technical assistance and a small amount of capital aid', the British contribution to the American effort was confined to training Vietnamese policemen 'in counter-insurgency techniques in Malaysia and to keep the British Advisory Mission in Saigon'. President Johnson 'would obviously like ... a token British military force ... but we cannot provide this without violating the 1954 Geneva Agreement ban on the introduction of fresh troops, military personnel, arms and munitions'. The best compromise might be to 'train more Vietnamese in Malaysia; to provide more police officers in Saigon; [and] to announce publicly that we are doing this as a token of our support for South Vietnam'.²⁹

On the evening of 7 December, there was a State dinner at the White House, with, as Bruce noted, 'a couple of hundred people, of several colours, and many occupations ... the reception was elegant, the dinner even more so'.³⁰ Wilson commented later that Johnson:

made the most eloquent, elegant speech about our common Anglo-American links through many of our citizens' kinship ... through the common origin of our legal system right back to Saxon times, through Norman law, Magna Carta and the great battles for the sovereignty of Parliament over the monarchy in Stuart times; our comradeship in two world wars, and in our efforts to create conditions of lasting peace following those wars.

But Wilson, as he noted later, had 'prepared no speech, and had to speak, as they say, right on'.³¹ In his impromptu address he used the expression 'close relationship' instead of the established formulation 'special relationship'.³² The new phrase, probably thought of well in advance of the dinner, suggested that although committed to close bonds with the United States the Labour government did not carry the Churchillian baggage of the Conservatives. This example of verbal dexterity also represented an effort to avoid antagonising the Labour left and yet it favoured the 'close' Anglo-American relations to which Wilson was personally dedicated. But the speech did not generate any excitement among Johnson and his colleagues, who had no real emotional commitment to the 'close' Anglo-American relations of which Wilson had spoken.

The MLF

The morning of 8 December was left open to allow the British party to exchange notes, but Wilson also used the interlude to lay wreaths at the National War Memorial and the grave of John F. Kennedy at Arlington National Cemetery.³³ Bruce noted that in the meantime on the American side there were:

meetings in the President's office of a small American contingent, joined by Hubert Humphrey [Vice-President], who has told the President there would presently be no chance of getting the MLF approved by the Senate. Mac Bundy, McNamara, George Ball, Dick Neustadt and I went to the White House War Room to revise a paper replying to the British paper [on the ANF] delivered to us yesterday. We ate hamburgers, drank coffee, added and deleted phrases. After approval by the President, it was turned over to the British.³⁴

Wilson's approach that afternoon was to try to cause doubt and delay by criticising the American counter-proposals to the formal British outline of the ANF submitted the previous day. These American proposals covered, for example, a range of technical and political questions, such as nuclear dissemination, voting arrangements and periodic meetings of the defence ministers of the contributing nations.³⁵ Demonstrating a precise grasp of the issues – a precision verging on downright pedanticism – Wilson assailed the American counter-response to the ANF: he 'had nineteen points to raise in connection with the American paper'. He asked, for example, about paragraph ten which referred to the United States 'surrendering its veto on the use of the force's nuclear weapons in the event of a politically unified Europe'. He 'regarded with horror any possibility of the

emergence of a completely separate European force', because of its implications for nuclear non-proliferation.³⁶ He also contended that:

the mixed manned surface fleet issue could bring the Labour Government down. Even though the Tory Government had given equivocal support to this concept, the Tories were now ready to bring down the Labour Government on this issue. Therefore the US position was most important and the British attitude toward the force would be governed by the permanence of the American veto.³⁷

Johnson listened quietly, and after the discussion he said that he would instruct his delegation at NATO to enter into full discussions with the British and other colleagues to prepare a study of what was involved. Johnson had wanted to let the MLF 'sink out of sight', to use Bundy's words, though without antagonising the United States's other European allies by giving the impression of an Anglo-American 'fix'. The summit communiqué – presented for the approval of Wilson and Johnson at the end of the final meeting at 4.00 p.m. – was especially bland and non-committal with regard to the MLF. It signified a new low-key approach on the part of the Americans: the matter had been discussed 'as a preliminary to further discussions among interested members of the Alliance'.³⁸ At 6.00 p.m. that evening Wilson gave a reception in 'honour of the President ... and Mrs. Johnson' at the British Embassy.³⁹ Two hours later Dean Rusk held a dinner for the British. Bruce presented in his diary an image of sheer opulence: 'Good food, good oratory. We had consommé with sherry, filet of sole with lump crab meat, roast capon with wild rice, cheese, pistachio ice cream and brandied peaches, consorting with Pinot Chardonnay, Chateau Lynch Bage, Piper Heidseck 1959, and liqueurs.'⁴⁰

Soon the MLF was no longer a major issue in the Anglo-American relationship, though its demise was not immediate. The *Economist* wrote in January 1965 that 'President Johnson, Mr Wilson and Herr Erhard [of West Germany] cannot afford just to stand by and blame one another for collective failure [on the MLF] ... the responsibility lies first with President Johnson'.⁴¹ Johnson told a press conference at his ranch in Texas on 17 January 1965 of his continued interest in the MLF, and on 9 February he told the German Ambassador that had not agreed with Wilson's assertion that any 'favourable views ... expressed in Europe' about the MLF 'had been coloured by US insistence'.⁴² In a telephone conversation of 11 February, Johnson badgered Wilson, saying that he was 'still waiting for the Prime Minister to carry out his agreement' in December 'to go and talk with the Germans' about the MLF/ANF. Johnson said he had been 'very careful not to be domineering, and he had wanted to give the British Prime Minister time to talk with the Germans on this matter, although he had not changed his own strong views' in favour of the MLF.⁴³ This was an odd stance to take considering that in December Johnson had expressed his disillusionment with the MLF, but it was in keeping with his desire not to make any obvious concessions to the British because of the effect that this might have on other European allies. On 26 February Rusk reminded Johnson of his 'suggestion in

December to Prime Minister Wilson that the best next step' on the MLF 'should be discussions among the interested European countries to determine how wide a consensus could be reached'. Rusk recommended to the President that he send a letter to Wilson pressing for action and trying to give the impression that the United States had not abandoned its own project. But Johnson declined to send any such message.⁴⁴ Finally, on 11 March Wilson wrote to Johnson about his recent talks in Bonn. It had become clear, said Wilson, that 'Erhard was not going to have anything to do with nuclear matters this side of the German elections ... I would judge that there is no progress to be made on this.' Without fuss Johnson said that he shared Wilson's view that 'the Germans do not want to do anything serious between now and their election'. He indicated that there should be 'a very careful review of the whole problem, so that we can be ready to move ahead in whatever way seems most likely to be effective after September'.⁴⁵

Throughout 1965 the MLF gradually became moribund, due to a mixture of practical and political objections from the European allies, including worries about nuclear non-proliferation, plus hostility from Moscow. In particular, British reservations, advanced by Wilson and quietly adopted by Johnson during the British visit to Washington in December 1964, had been the critical blow. Johnson told a journalist on 29 April that 'I didn't shove [Wilson] on the MLF. All of my advisers said I ought to demand that he move right then and there but he only had a three man majority, and I tried to treat him like I'd like to be treated if I were in the same situation ... I told him to ... talk to the Germans, get their views and we could work it out'.⁴⁶ Moreover, Wilson had avoided the invidious situation outlined by the Foreign Office in August 1964, whereby 'If eventually we decide not to join, and the Force nevertheless comes into being, our influence with the Americans will surely decline'.⁴⁷

After the summit: Washington

Johnson expressed satisfaction to Andrei Gromyko on 9 December that 'we now had the UK discussing the [nuclear weapons] problem with the Germans rather than Uncle Sam having to indicate any particular conduct'.⁴⁸ Yet the President needed Bundy to try to persuade him that the Wilson visit had been worthwhile. On 10 December, Bundy wrote that 'A couple of times over the last few days you have strongly expressed to me your doubts about the value of having Harold Wilson here. Since I think that this was without doubt the most productive and useful two days that we have had in foreign affairs since President Kennedy went to Berlin, I would like to urge the opposite view.' Bundy stated the 'negative fact that there is just no way in the world that a President of the United States can avoid reasonably regular visits from the Prime Minister of Great Britain'. If Johnson had 'said to Wilson that you were unwilling to see him in December, the reaction everywhere would have been critical'. Meetings with the British can bring 'real inconvenience ... because there is no way of predicting

what issues will come up'. The Nassau conference of 1962, Bundy reminded the President, 'was not set up to deal with Skybolt, which broke over its head', because of the timing of the budget of the US Department of Defence. 'There was no such difficulty' with Wilson, Bundy told the President, 'because we knew that the Atlantic nuclear problem would be at centre stage, but the handling of the matter was certainly difficult'. Prior to the visit Johnson had 'received a very strong recommendation to force Wilson to a decision [on the MLF], and you carefully walked around that and took a different and better course' of allowing the matter to be worked out between the British and the Germans. This was a 'major achievement'. Firstly, argued Bundy, 'We have had a very straight and honest talk with the British ... on the hard elements of the problem, and they have gone off to talk on their own with the Germans.' This presented the President 'as the firm but patient leader of the alliance'.

Secondly, Bundy suggested, Johnson had laid the 'basis for political education and political leadership with Congress as the progress of the enterprise justifies it'. The Administration had 'a major problem of communication with the Leadership and the relevant committees, but we have won time in which to go about it'. Thirdly, the meetings had 'forced discussions between you and your advisers which has for the first time given both you and them a clear understanding of the problem and the way you want it treated'. Fourthly, 'From now on ... the progress of this Atlantic negotiation will need your own continued personal command'. Bundy would 'make sure that the state of play is before you at every stage and that every significant decision is signalled as far ahead of time as possible'. Finally, Bundy concluded that 'the Wilson meeting has not only been a modest success in its own right, but a turning point in the process by which you take the effective command of a major issue of foreign policy'. This was 'a lot for two days', and there was also the 'fringe benefit that at least a hundred of your warmest political supporters were given a thank-you dinner of the most fashionable sort, because glamour is one thing the British still bring with them'.⁴⁹

Other observers in Washington had a favourable verdict of the talks. Robert Schaetzle of the State Department said on 11 December that 'the general impression was that the visit was highly useful and certainly achieved its principal purpose' of helping bring the MLF to a conclusion.⁵⁰ Ball told a journalist that Wilson had made a good impression on Johnson: 'They spent a lot of time just the two of them together. No-one was involved in that. I think Wilson made an impression of a highly capable politician and a shrewd man.' Ball also held the view that the President was 'impressive' in the talks – he showed great perception of the key issues and exuded 'a strength that had a big impact on Wilson'.⁵¹ (Later, though, he said that while Johnson 'had been impressed by [Harold] Macmillan', Wilson 'lacked Macmillan's consummate ability to deal on a friendly but slightly condescending basis. He wore no patrician armour, was too ordinary, too much like other politicians with whom LBJ had to deal, and Johnson took almost an instant dislike to him'.)⁵²

Although they had spent much time together talking ‘man-to-man’, Wilson had not won over the President. The Prime Minister had undertaken that he would ‘say nothing outside the White House’ that he had told Johnson inside,⁵³ but the President still feared, in Bundy’s words, that Wilson ‘might be tempted to put words in the President’s mouth for press purposes or to advocate his standpoint from the White House steps’; in other words, ‘to sell buses from the front steps of the White House’ as had Douglas-Home earlier that year.⁵⁴ Consequently, Johnson asked Bundy to ‘make his position very clear’ to Lord Harlech in order ‘that there be no misunderstanding of the forbearance and restraint with which he conducted his discussions of the Atlantic nuclear problem with Mr Wilson’. Bundy in turn asked David Bruce ‘to say these things to the Prime Minister, although not on the basis of a direct Presidential instruction’. Johnson ‘wants to be very sure that the Prime Minister does not misunderstand his position on the nuclear force problem’. He was a political man who knew what ‘a close election was like’. It had seemed to Johnson that it would have been ‘unfair to force an immediate decision ... on a man who has been in power for less than two months, with a four-seat majority and a very grave economic and financial crisis on his hands’. The President therefore ‘decided not to force the pace with the Prime Minister, but rather to allow his advisers to explain American thinking as clearly as they could within a framework which the President deliberately set as one of discussion and not of decision’.⁵⁵

Johnson also ‘recognised and understood the importance of giving the British a free hand in finding out for themselves the real position of the government in Bonn’ on the MLF. The ‘Labourites have been telling us for a very long time that we do not properly understand the Germans’, but ‘there is every reason for the Prime Minister to satisfy himself directly on this point, and if we have been wrong in our estimate of the Germans, no-one is more interested than we in finding out’. Meanwhile, ‘the President is gravely concerned by the risk that the Prime Minister may give others the impression that the US has in any way backed off in its basic assessment’ of the need for the MLF. Just because ‘the President himself did not pursue the argument was merely an indication of his desire not to force the judgement on the Prime Minister now’. Johnson asked Bundy ‘to emphasise particularly to the Ambassador [Bruce] the very great damage which could be done if the Prime Minister’ overstepped the mark. The President knew ‘the temptations of debate, and he has already had one painful experience with a speech of the Prime Minister in the House of Commons’. If ‘the impression should be created in the United States that the Prime Minister was trying to strengthen his position by seeming to have “won a victory” in Washington’, the President ‘would find it necessary to take a very different attitude toward this whole series of discussions’. Bundy surmised in the message to Bruce that ‘a man in the Prime Minister’s position would be extremely ill-advised to run any risks of this sort with a sensitive and determined man like President Johnson’, since the President ‘has plenty of cards to play if this becomes

a public contest'. Bundy said he would 'tell Lord Harlech that the President has shown great restraint in these last days because of his concern to avoid any appearance of running a power play against a weak opponent'. But if 'his generosity is misunderstood, I doubt if it is likely to last'.⁵⁶ But Wilson did not try to 'sell buses from the White House steps' or from anywhere else. Solicitously, he told Bruce on 8 December that he had 'thought he had handled his press conference this morning in a manner to cause no concern' in the White House.⁵⁷

After the summit: London

After Wilson's visit to Washington, most observers, including the President, anticipated that he would face a serious challenge in explaining what he had agreed to in Washington to the House of Commons in the foreign affairs debate scheduled for 16–17 December. The Conservatives were ready to attack him for any undertaking to commit British nuclear weapons irrevocably to NATO whereas the unilateral nuclear disarmers in the Labour Party would oppose any indication of British readiness to allow the Germans further access to nuclear weapons even as part of a multilateral group and subject to an American veto. Wilson had told the President on 8 December that he 'expected to have a problem ... next week when there would be a parliamentary debate on foreign and defence policy'.⁵⁸ David Bruce was worried about 'how he will deal with questions posed him ... in the House of Commons Foreign Policy Debate ... He will of course be pressed hard, and crockery may be broken... The opposition ... will query him in hope of extracting replies embarrassing to him and us'.⁵⁹ But Wilson's 'comprehensive' report to the Commons on his visit to Washington was 'his best performance in this session', noted the US Embassy with satisfaction. The Prime Minister 'achieved a statesmanlike level' of debate and analysis 'by avoiding controversy and packing a long speech with closely reasoned analysis'.⁶⁰ The warnings of the administration had been noted – Wilson did not try to portray himself as the victor in his dealings with Johnson, nor did he say anything that might upset the United States's other European allies. In fact, on 8 December, Wilson had arranged to have the broad outline of what he would say in the Commons cleared by the Americans.⁶¹

While in Washington Wilson had faced no unbending urge that Britain should join the MLF. He had not been obliged to make any concessions nor had he antagonised the President by the force of British opposition to the project. 'Clearly we had won the day', said Wilson in his memoirs. He noted with pleasure that:

One 1964 election myth had been disposed of: Sir Alec Douglas-Home's frequent gibe that Britain under a Labour Government with our distinctive nuclear policy would never be invited to sit at the 'top table'. This was because of his obsession with what he regarded as the 'independent nuclear deterrent'. In fact our approach, less obsessional and more realistic, had led to a much warmer welcome at the top table.

Both sides could feel we had laid down the basis of a satisfactory working relationship for the years ahead.⁶²

(Wilson's approach to the MLF had in reality not differed much from that of the Conservative government of Douglas-Home.) Wilson told the respective Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand Menzies and Holyoake on 14 December with similar satisfaction that the talks were 'conducted in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, and I feel that the visit was a really successful one'. The 'Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary [also] had very useful talks with their opposite numbers'. The Administration's talk of the 'multiplier effect' of British policy East of Suez evidently gratified Wilson, since he affirmed the same idea to Menzies and Holyoake.⁶³ To his Cabinet he presented the summit communiqué as a token of success, saying that its wording 'implied that the United States Government recognised ... our right to participate in all major international negotiations'.⁶⁴ Wilson claimed at the Labour Party Annual Conference on 12–13 December that his meeting with the President was 'one of the most important international discussions since the war'. He assured delegates that Britain was a fully-fledged partner of the Americans, still wanted at the 'top table', and that 'we shall be wanted so long as we have anything to contribute'. At the conference, however, he was obliged to denounce 'as a lie a press report that he had entered into a secret agreement' in Washington 'concerning British readiness to participate in the MLF'.⁶⁵

Wilson's philosophy of Anglo-American relations

Despite his private doubts about the value of the talks, on 9 December Johnson sent a glowing letter to the Prime Minister, saying what 'a pleasure it was for me to meet with you these past two days'. The meeting 'was in the long tradition of the constructive working relationship which has long existed between our two countries'.⁶⁶ Wilson was delighted by these comments, which suggested that he had succeeded in forging close personal relations with Johnson. He replied the same day he received Johnson's letter, expressing gratitude for 'the warmth of your welcome', and then outlining his credo for the Anglo-American alliance: he had 'long admired the way in which successive United States administrations since the war have shouldered the military, political and economic burden of the defence of liberty all over the world'. Britain had 'an equally essential role to play, complementary to yours, if smaller in scale, exploiting our particular advantage as the centre of the Commonwealth and as a member of all three regional alliances and the fact of the British presence from Gibraltar to Singapore'. Wilson indicated that this presence was 'no longer for imperial purposes but simply to help keep the peace, to promote a stable and just order and to be ready to respond to United Nations calls'. He told Johnson that he felt 'much satisfaction to find in Washington that we saw eye-to-eye on such matters', and was 'also gratified to find that both of us viewed the Atlantic

Alliance as the essential element in our national safety'.⁶⁷ On 3 January 1965, Housing Minister Richard Crossman wrote in his diary that Wilson valued his relations with the Americans far too highly:

in 1964 Harold Wilson was responsible for an overcommitment in overseas expenditure almost as burdensome – if not more burdensome – than that to which Ernest Bevin committed us in 1945, and for the same reason: because of our attachment to the Anglo-American special relationship and because of our belief that it is only through the existence of this relationship that we can survive outside Europe.⁶⁸

But Wilson's future influence on President Johnson would remain to be seen, not least because, as the Washington Embassy warned around the same time, Britain would 'be increasingly treated on [its] merits and shall be regarded not so much for who we are as for how we perform', and 'our ability to solve our own economic problems and to bring an end to what seems to the Americans to be a position of chronic insolvency'. Britain's 'unique capability of influencing American policy' would be a 'wasting asset unless we handle our own affairs with considerable skill and attention to the correct priorities'. The Washington summit was 'a useful start', but 'only a beginning'.⁶⁹

Notes

- 1 Anthony Shrimley, *The First Hundred Days of Harold Wilson* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), p. 91.
- 2 *The Washington Post*, 7 December 1964.
- 3 Shrimley, *Hundred Days*, pp. 91–2.
- 4 LBJL, Statements of LBJ, Box 134, 'Members of Prime Minister's party', 7 December 1964; VHS, Diary of David Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, entry for 7 December 1964.
- 5 PRO, PREM 13/103, Lord Harlech (David Ormsby-Gore) to Wilson, 16 November 1964.
- 6 Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964–1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 47.
- 7 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303: 50, entry for 7 December 1964.
- 8 PRO, PREM 13/103, 'Note for the Record', 27 November 1964.
- 9 Johnson's account to Bundy of his talk with Wilson, 7 December 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, *Western Europe Region* (Washington: USGPO, 2001), pp. 137–9.
- 10 On the international repercussions of British economic difficulties see 'Record of Meeting', 7 December 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. XII, *Western Europe* (Washington: USGPO, 2001), pp. 480–3.
- 11 Johnson's account to Bundy of his talk with Wilson, 7 December 1964, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, pp. 137–9.
- 12 Quoted in the pamphlet by Konrad Zilliacus, *Labour's Crisis: Its Nature, Cause and Consequence* (privately published, 1966), p. 3.
- 13 PRO, PREM 13/018, Trend to Wilson, 'Defence: Chequers Discussion', 19 November 1964.
- 14 PRO, PREM 13/103, 'Note for the Record', 27 November 1964.
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- 16 PRO, CAB 133/266, 'Meeting held at the British Embassy ... and later at the White House,

- on 7 December at 3.30 p.m.'
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 - 18 PRO, CAB 128/39, Cabinet minutes, 11 December 1964.
 - 19 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 2, Bundy, vol. 7 10/1–12/31/64 (2 of 3), 'The British and Vietnam', 5 December 1964.
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 - 21 William Warbey, *Vietnam: The Truth* (London: The Merlin Press, 1965), pp. 91–2.
 - 22 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 206, United Kingdom Cables, vol. II 10/64–2/65, State to London, Canberra and Wellington, 4 December 1964.
 - 23 PRO, CAB 133/266, 'Meeting held at the British Embassy ... and later at the White House, on 7 December at 3.30 p.m.'
 - 24 *Ibid.*
 - 25 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 48.
 - 26 Denis Healey's biographers noted that 'Confrontation was an almost unknown war to the British people, although officially 119 British servicemen were killed and 182 wounded before it came to an end in August 1966.' Geoffrey Williams and Bruce Reed, *Denis Healey and the Policies of Power* (London: Sidgwick and Johnson, 1971), p. 205.
 - 27 NARA, Records of George Ball 1961–66 (74 D 272), MLF 4, 'Memorandum of Conversation, 8 December 1964'.
 - 28 PRO, CAB 128/39, Cabinet minutes, 11 December 1964.
 - 29 PRO, PREM 13/692, 'Suggested Line if President Johnson Requests More British Aid for Vietnam', 4 December 1964.
 - 30 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, entry for 7 December 1964.
 - 31 Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1179, Wash. DC April 1970 NY 4 May 1970, University of Texas speech, 'Anglo-American Relations: a Special Case?', 30 April 1970.
 - 32 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 50.
 - 33 *Ibid.*
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 - 35 'US Comments on the UK proposal for a Project for an Atlantic Nuclear Force', *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XIII, pp. 153–6.
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 - 37 *Ibid.*
 - 38 The communiqué is reproduced in Ian S. McDonald, *Anglo-American Relations Since the Second World War* (London: David & Charles, 1974), pp. 199–202.
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- 51 LBJL, George Ball Papers, Box 1, Britain III (11/24/64–12/31/65), Telecon, White to Ball, 12/9/64 and Telecon, McGrory to Ball, 12/9/64.
- 52 George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (New York: Norton, 1982), p. 336.
- 53 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 47.
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From discord to cordiality, January–April 1965

From January to April 1965 the character of the Wilson–Johnson relationship traversed the spectrum from discord to cordiality. Discord erupted over the Vietnam War when Wilson telephoned Washington in the early hours of 11 February to suggest to Johnson an urgent visit to the White House. Wilson later claimed that he wanted to see the President to try to ensure that there was no dangerous escalation of American actions. In truth, he was concerned above all with convincing his critics in Britain – especially those on the Labour left – that he had some influence over the US President. The request to visit Washington was dismissed, as Johnson disdained advice from representatives of allied governments unwilling to commit troops to Vietnam and realised that Wilson was basically trying to shore up his domestic position. Subsequently, the White House regarded the Prime Minister almost as an irrelevance and was little inclined to consult him on American foreign policy. The President was also concerned in this period about British economic weakness. He despatched an adviser to London to see Wilson to try to investigate and possibly shape the British budget of 6 April so that it would harmonise with the interests of the United States. Wilson agreed to the US initiative, even though the visit might have caused a political storm in Britain had it become public knowledge – it would appear that the United States was dictating British economic measures. David Bruce, the US Ambassador to London, regarded Johnson’s initiative as a crude attempt to exploit British difficulties. Finally, Wilson managed to visit Washington, on 15 April. The visit went well, with Johnson giving the go-ahead to investigate the possibility of peace negotiations with North Vietnam. In these months, then, Wilson was notably compliant with American wishes and willing to tolerate poor treatment from Washington. A ‘close’ or ‘special’ Anglo-American relationship remained of great importance to him, both personally and as a means of trying to magnify Britain’s influence in the world.

Wilson's telephone call to Washington, 11 February

On 11 February, Housing Minister Richard Crossman contended that Britain had put itself ‘in the hands of American politicians’, because of Wilson’s

determination to 'recreate the Anglo-American axis, the special relationship between Britain and America'.¹ Although Wilson sought close ties with the White House, it is clear that if President Johnson wanted any such close relationship it would be with West Germany. As he told the West German Ambassador on 14 January, 'There was no-one ... who could bring about any division between our country and ... Germany ... for so long as he was President'.² In June 1965, Johnson told Erhard that 'he considered Germany the most trustworthy of all allies'.³ The President's personal inclinations aside, West Germany was militarily and economically a rising power, in contrast to a declining Britain. For example, around this time West Germany's armed forces exceeded those of Britain, at 430,000 to 425,000.⁴ On 15 March, Lord Harlech, the outgoing Ambassador to Washington, commented that Britain's ties with Washington were to some extent a wasting asset. Although Britain was 'still regarded as the most dependable ally of the United States and there is a deep and widespread affection for us', Harlech suspected that 'this may be partly due to the fact that we are no longer regarded as an equal and therefore as a possible rival'. The UK had 'a closer and more intimate relationship with the United States government than any other country and our views are listened to with greater attention but we too will be judged increasingly by our performance'. In Harlech's view, 'the myriad of close personal friendships built up at all levels during the war and immediate postwar years are a diminishing asset and nationals of other countries, if they care to make the effort, can establish almost equally close contacts'.⁵ Thus the portents for a close Anglo-American relationship over the long term were not especially good, and nor were some of the more immediate developments over Vietnam. In the House of Commons in June 1966, Wilson was later to explain his attitude towards American involvement in the area: 'There are three reasons ... why this fighting should cease. The first is because of the tragedy which this war brings on the people of Vietnam, people who, after 20 years of almost continuous fighting, want to live in peace, to till their farms, and bring up their children.' The second reason was that 'as long as this fighting lasts there is the danger of escalation to the scale of a land war in Asia, or possibly something worse'. Finally, 'because as long as the fighting in Vietnam casts a cloud over international relationships, the easing of tensions between east and west, progress in disarmament and progress towards a world agreement to stop the spread of nuclear weapons may be endangered by this poisoning of the atmosphere'. But Wilson did not support a precipitate withdrawal by American forces, because such a measure would have 'incalculable results, first in Vietnam. It would have incalculable results, too, over a much wider area than Vietnam, not least because it might bring with it the danger that friend and potential foe throughout the world would begin to wonder whether the United States might be induced to abandon other allies when the going got rough'.⁶

On 10 February 1965, Wilson learned of an 'extremely vicious attack by the Vietcong in the Saigon area, involving the destruction of a club largely used by

US servicemen'.⁷ Fearing an exaggerated American response, he discussed the matter with the Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart,⁸ at 11.30 p.m. that day. They decided that, in view of the controversy about Vietnam in the House of Commons, Wilson 'should fly to Washington to discuss matters with the President'. After consulting the former British Ambassador to Washington, Sir Harold Caccia, Stewart suggested to Wilson that the Prime Minister 'should first consult Lord Harlech'. Wilson spoke to Harlech 'by telephone at 1.00 a.m. on Thursday February 11'. He 'explained the parliamentary situation in this country and the fact that alone of the major powers Britain was appearing to keep silent over Vietnam and appearing simply to tag along in the wake of the Americans'. It was therefore 'highly desirable that the Prime Minister should be seen to be consulting the Americans in what they had to do in South Vietnam', by means of 'discussions with the President of the United States'. Harlech took up the matter with the White House, and at 2.00 a.m. he told 10 Downing Street that he had 'spoken to Mr. McGeorge Bundy', the White House National Security Adviser, 'and that the feeling at the White House was very strongly against a visit by the Prime Minister: it would smack too much of desperation'. The United States's 'intended action in South Vietnam would be moderate, measured and strictly relevant to the provocation'. It would look 'very bad in the United States if the Prime Minister was thought to be running to give the President advice or to consult him when American soldiers were being murdered'. Harlech concluded by telling Wilson that he 'should certainly not propose going to the United States unless he had beforehand made personal contact with the President: by personal contact Lord Harlech meant a telephone conversation'.⁹

With great faith in his personal diplomacy, Wilson made that 'personal contact' in order to try to secure a visit. In his memoirs he justified the initiative by saying that 'the pressures on the President to escalate the war, if need be by the use of nuclear weapons', could mean that 'his patience might falter and that he would give way to the hawks in the Administration and Congress, and above all, in the services'. Also aware of 'the reaction that would follow in the House of Commons', Wilson 'felt that this was a time for a personal discussion with him to remind him of the attitude of his friends, and indeed the rest of the world'. He therefore arranged to telephone the President 'on the "hot-line" and got through about 3.30 a.m. our time, 10.30 p.m. Washington time'.¹⁰ Wilson told the President of the 'high-level of concern in London' about events in Vietnam, and indicated 'that he would like to come to Washington to put himself in a better position to deal with that concern'. Johnson refused: 'it would be a very serious mistake for the Prime Minister to come over ... there was nothing to get upset about, any more than it would be right for him to get upset about Malaysia'. Any 'visit would be misunderstood here'. The American response in Vietnam 'had been very measured and reasonable ... it was not going to be any different whether the Prime Minister came here or not ... it would be a great mistake for us to jump up and down and fly the Atlantic every time there was an

issue of this sort'. Wilson spoke of his 'problems in the House of Commons', but Johnson had 'plenty of problems with his own Congress ... it would be a mistake for the Prime Minister to try to use the President as an instrument in the House of Commons'. Johnson had 'to deal with the Congress every day, but he did not pull the Prime Minister into it'. He did not 'see what was to be gained by flapping around the Atlantic with our coattails out'. Johnson pressed upon Wilson, once again, the desirability of British troops entering the war in Vietnam: 'the US', said Johnson, 'did not have the company of many allies' there. The United States needed 'British support', and if the Prime Minister had 'any men to spare, he would be glad to have them'. Wilson returned to the question of a visit to Washington, but Johnson retorted: 'Why don't you run Malaysia and let me run Vietnam?' Would Wilson think it wise for the President 'to announce to the American press tomorrow that he was going over to London to try to stop the British in Malaysia?' The Prime Minister 'gave way and reassured the President of his own basic support' for US policy in Vietnam. The conversation over, Johnson told Bundy to 'send off a message summarising the current situation to the Prime Minister's office'.¹¹

Five years later, in a speech about Anglo-American relations, Wilson returned to his telephone call: 'Never in the whole history of Anglo-American relationship, to my knowledge, has either a President or a Prime Minister spoken to the other in language one-tenth as abusive as what concurrently many English were saying about their Prime Minister, and many Americans about their President'.¹² Johnson's tirade did not seem to strain Wilson's basic loyalty to the White House, but he was stung nonetheless – until the news broke two days later he had wanted to keep the telephone call secret. On 29 March, Bundy recorded that Henry Brandon of the *Sunday Times* had given him 'quite an account of Harold Wilson's thinking' on Vietnam. Although Wilson had told Brandon 'about the telephone talk' he 'forbade him to print it' in case it undermined his efforts to present himself as a confidant of the President. Anticipating that the message would reach Wilson, Bundy told Brandon that the White House was not impressed when British politicians used Washington 'as a place for public criticism of the US in order to please their own political backbenchers'. Bundy thought that Brandon 'got the point, and I daresay it will have been in his Sunday article ... This should have some salutary effect' on Wilson's desire to advise President Johnson.¹³ The Prime Minister's Foreign Office assistant, Oliver Wright, suggested on 12 February that Johnson was somewhat limited and heavy-handed in his dealings with other countries: the telephone 'conversation ... together with other indications, indicate that the nature of US foreign policy, as pursued by President Johnson, is likely to be very different (and less helpful to British interests) than that pursued by President Kennedy'. Wilson had to accept, said Wright, that 'the man who is at present at the head of the United States is basically not interested in foreign affairs'. This meant that he had 'no particular vision in his mind of the sort of world that Statesmen should be constructing',

and was thus liable to misadventure and unstatesmanlike outbursts. Wright surmised correctly that Johnson was ill-disposed to the advice of foreign leaders: it was a case of ‘you get on with your problems and I’ll get on with mine’. Yet at this stage at least Wilson did not find the upshot of Wright’s argument palatable: it was suggested that given Johnson’s indifference to the British, the United Kingdom should seek closer ties with Europe.¹⁴ Wright also commented on 12 March that he had recently attended a CIA briefing, the object of which was ‘to demonstrate the degree of direct North Vietnamese involvement in South Vietnam’. For Wright the briefing simply demonstrated, though, that ‘the Americans are in a hopeless position in South Vietnam’. They ‘cannot win and cannot yet see any way of getting off the hook which will not damage their prestige internationally and the President’s position domestically’. This explained Johnson’s ‘bear with a sore head attitude on the telephone a couple of weeks ago and the current absence of any Presidential “determination” on American policy in Vietnam’. It appeared that ‘with his passion for “consensus”, the President is waiting for domestic opinion in the United States to crystallise’. Wright advised that it was best not to ‘badger’ the Administration.¹⁵ Wilson was in sympathy with these views, but that did not mean he would ever tell Johnson that the Americans were in a ‘hopeless position’ in Vietnam.

Initially, the Prime Minister tried to imply that his telephone call to Washington had gone well. He told his Cabinet the next day that he had talked for two hours ‘with the President of the United States and he had explained our attitude to him’. Wilson failed to mention the dismissive tone with which he had been received in Washington. He also tried to convey to MPs that he had real influence over President Johnson. On 11 February, the left-wing Labour MP William Warbey reiterated the increasingly frequent suggestion to Wilson that he should:

do what Attlee had done when Macarthur was asking for a nuclear attack on the Chinese Yalu River power stations – ‘fly to Washington’. [Wilson’s] answer was that this was not necessary ... because there was now a ‘hot-line’ between London and Washington. He had talked to Johnson on the hot-line today. The impression which he had intended to convey by this information was that he had talked to Johnson as Attlee had talked to Truman in 1951 [*sic*].¹⁷

Wilson tried to dismiss Warbey, telling him that Johnson was ‘having difficulty keeping dissentient Congressmen in Washington quiet’, and ‘the fuss which some of you are making here is not helping either’.¹⁸ Brandon noted in his memoirs that after ‘that incident’ of Wilson’s telephone call on 11 February, Bruce managed to convince the Prime Minister that ‘it was better to communicate with the President by teletype, because a man like Johnson to whom reaching for the telephone was second nature and principally an instrument to pressure people, did not like others using it to put him on the spot’.¹⁹ Indeed, Wilson made few if any more telephone calls to Johnson, relying on correspondence instead.

Wilson's desire for consultation over Vietnam

Wilson was anxious that Washington should keep him informed, even to consult him, about developments in Vietnam. As well as fitting in with his own propensity for diplomacy, this would help him to deal with those who charged him with an undue commitment to the United States. The White House at least kept 10 Downing Street informed, though these efforts fell short of consultation. On 11 February, the President sent, via Bundy, an 'account of the situation and our current plans', namely that 'US and Vietnamese air units will strike two targets in the Southern Part of North Vietnam' – some army barracks 'clearly associated with the infiltration programme of Hanoi'. The operation had been designed under Johnson's 'personal and careful supervision to be prompt, adequate and measured'. He was 'determined to give all necessary replies while keeping it clear at all times that he desires no wider war and that root cause of entire situation is in the systematic campaign of aggression by force and fraud against South Vietnam under the direction of the North Vietnamese leadership'. Bundy told Wilson that Johnson would discuss the 'whole situation fully with Ambassador Bruce ... and asks me to repeat that he welcomes consultation by cable and telephone any time the Prime Minister thinks it useful'.²⁰

Johnson felt a growing concern about the strength of support in Vietnam from the United States's allies. He questioned Bundy, whose subsequent memorandum on 16 February indicated that Britain was 'with us but wobbly on negotiations'. Officially, there was 'strong public support to date, but privately' there were 'pressures to get a negotiating track started'. The 'British have always put us on notice that substantial military action would create great public opinion pressures on them to take a negotiating initiative'. Bundy told Johnson that he thought they would 'continue to stand firm in public, but we would need extremely close consultation at all stages to hold them in line with what we thought was a wise approach to any question of negotiation'. Despite 'some backbench pressure', Bundy did not believe that Wilson 'would take any negotiating initiative that he had not fully discussed and cleared with us'. There were some suspicions, though: Bundy added that 'the British are in constant touch with the Canadians and the Indians, and there is always a possibility that some ill-timed diplomatic initiative would arise from the other two'.²¹

Domestically, Wilson faced growing pressure over Vietnam. This was all the more critical in the light of Labour's narrow majority in the Commons. On 24 February one Labour MP asked Wilson 'what consultations he had had with President Johnson on the war in Vietnam, and for a statement on the prospects of securing a peaceful settlement'. Characteristically, the Prime Minister's response implied real influence over the President, and it also left the MP with little scope for contention: 'we have been actively engaged in diplomatic consultations of a confidential nature'. These 'consultations are still going on, and I hope the House will understand that it would be unwise to prejudice the results

of much patient and discreet diplomacy by any premature public announcement'.²² In this guarded but sanguine statement Wilson was referring to Britain's tentative and unsuccessful contacts with Moscow on the prospect of reconvening a latter-day version of the 1954 Geneva Conference, which had partitioned Indochina. He was also referring to the equally unfruitful contact he had with the Americans. The Labour MP Sidney Silverman tabled an anti-US motion after the bombing of North Vietnam which had so alarmed Wilson. Additionally, the MP Konni Zilliacus gathered signatures for a telegram of protest which he proposed to send to President Johnson. On 22 March, it was reported that the Americans were using napalm bombs and gas in Vietnam. This brought another anti-US motion, now from the MPs John Mendelson and Tom Driberg.²³ Warbey pressed Wilson for an 'outspoken dissociation of Britain from what the Americans were doing in Vietnam'.²⁴

Pressures of this type confirmed that the Prime Minister's telephone call to Johnson on 11 February derived less from a real concern about possible American rashness than domestic political considerations, given Labour's thin majority in the Commons and the corresponding need to maintain Party unity. Bruce noted the intense 'restiveness here, especially in the House of Commons, over the British Government not seeming to play a more active part in trying to induce negotiations over Vietnam'.²⁵ Wilson, said Bruce, was 'under intense domestic pressure to intervene as mediator in the situation',²⁶ and was 'accused by many British, including a formidable number of moderate Labour parliamentarians, of being a mere satellite of the US, and of subscribing blindly and completely to policies about which he has not been consulted in advance'.²⁷ On 12 March, Wilson explained to Bruce that when he had discussed Vietnam with Johnson in December, 'the British government had agreed to support any American response that was measured and specifically related to the provocation'. This situation 'clearly no longer obtained, and the United States Government had made the change without consulting their most loyal ally'. This would place the British 'in an intolerable position; if it were allowed to continue we should soon be hearing stories about satellites and the 51st state'. Wilson said that his government 'could live with the originally planned posture of the United States: namely that of a stick in one hand and an olive branch in the other'. The British 'could probably live with any degree of toughening up of United States responses, provided there was also a public recognition of a readiness to negotiate in parallel'. But 'if things went on as they were, they could well lead to the biggest difficulty between Britain and the United States for many years, possibly since Suez'.²⁸

Clearly, Wilson's support for the Americans in Vietnam demanded a certain amount of political ingenuity. On 14 April, George Ball, Undersecretary of State, told Johnson that British support has been 'skilfully conducted and stoutly maintained by the Prime Minister', even though there was criticism of the 'close identification with US policy'.²⁹ Wilson charted a course between satisfying both Washington on the one hand and the Labour left on the other, avoiding a

serious break with either. But Labour criticism of US policy in Vietnam antagonised Johnson. While speaking to the new British Ambassador, Patrick Dean, on 13 April, he 'strongly criticised the attitude of the Labour backbench in Parliament and said that although he was at all times ready to listen to what his allies had to say, he would not be deterred by purely negative opinion'.³⁰ Johnson had little interest in keeping Wilson fully informed about the situation in Vietnam, although Wilson told his Cabinet on 4 March that he was 'in constant touch with the President'.³¹ Bruce noted on 16 February that his superiors had told him to 'avoid seeing the Prime Minister, if this were possible, but if not, to confine my conversation with him to generalities'. This reticent approach was because 'the timing and sequence of our action in Vietnam is still under discussion ... they expect to give me material for a full presentation tomorrow'. Subsequently, Bruce explained to Wilson, in vague terms, 'the general tendency of our present planning'. The Prime Minister affirmed that he 'would continue to back the US position', although he was not sure 'what it was'. To elicit more information, Wilson then told Bruce of the President's 'telephone message' on 11 February that the Ambassador 'would give him a complete summary of proposed US action', rather than the scant outline from Bundy. In the absence of a full summary, Wilson had asked Bruce whether he thought 'it might be well for him to communicate directly with the President' to find out exactly what was happening. But Bruce, conscious of Johnson's preoccupation with Vietnam, tried 'to advise that he not do so at the present time, but use as a channel his Embassy in Washington'. The Ambassador thought that it was 'obvious that what is most desired here is a statement by the President' to demonstrate that Wilson's views were important to the United States.³²

Bruce told the White House of Wilson's appeal for information about US policy in Vietnam. Bundy pursued this and on 16 February reminded Johnson of his obligation: 'you promised Wilson a memo on our exact position'.³³ The President then told Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, to send Bruce an update of American policy in Vietnam, to be presented to Wilson. The update was general and unrevealing. It said that the United States was committed to 'continuing air and naval action against North Vietnam when and wherever possible ... limited and fitting and adequate'. Washington would make a statement 'after the next military action' – details withheld – to reflect the intensification of the 'programme of pacification within South Vietnam' and the 'execution of a joint programme of measured and limited air action against selected military targets' in North Vietnam.³⁴ On 5 March, Bruce sent another telegram to Washington trying to encourage some sympathy with Wilson's position: 'Recent private conversations with British government leaders, including PM and Foreign Secretary, reveal an increasing concern that US and UK should be able to show movement toward negotiation on the Vietnam problem'.³⁵

Johnson and his associates were little inclined to take the prospect of negotiation seriously until the United States had consolidated a real military advantage

in Vietnam, but by then it would be less a case of negotiation than of imposing a peace on American terms. Johnson agreed, for example, with the view of former President Eisenhower, whose counsel the White House had sought. In a meeting of 17 February, Eisenhower told Johnson and his colleagues that:

if we can show a fine record of success, or real and dramatic accomplishment, we would be in a good position to negotiate. He advised not to negotiate from a position of weakness. He commented that Prime Minister Wilson of the UK had not had experience with this kind of problem. We, however, have learned that Munichs win nothing; therefore, his answer to the British would be 'not now boys'.³⁶

The phrase 'not now boys' therefore summarised Johnson's approach to the British on the question of negotiations in Vietnam. Practically the only action the Americans were prepared to take with respect to the British involved the language that Wilson should use in the Commons. On 9 March, the Prime Minister sought American advice, via the US Embassy, on what he should say about Vietnam in the House of Commons. Philip Kaiser, Bruce's assistant, asked the State Department for guidance on the contents of the statement that the Prime Minister would make that afternoon.³⁷ Later, Kaiser told Rusk that Wilson had fully accepted the American counsel, with his statement conforming 'closely to text agreed with Washington, with Wilson calling for ... an end to North Vietnamese aggression'.³⁸ By demonstrating his solicitude like this towards American sensibilities, the Prime Minister sought to encourage reciprocity on the part of the White House. He recalled to Bruce on 12 March that 'before he answered Questions on Vietnam in the House of Commons on the previous Tuesday, he had consulted the United States Government on what he should say; and, indeed, in response to last minute representations, had changed the text of his reply'. It would 'therefore place him in a very difficult position if, without any consultation, the United States Government were to alter their position'.³⁹ Wilson's recital of the American line in the Commons on Vietnam may have satisfied Washington, but it did not enhance his standing with the Labour radicals: Warbey described Wilson's performance as 'the end' and accused him of lying on behalf of the United States.⁴⁰ After the Commons statement on 9 March, Bruce thought that Wilson deserved an acknowledgement of his loyalty and compliance. 'Perhaps', he asked Rusk, 'if the President thought favourably of it, it might be well for him to send a personal communication to the PriMin, expressing thanks for his support, and stating he expected to keep him closely advised of his plans'.⁴¹ Rusk replied that he could 'convey to PriMin President Johnson's appreciation for the solidarity reflected in Wilson's statement in Parliament and his answers to questions'.⁴² Bruce did speak to the Prime Minister of Johnson's 'appreciation', though the 'personal communication to the PriMin' that the Ambassador had wanted was not forthcoming – casting some doubt on the authenticity of Johnson's gratitude. But the Ambassador's continued promptings did encourage some of Johnson's advisers to realise that British support for the US in Vietnam should not be taken for granted. Bundy told Johnson on 6 March

that Rusk and Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defence, both felt that 'to hold some of our allies we may need to be a little less rigid about "talks" than we have in the last ten days'. In particular, Wilson had that day 'been made nervous by one sub-Cabinet resignation and a lot of yammering' by troublesome MPs. He wanted 'to make some explorations toward the possibility of talks, and to say that they have been in consultation with us'. But this matter was not urgent, Bundy told the President, because Wilson was 'safely in Bonn' where he was less likely to cause trouble for the Americans than if he was at large in London.⁴³

Economic diplomacy

During this period the White House continued to be concerned about the strength of sterling. On 11 March, Johnson told Robert Anderson of the State Department that Wilson should 'quit' telling him how to 'concede and yield in South-east Asia' and should instead 'look after his budget'.⁴⁴ Some of the President's advisers wanted him to use his influence to ensure that the forthcoming British budget was a cautious one. The Secretary of the Treasury, Douglas Dillon, told Johnson on 27 March that 'Sterling has been weak over the past couple of weeks as the impression has grown that the United Kingdom budget, which is now due to be presented on April 6, will turn out to be inadequate'. If it appeared 'that the British are seriously considering devaluation, it is important that we concert closely with them, and, if necessary, intercede at the highest levels including conversations between yourself and the Prime Minister, in order to hold any devaluation to the \$2.50 level'.⁴⁵ On 30 March, William Martin of the Federal Reserve suggested to Johnson that he should express to Wilson the concern 'about the rumours of devaluation and trouble for sterling which are running around in the New York market'. The budget 'should be a tight one, should be recognised as such', and the British government should 'advertise it to be one designed to achieve confidence in your currency'. Martin advised Johnson 'that the important thing is to let the Prime Minister know of your interest and you might offer to send Kermit Gordon', the Director of the Bureau of the Budget, to London 'to discuss the matter in greater detail with him'.⁴⁶ The President favoured Martin's advice that the US Government should investigate the British budget to ensure that it was a tight one, but he was not inclined to speak to Wilson personally in case, as he told Dillon on 31 March, it seemed 'like I'm throwing my weight around'. The alternative approach of Gordon was a 'sound' idea.⁴⁷

That day, Bundy, now in London, spoke to Derek Mitchell, Wilson's principal private secretary, and Oliver Wright in the Prime Minister's Office, to say that Johnson 'would like to propose a visit ... by Kermit Gordon so that there could be close understanding before the budget debate on Tuesday on the political as well as the financial level'. Bundy emphasised that 'the President would be particularly glad to have an advance notice from the Prime Minister on any

problem which might lead to a need for US action'. Wilson responded that Gordon 'would be most welcome', and a meeting was set for Sunday lunch. Bundy noted Wilson's desire to confer over the 'hot-line' directly with the President again – if they could not confer about Vietnam, then they might do so about the budget. After checking with Johnson, Bundy declined Wilson's request, saying that 'the President was not going to be where he could talk this evening and his own judgement was that it would be best to hold up a telephone conversation ... until after Gordon's visit'. Wilson's 'failure', said Bundy, 'to come back with more pressure for direct telephone conversations suggests that he is ready to play it coolly' in his relations with the President, and to wait until they met face-to-face.⁴⁸

The American probing of the British budget could have aroused some controversy in the UK had it been publicised.⁴⁹ The Foreign Office noted that there was strictly 'no publicity' about Gordon's visit. There was a 'cover plan', however, that he had been 'sent to look into questions affecting United States overseas expenditure and while here had made informal contact with his former Oxford tutor, the Prime Minister'.⁵⁰ Derek Mitchell told Bundy on 4 April of the need for secrecy: 'by tradition and by necessity and security one has to conserve complete silence before a budget'.⁵¹ However, none of the British seemed to express any opposition to the American investigations. Wilson certainly did not, remarking blandly to Johnson he was 'very grateful to you for arranging for Kermit Gordon to be in London when we came back' from talks in Paris.⁵² On 6 April, Bruce urged in a telegram to be passed on to the President that it was 'essential that the US exercise more than usual caution and restraint in whatever official statement or comment we make initially about the UK budget'. Washington should 'take care to avoid responding too quickly and too enthusiastically to the British proposals', otherwise there might be 'suspicions that the US and Britain had jointly planned the budget'.⁵³ More vigorously, Kaiser contends in his memoirs that Johnson's action was an attempt to 'take insensitive advantage of the disparity of power between Britain and the United States', as well as Wilson's loyalty to Washington. It was 'a foolish act, an abuse of the special relationship', Kaiser wrote, noting that the 'preservation of the budget's secrecy until it was presented to the House of Commons was a basic political principle' in Britain. 'The Embassy was determined', he added, 'to keep Kermit Gordon's visit secret. Had it become public it might have created a political storm'.⁵⁴ The Foreign Office noted that on 4 April Gordon duly 'spent one and a half hours with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and they then joined the Prime Minister for lunch'. The 'opportunity was taken to give Gordon a run-down on the Budgetary situation (in general terms)'. He 'left reassured, and the reports he will be making when he returns to Washington ... will go straight to the centre'.⁵⁵

The extent, if any, to which the Americans helped shape the budget can only be speculated. However, it is certain that the Prime Minister and his colleagues

had little room for manoeuvre, as Dillon made clear to Johnson on 27 March. If the budget was lax, then:

the European countries will join in forcing the British Government to choose between substantial further restrictive action, such as increased sales taxes on consumer items, or a devaluation of sterling. They have the capacity to do this simply by refusing to agree to renew the support which they gave sterling last November and which runs out in May. It had been expected that the United Kingdom would make another drawing from the Monetary Fund in May for the purpose of paying off the bilateral support remaining from last winter's exercise. With an inadequate budget it is doubtful if the International Monetary Fund would, or could, agree to an additional drawing by the United Kingdom.⁵⁶

A CIA Intelligence Memorandum noted that the British budget of 6 April 1965 was cautious and deflationary, 'designed mainly to strengthen Britain's external position'. It sought to 'restrict consumer spending, to reform corporate taxation, and to reduce the outflow of capital', thus easing the pressure on sterling.⁵⁷ Certainly the budget did not cause any complaints in the White House. Johnson told Patrick Dean on 13 April that the British had scored a 'home run'. He expressed his appreciation concerning 'the visit of Mr. Kermit Gordon to London ... and the very satisfactory report which had been rendered to him on that occasion'. Johnson had ensured that 'word had been put round in Washington and New York that the steps which HMG were taking with regard to their financial and economic position, and particularly in respect to the budget, were satisfactory'. Johnson also 'spoke in high terms of the Prime Minister and the other Ministers concerned and said that ... great progress was undoubtedly being made by the British government in this field'.⁵⁸ Some of Wilson's colleagues were less impressed by the budget. George Brown complained to Wilson that it was "a soak 'em" package, the only justification for which is that "experts" somewhere are alleged to have formed the view that there is some magical figure of additional taxation which will restore foreign confidence and make sterling strong".⁵⁹

The second summit

Despite the rebuff from Johnson on 11 February, Wilson still wanted to visit Washington, for what would be his second trip there since becoming Prime Minister. In his memoirs he indicates that the telegram from the Americans which arrived on 11 February suggested a visit. Yet it would have been incongruous for the White House to make this suggestion, as the President had just several times dismissed the Prime Minister's request for a meeting. The telegram made no such reference.⁶⁰ Wilson himself initiated the trip, circuitously to avoid a direct refusal, through the British Embassy and on the pretext of a planned speech in New York. Two weeks after the telephone call, White House aide Bromley Smith sent a memo to his colleague Jack Valenti, indicating that

the British Embassy had sent a message to say 'that the British Prime Minister will be in New York on April 14 to address the Economics Club on the economic situation in Britain and, if possible, would like an hour with the President on the afternoon of the 14th or 15th'. Would 'the President be in town then and able to see Wilson? ... we believe the President should see him if it is at all possible'.⁶¹ Johnson was less than enthusiastic, wondering that since he had seen Wilson in December 'it would be enough' for Rusk to see him.⁶² Yet the President's advisers felt that this would cause a crisis of protocol in Anglo-American relations 'at the summit'. Valenti told the President firmly that 'there is no escape from seeing Prime Minister Wilson when he is here in April'. As Wilson had himself 'asked to see the President it would be an affront and an international flap if he didn't have this request granted. The Secretary will meet him first and then bring him in to see you'.⁶³ Johnson had to comply, not least because 'an international flap' would be more trouble than it was worth.

The President's reluctance to see Wilson also stemmed from his concern early in 1965 that a visit might suggest to the world that the Prime Minister was telling him what to do in Vietnam. Though Johnson had agreed to a visit, he searched in private for a way of breaking free. On 6 March, he called Ball 'to say that he has the feeling he is getting crowded into a corner' over Wilson's visit, in part because of the pressure from some other White House advisers. Johnson told Ball that as his 'lawyer' he 'should handle it', and find some means of escape from the commitment. The President claimed that 'he had received the last Prime Minister he wanted to receive'. Johnson was 'not ready to talk or for peace machinery or for conferences,' and he was 'decidedly not ready to be used as a floor mat by Wilson as he was used by the French Minister the other day – or like Lord Home had done on the Cuban trade' early in 1964. Johnson fulminated that if he had 'to get sick and leave town he would do it' to avoid seeing Wilson. He mentioned the telephone discussion on 11 February when 'he (Wilson) had wanted to come over that night'. Now the Prime Minister was 'coming on the 15th [of April] but there would be no discussion of peace negotiations or a treaty for Vietnam'. Ball agreed that the President 'could not be an instrument for helping Wilson with his domestic political problems', but the Undersecretary could do little to ease Johnson's difficulty.⁶⁴ Johnson told McNamara that he did not know 'how to stop this Wilson, but if he thinks I'm going to ... let Wilson use my platform to talk about consulting with him about where to have a conference, he's crazy as hell'.⁶⁵ A few days later Johnson complained that Wilson was coming 'to announce from the White House that we ought to have negotiations' over Vietnam.⁶⁶

Johnson's feelings about seeing Wilson soon became widely known. Bruce, for example, noted that in London 'snide remarks are frequent to the effect that the President does not want to see' Wilson in April, and these comments took Wilson's 'unvarying acquiescence for granted'.⁶⁷ In the *Sunday Times*, Henry Brandon contended that Johnson's lack of enthusiasm for foreign visitors derived

from the fact that while he had an 'inspired intuition ... in domestic affairs, he lacks the same flair in the foreign field'. While President Kennedy had taken a lively interest in international affairs and had enjoyed his contacts with foreign leaders, Johnson felt that little could be learned 'even from informal personal contact, that cannot be learned from reading diplomatic cables or the newspapers, both of which he spends a lot of time studying'. Brandon wrote that although the President was thus well-informed about world affairs, he resented the tactic used by 'foreign statesmen' whereby they would visit the United States 'without an invitation from the White House, under the pretext of honorary degrees, or speeches' (as noted, Wilson had lodged his latest request to visit Johnson on the back of a speech in New York). Johnson regarded these visits to the United States as a cheap form of proselytising, 'as an attempt to influence American public opinion by the back door'. To compound Johnson's irritation, said Brandon, 'it then becomes necessary for him to invite the speaker out of courtesy to the White House'. There was no escaping this situation without causing a crisis of protocol. Foreign visitors made great demands on Johnson's time, too: if a 'statesman comes to see him for only an hour or two, the President has to prepare himself for such a meeting for several hours in advance, because he does not want to appear uninformed or unresponsive'. The gist of Brandon's article was that the President 'tends to grumble about any unnecessary visitor, comparing his presence with a visit from his mother-in-law just as he was trying to get to the ball game'.⁶⁸ Its humour aside, this was an apt – if understated – characterisation of Johnson's reaction to the news of a visit from Wilson. However, Johnson's response might have been still harsher had Wilson not tried 'to discourage any belief that he is hurrying to see the President about Vietnam', as the US Embassy noted on 12 March.⁶⁹

On 22 March, Bruce lamented that 'The President has an antipathy for the Prime Minister'. In particular, Johnson thought that 'attempts on the part of the British to insinuate themselves into Vietnamese affairs' were 'irrelevant and impertinent'.⁷⁰ He believed that Wilson, 'for his own domestic, political purposes, wishes to capitalise on a supposed close relationship that is non-existent'. Bruce and Bundy, who was himself not especially enamoured of Wilson, saw 'eye-to-eye on this situation', believing that Johnson should at least try to give the impression of good relations, because 'The PM needs at least to be able to portray to his associates, and in the House of Commons, the appearance of an intimacy and a mutual confidence'. But the 'intimacy and ... confidence' of which Bruce spoke was 'in the President's view ... not a reality'. There was 'no room ... for lack of conventional courtesies between chiefs of allied states'.⁷¹

Bundy again responded to Bruce's concerns that Wilson's support for the United States might falter. He told Johnson on 22 March of the assertions in the United Kingdom that Wilson 'has deserted his principles to curry favour with the President, who in return has let it be known that the Prime Minister will be an unwelcome visitor in April. The cooler men in the Labour Party', said Bundy,

‘as distinct from the left-wing wild men, are said to be losing their patience’. This was ‘of course a wild misstatement of the existing situation’, because, according to Bundy, Wilson’s troubles were partly self-inflicted: none of these concerns in Britain ‘took account of the very great damage which Wilson did to himself by his outrageous telephone call to you’. It might therefore be expedient to let the Labour Party ‘struggle with its own political problems on the ground that Wilson’s troubles are of his own making, not ours’, Bundy suggested. The difficulty ‘with this course is that since Wilson prefers his own survival to solidarity with us, he would be mortally tempted to begin to make critical noises about us, thus appealing both to his own party and to the natural nationalism of many independent Englishmen’. This would not, said Bundy, ‘be helpful to Wilson in the long run, but it would not be helpful to us either’. When the White House fell out with Prime Ministers, ‘it’s usually portrayed as our fault’. Bundy argued that the alternative to a public split ‘is to see what is the least we can offer the British in return for continued solidarity in support of the essentials of our policy in Vietnam’. David Bruce, noted Bundy, thought that ‘this necessary minimum is simply that we should join them publicly that there is a full and continuing exchange of views and of information at all levels between our two Governments on this important issue’. Then, said Bundy, ‘we can put some parsley out ... about how much we look forward to the Prime Minister’s visit’. In return, Wilson should ‘undertake not to advocate negotiations and not to go back on the existing announced approval of our present course of action’. Bruce ‘thinks this position will not be easy for Wilson, but that he will find it distinctly preferable to a split with us at this time’.⁷² Despite its evident cynicism, Bundy’s memo was an honest attempt to ease Johnson’s aversion to Wilson.

To prepare the ground for his visit to Washington, Wilson sent Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart to speak to Johnson on 23 March. Stewart – like his predecessor Patrick Gordon Walker – supported the idea of a ‘close’ relationship with the United States. He was also a conventional figure who was never likely to steal much publicity from Wilson’s conduct of international affairs. But the Prime Minister had some worries about Stewart’s trip. He told him that the Americans:

should be left in no doubt about the strength of feeling here [on Vietnam] and about the difficulties which we are facing. There is a danger of widespread anti-Americanism and of America losing her moral position ... Should the President try to link this question with support for the pound I would regard this as most unfortunate ... If the financial weakness we inherited and are in the process of putting right is to be used as a means of forcing us to accept unpalatable policies or developments regardless of our thoughts this will raise very wide questions indeed about Anglo-American relationships.⁷³

Though there is no record that anyone in the White House had by then suggested such a ‘deal’, Wilson feared that Johnson would demand unequivocal British support for US policy in Vietnam, even a commitment of troops, in

return for US support for the pound. Certainly, Johnson had emphasised that the United States needed firm allies in Vietnam, and Wilson had courted White House support for sterling the previous year. Yet despite his dedication to the United States, Wilson understood that given the political situation in Britain there were limits to how far he could support the Americans in Vietnam, and, furthermore, it was unlikely that if it came to the crunch Washington would ever deny support – within reason – for sterling. The United States had an interest in so doing, in order to avoid an international financial crisis.⁷⁴ Thus Wilson's concern that the United States would exploit Britain's economic weakness in this way were exaggerated. Moreover, there is no record that sterling was even mentioned during Stewart's visit to the White House.⁷⁵

However, Johnson and the Foreign Secretary did discuss Vietnam. The President complained later that Stewart had 'not offered a single practical or helpful suggestion' on the matter. He thought it 'insulting for politicians to come chashing over to see him, to expound for home consumption their condemnatory statements from the White House steps, unless they had practicable solutions to offer for American problems'.⁷⁶ On 23 March, Wilson had asked Stewart to raise the issue of the use of gas in Vietnam: 'the American decision to use gas, even though it be non-lethal, coming on top of the use of napalm has greatly aggravated the concern felt here in Parliament and indeed more widely. I hope you will leave the Secretary of State and the President in no doubt at all about the difficulty into which we have been put.' Wilson was feeling the pressure of continued jibes 'that Her Majesty's Government is the tail-end Charlie in an American bomber'.⁷⁷ While in the United States Stewart did indeed raise the gas issue, but Bruce's diary entry for 24 March indicated that by doing so he jeopardised Wilson's seemingly low chances for a harmonious meeting with Johnson three weeks later. Bundy had telephoned Bruce, the Ambassador noted, 'to tell me to prepare a draft of a possible letter to the Prime Minister, expressing the President's indignation over Michael Stewart having answered a question at the National Press Club' soon after his meeting with Johnson 'by replying with a citation from the Declaration of Independence'. Stewart had 'coupled British objections' to the United States's use of gas in Vietnam 'with a quotation about the "decent observance of the opinions of mankind"'. But the American Ambassador finally persuaded Johnson not to 'rebuke' Wilson for Stewart's 'delinquency'; 'a great relief to me, for I thought it would be undignified and unnecessary to do so', he wrote.⁷⁸ That day the President told Rusk that it would have been 'good' if Stewart had not visited the United States. He complained about foreign politicians 'coming over here and using me as a forum ... now we got Wilson and I don't know what to do about it, but I just hate to see my allies destroy me – I'd rather my enemies do it ... Everybody just wants to come and lecture us ... giving us hell'.⁷⁹ Dean reported of his conversation with the President on 13 April that he attacked 'the complaints made about the American use of gas, which is not poisonous gas anyway and which the British had used just

as frequently'. In any case, 'the British were forced to kill quite a few Indonesian infiltrators every day and he made no complaint'. His 'friends and allies should certainly state their views, but they should not stab him in the back or slap him on the face (at this point the President slapped his own face quite vigorously)'.⁸⁰ Gradually, Johnson came to see the gas issue more lightly. He told a journalist on 29 April that 'Stewart got off on the gas thing ... he joined the Russians a little bit for propoganda ... but after he found out they'd [the British] used it two or three hundred times themselves he was less critical'.⁸¹

Prior to Wilson's visit, Rusk tried to boost Johnson's perceptions of the British. The Secretary told the President on 22 March that 'we have an excellent degree of understanding and cooperation in crucial foreign policy matters from the new Labour government in Britain ... Anything we can do to maintain this state of affairs is in our best interests'.⁸² On 14 April, George Ball praised Wilson's political leadership, his loyalty on Vietnam, his efforts to 'develop a stringent budget' and his 'evident determination ... to defend the pound without devaluation'.⁸³ Fearful that relations between Wilson might deteriorate further, Bundy sent a barrage of messages to Wilson to emphasise the importance of avoiding ... the Douglas-Home error, or the Michael Stewart error' – in other words, to ensure that the Prime Minister did not try to score political points at Johnson's expense. Wilson did not want anything substantial from the White House, only to 'be on visibly close terms with you', Bundy told the President on 15 April. Johnson was 'in the driver's seat, but my fingers are crossed because I know whose fault it will be if something goes wrong'.⁸⁴

On 10 April, Patrick Dean advised that to help strengthen the Anglo-American relationship, Britain should provide more support for the United States in Vietnam. Johnson and his advisers were 'very anxious to see a greater participation on the ground from South Vietnam from America's Allies, including ourselves'. Suggestions 'ranged from provision of British military advisers or transport pilots ... to a British medical team or an expert British team to help in the handling of the growing refugee problem, or again more police advisers'. Dean anticipated that Johnson or Rusk 'will argue that the offer of unconditional talks and economic aid in the President's speech' at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore on 7 April 'constitute an important contribution to the search for a peaceful solution for Vietnam'. They 'may continue that now a practical demonstration of further help from us, however limited, would be valuable'. Dean believed that 'a willingness to consider additional help might pay quite disproportionate dividends in terms of our ability to influence United States policies, and I hope that the Prime Minister would be willing to say that he is at least prepared to see what we can do'. The Ambassador concluded by saying that 'help in dealing with the refugee problem might be the most useful and perhaps the easiest for us to handle'.⁸⁵ On 13 April, Dean added that Johnson was 'still very heavily pre-occupied with Vietnam and has the strongest personal feelings about it'. He expected that he would 'take the matter up with the

Prime Minister', and advised that Wilson should 'make it plain, both privately and publicly how much we abhor and are opposed to incidents like the bomb attack on the US Embassy in Saigon and the general atrocities perpetrated by the Viet Cong and their friends in South Vietnam'. This would ensure that Johnson 'would be a great deal more ready to listen to proposals' for peace discussions.⁸⁶

Wilson's itinerary comprised a visit to the Economic Club of New York on 14 April, to give a speech on the British economic situation, and a trip to see the President in Washington the next day. In New York, as a 'Salesman for Sterling', Wilson succeeded in 'extolling' the currency's 'positive merits to the American business community'.⁸⁷ Bruce, now in Washington for the Wilson visit, noted that the White House was pleased with the speech. The Ambassador also noted that on the morning of 15 April he and Bill Tyler, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, 'motored to Andrews Field to meet Prime Minister Wilson and his Party'. Bruce wrote that Johnson had been 'fretting over the Wilson visit, thinking it unnecessary to see him except at lunch, after which he hopes to leave for Texas', but, dissuaded from such curtailment, 'he received the PM alone, chatting with him in the Oval Office' for half an hour. 'Meanwhile, Pat Dean, Burke Trend, William Armstrong, Derek Mitchell, Oliver Wright and other Britishers remained with our American group in the Cabinet room'.⁸⁸

Surprisingly in view of its antecedents, Wilson noted that the meeting was 'very cordial and friendly ... fast moving ... largely an exchange of views without seeking any new agreements'. He recorded that the talk began with a 'friendly reference from the President about the growing strength of our economic position and indeed he was very flattering about the success and standing of the Government generally'. Johnson felt that Wilson's speech in New York had 'done a great deal of good' in bolstering the status of sterling. His own 'earlier anxieties about sterling have now been set completely at rest and he referred particularly to the visit of Kermit Gordon in this context'. In the 'course of the lunch' Wilson 'went further with the President into an outline of our domestic political situation on which he seemed to be very well briefed'. Johnson seemed 'highly satisfied with the progress of the Government and the toughness of our decisions in a number of directions'. The President expressed his 'very deep appreciation' for 'the line we had taken' on Vietnam. To assure the Prime Minister that he was a man of moderation, Johnson said that he was 'working along the lines of the bomb-plus-olive-branch approach which was the centre of his Baltimore speech' which had suggested US aid for peaceful development in Vietnam. This was a '3D approach: determination, discussions, and development'. The President expressed gratitude, said Wilson, 'for our immediate response' to the speech, 'and also earlier for our condemnation of the bombing of the Embassy in Saigon'. Johnson summarised 'the agonising decisions' he had been obliged to take, 'the pressures he had been under and said that his line throughout had been a middle path between those who wanted to use Vietnam as a jumping-off ground for an all out attack on China, and those who felt that

the United States should quit Vietnam without conditions'. Wilson noted that unlike the December summit and the telephone conversation in February, Johnson did not make 'any suggestion of our committing troops to Vietnam nor even any reference to police, medical teams, or teams to handle the flow of refugees'.⁸⁹

In response to Johnson's forbearance and candour, Wilson gave him an 'account of the political difficulties we had faced' with regards to Vietnam. To help ease some of those difficulties, Wilson then spoke of the prospect of peace negotiations, suggesting 'a joint approach with the Russians as co-Chairmen'. Johnson consented to a low-key British investigation of possible peace negotiations in Vietnam, although that is not to say that the White House sought anything other than to perpetuate its 'position of strength' in Vietnam.⁹⁰ After their talk in the Oval Office, the two leaders had lunch, along with various Cabinet members, Congressmen, Senators and members of Wilson's party and the British Embassy. Bruce said of the meal: 'Delicious food, California wines, speeches pledging eternal Anglo-American friendship by the two Chiefs'.⁹¹ That day the Prime Minister also spoke to Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, and a number of White House economists. Finally, Bruce and Tyler 'saw the Wilsonites off' that 'evening at Andrews; they seemed pleased with their brief visit'.⁹²

The Prime Minister's indication that the talks were 'very cordial and friendly' was not entirely self-serving – on 16 April Patrick Dean told Oliver Wright that 'An old friend of mine, who was not directly involved in the talks but who heard immediately afterwards the views of those who had been present, said last night to a member of my staff that the President was genuinely very happy about the way the visit had gone'. When Dean suggested that 'the speaker might just be trying to say the right things he roundly affirmed that he meant just what he had said, and added that he personally was glad because he had earlier had some forebodings about how it would go'. These forebodings had arisen 'because he knew how very sensitive the President was and how quickly he had been angered by the succession of people who ... came offering gratuitous advice and passing moral judgments on his actions and on the American conduct of affairs generally'. The White House official who spoke to Dean 'mentioned how opportune it had been that a telegram from the American Embassy in London had come in and been put before the President just before the talks'. This telegram, from Bruce, 'reported how stoutly the Foreign Secretary had recently spoken in support of United States policy, and it doubtless helped to create a good atmosphere at the outset'.⁹³ The durability of the 'good atmosphere' between Wilson and Johnson remained to be seen.

Notes

- 1 Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, vol. I, *Minister of Housing, 1964-66* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), p. 156, entry for 11 February 1965.
- 2 NARA, White House Agency Files 1963-67 (70 D 217), President M of C/1965 January-March, Johnson's conversation with the German Ambassador, 14 January 1965.

- 3 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Boxes 185–6, Germany: Memos VIII 4/65–7/65, 'US–German Relations', 4 June 1965.
- 4 David Reynolds, 'A "special relationship"? America, Britain and the international order since the Second World War', *International Affairs*, 62 (1986), p. 13.
- 5 PRO, FO 371/179558, AU 1015/18, Lord Harlech's Valedictory Despatch, 15 March 1965.
- 6 Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1127, L-2 1963–66, House of Commons speech, undated.
- 7 Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964–1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 80.
- 8 The previous foreign secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker, had resigned in January after losing his seat in Parliament.
- 9 PRO, PREM 13/692, 'Note for the Record: South Vietnam', 11 February 1965.
- 10 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 80.
- 11 Transcript of Wilson–Johnson telephone conversation, 10 February (in the United States) 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. II, *Vietnam: January–June 1965* (Washington: USGPO, 1996), pp. 229–32.
- 12 Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1179, Wash. DC April 1970 NY 4 May 1970, University of Texas speech, 'Anglo-American Relations: a Special Case?' 30 April 1970.
- 13 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 3, Bundy Vol. 4 (2/3) March 4/14/65, Bundy to Johnson, 29 March 1965.
- 14 PRO, PREM 13/316, Wright to Wilson, '*Haute Politique*: Thoughts for the Weekend', 12 February 1965.
- 15 PRO, PREM 13/693, Wright to Wilson, 'Vietnam', 1 March 1965.
- 16 Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1964–1970* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), p. 11, entry for 11 February 1965.
- 17 William Warbey, *Vietnam: The Truth* (London: The Merlin Press, 1965), p. 111. It was in December 1950, not 1951, that Attlee saw Truman to warn him about the dangers of using nuclear weapons in Korea.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Henry Brandon, *Special Relationships: A Foreign Correspondent's Memoirs from Roosevelt to Reagan* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 210.
- 20 NARA, Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961–66 (66 D 294), UK–Johnson 64–66, 'From McGeorge Bundy, for Wright for Prime Minister', 11 February 1965.
- 21 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 27 Military Operations Viet S, 2.16.65, Bundy to Johnson, 16 February 1965.
- 22 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 27 Military Operations Viet S 2.1.65, Embassy to State, 24 February 1965.
- 23 Edward Short, *Whip to Wilson: The Crucial Years of the Labour Government* (London: Macdonald, 1989), pp. 118–20.
- 24 Warbey, *Vietnam*, p. 111.
- 25 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:51, entry for 6 March 1965.
- 26 *Ibid.*, entry for 16 February 1965.
- 27 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 27 Military Operations Viet S 2.1.65, Embassy to State, 24 February 1965.
- 28 PRO, PREM 13/693, Wilson–Bruce conversation, 12 March 1965.
- 29 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 212, UK XV 12.63–9.65, Ball to Johnson, 14 April 1965.
- 30 PRO, PREM 13/694, 'Condensed Record of the Meeting with President Johnson at the White House on April 13 on Presentation of his Credentials by Sir Patrick Dean', 13 April 1965.
- 31 Castle, *Diaries*, p. 17, entry for 4 March 1965.

- 32 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:51, entry for 6 March 1965.
- 33 Bundy to Johnson, 16 February 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. II, p. 293.
- 34 State to Embassy, 16 February 1965, *ibid.*, pp. 294-5.
- 35 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:51, Embassy to State, 5 March 1965.
- 36 'Memorandum of a Meeting with President Johnson', 17 February 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. II, p. 302.
- 37 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964-66, POL 27 Viet S. 3.11.65, Embassy to State, 9 March 1965.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 PRO, PREM 13/693, Wilson-Bruce conversation, 12 March 1965.
- 40 Short, *Whip to Wilson*, p. 119.
- 41 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:51, entry for 9 March 1965; NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964-66, POL 27 Viet S. 3.11.65, Embassy to State, 12 March 1965.
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- 43 Bundy to Johnson, 6 March 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. II, p. 404.
- 44 LBJL, tape WH6503.06, citation 7058, Johnson-Robert Anderson telephone conversation, 9.16 a.m., 11 March 1965.
- 45 Dillon to Johnson, 27 March 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968*, vol. VIII, *International Monetary and Trade Policy* (Washington: USGPO, 1998), pp. 143-4.
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- 54 Philip Kaiser, *Journeying Far and Wide: A Political and Diplomatic Memoir* (New York: Scribners, 1992), pp. 226-7.
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- 59 Bodleian Library, Lord George-Brown Papers, Ms. Eng. C. 5002, Brown to Wilson, 19 March 1965.
- 60 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 80; NARA, Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961-66 (66 D 294), UK-Johnson 64-66, 'From McGeorge Bundy, for Wright for Prime Minister', 11 February 1965.
- 61 LBJL, WHCF, Box 76, CO 305 UK 7.2.65-7.1.65, 'Memorandum for Mr. Valenti', 25 February 1965.
- 62 NARA, Records of Secretary of State Dean Rusk (72 D 192), Telephone Calls 2.18.65-2.28.65, 'Telephone Call from Mr. Valenti', 26 February 1965.
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- 65 Quoted in Michael Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964–1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 214.
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- 71 *Ibid.*
- 72 Bundy to Johnson, 22 March 1965, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. II, pp. 468–9.
- 73 Quoted in Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Life of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993), pp. 222–3.
- 74 The question of an Anglo-American strategic-economic 'deal' in 1965 is considered in Chapter 5.
- 75 For Stewart's conversation with Johnson, see *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, pp. 486–7.
- 76 Bruce diary entry for 23 March 1965, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. II, p. 472.
- 77 Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1580, T2/65-T294/65, Wilson to Stewart, 23 March 1965.
- 78 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:51, entry for 24 March 1965.
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- 82 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 215, UK Wilson Visit 4/15/65, Rusk to Johnson, 22 March 1965.
- 83 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 212, UK XV 12.63–9.65, Ball to Johnson, 14 April 1965.
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- 85 PRO, PREM 13/694, Washington to Foreign Office, 10 April 1965.
- 86 PRO, PREM 13/694, 'Condensed Record of the Meeting with President Johnson at the White House on April 13 on Presentation of his Credentials by Sir Patrick Dean', 13 April 1965.
- 87 PREM 13/684, PRO, *The Washington Post*, 'Salesman for Sterling', 16 April 1965.
- 88 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:52, entry for 15 April 1965.
- 89 PRO, PREM 13/532, 'Record of Meeting between the Prime Minister and President of the United States at the White House on Thursday, April 15 1965'.
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- 93 PRO, PREM 13/684, Dean to Wright, 16 April 1965.

A 'battalion would be worth a billion'? May–December 1965

The months May–December 1965 saw several developments in the Wilson–Johnson relationship. The White House feared, in the light of London’s ongoing Defence Review, that economic troubles might compel the Wilson government to reduce its military commitments East of Suez, leaving the United States as the only world policeman. This possible scenario worried President Johnson, with the result that his advisers decided that it would be fitting to try to impose some sort of ‘deal’ on London – the United States would support sterling only in return for a British commitment to avoid far-reaching defence cuts. There is little direct evidence concerning Johnson’s own position on this arrangement, but it is clear nonetheless that he wanted Wilson to understand that US support for the pound would be less likely if the British began to reduce their global responsibilities. However, Johnson overrode his National Security Adviser, McGeorge Bundy, who maintained that the United States should support sterling only if the British committed troops to Vietnam, as well as maintaining their existing defence commitments: ‘a battalion would be worth a billion’.¹ The President, however, was sensitive to the impression that might be conveyed if the United States enlisted ‘mercenaries’. Wilson always denied striking a deal with Johnson, but in truth he did accept the link between Britain’s defence posture and the ease of securing US support for sterling. On 17 June, Wilson initiated his ‘Commonwealth Peace Mission’ to try to bring peace to Vietnam, essentially on American terms. He believed that he had Johnson’s firm support, but the President was in fact hostile towards the scheme, which he thought might turn out to be an embarrassment to Washington. The project failed in part because of the perception among the communist powers that Wilson was merely Johnson’s ‘errand boy’. On 16–17 December, Wilson visited Washington for the third time since assuming power. The summit went well, not least because he underlined his commitment that the UK should remain in force East of Suez and affirmed his support for US policy in Vietnam.

'Imperial delusions'? Wilson and Britain's global role

Upon taking office in October 1964, the Labour government began a Defence Review, to try to find ways to save money in this regard. It sought to spend no more than £2 billion on defence by 1969/70 (at 1964/65 defence estimate prices). The figure was roughly the cost of defence for 1964/65, and meant a reduction of £400 million from earlier projections for 1969/70.² NATO and the Far East were prime candidates for cuts. Commitments in these regions cost '£180 million and £270 million respectively', as the US Embassy noted on 11 November 1965.³ A CIA report on 7 June noted that the most expensive of these, the bases in the Far East, were 'supportable under ordinary circumstances' by an economy with a GNP the size of Britain's, which stood at 'more than \$800 billion'. However, the balance of payments deficit, 'a record breaking \$200 billion' in 1964, generated 'apprehensions about sterling devaluation – which might in turn generate a run against the dollar'.⁴ In 1964/65 the foreign exchange costs of defence spending accounted for around 40 per cent of Britain's balance of payments deficit on current and long-term capital accounts.⁵ The British continued to face the question of 'whether they can save the pound with a combination of domestic toughness and substantial foreign help or whether in sheer prudence they must give themselves more leeway by drastically reducing their defence spending abroad'.⁶

Wilson wanted to reduce the cost of Britain's defence commitments, but he still supported the idea that Britain should continue to play a global role. He certainly wanted the Americans to appreciate his commitment to East of Suez. On 14 May 1965, he told Dean Rusk, US Secretary of State, and David Bruce, US Ambassador, that he would rather 'take half of the British troops out of Germany than withdraw them from the Far East'.⁷ Wilson believed that Europe was unlikely to be the scene of another war,⁸ and he knew that, given the situation in Vietnam, the Johnson administration preferred a substantial British presence in Asia to one in West Germany. As Rusk commented on 22 October, a 'marginal input by the United Kingdom in NATO is less important than an input in Southeast Asia'.⁹ The Foreign Office backed up Wilson's regard for East of Suez and close Anglo-American ties. On 12 August, Paul Gore-Booth, the Permanent Under Secretary, noted American concern about Britain abrogating its role in the world, which might precipitate 'a gradual return to isolationism within the United States'. Washington believed that it was 'an essential American interest that they should continue, in effect, to play a world-wide peace-keeping role', but without the help of major allies 'there will be a revulsion of American opinion against it, with damaging longer term consequences for American interests'. Because Britain believed that 'the damage to our own interests in such circumstances might be even greater, we think it desirable to seek, within the limits of our ability, to maintain our global role, in association with the Americans'. Moreover, said Gore-Booth, 'even if the Americans are

prepared in the last resort to go it alone, a British withdrawal would inevitably change the whole nature of our relationship with the United States and drastically reduce our influence on them'. Britain's 'ability to go on acting as a world power, even if of secondary dimensions and pretensions' was 'an essential element in our association with America'.¹⁰ The Conservative opposition supported the preservation of the world role, too. The US Embassy noted that after Wilson's defence in the House of Commons on 21 December 1965 of the global role 'the Opposition did not directly challenge the Government's view of Britain's defence role in the future'.¹¹

However, Wilson's views did not command universal assent. The US Embassy noted on 5 November that there was growing controversy in Britain about 'the level of national defence commitments east of Suez and the wisdom of continuing to maintain them in view of allegedly more pressing priorities'. Some of the criticisms were 'technical and deal with the kind and degree of relevant military investment and support'. Critics in the Labour Party attacked 'other aspects of the British engagement east of Suez', arguing that the country 'can no longer sustain a role based on "imperial delusions" and call for a drastic cut-back of east of Suez commitments and order to provide ... the means to pursue a stable balance of payments policy and much needed social reforms at home'. The Embassy noted that many 'avowed leftists ... oppose the scale and extent of British commitments on grounds of doctrine and conscience', while others believed that Britain should 'rearrange its defence priorities everywhere if it is to carry out domestic social and economic aims of more immediate concern to the British people'. Others saw 'in reduced international tensions between the West and the Soviet Union in Europe additional reasons why Britain can afford to reduce its total military commitments'.¹² Some figures in Wilson's Cabinet also criticised his attitudes. Noting the Prime Minister's recent affirmation of support for the British role East of Suez to Dean Rusk, George Brown protested on 19 May that he disagreed 'with this strategy both on principle and also in relation to the claims it would be bound to make on our resources and its consequences for our balance of payments'.¹³ Brown felt that British money was better spent at home, and he complained later that Wilson was committed to East of Suez in part because of an excessive dedication to the White House: he 'was now bound personally and irrevocably to President Johnson and had ceased to be a free agent'.¹⁴ On 17 November, Philip Kaiser at the US Embassy reported the deliberations in London about the Defence Review, among 'key Cabinet officials, senior civil servants [and] military chiefs'. Kaiser had learned from 'several participants' that Denis Healey, Minister of Defence, felt that 'numbers of British troops ... should be substantially reduced' to help save money. 'East of Suezers' had a difficult time, said Kaiser; Wilson, George Wigg [Paymaster General] and the Foreign Office were the 'only strong defenders of East of Suez role'. Healey had argued that there was 'no real national role for UK East of Suez and that British [were] liable to be nothing more than hangers-on in [the]

area'. A number of 'high officials' in the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence had later 'expressed concern' to the Embassy about the threat to the position East of Suez. They 'genuinely fear [the] erosion [of the] UK's East of Suez position and have suggested that the subject of [the] British defence review would be sufficient justification for [a] meeting between President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson sometime in December'.¹⁵ Some of those who questioned the validity of Britain's global role cited the 'precedent' of Britain's abandonment of Greece in 1947. This had led to Washington's promulgation of the 'Truman Doctrine', by which the United States expanded its global peacekeeping presence and helped to fund the defence effort of allied states.¹⁶

An Anglo-American 'deal'?

Time and again the White House stressed to the British the importance of the East of Suez role. For example, on 10 June 1965 Patrick Dean, the British Ambassador to Washington, told Gore-Booth of the concern of Robert McNamara, US Secretary of Defence, that 'the United Kingdom had to regard herself as having inescapable commitments in the Indian Ocean for at least the next ten years'. The United States had the 'military resources to take this part of the world on, but not the political strength either at home or abroad to do so alone and without allies. If, therefore, the British withdrew there would be a vacuum which somebody else would no doubt fill'. The 'last thing' that American policymakers wanted was 'to find themselves involved with Indonesia at the same time as they are confronting the Chinese in Vietnam, and we are most important to them as a political and military buffer'.¹⁷ On 20 May, Francis Bator of the National Security Council sent a memorandum to President Johnson warning that economic troubles might prompt the British to initiate 'sharp changes' in their 'foreign political and military commitments'. Washington 'should expect growing British pressure on us to support troop reductions in Europe, or take over some of their East of Suez commitments, or to help ease some of the pressure on their arms and aviation industries'. Although Wilson had assured the White House that he would not devalue the pound, his measures of 'tight money, import restrictions, controls on capital movements and "persuasion" to clamp down price-wage-inflation' could well prove inadequate. The British faced the 'big question', said Bator, of 'whether they will be able to protect the pound through a combination of tough domestic measures plus external (notably US) help', or whether, 'in addition, major cuts in defence spending abroad will be necessary'. Bator argued that Wilson was 'too conscious of our support for the pound and of his reciprocal support for our position on Vietnam' to try to 'pressure us *very* hard or to present us with unpleasant surprises'. However, there were growing pressures 'within the government for something to give' with regard to Britain's military presence in Europe or East of Suez.¹⁸ Bator's concerns that Britain might be tempted to shed some of its global

commitments registered with President Johnson. On 16 June, he told the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Fowler, that as well as investigating the general question of international liquidity, he should examine Britain's economic problems. British weakness was 'of major foreign policy concern' to the United States, said Johnson. He asked Fowler to consider how the United States could 'arrange for a relief of pressure on sterling, so as to give the United Kingdom the four or five year breathing space it needs to get its economy into shape'. Otherwise, Washington faced the 'danger of sterling devaluation or exchange controls or British military disengagement East of Suez or on the Rhine'.¹⁹

The President's worries about British economic troubles gave some of his subordinates the idea that there was scope to impose some kind of politico-economic deal on Wilson, to ensure that any British defence measures did not threaten US interests. On 25 June, Bator asked Bundy, in the approach to a visit from James Callaghan, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, 'whether we are prepared ... to engage in a purposeful, joint exploration of a possible deal – which will involve defence, as well as money and commercial policy'. This 'deal' would seek to 'protect the pound, avoid exchange or trade controls, and maintain the British presence East of Suez and on the Rhine'. Bator argued that Callaghan's visit should be used to give Wilson 'a sense that we are engaged on his economic problem and that there is some prospect for a deal which will keep the speculators at bay, and, over the longer term, give him a chance to pull off his economic programme to get the UK economy into competitive shape'. This would help ensure that Wilson thought of the United States should economics force him to consider deep cuts in Britain's foreign commitments.²⁰ On 28 June, Bundy tried to prime the President on the question of reaching an Anglo-American understanding. He told him that after discussing 'the British problem' it was 'agreed that we should not make any deals with the British on the pound alone'. Any arrangement 'should be put together in terms of our overall interests – political and economic, as well as monetary'. None 'of us expects his kind of deal can be made with Callaghan. It will have to be a bargain at a higher and broader level', between the President and Wilson.²¹ However, at this point Johnson made no concessions to this approach, which might easily have been interpreted as an attempt to coerce a loyal and valuable ally. In any case, Callaghan's visit to Washington included an hour with Johnson, who proved 'sympathetic' towards British economic difficulties, not least because of an 'awareness of their possible impact on the dollar'.²²

The President's advisers continued to moot the question of a deal. On 29 July, Bator told Bundy that Fowler, Robert McNamara (Secretary of Defence) and George Ball (Undersecretary of State), had agreed on roughly the same position on a quid pro quo with Britain:

- a East of Suez and BAOR are sacrosanct (by and large);
- b \$2.80 is sacrosanct;
- c no pre-crisis preventive package is available;

- d an emergency rescue package, in the face of a crisis, must be multilateral – we will not foot the bill without substantial help from others ...
- e no multilateral rescue package is obtainable unless the UK takes further steps to compress internal demand, etc;
- f UK troops in Vietnam, while not strictly a necessary condition for us to be forthcoming on sterling, would greatly improve the odds.²³

Bator added that 'even if we leave out Vietnam ... they must under no circumstances devalue, or impose comprehensive trade and exchange controls, or cut back on East of Suez or on the Rhine, yet we will not take part in a rescue operation unless they are prepared sharply to deflate at home'. Johnson opposed the devaluation of sterling and any British cutback on global commitments, but despite the promptings of his subordinates he had yet to show his cards on the matter of a politico-economic bargain with London. It was thus necessary, Bator told Bundy, to prepare 'the President's mind' and to get a clear 'reading on his priorities'.²⁴ Assuming that Wilson did not 'come through on Vietnam', but that London was 'prepared to promise to stay on the Rhine and East of Suez', would Johnson:

- a ... prefer to bail out the British with the US putting in the bulk of the money even if they will *not* promise the internal measures that are needed to avoid another crisis a few months later? In other words, are we prepared simply to underwrite \$2.80 indefinitely?
- b If not, it is useless to say to ourselves that devaluation is unthinkable. It had better become thinkable ... in the minds of the principals and the President.²⁵

Bator believed that Johnson would rather see the devaluation of sterling than permit the United States to 'underwrite \$2.80 indefinitely' without deflationary measures in Britain. If, however, Wilson 'makes an absolute objective of \$2.80 – then of course we are in the saddle and can impose whatever terms we wish when he comes for help on a Friday evening'.²⁶

Johnson's key advisers wanted to use US support for the pound as a lever to impose terms on the British, but the 'hawkish' Bundy wanted Britain to do more than to keep its existing commitments: he was especially keen that the British should commit troops to Vietnam. This was despite the fact that economic difficulties made London ill-disposed 'to conceive of adding anything' to existing commitments, compounding 'their difficulty in responding' to Johnson's own desire for a British flag in Vietnam.²⁷ Knowing Wilson's desire to deal with Johnson face-to-face, Bundy told the President on 28 July that the Prime Minister might seek 'a private understanding with you'. Any attempt to this end would be unacceptable, said Bundy, because 'the British are constantly trying to make narrow bargains on money while they cut back on their wider political and military responsibilities'. It made 'no sense for us to rescue the pound in a situation in which there is no British flag in Vietnam, and a threatened British thin-out in both east of Suez and in Germany ... a British brigade in Vietnam

would be worth a billion dollars at the moment of truth for sterling'.²⁸ On 29 July, Ball warned Bundy that any demand for British troops in Vietnam presented in the context of 'balance of payments help' from the US 'would give the British the reaction that we are asking them to be Hessians [*sic*]'. In the face of Ball's analogy that Washington would in effect be enlisting mercenaries to fight in Vietnam, at least on this occasion Bundy conceded that the United States 'did not want to be buying troops', which would look 'bad from everybody's point of view'. However, Wilson needed to know, Bundy asserted, that unless the British played by American rules Johnson might not 'even do a short run rescue operation' to protect sterling. Bundy repeated to Ball his fear that Wilson might 'come to the President through the Treasury and make a money deal without our getting certain satisfaction on some political points' concerning Britain's stance in world affairs.²⁹ Bundy's concern in this respect indicated that Johnson was less impressed by the crude notion of a 'deal' with Wilson than were some of the White House advisers.

Johnson, Wilson and the 'deal'

The documentary record contains few of President Johnson's direct comments about a bargain with Wilson. There is evidence, though, of his exasperation with Labour's apparent unwillingness to uphold the toughest of measures to preserve the parity of sterling. He asked Eugene Black, president of the World Bank, on 5 August:

What can we do about the British pound thing? We've told them how far they ought to go and they won't do it ... then we're going to have to bail them out. We tell them we won't do it except multilaterally but I think we're going to have to. They know that we can't make good on our threats ... we can't walk away from it and I just don't know what to do ... They got us by the yin-yang. I want some smart fellow like you to figure how to tell them to go to hell.³⁰

Later that evening Johnson told William Martin of the Federal Reserve that he had 'never had any confidence' in the British ability to handle their economic difficulties. He was tempted to say 'we begged you, pled with you, tried to tell you and you haven't followed our advice so we can't help you'. The British were like 'a reckless boy that goes off and gets drunk and writes cheques on his father'. The father honours 'two or three or four' of the cheques before 'call[ing] him in and just tell[ing] him now we've got to work this out or you live off what you're making ... if you don't, I can't come to your rescue any more'. But the boy just 'goes home' and writes another cheque.³¹ There is evidence that Johnson finally accepted the view that US economic support, however reluctantly it was dispensed, could be used to shore up the British commitment to the global role. His thinking in this regard is reflected in the comments of his advisers. On 28 July, Bator noted Johnson's belief that anything 'which could be regarded as even a partial British withdrawal from overseas responsibilities is bound to lead

to an agonising reappraisal', so far as US support for sterling was concerned.³² On 8 September, Johnson indicated that he fully supported the views of George Ball.³³ Ball believed that Johnson should tell Wilson that 'we are coming to your rescue on the condition that they [*sic*] are not going to pull back from their present commitments'.³⁴ Patrick Dean gathered from a conversation with Johnson on 12 August that the Americans were 'prepared to go quite a long way to help us in our present difficulties, provided that they remain satisfied that we are ready to continue to help ourselves and do our share in the world'.³⁵

The President did not, however, want to go so far as to try to force Wilson to place British troops in Vietnam. Johnson was not always a man of great subtlety, but he realised that if, under these circumstances, Wilson agreed to send men to Vietnam then the controversy of the US stand there might be inflamed still further should the facts emerge of the recourse to 'mercenaries'. Clive Ponting has indicated persuasively that in rejecting the 'a battalion for a billion' approach, Johnson understood that, given feelings in the Labour Party and among the British public, Wilson would not be able to commit British troops to Vietnam, and to press him to do so might strain his desire to sustain Britain's global role and not to devalue sterling.³⁶ In March 1965, Wilson himself said that the situation in Vietnam created a 'danger of widespread anti-Americanism and of America losing her moral position'. If Washington tried to use Britain's 'financial weakness ... as a means of forcing us to accept unpalatable policies or developments ... this will raise very wide questions indeed about Anglo-American relationships'.³⁷ Johnson vetoed Bundy's efforts to try to force the British to commit troops to Vietnam. After a talk with the Cabinet Secretary, Burke Trend, on 2 August, Bundy told the President that 'In accordance with your instructions I kept the two subjects of the pound sterling and Vietnam completely separate'.³⁸ Bundy's account to Johnson on 10 September of Ball's talk with Wilson also indicates the President's reluctance to demand British troops in return for American money:

The one thing which [Wilson] was apparently trying to avoid was a liability in Vietnam, and you will recall that it was your own wisdom that prevented us from making any such connection earlier in the summer, although I did once informally say to one of the Prime Minister's people that a battalion would be worth a billion – a position which I explicitly changed later.³⁹

The question of the alleged deal attracted some attention in Britain. Wilson noted in 1970 that 'there was a small minority on the extreme left' who believed that Anglo-American bonds were 'not so much a relationship as a cash nexus'. The 'legend' was that 'short-term monetary accommodation' was made available only in return for a secret understanding that Britain would support US policy in Vietnam'. But according to Wilson the truth was that 'there was never any suggestion' that Vietnam or British troop commitments abroad 'should be taken into account when urgently needed economic cooperation was involved'.⁴⁰ Edward Short, Wilson's Chief Whip, suggested that during the first Wilson

government (1964–66) Britain's 'reliance on United States support for sterling forced us to refrain from any overt criticism' of American involvement in Vietnam. Wilson is said to have framed this bargain with Washington even before the Labour government came to power.⁴¹

After studying the available sources at the Johnson Library as well as the memoirs and diaries of various British politicians, Ponting concluded that in 1965 'the Labour government reached a series of "understandings" with the United States', which 'fundamentally shaped both British domestic and strategic policy' for the first three years or so of the Wilson government.⁴² The terms held that the Wilson government would preserve the parity of the pound, implement deflationary economic policies at home and maintain Britain's defence commitments in the Far East in return for American support for the pound.⁴³ Ponting's ideas were subsequently adopted by at least one more historian,⁴⁴ although some writers were more critical. C. J. Bartlett, for example, argued that 'While dependence on American assistance in 1964–65 might seem to have left the British government dangerously exposed to American influence (or even dictation), in practice it is just as reasonable to argue that the Wilson government was able to turn American self-interest to its own advantage ... In effect, Washington was subsidising the Wilson government to pursue policies which the latter wished to pursue in any case.' American policymakers may also have 'failed to distinguish between genuine British opposition to American demands and a tactical stance designed to wring aid from Washington'.⁴⁵ Chris Wrigley has put forward similar arguments.⁴⁶

The release of more primary source material in recent years has permitted more substantiated reflections on the Anglo-American 'deal'. Saki Dockrill has argued that while there was 'a tacit understanding on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean that defence was closely linked to the economy, British officials and ministers just managed to avoid entering into a formal linkage agreement with the United States', not least because it would be impossible to do so while the Defence Review was in progress.⁴⁷ John Dumbrell comments that the 'deal' 'never attained any formal status, remaining rather at the level of shared understandings within a well defined power relationship'.⁴⁸ Thomas Schwartz supports these conclusions in his comments that 'the evidence indicates that the arrangement was more in the nature of a classic "gentleman's agreement" than an explicit bargain'.⁴⁹

In the face of speculation about his commitment to Washington, Wilson denied – correctly – that there was ever any explicit bargain on Vietnam or any other issue. Wilson told Johnson on 2 August 1965, for example, that 'I should be loath ... to run the risk of spoiling any chance we may have of fulfilling the functions which we originally accepted as co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference.' This was Britain's position, Wilson told the President, 'when you first raised the matter with me last December and its advantages for both of us seem to me to be just as valid, if not more so today'.⁵⁰ Wilson informed Ball on 9

September that Britain 'would not accept an additional demand for a United Kingdom contribution to Vietnam as a quid pro quo for US Government short-term support for sterling'.⁵¹ He also told Bruce that day that 'the attitude of the United States had been made abundantly clear by the fact that at a time when President Johnson would dearly have liked to see United Kingdom participation in Vietnam this had never been raised during all the discussions leading up to the present support operation'.⁵² David Bruce also denied that there was ever any Anglo-American deal. He argued that while the Johnson administration was 'anxious' about the possibility of a British withdrawal from East of Suez or from West Germany, it never told Wilson that, 'If you will do this, we will help you, about your foreign exchange problem'.⁵³ On 17 July 1966, Henry Brandon, the *Sunday Times*' Washington correspondent, wrote to Wilson about the American desire to frame a deal: 'a long-term, massive loan in exchange for our maintaining all our present military commitments in the near future'. Brandon suggested that Wilson could respond by presenting 'a bill to the US of what it would cost Britain to agree to American insistence on maintaining these military commitments and ask for some sort of military aid for the duration of Britain's economic recovery period'.⁵⁴ Wilson's reply evaded the point, saying little more than 'we ourselves have been giving a great deal of thought to the problem of the mechanics of consultation over the whole field of public policy'.⁵⁵

Yet on other occasions he made clear his acceptance of a tacit connection between US support for sterling and Britain's posture East of Suez. On 9 September, Ball told him that 'it would be a great mistake if the United Kingdom failed to understand that the American effort to relieve sterling was inextricably related to the commitment of the United Kingdom to maintain its commitments around the world'. Wilson admitted that 'all aspects of the [Anglo-American] relationship must be considered as a totality in any long-range review of the United Kingdom defence effort'.⁵⁶ In a Cabinet meeting in February 1966 he 'repeated time after time that the Americans had never made any connection between the financial support they gave us and our support for them in Vietnam', but he added that American 'financial support is not unrelated to the way in which we behave in the Far East: any direct announcement of our withdrawal, for example, could not fail to have a profound effect on my personal relations with LBJ and the way the Americans treat us'.⁵⁷ Wilson and Johnson did not strike any explicit, formal 'deal', but the British leader realised that if Britain began to abrogate its status as a world power, then the Americans might well think twice about providing further financial support. In effect, though, the American approach was superfluous, as Wilson already had no wish to devalue the pound or to initiate deep cuts in Britain's defence spending. Even before Labour's return to office in October 1964, Wilson had repeatedly spelt out his commitment to the British defence posture East of Suez.⁵⁸ Moreover, the US stake in international economic stability meant that the Johnson administration would probably continue to support sterling regardless of Britain's defence posture.

Foreign Office official G. C. Mayhew commented on 12 May 1966 that 'We have ... been told over the past 18 months that continued US support for sterling depends to some extent on our willingness to continue to share the US burden east of Suez'. But he was not convinced that 'the maintenance of sterling as an international reserve currency is of less interest to the Americans than it is to us and that the linking of support for it to a continued British presence east of Suez does not contain an element of bluff'. As his colleague K. J. Uffen added on 5 July 1966, 'I would have thought it would have remained an American interest to continue to support sterling provided that our economic and monetary policies were not so perverse as to profoundly undermine the basis for international monetary cooperation'.⁵⁹

The idea of American economic support to sustain Britain's global commitments certainly had some British adherents. Patrick Dean told Paul Gore-Booth on 10 June 1965 that 'if we feel bound to invite the Americans to assume some of our present commitments East of Suez, or to assist us financially in meeting them, we shall have to convince McNamara, and behind him the White House, that having made all possible economies in our defence establishment, it is still beyond our capabilities to handle them on our own'.⁶⁰ Gore-Booth commented on 12 August that the 'current alarm felt in Washington lest Britain should disengage from her worldwide role ... could and should be turned to profit when American support, financial or otherwise, will make the difference between maintaining the British commitment' and cutting back.⁶¹ Gore-Booth's colleague, John Nicholls, suggested on 8 October that the Americans would 'have to dip their hands into their pockets if they want us to continue playing our present role in the world ... economically and financially, we are not in a position to do what the Americans would like us to do'. The 'only difference is that we now appear to have a pistol at our heads and that, when the Defence Review is completed, it will be somewhat more difficult for the Americans to accept the obvious conclusion that they will have to make it financially possible for us to do what they regard, and what we in our hearts accept, as our duty'.⁶²

British economic problems

The measures of the United States to try to ease its own, substantial balance of payments deficit compounded British economic difficulties.⁶³ On 10 February, President Johnson announced moves to induce US companies to bring more money home and to encourage US banks to reduce overseas lending. Within 'a few weeks dollars became scarce' in continental Europe, and 'the measures seem to have been the direct cause of some withdrawals of funds from London'. On 25 May, Britain made its second IMF drawing of £1,400 million. This was needed mainly to repay the short-term assistance borrowed from central banks in November 1964, but financial experts still remained concerned as to whether Britain had 'really got to grips with its basic economic problem'.⁶⁴ Wilson

realised that to strengthen his ties with the President he had to make it apparent that any American money would not be used to finance a domestic spending spree. Wilson told Johnson on 29 July of the Labour government's latest economic measures, announced two days earlier:

Politically this has been a very difficult operation indeed ... Many of my colleagues were resistant to what I considered necessary and since the announcement there has been a lot of unrest among our supporters in Parliament and outspoken opposition by the Trade Union Congress. The support of the Confederation of British Industries and the recognition by our *Financial Times*, with its specialised readership, that the measures showed the Government's determination to put the strength of sterling before politics, are things which count both ways for a Labour Government – particularly when it is far from certain that there is a case on objective economic grounds for more than a minor degree of deflation.⁶⁵

The British budget was initially well received by economists, but it soon became apparent that the financial markets were 'unconvinced that the crisis was finally under control'. On 2 August, a newspaper report indicated that President Johnson and William Martin had drawn pessimistic conclusions about sterling. This contributed to 'heavy and widespread selling of sterling, and devaluation rumours revived'.⁶⁶ (Johnson had said little in public about the British economic situation because, as Fowler had advised on 16 June, any 'statement ... would be taken as an indication of concern and might have unfortunate repercussions'.)⁶⁷ On 5 August, Bundy told Johnson of the renewed pressure against sterling: the British 'lost \$80,000,000 yesterday and \$180,000,000 today. Estimates of possible losses tomorrow run between \$300,000,000 and \$500,000,000'. If the losses continued 'at this rate into next week, they would literally run out of reserves and be forced into devaluation in a very few days'. Bundy feared that 'if the Prime Minister is faced with imminent devaluation, he will try to come over here and dump the problems in your lap'. To avoid this, Bundy had warned Derek Mitchell, Wilson's Principal Private Secretary, 'that there should be no such visit unless we agree to it, and that I do not myself see what the virtue of it is'. Bundy was sure, he told Johnson, that the 'Prime Minister will not come without further consultation (he is in fact on a train to the Scilly Isles, because if he changed his plans and stayed behind it might deepen the panic for tomorrow)'.⁶⁸

Wilson had indeed considered 'dumping' the problem in Johnson's lap. On 5 August, in response to the worries of Lord Cromer, the Governor of the Bank of England, he said that 'if the issue was as bad as he thought, then I would be ready to fly to America for talks with the President and the Federal Reserve authorities there, because, obviously, we were all in it together'. Wilson 'went so far as to have a call put through to the President on a contingency basis and to make provisional arrangements to have a plane ready to pick me up'.⁶⁹ However, this proved unnecessary, as, due to Wilson's assurances that Britain would preserve its global role as well as to concerns for international financial stability, the Americans provided help. On 1 September, Bator informed Johnson that

the Federal Reserve and the Treasury were 'hard at work helping the British line up the Continentals' to participate in another multilateral bailout for sterling. It was likely, said Bator, 'that by early next week all the major central banks will be on board'. The pound would have 'a solid international stand-by defence against the speculators which is not likely to cost any of us very much money'. In return, Wilson 'will have staked his political life on getting Parliament to adopt a more ambitious wage-price policy (short of outright controls) than any major Western country'. Britain at last had 'a fair chance to contain inflation without enforced and prolonged stagnation'.⁷⁰ The bailout succeeded in bolstering the pound, temporarily at least. Confidence in sterling was renewed by the influx of \$1 billion in credits from foreign central banks.⁷¹

The Commonwealth Peace Mission on Vietnam

A Foreign Office analysis from June 1965 examined the Vietnam War in the context of the Anglo-American relationship. It began by noting that British 'direct involvement' in Vietnam 'is insignificant. Our major interest in the situation in Indochina is to see that it does not escalate into a global or regional war in which we might be involved'. But Britain's 'interests as a non-communist power would be impaired if the United States Government were defeated in the field, or defaulted on its commitments'. As 'a major global ally we have an interest in *how* the United States wages its wars'. Britain could meet its needs 'by keeping in continuous and close touch with the Americans and showing them that though we make no military contribution in Vietnam we have a number of major assets of value to them'. These included 'the Co-Chairmanship of the Geneva Conference [1954] which, as the Prime Minister has said in the House, we will use to the advantage of the Western side'; a 'direct expertise on China which the Americans lack'; and, finally, the British 'attitude has a bearing on that of others, particularly the Commonwealth'. Britain should 'give support to our major ally', and whenever the British declared 'a determination to seek a peaceful settlement we should accompany this with an expression of general support for the Americans, while avoiding passing judgment on their specific actions'. The analysis did not express much faith in Wilson's ties with the President, though: Johnson's 'secretive nature' meant that 'high-level approaches to him' on Vietnam 'are difficult'.⁷²

David Bruce tried to foster appreciation in the White House for Wilson's continued support. On 3 June, he wrote that although the war's recent intensification could tempt Wilson 'to buy some easy political credit at the expense of the US on the Vietnam issue, I do not think he will', because of the depth of his commitment to Washington.⁷³ Yet Johnson remained unimpressed. On 3 June, Bundy wrote to the President, noting Johnson's 'scepticism when one or another of us has remarked that the British have been very solid and helpful on Vietnam. And you have recollections ... of Harold Wilson's effort [on 11 February] to

telephone his way into a fancy trip to the White House at just the wrong time'. Moreover, Bundy noted, Johnson still felt 'the wounds of what Home said about the buses and what Michael Stewart said about gas, although everyone else has long since forgotten those particular episodes'. Every 'experienced observer', Bundy continued, 'from David Bruce on down has been astonished by the overall strength and skill of Wilson's defence of our policy in Vietnam and his mastery of his own left wing in the process'. British support 'has been of real value internationally – and perhaps of even more value in limiting the howls of our own liberals'. It was true, Bundy told the President, 'that we would get this sort of backing more or less automatically from a Conservative government, but support from Labour is not only harder to get but somewhat more valuable in international terms'. British support had come cheap to Washington, demanding little more than the effort involved in 'keeping them reasonably well-informed and fending off one ill-advised plan for travel' on the part of the Prime Minister. It was 'well worth our while to keep the British on board as long as it can be done simply by keeping them fully informed and giving them the feeling that they are in the know as we go ahead'.⁷⁴ To Bundy, therefore, Johnson should try to keep Wilson and the British 'on board', because the small effort required to do so was a sound investment.

A State Department analysis noted the pressure on the Prime Minister to attempt some kind of initiative to help bring peace to Vietnam. It concluded that Wilson, facing a 'small circle of pacifists and neutralists in the left wing ... of his party ... is conscious of the strength of British public opinion for détente with the East'. The 'role he must play to keep matters under control at home is that of a responsible world statesman, patiently seeking the resolution of disputes while remaining loyal to his chief ally'.⁷⁵ Wilson initiated the so-called 'Commonwealth Peace Mission' to try to fulfil these goals.⁷⁶ This was, notes Philip Ziegler with some justification, 'a dazzlingly ingenious attempt to achieve his three main policy objectives in a single stroke: to maintain the Anglo-American alliance, to fortify the unity and standing of the Commonwealth, and to keep his left-wing quiet'.⁷⁷ On 17 June, Wilson and other leaders of the British Commonwealth, meeting in London, announced that a four-member mission (the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom, Ghana, Nigeria, and Trinidad and Tobago) would speak to the governments chiefly concerned to try to bring about a peace settlement in Vietnam.⁷⁸ For the benefit of the White House, Wilson had already 'explained the initiative we had in mind' to David Bruce, who responded enthusiastically, describing the idea as 'brilliant', 'terrific' and 'something with great prospects'. Later, Derek Mitchell told Bruce that Wilson's idea had been 'submitted to the most rigorous scrutiny both within No. 10 and by the Foreign Office; but it had survived on the grounds that ... it was bound to be a winner whether or not the Mission succeeded'. Even if the communists turned it down, the British and American willingness to talk peace would generate favourable publicity for London and Washington. Mitchell and Bruce then discussed 'whether

there should be any direct contact between the Prime Minister and President Johnson' on the matter. Mitchell noted that he had advised Wilson against telephoning the President to gain his approval, as when he had telephoned Johnson on 11 February the 'conversation had been thoroughly unsatisfactory'.⁷⁹

The Ambassador wrote to Washington about his talk with Wilson, stating that the Prime Minister had given the assurance that 'he would not be a party to any arrangement that was not satisfactory to the United States'.⁸⁰ Bruce also telephoned Bundy to ask 'whether the President would ... send a pleasant personal message to the Prime Minister'. Bundy replied that the President 'had no liking for hot-line conversations, but he might be persuaded to send Wilson a telegram'.⁸¹ Johnson chose not to respond directly to Wilson, but did forward a message to say that he was 'keenly interested in the Prime Minister's imaginative proposal for a mission of Prime Ministers'. Bundy also implied that the exercise interested Washington primarily for its public relations value rather than for the possibility that it might lead to negotiations: even if the 'mission fails in its immediate purpose, it should also succeed in showing just where the responsibility lies'.⁸² On 15 June, McNamara advised Johnson that he did not think anything would be accomplished by the Commonwealth mission, 'but if you express your willingness to ... have US representatives at a conference under those circumstances' it would 'further the peace image that you're pushing'. The project was 'primarily' for Wilson's political benefit 'but it fits in with our plans as well'. Johnson responded that he did not 'see any objection'.⁸³ In presenting the Mission to the House of Commons on 17 June, Wilson omitted to mention his prior cultivation of American support, seeking instead to create 'the impression he was acting independently' of Washington. He simply noted that there had been a television report indicating Johnson's approval.⁸⁴ In private, the Prime Minister felt that he had gained Presidential endorsement of the Mission. He wrote to Johnson on 6 July, pleased 'that you were able to welcome ... a mission on Vietnam'. Johnson's 'Baltimore speech last April and repeated offers of discussions since then have been crucial'.⁸⁵ Wilson believed that 'the Commonwealth – the world in microcosm – has a great role to play in taking the sting out of the major problems that lie ahead of us in international life'.⁸⁶

Wilson wrote in his memoirs that Johnson tried 'in the most restrained way to counter the line being put out in communist capitals that my initiative was a put-up job on behalf of Washington'. The President, Wilson said, was 'keen to see any direct line into Hanoi, provided he could keep below the horizon'.⁸⁷ Johnson's desire to keep a low profile stemmed not only from the need to stop the communists thinking that the peace initiative was a Washington set-up, but from a certain amount of cynicism towards Wilson's project. On 21 June, he said that North Vietnam and China 'both have made statements on this Wilson mission, telling him to go to hell ... Wilson will just screw things up more when he comes over here'. Johnson feared that the Prime Minister would 'make a big

speech dividing our country', which was increasingly torn by controversy over Vietnam.⁸⁸ On 23 June, in a discussion in the White House, the President voiced:

considerable concern about the Wilson mission and said that he saw no point in having the Prime Minister come to Washington if Washington and Saigon were the only capitals which would receive him. He expressed the view that a Wilson visit could be counterproductive, would achieve little in the interest of peace, and might turn out to be a further embarrassment to the United States' foreign policy.⁸⁹

On 23 June, Bundy noted that although Moscow had just dismissed 'the Wilson Peace Mission and in rather tough language', Wilson's zeal was such that he 'expected the British to move right ahead even though no Communists will give them the time of day'.⁹⁰ On 25 and 28 June respectively, China and North Vietnam finally dismissed the Commonwealth Peace Mission.⁹¹ The communists' perception that Wilson was little more than Johnson's 'errand-boy' contributed to the failure. For example, Hanoi noted in an article in the Party newspaper that Wilson had been 'trying hard ... to keep British policy on Vietnam closely concerted with President Johnson's thinking'. They argued that the British Prime Minister was far too committed to Washington to be an effective mediator:

When Johnson spoke of negotiations with preconditions, Wilson promptly demanded that the Viet Cong ... lay down their arms, and North Vietnam stop its aggression. When Johnson changed tune and asked for unconditional discussions, Wilson also changed tune and asked for unconditional discussions and unconditional cease-fire. When Johnson said the USA has to defend South Vietnam against aggression, Wilson also stressed the need to guarantee South Vietnam from aggression.⁹²

The North Vietnamese were of course right in their assertions of Wilson's commitment to the American line. He seemed to realise himself that he was too close to the US President to be able to mediate properly, telling him on 2 August that British 'solidarity' with Washington 'is nowhere better understood than in Hanoi, whose leaders, in common with other communist governments and their sympathisers, never cease to reproach us for it'. But all the same, Wilson was determined to persevere in his 'support for American policies which I believe to be in the interests of peace and stability in the world at large, no less than in South East Asia'. In the face of 'the persistent North Vietnamese refusal to negotiate', Wilson told Johnson that he saw 'no alternative to your policy of strengthening your forces in South Vietnam in order to demonstrate to Hanoi the futility of their dreams of military victory'.⁹³ Wilson went on and praised Johnson for 'the careful balance you have throughout maintained between determined resistance to aggression and a patient insistence on your readiness to negotiate an honourable settlement ... I wish there was more we could do to help you'.⁹⁴ It seems that Johnson was responsive to this sort of sycophancy. On 12 August, while speaking to Patrick Dean, he spoke, uncharacteristically, 'in the highest terms of ... the Prime Minister and said he realised only too well how difficult it

had been for HMG to continue to support US policy in Vietnam with so small a majority in Parliament'.⁹⁵

The third summit

Wilson's love of the world stage meant that the idea of visiting the White House was never far from his mind. The part-time White House adviser Richard Neustadt noted on 9 August, after speaking with the Prime Minister, that 'He wants to see the President, and as we talked he came up with a succession of reasons why the time would soon be ripe for an exchange of views "from politician to politician"'. Neustadt said that these 'reasons ranged from "Africa" (I tried to look incredulous) to a concert against de Gaulle's "cold war"'.⁹⁶ Later, Wilson indicated that he wanted to see Johnson to reassure him that the outcome of the Defence Review would not jeopardise American interests.⁹⁷ On 16 November, Bundy told Johnson that he had just heard 'from Derek Mitchell in Harold Wilson's office, that Wilson is likely to ask us soon if he can come and see you some time in the second week in December'. The British had 'completed their major review of defence policy, and before they make decisions, Wilson wants to discuss the problem with you'. Bundy told the President that 'it may well be in our interests to have Wilson here in December, both to make sure their defence review does not leave us in the lurch in some important part of the world'. Moreover, if Wilson 'comes to the UN, I don't see how we can easily avoid a visit'.⁹⁸ On 17 November, Bundy again wrote to Johnson, saying that the British were still 'eager for an answer on Wilson's proposal of December 17'. Consistent with the President's usual lack of enthusiasm for Wilson, Bundy proposed a low-key meeting: 'the best thing to do with Wilson is one serious talk at the Ranch, and leave it at that ... you will not really want to have a lot of ministers on your own'. If Wilson 'is in this country to address the UN, and asks to see you, there really isn't much choice'.⁹⁹ Johnson liked the idea of seeing Wilson alone at the ranch in Texas, because this would mean a minimum of fuss. However, Bruce feared that if Wilson did not go to the ranch, then the President would not bother to see him at all.¹⁰⁰ Due to Johnson's commitments in Washington, it was finally arranged that he would see Wilson at the White House.

To improve attitudes towards him in Washington, on 26 November Wilson told Ball and McNamara, who were then in London, that 'there was no question of the British Government taking decisions on the Defence Review without discussions with our allies and primarily with the United States'. The first step would be a 'private talk with the President' to discern 'the American views on the various options open to us and see if we could reach agreement on priorities'.¹⁰¹ Bundy told Johnson on 16 December that American enquiries had gleaned from Burke Trend 'that the British review is leading toward these conclusions: (1) maintain current strength in Europe; (2) stay in the Persian Gulf but pull out of Aden in 1968; (3) cut-back in the Far East as soon as confrontation ends –

hopefully in 1968–1970'. Bundy said that if these were Wilson's 'preliminary conclusions', then 'the sore spot for us is the projected Far Eastern cut back'. The Americans needed 'a British role at Singapore for as far ahead as we can see, and I think you may want to press the Prime Minister hard on this point'. If the British confrontation with Indonesia ended, 'the ordinary cost of this Far Eastern position should go way down, and some British presence there is of very high importance to us'. If 'the new British defence policy foreshadows withdrawal in Southeast Asia, the impact on our own effort will be real'.¹⁰²

On 16 December, Bruce 'went to the White House at 11.00 a.m., where President Johnson convened Messrs. Ball, McNamara, Moyers, Bundy, Valenti and myself to consider the probable agenda items for his talk with Harold Wilson this afternoon'. The team answered a range of questions from the President, including questions on Vietnam and the British Defence Review.¹⁰³ One of Johnson's enquiries reflected his disdain for Wilson. The President asked Bruce:

why the Prime Minister was so set on making trips across the Atlantic to see him, especially in view of charges in the British press and Parliament of Wilson's subservience, in some respects, to American policies. I replied that I thought such visits were useful to the PM in terms of his domestic politics, and he was anxious to establish with the President something like the close relationship – or its appearance – which existed between Harold Macmillan and President Kennedy.¹⁰⁴

On an earlier occasion Johnson had complained to Rusk that he was 'pretty fed up' with Wilson 'running over here'. He suggested that 'we botched this in the State Department' by giving the Prime Minister too much time. This might have 'reverberations' among other visiting allies such as Chancellor Erhard of West Germany: 'Why the hell do we throw in an extra two hours for Wilson?'¹⁰⁵ But as Bruce noted on 16 December, Wilson arrived at Andrews airforce base 'from New York, where he had addressed the UN'. He then went 'directly to the White House',¹⁰⁶ where he spoke with Johnson for about an hour. They then talked together with officials. The topics included Vietnam. On arrival in Washington, Wilson received a telegram from sixty-eight Labour MPs, not only from the left but right across the Party, demanding that the United States should stop bombing North Vietnam, which, it was feared, might escalate into a war with China. The telegram was organised and despatched in complete secrecy to coincide with the Prime Minister's arrival. Edward Short suggested in fact that Wilson himself had somehow orchestrated the telegram, to remind Johnson of the pressure he faced from the Labour left.¹⁰⁷ Wilson noted later that during his visit he 'pushed the President hard ... at least to suspend the bombing to test the sincerity of North Vietnamese hints that there might be a response on their side, possibly leading to negotiations'. He also indicated that if US aircraft were to bomb Hanoi or Haiphong the Labour government would be 'forced publicly to dissociate from that action'.¹⁰⁸ However, he also offered his strong 'support of US efforts to pursue peace ... and said that his Government was quite satisfied with the willingness repeatedly expressed by the United States to go to the conference table'.¹⁰⁹

Wilson also outlined to Johnson the findings of the Defence Review. He understood the importance that the United States attached 'to a continuation of British defence commitments and gave assurances that the British world wide role would be maintained'. He said there would be 'readjustments in the British defence posture East of Suez but that they would maintain their presence'. In the long run, Singapore 'might become very tricky', due to political difficulties there, 'and the UK had no real assurance that it could be used in times of need'. Consequently, the British government had been 'considering the possibility of an alternative base in Northern Australia'. Wilson 'expressed interest in the possibility of defence talks with Australia and New Zealand and, by implication, with the US on the defence problems of the area'. With respect to Aden, Wilson said that 'this could not be regarded as a long-term base'. In the Persian Gulf there 'continues to be a need to affirm some protection to Iran and Kuwait'. The Prime Minister thought that Bahrain 'would have some use in this connection but that generally it should be possible to lighten the British presence in the Gulf'. David Bruce suggested that Wilson was 'careful in phrasing his remarks on the defence review to indicate a desire to have our comments while avoiding any commitment that British decisions would conform to our views'.¹¹⁰ Though Wilson had made it clear that the British needed to make cuts in the cost of their defence posture, his affirmations that Britain would continue to play a global role satisfied the President. He later took Wilson to the ceremony of switching on Washington's Christmas lights, which Wilson recalled proudly was the first such honour to be bestowed on 'a British Prime Minister since one to Mr. Churchill, twenty one years earlier'. In his speech the President confirmed that Britain should continue its peace-making efforts in Vietnam, and claimed that he would support any initiative from London to that end. This, said Wilson, satisfied that his peacemaking efforts had born fruit, 'was a far cry from the hot line explosion ten months earlier'.¹¹¹ However, Marcia Williams, Wilson's personal secretary, was more realistic in her interpretation of Johnson's address. She argued that 'the speech, far from being complimentary to the British was meant critically, hitting out at us in an oblique way maybe but nevertheless an attack on us for not participating in the Vietnam War'.¹¹² Her interpretation was correct. Earlier that day, in response to a comment from Dean Rusk about the possibility of a British troop commitment to Vietnam, Johnson responded sarcastically that 'Wilson is going to do nothing. He wants a DSC for fending off his enemies in Parliament'.¹¹³ On the day after the Christmas lights ceremony, 18 December, Bruce 'went to Andrews Field this morning to see the Wilsons off'.¹¹⁴

Johnson thought well of his talks with Wilson, saying that the 'most important thing about the meeting was the feel of it, not the substance'. It was 'like two partners meeting each other after each of them had taken a business trip and each reaching a conclusion that each thought the other did all right ... this had been a most satisfactory and helpful discussion'. He added with a hint of

sarcasm that 'the Prime Minister's expressions of gratitude' for American economic support 'had been really touching, and you could not help but like him'.¹¹⁵ Observers also had a good impression of the latest talks. Francis Bator told Bruce that Johnson 'considered his conversation with Wilson today the most satisfactory he had ever had with a foreign President or Prime Minister, and had voiced a sympathetic feeling about Wilson'. Bruce noted that Wilson himself 'considers his visit has been eminently successful; he has every right to be pleased, for President Johnson has been favourably impressed by him, and their relationship will be more intimate than heretofore'.¹¹⁶ Bundy reflected that Wilson's visit 'marked another step forward in the understanding and mutual respect between the British government and our own'. Wilson was 'most generous in his expressions of understanding for the way in which the United States Government has stood with the British Government in facing certain financial problems over the last year or more'. Johnson and Wilson 'were able to confirm their close understanding and support' for one another, and to 'understand each other quickly and easily on every issue they discussed'. Both governments 'will now be able to move forward with confidence in a series of efforts which are of great concern to both of them'. The Defence Review was a 'special example' of the value of the summit: 'The British Government faces very important problems of matching its commitments to its resources, and in most cases where there is a British interest there is a very important American interest, too'. After hearing Wilson's 'exposition and discussing it with Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara, the President is confident that the two governments can work fruitfully together to meet their common responsibilities'. The 'firm and clear determination of the British Government to play a constructive world role within the limits of the available resources' had made this possible. Johnson was also 'impressed by the Prime Minister's firm grasp of the fact that the defence of freedom and peace in every part of the world is a matter of high importance to all free men'.¹¹⁷

Henry Brandon of the *Sunday Times* said that the visit had been the Prime Minister's 'most successful encounter with the President so far'. Brandon noted that 'one or two hasty moves sometime ago did not go down well with Johnson, probably due to Wilson misjudging [the] intimacy of his relations' with the President. However, the 'rapproch Wilson had previously wrongly taken for granted now seems truly established'.¹¹⁸ On 21 December, Wilson gave the Commons what the US Embassy described as a 'very optimistic and encouraging report' on the visit to Washington. The talks were 'very thorough and searching ... brisk, comradely and fruitful'. Wilson doubted 'whether relations between our two countries have been closer or more frank and marked by clearer understanding ... than probably at any time since the Second World War'. There was 'complete agreement ... with HMG's decision to continue [to] maintain [a] worldwide defence role, particularly to fulfil those commitments which for reasons [of] history, geography, Commonwealth association, and [the] like, we, and

virtually we alone, are best fitted [to] undertake'. Moreover, the Prime Minister was 'absolutely satisfied that the President was anxious and determined ... to bring fighting to a speedy conclusion' in Vietnam 'and to find an honourable, just and permanent solution'. Finally, Johnson had given the 'fullest support to Britain's peace role'.¹¹⁹

Notes

- 1 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 4, Bundy Vols. 12–14, Bundy to Johnson, 'Your meeting with Joe Fowler at 12.30 tomorrow', 28 July 1965.
- 2 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 215, UK Wilson Visit Briefing Books 12/17/65, 'Visit of PM Wilson ... UK Defence Review', 13 December 1965.
- 3 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, DEF – Defence Affairs UK, 1-Policy, Plans, Readiness 7.1.65, Embassy to State and Defence, 'United Kingdom 1965 NATO Annual Review Submission', 11 November 1965.
- 4 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 207, United Kingdom Memos Vol. IV 5/65–6/65, Britain's Expenditures East of Suez', 7 June 1965.
- 5 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, DEF – Defence Affairs UK, 1-Policy, Plans, Readiness 7.1.65, Embassy to State and Defence, 'United Kingdom 1965 NATO Annual Review Submission', 11 November 1965.
- 6 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 215, UK Trendex 4/65–8/65, author unknown, 'Draft Memorandum for the President, US–UK Relations', 1 June 1965.
- 7 NARA, Subject-Numeric Files 1964–66, DEF – Defence Affairs UK, 1-Policy, Plans, Readings 7.1.65, 'British Defence Review', 14 May 1965.
- 8 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 215, UK Trendex 4/65–8/65, author unknown, 'Draft Memorandum for the President, US–UK Relations', 1 June 1965.
- 9 Conversation between Rusk and the Australian Ambassador, 22 October 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. XXVII, *Mainland Southeast Asia, Regional Affairs* (Washington: USGPO, 2000), p. 15.
- 10 PRO, FO 371/179574, AU 1051/35/G, 'The Present United States–United Kingdom Relationship ...', 12 August 1965.
- 11 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, DEF – Defence Affairs UK, 1-Policy, Plans, Readings 7.1.65, 'Defence Aspects of the Foreign Affairs Debate', 31 December 1965.
- 12 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 2–1 UK, Joint Weekas UK 10.15.65, Embassy to State, 5 November 1965.
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- 16 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 215, UK Trendex 4/65–8/65, author unknown, 'Draft Memorandum for the President, US–UK Relations', 1 June 1965.
- 17 PRO, PREM 13/215, Dean to Gore-Booth, 10 June 1965.
- 18 LBJL, Francis Bator Papers, Box 22, 'US–UK Relations', 20 May 1965.
- 19 Johnson to Fowler, 16 June 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. VIII, *International Monetary and Trade Policy* (Washington: USGPO, 1998), pp. 171–4. The document is also reproduced in Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives*

- of the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. 597-8.
- 20 LBJL, Francis Bator Papers, Box 2, Chron. File NSC 1/1/65-6/30/65, 'The Callaghan Visit', 25 June 1965.
 - 21 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 3, Bundy Vol. 11(1/3) June 1965, Bundy to Johnson, 28 June 1965.
 - 22 Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1581, T1/65-T298/65, Callaghan to Wilson, 30 June 1965.
 - 23 LBJL, Francis Bator Papers, Box 2, Chron. File NSC 4/1/65-8/31/65, Bator to Bundy, 'The UK problem, and "Thinking about the Unthinkable"', 29 July 1965.
 - 24 *Ibid.*
 - 25 *Ibid.*
 - 26 *Ibid.*
 - 27 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 215, UK Trendex 4/65-8/65, author unknown, 'Draft Memorandum for the President, US-UK Relations', 1 June 1965.
 - 28 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 4, Bundy Vol. 12 (1/3), Bundy to Johnson, 28 July 1965.
 - 29 LBJL, George Ball Papers, Box 1, Britain III (11/24/64-12/31/56), 'Telcon, Bundy-Ball', 29 July 1965.
 - 30 LBJL, tape WH6508.01, citation 8509, Johnson-Eugene Black telephone conversation, 5.50 p.m., 5 August 1965.
 - 31 LBJL, tape WH6508.02, citation 8510, Johnson-William Martin telephone conversation, 11.47 p.m., 5 August 1965.
 - 32 LBJL, Francis Bator Papers, Box 2, Chron. File NSC 1/1/65-6/30/65, 'Agenda: Preparation for Trend', 28 July 1965.
 - 33 LBJL, Francis Bator Papers, Box 22, UK 1965, Johnson to Wilson (draft), 8 September 1965. Though this letter was only a draft and there is no record that a revised version was actually sent, nonetheless it still indicates Johnson's view.
 - 34 LBJL, George Ball Papers, Box 1, Britain III (11.24.65-12.31.65), 'Telcon, Fowler-Ball', 29 July 1965.
 - 35 PRO, FO 371/179573, AU 1051/22, M. N. E. Stewart (on behalf of Dean) to Foreign Secretary, 12 August 1965.
 - 36 Clive Ponting, *Breach of Promise: Labour in Power 1964-1970* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 51.
 - 37 Quoted in Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Life of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), pp. 222-3.
 - 38 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 4, Bundy Vol. 12 (3/3), Bundy to Johnson, 'News from the British Front', 2 August 1965.
 - 39 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 4, Bundy Vol. 14 (2/3), Bundy to Johnson, 'Report from George Ball', 10 September 1965. Bundy remained enamoured by the idea of a deal with the British. Patrick Dean noted Bundy's comment on 30 September that 'if the conclusions of the Defence Review were in fact in accordance with American thinking, the means for placing sterling on a really secure basis in the intermediate and long terms could be discussed and settled between the two Treasuries'. However, 'if on the other hand the Defence Review showed that we were planning to cut our commitments, then the whole range of problems, defence, political, economic and so on would have to be brought together and discussed at a very high level'. PRO, FO 371/179566, AU 1023/39, Dean to Stewart, 30 September 1965.
 - 40 Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1179, Wash. DC April 1970 NY 4 May 1970, University of Texas speech, 'Anglo-American Relations: a Special Case?', 30 April 1970.
 - 41 Edward Short, *Whip to Wilson* (London: Macdonald, 1989), p. 117; John Dumbrell, *The Making of US Foreign Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 223.
 - 42 Ponting, *Breach of Promise*, p. 48.

- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 48–58.
- 44 For example, see David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 227–8.
- 45 C. J. Bartlett, *'The Special Relationship': A Political History of Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 110, 111.
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- 47 Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice Between Europe and the World?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 119.
- 48 John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After* (London: Macmillan, 2001), p. 69.
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- 53 LBJL, David K. E. Bruce oral history interview conducted by Thomas H. Baker, 9 December 1971, pp. 17–18.
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- 55 PRO, FO 371/179573, AU 1051/21, Wilson to Brandon, 17 July 1965.
- 56 Ball's talks with Wilson, 9 September 1965, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, p. 507.
- 57 Crossman, *Diaries* vol. I, p. 456, entry for 14 February 1966.
- 58 See Neville Brown, *Arms Without Empire: British Defence in the Modern World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 39.
- 59 PRO, FO 371/185011, AU 1051/27, 'Britain's Relationship with the US ... ', 5 July 1966.
- 60 PRO, PREM 13/215, Dean to Gore-Booth, 10 June 1965.
- 61 PRO, FO 371/179574, AU 1051/35/G, 'The Realities of the Present US–UK Relationship', 12 August 1965.
- 62 PRO, FO 371/179566, AU 1023/41, John Nicholls memorandum, 8 October 1965.
- 63 Bator recorded the extent of the US balance of payments deficit in May 1966: 'The first quarter results are poor: an overall deficit running at \$2.4 billion per year (the 1965 rate was \$1.3; 1964, \$2.8)'. Bator to Johnson, 11 May 1966, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. VIII, p. 282.
- 64 Bodleian Library, Lord George-Brown Papers, Ms. Eng. C. 5009, 'Enquiry into the Position of Sterling 1964–65', 1 June 1966.
- 65 Quoted in Ziegler, *Wilson*, p. 204; Wilson to Johnson, 29 July 1965, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, pp. 499–500.
- 66 Bodleian Library, Lord George-Brown Papers, Ms. Eng. C. 5009, 'Enquiry into the Position of Sterling 1964–65', 1 June 1966.
- 67 LBJL, WHCF, Box 76, CO 305 UK 11.1.65–7.1.65, Fowler to Johnson, 16 June 1965.
- 68 Bundy to Johnson, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. VIII, pp. 177–9.
- 69 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 129.
- 70 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 208, UK Memos Vol. VI (1/2) 7/65–9/65, Bator to Johnson, 'Battle of the Pound', 1 September 1965.
- 71 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 215, UK Wilson Visit 12.17.1965, 'British Problems and Policies on the Eve of the Wilson Visit', undated.
- 72 PRO, PREM 13/695, 'Vietnam: Anglo-United States Relations', undated and with no drafting information.
- 73 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 27 Viet S. 6.3.65, Embassy to State, 3 June 1965.

- 74 Bundy to Johnson, 3 June 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968*, vol. II, *Vietnam, January-June 1965* (Washington: USGPO, 1996), pp. 716-17.
- 75 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 215, UK Wilson Visit 12/17/65, author unknown, 'British Problems and Policies on the Eve of the Wilson visit', undated.
- 76 In his memoirs Johnson listed 72 major peace initiatives by various countries during his time in office (Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, pp. 579-89). The British were involved in nine of these, although only the Commonwealth Peace Mission of 1965 and the phase A-phase B initiative of February 1967 featured to any significant extent in the Wilson-Johnson relationship. For the follow-up to the Commonwealth project, see John W. Young, 'The Wilson Government and the Davies peace mission to North Vietnam', *Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), pp. 545-62. The phase A-phase B initiative is considered in Chapter 6 of this work.
- 77 Ziegler, *Wilson*, p. 225.
- 78 Document 6 (Editorial Note), *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968*, vol. III, *Vietnam, June-December 1965* (Washington: USGPO, 1996), p. 15.
- 79 PRO, PREM 13/690, 'Note for the Record: Commonwealth Peace Mission on Vietnam', midnight, 15 June 1965.
- 80 Document 6 (Editorial Note), *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. III, p. 15
- 81 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS5:1B8303:55, entry for 16 June 1965.
- 82 White House to the Embassy in the UK, 16 June 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. III, pp. 11-12.
- 83 LBJL, tape WH6506.04, citation 8141, Johnson-Robert McNamara telephone conversation, 5.50 p.m., 15 June 1965.
- 84 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964-66, POL 27 Viet S, 6.16.65, Embassy to State, 18 June 1965.
- 85 At Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, on 7 April, Johnson had said that 'We remain ready ... for unconditional negotiations.' Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, pp. 132-4, 580.
- 86 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 4, Bundy Vol. 12 July 1965 (2/3), Wilson to Johnson, 6 July 1965.
- 87 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, pp. 113, 122.
- 88 Quoted in Michael Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 366.
- 89 Cabinet meeting, 23 June 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. III, p. 40.
- 90 'Agenda Prepared by the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy): Meeting with the President, Wednesday 23 June 1965, 5.30 p.m.', *ibid.*, p. 38.
- 91 Editorial note, *ibid.*, p. 15.
- 92 Cmnd. 2756, *Recent Exchanges Concerning Attempts to Promote a Negotiated Settlement of the Conflict in Vietnam* (London: HMSO, 1965), p. 94.
- 93 NARA, Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961-66 (66 D 294), UK Johnson 64-66, Wilson to Johnson, 2 August 1965.
- 94 *Ibid.*
- 95 PRO, FO 371/179573, AU 1051/22, M. N. F. Stewart (on behalf of Dean) to Foreign Secretary, 12 August 1965.
- 96 LBJL, NSF: Name File, Box 7, Neustadt Memos, Neustadt to Bundy, 9 August 1965. The reference to de Gaulle's 'cold war' means his criticisms of American leadership of Western Europe, culminating in the announcement on 7 March 1966 of France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated command structure. For the American response see Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe*, pp. 92-140; H. W. Brands, *The Wages of Globalism: Lyndon B. Johnson and the Limits of American Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 85-121.
- 97 Wilson also wanted American support for economic sanctions against Rhodesia, which had declared independence from Britain on 9 November 1965 in order to preserve white

- rule. This is a substantial issue, which for reasons of space is not covered in this work. Ponting notes that although Rhodesia was 'a dispute between Britain and one of her last remaining colonies, the Americans were drawn in at every stage. When Wilson visited Rhodesia in an attempt to stop the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in October 1965 the Americans were given special daily briefings in Salisbury on the progress of the talks and the positions taken by each side. Immediately after the UDI joint talks were held on how to assist Zambia and, more importantly, on how to implement oil sanctions where Britain would not make any move without US agreement. The closeness of the relations between Britain and the United States over Rhodesia can be judged by two factors – the frequency of the messages between Wilson and Johnson, and the information exchanged. For example, in the five days after 8 January Wilson sent four personal messages to Johnson about Rhodesia and in the sixteen days after 11 November 1966 (the run-up to the *Tiger* talks [discussions between Wilson and Smith on board *HMS Tiger*]) he sent thirteen. Apart from these personal messages the UK was also giving the Americans copies of the correspondence between the British and the Rhodesian governments over the possible terms for a settlement within a day of the Rhodesian replies being received in London (information which was not circulated to the British cabinet).' Ponting, *Breach of Promise*, pp. 46–7. For documents see *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. XXIV, *Africa* (Washington: USGPO, 1999), pp. 788–962.
- 98 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 5, Bundy Vol. 16 10/15–11/19/65 (1/3), Bundy to Johnson, 16 November 1965.
- 99 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 5, Bundy Vol. 16 10/15–11/19/65 (1/3), 'Visitors', 17 November 1965.
- 100 LBJL, George Ball Papers, Box 1, Britain III (11/24/64–11/23/65), 'Telecon, Bruce to Ball', 17 November 1965.
- 101 PRO, PREM 13/681, Wilson–McNamara conversation, 26 November 1965.
- 102 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 5, Bundy Vol. 17 11/20–12/31/65 (2/3), 'The Wilson Visit', 16 December 1965.
- 103 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS5:1B8303:55, entry for 16 December 1965.
- 104 *Ibid.*
- 105 LBJL, tape WH6512.03, citation 9317, Johnson–Dean Rusk telephone conversation, 12.58 p.m., 11 December 1965.
- 106 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS5:1B8303:55, entry for 16 December 1965.
- 107 Short, *Whip to Wilson*, p. 205.
- 108 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 187.
- 109 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 209, UK Memos VII 10/65–1/66, 'Visit of PM Wilson, December 15–19 1965'.
- 110 'Visit of PM Wilson, December 15–19 1965', *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, p. 511.
- 111 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 188.
- 112 Marcia Williams, *Inside No. 10* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p. 66.
- 113 'Note of Meeting', 17 December 1965, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. III, p. 644.
- 114 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS5:1B8303:55, entry for 16 December 1965.
- 115 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL UK–US, 1.1.66, Johnson's account of his conversation with Wilson, 17 December 1965.
- 116 VHS, Diary of K. E. David Bruce, MSS5:1B8303:55, entry for 16 December 1965.
- 117 LBJL, Papers of LBJ: Appointment File (Diary Backup), Box 26, December 16–17 1965, 'Comments on the President's three visitors', undated and with no drafting information.
- 118 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 1 UK–US, 4.20.65, Embassy to State, 'British Press on Johnson–Wilson talks', 20 December 1965.
- 119 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, Viet S 12.22.65, 'British Press on Johnson–Wilson talks', 22 December 1965.

Dissociation, January–July 1966

In the months January–July 1966 there was particular strain in the relationship between Harold Wilson and Lyndon B. Johnson. The Labour government won the general election of 31 March with a comfortable majority of ninety-four, but this margin of victory gave rise to a vigorous ‘New Left’ within the Labour Party which would bedevil Wilson’s commitment to Washington. To placate this group, he ‘dissociated’ Britain from the US bombing of the North Vietnamese cities of Hanoi and Haiphong, which was carried out on 28–29 June. He stated that Britain still supported the general principle of the United States’s policy in Vietnam and, on a personal level, he was as committed as ever to close relations with Johnson. But Johnson failed to understand why, with Labour’s position in the Commons newly-secured, Wilson had acted as he did. The US Ambassador David Bruce and the British Ambassador Patrick Dean both helped ease the rift, but Wilson’s questioning of US policy in Vietnam and the more general problems of continuing British economic difficulties precipitated a concern in some quarters of the White House that Britain’s claim to a ‘great power’ role and a close relationship with the United States should be discouraged. Johnson had never favoured the idea of close relations with the British, but he wanted Britain to retain its global role. On 29 July, Wilson visited Washington for the fourth time since assuming office in October 1964. Despite his prior intimations of uncertainty about the future of Britain’s position East of Suez, his loyalty to Washington and his desire to overcome the ill will engendered by the criticisms over Vietnam led him to reaffirm his commitment to East of Suez and to the parity of sterling – both of which were important to the ‘special relationship’. Wilson’s performance delighted Johnson, with the result he used his luncheon toast not only to eulogise the Prime Minister but as a means of bolstering sterling in the eyes of currency speculators.

The general election

In 1966 Wilson was, as ever, concerned that Britain should have the sympathetic understanding of the White House. Hence he wrote especially often to the President. According to Henry Brandon, the American correspondent of the

Sunday Times, the letters were well received. He told Wilson on 24 May that Johnson 'last week in private conversation with me went out of his way to emphasise how much he enjoys communicating with you and reading your personal messages'. Brandon was certain that Wilson was 'the only foreign statesman who has succeeded in establishing this kind of rapport – and personal relations matter a great deal with this President'.¹ Despite the upbeat tone of Brandon's comments, Johnson was at best ambivalent towards Wilson himself. Generally, he disliked seeing the Prime Minister face-to-face, because he thought that most foreign statesmen were opportunists who used their visits to the White House mainly to secure political advantage at home. He also had little desire for 'hot-line' conversations, as he resented being put 'on the spot' over the telephone. But Wilson's letters did not place him under pressure as did the more direct means of communication, and they were of growing interest to the President as US ties with Britain grew more problematic. The Prime Minister wrote thirty-one times in January–July 1966 – on average, more than once a week.²

On 27 February, Wilson wrote a typically candid and long letter to the President, explaining that he and his colleagues had decided 'to hold an immediate general election'. The Labour government needed to boost its majority, which had fallen to one, in order to safeguard its position and to 'toughen up and speed the measures needed to strengthen our economy'. Though he used diplomatic language, Wilson invited Johnson to visit Britain for the campaign: 'I am not proposing to ask you to come and help us during the election', but there were 'of course, abundant precedents'. In 1955 President Eisenhower 'agreed to Eden's request for an early Summit meeting to which, in fact, Eisenhower was strongly opposed'. In 1959 the President 'conferred the same benefit on Macmillan and indeed allowed himself to be toted through fourteen London marginal constituencies in an open car with Macmillan beside him'. The issue of Anglo-American relations featured in British domestic politics: Wilson told Johnson that Edward Heath, the new Conservative leader,³ was 'now attacking our defence review on the grounds that it drives us too closely into relations with you'. In a similar vein, Heath's predecessor, Alec Douglas-Home, had called on 'the electors to vote Conservative so that we do not accept satellite status to the United States'. Wilson anticipated that 'this will be one of their themes and that they will make an appeal to the latent anti-Americanism amongst some of our electorate which they called into being with some success at the time of Suez' in 1956. The 'big issue', though, in which Wilson wanted to confide to Johnson, 'relates to sterling'. Election speculation had 'led to a little weakness in the last week or two because elections mean instability and also because there has been some fear that if the Conservatives got in they would do what we did not do and devalue sterling on the day they took office, blaming it on their predecessors'.⁴ The President's reply was brief and impersonal, and showed no inclination to visit Britain as the Prime Minister had wanted: 'I will not break the rules by wishing you good luck'.⁵

On 31 March, Labour won the election with a decisive ninety-four seat majority, but the size of the victory brought problems for Wilson and his commitment to the Washington axis. A State Department analysis some months later reflected that Wilson, 'like his predecessors as head of the Labour Party, is feeling the sting of opposition yapping at his heels from within his own party's ranks'. This opposition was 'much more worrisome to him than that of the entire Conservative Party'. Previously, because of the 'bare majority in the last Parliament, he used the threat of the government's fall to quell rambunctious back benchers', and his success in doing so 'contributed greatly to his image as an able leader and his stunning electoral victory last March'. But the substantial victory was a double-edged sword, as it created a 'situation where unruly backbenchers cannot be contained, but offer opposition to his leadership'. The Labour left posed the greatest difficulty for Wilson. He had 'sought to secure this flank by including in his cabinet most of the top leaders of the traditional left-wing', but a strident 'New Left' had developed nonetheless. Its standard-bearers included some 'traditional left-wingers such as Michael Foot', along with some 'new elements, principally educators or journalists, who are doctrinaire, articulate, and constructive'. Unlike their 'Bevanite forbears, the New Left is not trying to displace' Wilson, but to drive him back to a more 'socialist' approach.⁶ This would involve a more independent line towards Washington.

Wilson's 'dissociation' from the American bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong

On 26 January, Patrick Dean suggested that if the Americans became involved in a 'harder-hitting war' in Vietnam, then Britain might find itself under 'increasing fire'. As American casualties rose, 'and the effects of the Vietnam War on the budget become apparent, Americans are likely to ask more and more insistently what their allies are contributing, militarily and economically, to this defence of the free world against aggression'. The United States was 'feeling lonely and a bit edgy about Vietnam'.⁷ Wilson scarcely needed prompting to keep in touch with the White House over the matter. On 9 February, he explained to the President the mounting difficulties he faced from within the Labour Party: 'the Foreign Secretary and I have had over the past ten days to face by far the most dangerous attack from within the Parliamentary Party on the question of Vietnam'. The attack 'centred around the decision' of the United States to resume bombing after a pause over Christmas 'and was activated by the very clear statement put out by the Foreign Secretary that the bombing decision had not only our understanding but our support'. This led to the 'despatch on the same Monday evening' to William Fulbright, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington, 'a telegram signed by 90 Labour MPs, covering ... a wide consensus right across the Party, including some who had previously supported our action'. Wilson told the President that two days later he 'addressed a full meeting of our Parliamentary Party when I repeated my full

support of the Foreign Secretary's statement and took full responsibility for it'. Wilson made a 'very strong attack on those concerned and got considerable mileage out of our of pointing out that during the 40 days bombing pause [over Christmas] there was not a sound out of them commending the United States administration for the opportunities they had opened up for a peaceful settlement'. He 'managed to detach from the [anti-American] lobby all but the irreconcilables, but their attack continues and gets a great deal of support from Party supporters in the country'. Next, said Wilson, 'the Opposition who on the whole have supported the United States position on Vietnam and have given in the main general but not enthusiastic support to Her Majesty's Government, had yesterday a Parliamentary Day' on which they chose Vietnam as a topic of discussion, 'in the hope of exploiting what they called the split'. Wilson and his Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart 'decided to meet the challenge head on ... the operation was a total success'. But the Prime Minister told Johnson that the challenge had shown 'once again the difficulties I am bound to have from time to time ... with a parliamentary majority so much less than my real present majority in the country'.⁸

Wilson's account of his victory over the critics of the United States was not exaggerated. David Bruce told the State Department on 2 February that a 'high placed Labour government source' had indicated that Wilson was 'aggressive, uncompromising, and effective ... completely overwhelming [the] critics ... Wilson never looked better ... in dealing with [an] internal Party problem'.⁹ But the Prime Minister's difficulty with supporting the American position in Vietnam intensified as the United States stepped up its efforts there. In late May, Bruce informed Wilson that the Administration was contemplating the bombing of POL (petrol, oil and lubricants) facilities in the North Vietnamese cities of Hanoi and Haiphong. Wilson told Johnson on 24 May that this measure would jeopardise British support: 'we have always made it clear that bombing either of these cities would create a situation where we would have to disassociate ourselves from the action taken'. Wilson reminded Johnson of his remark to this effect at their last meeting in December 1965, a comment which he had also made 'more than once when under pressure in the House of Commons'. The President would have to understand that 'I shall have to make a statement of this kind if this action takes place, though you will realise equally that this will not affect my general support of American policy in Vietnam'. For the record, and with few chances of success, Wilson urged the American leader not to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong: 'I would ... ask you to reconsider whether this action, whatever its results in terms of immediate military advantage, is worth the candle'. But the decision 'will be yours, and I know you will understand our difficulties and the nature of the statement we would have to make'.¹⁰

Wilson understood that he could not exert much influence on US policy in Vietnam, largely because Britain did not have troops there. An MP asked him in the Commons on 23 June 1966 whether he was 'aware that there are many

people in this country who would like him to do precisely what Attlee did in 1950 – urge commonsense on the Americans?’ Wilson responded that he was:

a member of the Cabinet when Lord Attlee went to Washington to deal with a very serious situation caused by a statement that the atom bomb was to be used in North Korea. I believe that intervention was decisive. It is a point that at that time we had troops in Korea. We do not have troops in Vietnam. So far as the views of this country are concerned ... they have been regularly explained to the President of the United States and to this House.¹¹

Wilson's concerns in 1966 about the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong had little impact on the thinking of the White House. Johnson told him on 27 May that it was 'essential that we reduce the oil supply' to the communists 'in the light of the radical increase in the flow of men and materiel by truck to South Vietnam'. The calculus was 'whether they shall have less oil or I shall have more casualties'.¹² Washington sent Colonel Bernard Rogers to explain that the bombing would be directed solely at POL facilities and not at civilians. However, the ferocity of the critics in Britain was such that Wilson would still need to dissociate the Labour government from the measures regardless of the number of civilian casualties. On 3 June, he let Johnson know that 'the possible military benefits that may result from this bombing do not appear to outweigh the political disadvantages that would seem the inevitable consequence'. But 'our reservations about this operation will not affect our continuing support for your policy over Vietnam', said Wilson, demonstrating the delicacy of his position, balanced between the White House and British opinion.¹³

On 14 June, Johnson warned Wilson that he saw 'no way of avoiding such action, given the expansion of the illegal corridor through Laos, the continuing build-up of North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam, the growing abuse of Cambodian neutrality, and the absence of any indication in Hanoi of a serious interest in peace'. He 'deeply hoped' that the Prime Minister could 'maintain solidarity with us in Vietnam despite what you have said in the House of Commons about Hanoi and Haiphong'. Johnson then made another low-key plea for British troops in Vietnam, saying that Britain's role as co-chairman of the 1954 Geneva conference, which partitioned Indochina, did not mean Britain 'should stand aside', because the other co-chairman, the Soviet Union, was helping to arm the communists. Finally, he hoped of Wilson:

that you will not find it necessary to speak in terms of dissociation. But it would be important to us if you could include the following elements:

- 1 You were informed of the possibility that such an action would, in our minds, become necessary.
- 2 You expressed your own views to us in accordance with the statements which you have already made in the House of Commons.
- 3 The particular step taken by US forces was directed specifically to POL storage and not against civilian centres or installations.
- 4 Since Britain does not have troops engaged in the fighting, it is not easy or

- appropriate for Britain to determine the particular military action which may be necessary under different circumstances.
- 5 It is a great pity that Hanoi and Peiping have been so unresponsive to unprecedented efforts by the US and others to bring this problem from the battle field to the conference table.
 - 6 Britain is satisfied that US forces have no designs against civilian populations and are taking every possible precaution to avoid civilian casualties.
 - 7 Britain as a member of SEATO fully understands and supports the determination of its fellow SEATO members to insure the safety and self-determination of South Vietnam.

There had been forewarnings that British dissociation from US actions in Vietnam would strain the Anglo-American relationship. As early as 30 December 1965, Patrick Dean told Paul Gore-Booth, Permanent Under Secretary of the Foreign Office, that Averell Harriman, Washington's Ambassador-at-Large, and Dean Rusk had indicated that 'if HMG were to maintain their influence with the President it was most important that there should be no statements of "dissociation" from American policy'. In particular, Harriman had said that 'while the political difficulties of the Prime Minister in Parliament were not underestimated, it ought to be possible ... to express disagreement with American policy in a way which would not put the President's back up'.¹⁵ On 15 June, Wilson discussed Johnson's message of the previous day with Michael Stewart (Foreign Secretary), along with Burke Trend (Cabinet secretary), Michael Halls (Wilson's Principal Private Secretary), and Michael Palliser (Wilson's Foreign Office assistant). They decided that Stewart would see David Bruce 'as soon as possible to obtain from him, on a purely personal basis, his estimate of the likely date of the bombing; and his advice on the desirability of a visit to Washington by the Prime Minister and on the timing of any such visit'.¹⁶ But Bruce could offer little concrete information, as the debate in the White House about the virtue of bombing Hanoi and Haiphong, and the possible impact on the Russians and the Chinese, was still proceeding.¹⁷ When the discussions had ended, Johnson wrote to Wilson to say that 'we now feel it necessary to go ahead with the operation against POL installations'.¹⁸ In view of the growing international controversy surrounding Vietnam, Wilson's diplomatic support was important to the White House, which therefore tried to keep him 'on board' as far as possible by telling him in advance of the attacks. Only he, the 'chiefs of governments with troops in Vietnam' (such as Australia) and Lester Pearson of Canada were thus favoured.¹⁹

Wilson wanted the Americans to realise that Britain was fundamentally a faithful ally despite the talk of dissociation. On 2 June, Bruce told Johnson that Wilson wanted to visit the White House again: 'It has been about six months since he last saw you, and there are many things he would like to discuss'. The Prime Minister was concerned, though, 'to avoid speculation whether his trip was in connection with whatever decision you make about bombing' – a visit

'might be construed as a last minute plea for you to abandon the project'. If bombing took place, 'his journey might be interpreted in Britain as representing a summons from you to rake him over the coals for not having supported you in this respect'.²⁰ On 10 June, Wilson informed Johnson that 'it is right for us not to meet too near the bombing. It would be a political mistake for both of us if people could say I was making a trans-Atlantic dash, with my shirt-tails flying, to put pressure on you'.²¹ Johnson agreed, telling him on 14 June that 'there should be a great deal of blue sky between your visit and possible action on Vietnam'.²² Johnson was worried that Wilson would exploit his odyssey to give the impression of dictating to the White House. Dean Rusk shared this view, fearing that the 'timing of a brief visit from the Prime Minister' might suggest 'that he is coming to Washington to persuade our President to be a good boy'. The Secretary of State recalled 'Attlee's frantic visit during the Korean War'.²³ But the Prime Minister's efforts to see Johnson were supported by Bruce, who commented on 15 June that Wilson should visit Washington to help 'keep up' 'the personal relationship' with Johnson.²⁴

Walt Rostow, the new National Security Adviser in the White House, compounded Johnson's reservations about another visit from Wilson. Rostow was one of the chief 'hawks' in the Administration, and had little patience with those American allies that would not send troops to Vietnam. On 28 July, he told Johnson that British reticence towards Vietnam meant that Washington faced 'an attitude of mind which, in effect, prefers that we take losses in the free world rather than the risks of sharp confrontation'.²⁵ In connection with the British threat of dissociation and the prospective Wilson visit, Rostow advised the President on 17 June:

as things stand I take it to be our task to make bloody clear to the British Embassy in Washington and the British Government in London that (1) the visit must be very carefully prepared; (2) the Prime Minister, whatever his pressures at home, should not come here *unless what he says here in public and private reinforces your position on Vietnam*; (3) if this is impossible for him, he must find an excuse for the visit not to take place.²⁶

On 22 June, Patrick Dean wrote to Michael Palliser, Wilson's Foreign Office secretary, about the efforts of Rostow and Rusk to make sure that Wilson should behave properly lest he alienate the President completely. Rostow said that Johnson 'had now accepted the Prime Minister's suggestion for a visit and was ready to receive him towards the end of July'. The President's 'first reaction to the suggestion, however, had been far from favourable'. He was 'under great domestic pressure and was, because of Vietnam, having to sit by' as 'his overwhelming political power fragmented'. The polls 'showed about 52 per cent against the President's policy, and of this only 10 per cent was on the side of the doves in Vietnam and some 40 per cent wanted the President to use more military power'. Johnson was 'under great personal pressure, but remained determined to pursue the line of policy he judged to be right'. He considered that the British refusal to

provide troops violated the country's 'obligations under SEATO'. He thought 'that as one of the co-Chairmen under the Geneva Accords we had a special responsibility, since the use made by the North Vietnamese and their friends in transitting Laos in order to attack South Vietnam was a clear violation of the Geneva Agreements'.²⁷

Rostow had told Dean that Johnson was 'receiving messages from Mrs. Gandhi, Lee Kuan Yew and even the Israeli government, urging him not to give way or abandon South Vietnam, but publicly he received little support'. He wanted 'practical help, not advice about how to run the war and conduct limited military operations from those who were taking no active part'. Johnson's 'first reaction to the Prime Minister's message' about dissociation from the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong 'had therefore been very strong, particularly to the implication that he was about to order the bombing of civilian centres when in fact all that the Americans intended to attack was oil installations and trucks'. Both Rusk and Rostow 'hinted strongly' to Dean 'that they had had a very difficult time with the President in order to persuade him not to react very sharply and to agree that there were a number of subjects which he could usefully discuss privately and with no holds barred with the Prime Minister'. He had now agreed, 'but kept on asking why the Prime Minister wanted to come'. Rostow said that Johnson 'had very much admired the way in which the Prime Minister had stood his ground and given the President such firm support when he had only a majority of three' in the House of Commons. Now Johnson 'could not understand why, when Mr Wilson had a really big majority, he felt it necessary to dissociate himself much more than before from American actions'. Johnson feared that Wilson 'might cut away the ground from under his feet in the same way as Mike Pearson had tried to do in his speech at Philadelphia over a year ago'.²⁸ (On 2 April 1965, Pearson, the Canadian Prime Minister, in an address at Temple University in Philadelphia, criticised US policy in Vietnam. His comments reinforced Johnson's suspicions that foreign statesmen used their visits to Washington mainly so that they could play to the gallery at home.)²⁹ Rostow had told Dean that if Wilson acted rashly then 'the damage to Anglo-American relations would be great and long-lasting', as Johnson felt that 'if for any reason the Prime Minister could not say helpful things about Vietnam both privately and publicly, i.e. to leading Senators and so on, when he was in Washington, it would really be better for the visit to be postponed'. Dean Rusk 'did not go so far' as to say that the visit might have to be cancelled, 'but he did say that the terms in which the Prime Minister dissociated himself from the bombing of the oil installations, if and when this took place, would be crucial'. Dean apologised to Palliser that the letter did 'not make very pleasant reading, but both Rusk and Rostow were at pains to emphasise the strength of the President's feelings'. In order to 'ensure the success of the visit the first requirement is to reassure the President about the purpose and objectives of the Prime Minister's visit'. The best way, said Dean, 'would be to let the President and Dean Rusk have as soon

as possible a list of topics which the Prime Minister wants to talk about'. In order to play down differences over Vietnam, the topics might include 'East-west relations, European problems including especially Germany, NATO and French policy, disarmament, Rhodesia and any other African problems and defence East of Suez including Malaysia'.³⁰

Wilson's concerns for his ties with Johnson could not overcome his domestic need to dissociate from American actions. The US Embassy noted that following the raids on Hanoi and Haiphong on 28–29 June, 10 Downing Street 'issued a statement disassociating the UK government from the US bombing of fuel storage facilities in the Hanoi–Haiphong areas'. The statement indicated, though, that 'the British Government continues to support the US policy of assisting South Vietnam to resist Communist domination', and it largely conformed to Johnson's suggestions to Wilson in the letter of 14 June.³¹ Wilson repeated the statement of dissociation in the House of Commons. As Patrick Dean noted, the statement 'had been very carefully worded and two thirds of it had been devoted to confirming that US basic policy as regards Vietnam still had the support of the British government'.³² The US Embassy in London noted that in the subsequent debate Edward Heath 'strongly supported US policy'. He charged that 'the Government's endorsement of US policy in Vietnam but disassociating itself from the implications of that policy was an untenable position'. The Labour left 'condemned the US action and called on the Prime Minister to disassociate the UK completely from US Vietnam policy'. Wilson 'rejected the left-wing demands and reiterated UK support for American policy', placing 'the onus for the continuation of the conflict squarely on North Vietnam'.³³

Wilson practically apologised to the President after the dissociation: some 'actions and statements of ours in the past few days have not been helpful'. He spoke of the pressure he was under 'to acknowledge that the logic of disagreeing with this particular operation would be a total denunciation of the whole of your Vietnam policy'. Wilson had rejected this view, 'not only because I distrust the motives of those who put this argument forward, but because their argument itself is balls'.³⁴ The vivid language did not mollify the President, who was deeply weary of the war in Vietnam. As Patrick Dean noted, he regarded the conflict as a 'lamentable diversion of money and effort from the more worthwhile task of building the "Great Society"'.³⁵ Johnson sought Bruce's opinion to try to understand the British dissociation. On 11 July, the Ambassador explained that as 'a political animal, highly skilled, intelligent, a master at infighting', Wilson was 'usually adept at making ambiguous public statements to serve his political aims'. However, in December, while 'reporting to the House of Commons ... on his trip to Washington', he said 'that he had discussed the bombing of North Vietnam with the President' and that the UK opposed the bombing of 'the major cities in North Vietnam'. In subsequent months, Wilson had 'repeated this so frequently to meet tactical pressures from within his own party that ... he had left himself no room for manoeuvre'. When Wilson first

took office in October 1964, said Bruce, 'he accepted the principle of the continuity of British foreign policy, which was based upon the long established friendly relationship with the US'. This meant that Wilson was 'prepared to cooperate with the United States on major American policies in a measure that would not always be popular' in Britain. 'Nevertheless, to counter the charge of being a mere puppet or satellite of the US, HMG would, from time to time, assert its independence by taking exception to certain details of policies to which he is ready to give general support'.³⁶

Bruce said that, to Wilson, Vietnam posed 'in acute form the problem of defining acceptable limits of Anglo-American cooperation'. American moves had 'increased his fears of escalation and certainly cut against the grain of his belief that there could be no clear cut military victory in Vietnam'. Wilson believed, too, that 'a basis for a political settlement must be found, and he was increasingly frustrated' that it had proved elusive. The Prime Minister's 'internal party problem was not only one of dealing with the small band of leftist militants who long ago wanted him to break unconditionally with the US'. He did not have 'much to fear from them, despite their noise and pressures', but when 'the dissidence over Vietnam widened to include a substantial number of Labour MPs in the centre and on the right-wing ... the problem of party management threatened to get out of hand'. Wilson was forced finally to adopt 'the view of those elements which though generally moderate would not accept unconditional support of US military policy in Vietnam'.³⁷

Bruce added that Wilson could not 'ignore the pressures on him from many sides after the bombing decision without endangering his leadership of the Party'. If all else failed, and 'he did not secure the support that he wanted, he even hinted at dissolution' of Parliament. Wilson 'almost certainly did not believe that the situation would come to that, but it was a possibility'. Summit trips to Moscow and Washington, 'announced at the height of the crisis, were particularly designed as insurance against the extreme possibility of going to the country, and also more immediately as a means of isolating the extremists and forcing the waverers to fall into line'. As well as needing to 'placate dissidents by a show of independence, the PM was, I think, influenced by an exaggerated idea of his possible effectiveness as a mediator with the Soviet authorities'. Bruce advised that Johnson should 'content himself with remarking on his disappointment ... and say he expects continuing fidelity to the promise of adherence to our overall objectives in Vietnam'. The President could 'add that after reviewing the debates in the House of Commons he had noticed that Heath, Douglas-Home and others of the Opposition had been much stronger advocates for American policy than Wilson's government'. Bruce concluded that given Wilson's 'overriding desire and necessity' to get along with the President, 'or to restore any impairment' of relations, 'he will be doubly careful to try to avoid saying anything embarrassing to us'.³⁸ Dean wrote to Michael Palliser again on 2 July, reporting Walt Rostow's further efforts since the dissociation to make it clear

that Wilson should not antagonise the White House any further. Rostow told Dean that the President 'fully realised that the Prime Minister had got political difficulties which had to be handled carefully'. Nevertheless 'the visit must not be used in any way to undercut the President's position, particularly on American soil'. The Prime Minister had to realise, Rostow emphasised to Dean, that the object of his trip 'must be to strengthen the President and that the visit must not be used for political purposes at home'.³⁹ After talking to British representatives, Rostow informed the President on 3 July that he had 'worked on the British Ambassador here' and that 'David Bruce has talked ... to Wilson'. The Americans had been as 'bare-knuckled ... as diplomacy permits and Wilson appears to have the point loud and clear'.⁴⁰

On 2 July, George Ball advised Bruce that the President was willing to meet Wilson on 29 July, but only on 'two conditions: careful preparation for the meeting and that the Prime Minister, whatever his pressures at home, not come unless what he says here in public and in private reinforces the President's position on Vietnam'.⁴¹ On 3 July, Ball explained further to Bruce that Wilson's 'preparations' include expressing 'strongly optimistic views about the progress of free Asia', such as 'the forthcoming elections in South Vietnam ... and the progress being made toward improving economic conditions in Southeast Asia'. Ball said that the Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt had given the Americans fulsome support on a recent visit. This had been a 'great shot in the arm', and there was no reason, argued Ball, why Wilson's visit 'could not have the same public effect without any way compromising the position he feels compelled to take in Britain on specific aspects of the South Vietnamese conflict'.⁴² On 4 July, Bruce saw Wilson, who more or less pleaded to be able to see Johnson: he was 'absolutely confident he could avoid any embarrassment to the President during his visit to Washington'. Wilson emphasised that he was 'a politician and, as such, highly sensitive to other statesmen's concerns. He has never yet embarrassed [Johnson], and would on no account do so'. Wilson wanted the President to be absolutely sure that 'he does not believe in making a mess on another fellow's carpet'. The 'showdown with his own party will soon be over, and though it will be a violent episode, he has no doubt of winning'. Bruce regarded Wilson's 'assurances' as 'sincere and determined'.⁴³

Wilson and the problems of British decline

On 3 February, Dean told the Foreign Office that on the matter of British defence policy there was 'a sense of relief' in Washington that 'we have managed to make such a good showing with what is by American standards a very modest sum of resources, and that we are not in quite such a hurry to implement the more drastic measures as they had feared'. So far as the Far East was concerned, Washington believed that Britain's 'physical withdrawal from the South-east Asian mainland would have profound psychological repercussions on Asian

and indeed on American opinion and create a climate which would fatally weaken their position in Vietnam'. There was however, 'a deep satisfaction that Her Majesty's Government is prepared to remain committed to Indo-Pacific defence'.⁴⁴ In a further letter to the Foreign Office on 16 February, Patrick Dean wondered 'whether it is still the Prime Minister's intention to communicate with the President', in the light of possible developments stemming from the ongoing British Defence Review. Dean realised that although 'the Prime Minister has many other preoccupations (and so has the President), I think there would be advantage, if only to keep the record straight'. Such a message could 'recapitulate the basic principles underlying Her Majesty's Government's 1970 defence plans ... and show the extent to which we have responded to American preoccupations'. It could 'also serve as a vehicle for reminding the President of the heavy balance of payments burden which we are accepting in maintaining our world-wide defence role and the continuing need for United States cooperation in mitigating its effects on our external financial position'.⁴⁵ Wilson wrote to the President the same day, stressing the continuing British commitment to a global peacekeeping role alongside the United States: 'The Cabinet have now taken their decisions and these will become public knowledge when the White Paper on Defence is published on 22 February ... our decisions follow very closely the outlines I gave you of our provisional thinking when we met last December'. The adjustments 'provide a sound basis for our continued cooperation which, as you know, is at the heart of all our overseas policies'.⁴⁶ The Defence White Paper of 22 February indicated that Britain would remain a world power, but acknowledged that although the country would retain a presence in Singapore and Malaysia, it would reduce its forces when Malaysia's confrontation with Indonesia ended. The British base at Aden would be abandoned by 1968, but British forces in the Persian Gulf would be augmented to some extent. There would be some cutbacks in the Mediterranean. The UK would keep its 51,000 man British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) intact, consistent with its NATO obligations, provided that the German government was prepared to offset fully the foreign exchange costs of the BAOR.⁴⁷

For Wilson, defence issues were entwined with his concern for Britain's standing in the eyes of the Americans. He told his Cabinet on 17 July 1966 that a 'complete withdrawal of forces from one of the three main theatres – Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East – would be contrary to the commitments we had indicated, when discussing the results of the Defence Review with our allies, that we would continue to discharge'. A large withdrawal 'from any of these theatres could hardly fail to do incalculable harm to our international standing'.⁴⁸ But as 1966 drew on, fewer of Wilson's colleagues accepted his thinking. Housing Minister Richard Crossman complained that Wilson had delusions of grandeur: 'it's all a fantastic illusion. How can anyone build up Britain now as a great power East of Suez when we can't even maintain the sterling area and some of our leaders are having the idea of creeping inside Europe in order to

escape from our independence outside?' Wilson was 'trying to be some kind of British de Gaulle, but, unlike the General, at the same time he wants to nestle under the shadow of the USA and restore Ernest Bevin's concept of the special relationship'.⁴⁹ Anthony Wedgwood Benn argued that 'this country is dependent on the United States and cannot act in a military sense apart from the United States'. Referring to certain allegations of British dependence on the United States, Benn said that for the 'right wing of the Labour Party to say this is significant, since it has been denied so often in the past'. Benn contended that 'most people realise now that a continuation of permanent bases East of Suez is bunk, or at any rate a declining policy'.⁵⁰

On 9 June, the US Embassy noted the increasing opposition to the government's East of Suez policy. Although 'left-wing elements oppose government policy on doctrinal grounds, the size and character of the dissidents suggest that current dissatisfactions are not predominantly doctrinal or ideological'. These dissatisfactions stemmed primarily 'from most middle-of-the road and right-wing Labour MPs who oppose the continuation of a British role in the east, from a conviction that the UK has no longer the economic resources to uphold an independent position in this theatre'. Although the Labour government was not 'likely to make precipitate or unilateral decisions', the 'differences over East of Suez policy, now acutely focused in parliamentary Labour circles and reflected in both the Conservative and Liberal Parties, could impose a serious strain on the Anglo-American alliance'.⁵¹ On occasions even Wilson seemed to doubt the viability of the posture East of Suez. On 10 June, he told Dean Rusk that preserving this role 'involved deep domestic problems'. In 1965 he had 'got away pretty well with a tough line on Vietnam but the situation was now changing'. The Vietnamese lobby was 'no longer standing alone and a big fight was brewing not only with the pacifists but with the sophisticated Europeanists'. The East of Suez commitment faced 'heavy attack and a much more dangerous line-up against the British policy was now coming about'. Both of 'these factions were afraid of Britain getting dug in Southeast Asia in a policy of containment of China'. It was 'not only the pacifists and the Europeanists who opposed the East of Suez policy, but the economists, who felt that more foreign exchange was seeping away than was justified by British interest in the area'.⁵²

Britain's economic difficulties required firm remedies. On 15 July, Henry Fowler of the US Treasury advised James Callaghan, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, that 'if the United Kingdom is to avoid devaluation, to maintain the pound as a reserve currency, restore its position, and avoid the risk of dangerous dislocation of international financial affairs, much stronger stabilisation measures than those presently invoked are required'.⁵³ This Wilson realised. On 20 July, he told Johnson that the next budget 'must have – and will have – a very hard disinflationary impact'. It would mean 'a total standstill for the next six months on prices and incomes and a further six months period of very severe restraint' in that field. In order to bear the sacrifices, the public needed 'to be

satisfied that they are not carrying a disproportionate share of the general cost of Western defence'. But Wilson wanted to reassure the President that despite Britain's financial problems 'any cut of this nature should not affect the basic lines of foreign policy on which the defence review was founded'. Cuts in overseas spending 'must be consistent with our international commitments and with our common policy in defence of Western interests across the world'.⁴⁰ The budget, announced on 20 July, included a £500 million combination of reduced spending and increased taxes, a wage-price freeze, and cuts in direct overseas spending, including cuts in defence and aid of about £100 million per year.⁵⁵ The budget met with White House approval, with Dean Rusk informing the President on 27 July that it comprised 'the most severe deflationary measures of any postwar British Government'.⁵⁶ Johnson himself told Patrick Dean on 22 July that 'the measures ... were helpful and should succeed'.⁵⁷

Despite these votes of confidence in Washington, more widely 'the immediate reaction to Mr Wilson's measures, especially in the exchange markets, was only lukewarm, reflecting scepticism that he would adhere to a sufficiently deflationary course to meet the problem'.⁵⁸ The budget created as many problems as it solved for Wilson. A State Department analysis of 27 July noted that many of the Labour government's moves 'come down hard on the toes of trade unionists, who are now joining the left-wing back benchers in opposition tactics'. Difficulties over the government's incomes policy had 'brought about the first resignation of a member of his cabinet, Minister of Technology Frank Cousins'. This departure 'represents a visible split in the leadership of the Labour Party ... and raises prospects of a more intensive intra-party opposition'. One of the key issues 'will, of course, be the kind of support Wilson receives from the trade union segment of the Labour Party'. Much of the 'burden of his austerity programme falls upon the average consumers, and the wage-freeze portion hits directly at the working-class, Labour's main electoral support'. Wilson would face continued strong pressures, and would need 'to take the bit in his teeth in the future and push relentlessly forward with programmes, which, like the austerity measures, may be unpopular'. As a 'talented politician' he had managed to 'extricate himself from some tight spots in the past, but ... there comes a time when there is no place to dodge'.⁵⁹

British problems led Washington to see Britain more and more, as Henry Brandon put it, 'with humiliating sadness – her prestige and her power position have not been so low for a long-long time'.⁶⁰ Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defence, Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow still believed that Britain could and should uphold its commitments East of Suez,⁶¹ but on 23 May a composite report from the US Embassy in London had argued that on most 'hard' calculations 'the British appear to have a limited future in international power terms, certainly small indeed if they persist in over-stretching themselves and fail to manage their economy'. Britain 'lacked the material resources, the vantage points, and the leverage to play their own Great Power role, even if economic fortune favours

them'. More than ever before, Britain's foreign policy and international role 'must be tailored to harsh economic imperatives'.⁶²

The Americans had played a critical role in helping to bail out sterling in November 1964 and in August 1965, but throughout 1966 they gave few indications that they might do so again. John Stevens, an economics minister at the US Embassy, explained on 27 July that the 'failure of the exchanges to turn round, the continued doubts about when the United Kingdom economic situation will show clear improvement, as well as the size of the recent exchange losses' led him to believe that 'opposition to devaluation of sterling at the highest levels' in Washington 'may be changing'. There was a growing feeling, said Stevens, 'that if it has to come, the sooner the better, and in that case the United States dollar can look after itself'. This outlook stemmed in part from the US Defence Department, which felt that 'continued United Kingdom psychological support of the United States in the Far East is of more importance than the sterling rate; some stems from what seems to be an excessively confident feeling' on the part of Henry Fowler, US Secretary to the Treasury, 'that the United States can get their way on international liquidity'. Stevens concluded that 'if there is a real risk of a further heavy run on the pound after the publication of the July figures and of our running out of ammunition, officials cannot be counted upon to suggest spontaneously giving help neither for United States political reasons nor out of fear for what might happen to the United States dollar'.⁶³

On 18 July, Fowler told President Johnson that if Washington continued its pressure on London to remain as a world power, then British economic weakness would simply be exacerbated and prolonged. He noted the most recent sterling troubles: 'Last week's severe losses – \$200 million on Friday alone – followed a month of weakness'. If the British did not take 'severe measures, they very likely will face an avalanche by the end of the week'. Austerity measures would 'solve' Britain's payments problem only 'at the cost of recession now, and over the longer pull, unacceptable unemployment and little or no growth'. Wilson would still face 'the basic problem faced by every British government since the postwar recovery – how to keep his international payments in order, and, at the same time, keep unemployment at a tolerable level and maintain a good rate of growth'. Fowler continued to say that 'there will be great political pressure on him to reduce defence spending – especially East of Suez'. Without such a policy, 'he will be accused of making his unemployed pay for a neo-colonial policy, under pressure from Washington'. If the British strove at all costs short of devaluation to remain a world power, 'it will either cost us a weak Britain and a great deal of balance of payments money, or, even more likely, a weak Britain and eventual devaluation of sterling'.⁶⁴ On 22 July, George Ball tried to persuade the President to try to discourage British claims of a 'special relationship' with the United States, by easing the pressure for a continued British role East of Suez, refusing any further short-term financial support, stressing its willingness to take part in a financial operation that would lead to British

membership in Europe, and helping the British phase out their national nuclear deterrent.⁶⁵

The fourth summit

The auguries for Wilson's visit to Washington, on 29 July, were not favourable. J. A. Thompson of the British Embassy reported on 18 July that Rostow had said that the mood would 'not be particularly cordial', as Johnson had been 'hurt' by the British dissociation over the bombings of North Vietnam. The President even 'wondered why Wilson was coming', and Thompson thought that 'if the main reason for the visit lay in domestic political considerations the President would not be sympathetic'. Francis Bator had indicated that Johnson had two criteria for the visit: the effect it would have on 'his big problem, Vietnam', and the degree of confidence he could feel in 'Britain controlling her affairs in such a way that she could play a useful and important role' in the world. So far as Vietnam was concerned, Johnson hoped that Wilson would 'express general support' for his policy; state that 'the conflict and its continuation was the fault of Hanoi'; and refuse 'to say anything substantive about the bombing of the oil installations'. However, Johnson wanted to be confident that 'it was not primarily Vietnam that the Prime Minister wanted to talk about; rather his object was to continue the exposition he had given last December of Britain's role in the world'.⁶⁶ Bator also told Thompson that 'Even those advisers who are most friendly to Britain are expressing doubts about the ability of Britain to sustain her chosen role ... [that] the British economic position was trickling away and that this would continue'. Wilson 'should convince the President against the doubters that Her Majesty's Government had all the threads of the situation in their hands', as Johnson feared that Britain 'might lose control of events and cease to play an important role in the world'. A few days later, though, Patrick Dean recounted to the Foreign Office his latest conversation with the President. Johnson was 'most relaxed and spoke of the admiration and respect which he had for the Prime Minister'. He said he was 'much looking forward to talking with him and to learning from him how best to deal with the domestic, financial and economic problems which were very much the same in the two countries'. Sooner or later 'the Americans might have to take the same sorts of steps and he thought the Prime Minister could tell him a lot of useful things'.⁶⁷

Wilson was scheduled to spend one hour alone with Johnson from 11.00–12.00 a.m., noon–1.00 p.m. with Rusk, McNamara, Fowler, Ball and others, lunch at 1.00 p.m. with forty-four guests, and at 3.00 p.m. there would be a continuation of the meeting with advisers.⁶⁸ It became obvious that Wilson's chief purpose was to strengthen his ties with Washington, post 'dissociation'. His Foreign Office briefs, for example, presented Vietnam as but eleventh of the sixteen possible topics (ranging from NATO to Latin America) for discussion.⁶⁹ Vietnam was not ignored in the talks though: while in the White House Wilson

'affirmed his strong support for US policy in Southeast Asia, Vietnam in particular ... disagreement on particular actions did not mean any weakening of support for general policy'. He also stated to the Americans that Britain was 'more useful to you, as well as to the world, as an ally rather than as a satellite'.⁷⁰ The country would 'continue to carry its share of the load' East of Suez. He said that Britain was interested in joining the Common Market, 'but not on French terms', as Paris would 'insist that the UK break its ties with the US, or at the very least ... abandon their East of Suez position'. Britain did 'not want to become a narrow, Europe-oriented country without an Atlantic role'.⁷¹ Wilson stated his 'absolute and unshakeable commitment to solve the balance of payments problem without devaluation ... We mean business'.⁷² The Prime Minister added that the cost of the British troops in Germany 'presented a difficult problem', but he received Johnson's assurances: the US would 'purchase ships in the UK to the value of \$23 million ... Also, some \$15 million would accrue to the UK from shifts of some air units out of France to Great Britain. In addition, we would be buying Rolls Royce A7 engines. All of this might add up to \$100 million'.⁷³

The President was so impressed by Wilson's affirmations in support of Britain's world role that he 'discarded his original speech for the lunch and had it considerably strengthened during the period between the end of the private talk and lunch'.⁷⁴ The revised toast was rhetorical and full of hyperbole, but it was significant all the same. It was designed, in the light of Britain's economic and defence problems, to consolidate Wilson's commitment to the Washington axis and to give financial markets a degree of confidence in Labour's management of the British economy:

A nation that has given us the tongue of Shakespeare, the faith of a Milton, and the courage of a Churchill must always be a force for progress; and influence for good, in the affairs of men. In World War II, Mr. Prime Minister, England saved herself by fortitude and the world by example. You personally are asking of the British people today the same fortitude – the same resolve – that turned the tide in those days.⁷⁵

Wilson was, the President continued with a hint of sarcasm, 'gallant and hardy ... a man of mettle ... a leader whose own enterprise and courage will show the way'.⁷⁶ Dean Rusk was 'rather surprised at the warmth' of Johnson's toast,⁷⁷ while a State Department official is alleged to have said of the address that 'there has been nothing like it since the days of Dien Bien Phu, when successive French Ministers were compared to Lafayette in the hope of persuading them to go on fighting in Indochina'.⁷⁸ On 3 August, a pleased Patrick Dean assessed that the 'general feeling, both among officials and non-officials, is that the visit was highly successful, certainly more so than people had been expecting'. A number of people had told Dean 'how well the Prime Minister must have handled the President to have obtained such a satisfactory result and there is ... general pleasure on almost all sides that the close and friendly relations established here last December have not only been preserved but strengthened'. Apparently, the President had said of Wilson that 'I really do like that man'.⁷⁹ On 6 August,

Dean suggested further that there were several reasons for Johnson's effusiveness towards the Prime Minister. Firstly, there was 'an obvious interest from the American point of view in doing anything possible to reinforce international confidence in the Prime Minister and HMG, and, hence in sterling'. Secondly:

although the President must have known that he could not expect anything of major importance in the way of additional help or new commitments East of Suez, the negative aim of ensuring that HMG ... do not withdraw their general support for the United States over Vietnam and in relation to Southeast Asia generally, acquired an almost dramatic importance when the President began to reflect seriously upon the potential consequences of Britain drifting seriously out of line.⁸⁰

The British dissociation had 'rattled' the President. It was 'extremely important from the point of view of American standing with world opinion that the leading socialist-governed country in the world should support their objectives in Southeast Asia'. Thirdly, the Administration might soon face 'the need for fairly stringent economic measures to control the growing inflationary tendencies in the American economy'. Johnson 'may therefore see a strong vested interest in praising the Prime Minister's courage, in endorsing HMG's economic policies and, of course, in the success of a programme of retrenchment which is going to hurt quite a large section of the British public'. Underneath the President's 'fair words, which were I am sure genuinely meant, there was a good deal of American self-interest in the whole exercise'. Certainly, 'the personal rapport between the President and the Prime Minister was reaffirmed and I have no doubt that the President genuinely enjoys seeing the Prime Minister and talking about their mutual problems'. He also felt 'an admiration for the Prime Minister's powers of exposition and conviction'. In addition, 'the meeting brought out quite clearly that both the Americans and ourselves badly need each other, and that although our financial troubles make our present position rather parlous, the Americans are themselves facing equally dangerous potential difficulties'.⁸¹ Yet Johnson's behaviour would soon suggest that he felt little sympathy for the British, whatever Washington and London might have had in common.

Notes

- 1 PRO, PREM 13/1064, Brandon to Wilson, 24 May 1966.
- 2 NARA, Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961-66 (66 D 294), UK Johnson 64-66, 'UK Officials' Correspondence to President Johnson', undated.
- 3 Alec Douglas-Home had resigned on 22 July 1965.
- 4 Wilson to Johnson, 27 February 1966, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968*, vol. XII, *Western Europe* (Washington: USGPO, 2001), p. 532.
- 5 NARA, Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961-66 (66 D 294), Pres. Correspondence: UK/Wilson to President, Johnson to Wilson, 27 February 1966.
- 6 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 209, UK Memos Vol. VIII 1/66-7/66, State Department Intelligence Note, 27 July 1966.
- 7 PRO, FO 371/186311, DV 103145/19, 'Vietnam and the American People', 26 January

- 1966.
- 8 NARA, Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961–66 (66 D 294), Pres. Correspondence: UK/Wilson to President, Wilson to Johnson, 9 February 1966.
 - 9 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 27 Viet S, 2.2.66, Embassy to State, 2 February 1966.
 - 10 Wilson to Johnson, 24 May 1966, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, p. 533.
 - 11 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 15–1 UK, UK Head of State/Executive Branch 2.8.66, Embassy to State, 23 June 1966.
 - 12 Johnson to Wilson, 27 May 1966, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, p. 534.
 - 13 NARA, Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961–66 (66 D 294), Pres. Correspondence: UK/Wilson to President, Wilson to Johnson, 3 June 1966.
 - 14 Johnson to Wilson, 14 June 1966, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. IV *Vietnam 1966* (Washington: USGPO, 1998), pp. 426–7.
 - 15 PRO, FO 371/186313, DV 103145/140, Dean to Gore-Booth, 30 December 1965.
 - 16 PRO, PREM 13/1274, 'Note for the Record', 15 June 1966.
 - 17 See, for example, 'Summary Notes of the 559th Meeting of the National Security Council', 17 June 1966, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. IV, pp. 437–44.
 - 18 NARA, Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961–66 (66 D 294), Pres. Correspondence: UK/Wilson to President, Johnson to Wilson, 23 June 1966.
 - 19 Note 3, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. IV, p. 451.
 - 20 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 8, Rostow Vol. 5 5/27–6/10.66 (1/3), Bruce to Johnson, 2 June 1966.
 - 21 NARA, Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961–66 (66 D 294), Pres. Correspondence: UK/Wilson to President, Wilson to Johnson, 10 June 1966.
 - 22 Johnson to Wilson, 14 June 1966, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. IV, pp. 426–7.
 - 23 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 7 UK, 6.1.66, Rusk to Ball (from US Embassy Oslo to State Department), 3 June 1966.
 - 24 PRO, PREM 13/1274, Maclehorse (Foreign Office) to Palliser, 15 June 1966.
 - 25 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 9, Rostow Vol. 9 – July 16–31, Rostow to Johnson, 28 July 1966.
 - 26 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 8, Rostow Vol. 6 – June 11–20, Rostow to Johnson, 17 June 1966.
 - 27 PRO, PREM 13/1083, Dean to Palliser, 22 June 1966.
 - 28 *Ibid.*
 - 29 Editorial note, *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. XII, p. 695.
 - 30 PRO, PREM 13/1083, Dean to Palliser, 22 June 1966.
 - 31 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 2–1 UK, Joint Weekas UK 4.14.66, Embassy to State, 1 July 1966.
 - 32 PRO, PREM 13/1083, Dean to Palliser, 2 July 1966.
 - 33 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 2–1 UK, Joint Weekas UK 4.14.66, Embassy to State, 1 July 1966.
 - 34 LBJL, NSF: Files of W. W. Rostow, Box 12, Wilson Visit, Wilson to Johnson, 1 July 1966. So far as Wilson's 'undiplomatic' language was concerned, Bruce said he felt 'partly responsible for ... Prime Minister's use of [this] rather colourful word. He told me ... he had first intended to say "bull". Did I think the President would be offended if he substituted "balls"? (The latter term has greater currency in Britain than the former.) ... I was sure the President would not be disturbed by this picturesque description.' NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 7 UK, 7.4.66, Embassy to State, 4 July 1966.
 - 35 PRO, FO 371/18003, AU 1022/7, Dean to Foreign Office, 18 May 1966.
 - 36 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 12, Wilson Visit, Bruce to State, 11 July 1966.
 - 37 *Ibid.*
 - 38 *Ibid.*

- 39 PRO, PREM 13/1083, Dean to Palliser, 2 July 1966.
- 40 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 12, Wilson Visit, Rostow to Johnson, 4 July 1966.
- 41 Note 2, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. XII, p. 538.
- 42 NARA, Subject-Numeric Files 1964-66, POL 27 Viet S, 7.3.66, Ball to Bruce, 3 July 1966.
- 43 Embassy to State, 4 July 1966, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. XII, p. 538.
- 44 PRO, PREM 13/801, Dean to Foreign Office, 3 February 1966.
- 45 PRO, PREM 13/802, Dean to Foreign Office, 16 February 1966.
- 46 NARA, Presidential and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961-66 (66 D 294), Pres. Correspondence: UK/Wilson to President, Wilson to Johnson, 16 February 1965.
- 47 Cmnd. 2901, *Statement on the Defence Estimates 1966 Part I The Defence Review* (London: HMSO, 1966), pp. 4-11.
- 48 PRO, CAB 128/41, Cabinet minutes, 14 July 1966.
- 49 Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, vol. I, *Minister of Housing 1964-66* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), p. 540, entry for 15 June 1966.
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- 69 PRO, PREM 13/1262, W. K. Reid (Foreign Office) to Palliser, 'Briefs for the Prime Minister's Visit to Washington, July 1966', 11 July 1966.
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- 72 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 216, UK: PM Wilson Visit Briefing 7/29/66, Bator to Johnson, 29 July 1966. For a British account of the talks, see PRO, PREM 13/1083.
- 73 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 216, UK: PM Wilson Visit Briefing 7/29/66 (1/2), 'UK Military Attachments', 29 July 1966. These 'deals' had been arranged primarily between the respective staffs of Wilson and Johnson. As Alan P. Dobson notes, the Americans were generous on matters such as these. In order to achieve a rough balance between mutual defence spending in each other's country, Washington agreed in February 1966 to buy \$325 million worth of additional arms from Britain; helped it sell a further \$400 million worth in the Middle East; and set up a credit facility to help with the British purchase of US aircraft – significant payments for which were postponed till 1968. Alan P. Dobson, *The Politics of the Anglo-American Economic Special Relationship* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), p. 219.
- 74 PRO, PREM 13/1262, Dean to Maclehorse, 3 August 1966.
- 75 PRO, PREM 13/1083, Wilson–Johnson meeting, 29 July 1966. The reference to Churchill attracted much newspaper attention. Francis Bator advised White House staff that in their dealings with the press that if 'the subject comes up, or can be raised in context, we can usefully point out that: the President thinks very highly of the PM ("man of mettle"); the President did *not* compare the PM to Churchill – he said that a nation which produced a Shakespeare, Milton and Churchill "could not think small"; the President did say that, as in World War II, England is blessed with gallant and hardy leadership; the whole thing is a silly tempest in a teapot, cooked up by reporters who didn't read the text very carefully'. LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 9, Rostow Vol. 10 August 1–11 1966, 'Harold Wilson versus Winston Churchill', 9 August 1966.
- 76 PRO, PREM 13/1083, Wilson–Johnson meeting, 29 July 1966.
- 77 PRO, PREM 13/1262, Dean to Maclehorse, 3 August 1966.
- 78 Quoted in Konrad Zilliacus, *Labour's Crisis: Its Nature, Cause and Consequence* (privately published pamphlet, 1966), p. 5.
- 79 PRO, PREM 13/1262, Dean to Maclehorse, 3 August 1966.
- 80 PRO, PREM 13/1262, Dean to Palliser, 6 August 1966.
- 81 *Ibid.*

6

A declining relationship, August 1966–September 1967

The period August 1966–September 1967 saw a decline in Wilson's commitment to President Johnson and to the United States, both personally and in the wider context of British foreign policy. In February 1967, the Prime Minister tried to use the visit to London of the Russian leader Alexei Kosygin to bring Hanoi and Washington to the negotiating table over Vietnam. Wilson was sincere – if over-optimistic – in his belief that he and his colleagues could play the role of peace brokers, although it is clear that he also wanted to bolster his standing in the eyes of the critics in Britain of American policy in Vietnam. The Prime Minister's initiative collapsed when the White House toughened its negotiating stance at the eleventh hour, although there had been no real intimations that Hanoi was ready to talk. There were a number of reasons why the White House changed its position, including the fear that the communists would exploit the bombing pause which was central to the phase A–phase B peace formula under which Wilson was operating. Washington also felt little faith in negotiations conducted through third parties and saw Wilson's efforts as essentially self-serving and a distraction from the more important issue of events on the ground in Vietnam. Wilson's treatment by the White House led him to question the value of his relationship with Johnson and Britain's ties with the United States. The British decision in 1966 to seek membership of the EEC strengthened this outlook, as did Britain's planned withdrawal from East of Suez by the mid-1970s. Johnson opposed any announcement of a withdrawal from the region, at least until the United States had succeeded in Vietnam, a position which he stressed in correspondence with the Prime Minister and when Wilson visited Washington on 2 June 1967. However, political opposition at home, economic problems and the turn towards Europe meant that by this stage Wilson had little freedom of choice on the matter. The British government announced its plans for withdrawal on 18 July 1967. This relinquishment of the post-war peacekeeping role alongside the Americans, combined with Wilson's personal disenchantment with the White House, made this period a transitional one in the Anglo-American relationship.

A 'hell of a situation': the phase A–phase B affair

George Brown, the new British Foreign Secretary, was in Moscow in November 1966, when Janusz Lewandowski, the Polish representative of the International Control Commission, was involved in a peacemaking initiative concerning Vietnam. However, Brown could not answer Russian questions about Lewandowski's activities, as Washington 'had failed to inform us' of what was happening, Wilson complained later.¹ He told David Bruce, US Ambassador to London, on 10 January 1967 that this lack of communication raised 'a major issue of confidence in relations between the Foreign Secretary and himself and the President and Mr. Rusk [Secretary of State]'. If he was 'to work with the President then the British Government must be treated more as a partner in things that mattered'.² The Prime Minister anticipated that when Parliament reassembled after the Christmas recess there would be 'much more serious pressure over Vietnam', including 'serious disquiet' in the Labour Party. Although the Government 'did not intend to "dissociate" from United States Government policy', the situation was 'harder to hold, politically, than hitherto'. Public opinion, 'not just on the so-called left-wing, was much more critical of the United States Government' than in 1966. Wilson could 'hold the position', but the Anglo-American relationship might well face strain.³

A State Department analysis on 15 February also noted the continued controversy in Britain about Vietnam. Both the Conservative and the Labour Parties were 'officially committed to general support of United States policy in Vietnam'. This approach presented 'no problem for the Conservatives as they are in the opposition', but Labour's official support presented problems for Wilson. It obliged him to 'bend and shape this general policy to fit specific situations in the light of conditions within his own Party'. British opposition to American activities in Vietnam had 'waxed and waned depending on developments'. Now the opposition was 'at one of its periodic peaks, largely because of the United States' bombing of North Vietnam'. Even those people in Britain, including Wilson, who wanted the United States to succeed in defeating the communists, 'believe that the bombing of North Vietnam does not bring military results commensurate with its high political cost'. British opposition had 'always found its most effective voice in a segment of the Parliamentary Labour Party', though. Labour MPs had 'a natural forum' in the Commons and were able to 'bring pressure to bear directly on the Prime Minister'. This pressure had 'produced some embarrassing moments for US/UK relations, as was the case last April and June when HMG "dissociated" itself from American bombings of the North'. Nevertheless, Wilson had 'demonstrated great political skill' in controlling 'the vociferous critics of American policy ... without making basic alterations in his policy of support for the United States'. His chief argument, 'the one he always draws on when forced to a wall, has been that the Americans are willing to talk peace whereas the other side is not'.⁴

Political pressures, a predilection for high-profile diplomacy and a desire for peace meant that Wilson still wanted to try to help to end the Vietnam War. On 28 November 1966, after visiting London, Washington's Ambassador-at-Large, Averell Harriman, informed Johnson and Rusk that Wilson and Brown were 'anxious to do everything they can to help bring about the end of hostilities in Vietnam'.⁵ Wilson's hopes rose on 2 January 1967, when Johnson told the press of Washington's appreciation for 'the interest of all peace-loving nations in arranging a cease-fire and attempting to bring the disputing parties together to work out a conference where the various views can be exchanged'.⁶ Wilson was especially determined that he should be fully informed about Vietnam for the visit to London of the Russian premier, Alexei Kosygin, in February, as he thought that 'the way that Kosygin had handled the timing and length of his visit' implied that 'the Soviet Government related this to the possibility of a truce'.⁷ He also believed that the Russians had felt more faith in London's role as an intermediary since the British 'dissociation' from the American bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong in June 1966.⁸ Consequently, Wilson asked Bruce on 10 January 'for some American representative' to provide a 'full and frank' briefing on Vietnam and the Administration's attitude towards peace negotiations.⁹

Johnson sent Chester Cooper of the National Security Council to brief the British. On 30 January, he advised Wilson and Brown that Washington's 'direct contact with the North Vietnamese ... was low-level and fragile', but the Americans were 'trying to keep it alive'.¹⁰ Cooper outlined the 'phase A-phase B' peace formula, which had first been mooted by Arthur Goldberg, the US Representative to the United Nations, in September 1966. The formula held that the United States would 'order a cessation of all bombing of North Vietnam the moment we are assured, privately or otherwise, that this step will be answered promptly by a corresponding and appropriate de-escalation on the other side'.¹¹ The adversaries would then enter into detailed talks. Yet Johnson had never felt enthusiastic about phase A-phase B, as he feared that the army of North Vietnam 'might use a bombing halt to improve its military position'.¹² In fact, phase A-phase B was but one of 'at least four de-escalatory proposals' remaining unresolved between the United States and North Vietnam by early 1967.¹³ Owing to growing concerns in the White House that the North Vietnamese would exploit any bombing pause, Johnson abandoned the phase A-phase B formula when he wrote to Ho Chi Minh, the leader of North Vietnam, on 8 February. The President offered to stop bombing 'only as soon as ... infiltration into South Vietnam by land and sea *has stopped*'.¹⁴ Johnson gave a broad outline to Wilson of the letter to Ho, but when the Prime Minister asked for a copy he was informed that it was 'inappropriate' to provide one because of the need for secrecy on all direct communications with Hanoi.¹⁵ The White House did not even tell Cooper – who was to remain in London for the duration of the Kosygin visit – or Bruce exactly what Johnson had told Ho.¹⁶

On Monday 6 February, Wilson had outlined the original version of the phase A–phase B formula to Kosygin. Cooper advised the White House that the optimistic Wilson had formed the impression from the Russian premier that North Vietnam was ‘ready to negotiate’. Wilson believed that Kosygin was ‘deeply concerned about the state of Communist China and the threat it represented, and willing, apparently, to underwrite Hanoi’s commitment to talk if we stopped the bombing’. Through Cooper, at 7.35 p.m. that evening Wilson ‘signalled that he wished to talk to the President on the telephone’.¹⁷ The message first reached Walt Rostow, the ‘hawkish’ National Security Adviser, who did not share the Prime Minister’s excitement. Rostow advised Johnson that ‘We have a problem: real, but soluble’. The British ‘took our proposal ... and put it into A–B form: first bombing halt, then simultaneous stopping of infiltration’.¹⁸ Johnson, who was engaged in a Congressional briefing, asked Rostow ‘to telephone 10 Downing Street and tell [Wilson’s Foreign Office aide] Michael Palliser ... that we were not prepared to accept talks in exchange for a cessation of bombing North Vietnam’. The Vietnamese would have to make their own sacrifice towards peace before the United States could engage in any discussions. In response, Wilson asked the White House for an ‘alternative proposition’ for Kosygin to pass to Hanoi. Johnson ‘came down to the Situation Room’ of the White House at about 9.00 p.m. Washington time, to discuss the matter. After talking to Rusk, McNamara (Secretary of Defence) and Rostow, he then ‘retired to his bedroom’ while his advisers attempted to draft a peace formula for British use with Kosygin. The message for Wilson was ‘then taken to the President’s bedroom; revised by him; and dispatched directly to the Prime Minister at about midnight Washington time’.¹⁹

Johnson believed that any peace negotiations were more likely to prosper if they took place directly between the Americans and the North Vietnamese,²⁰ so he tried to dampen Wilson’s enthusiasm for peacemaking. The President suggested to Wilson that the communists were hostile to peace moves: last year the United States had ‘agreed to meet with the North Vietnamese under Polish auspices but nothing came of it’. Washington had ‘stopped bombing in the region of Hanoi but we have seen neither a corresponding military step on their side nor a use of existing channels to get on with the discussions’. Since 23 December the North Vietnamese had received a number of ‘messages from us but we have not had any replies of substance’. American representatives had told Hanoi that they were ‘prepared to take additional military measures of de-escalation similar to the limitation of bombing on the Hanoi perimeter’. There was no reply to this offer. Johnson said that Washington was ‘ready for private or public talks with Hanoi’, but all the previous American contacts had given ‘no impression from them as to the substance of the issues which must be resolved as a part of a peaceful settlement’. Although he was not explicit on the point, Johnson disdained the phase A–phase B formula under which Wilson was still operating: Washington could not accept ‘the exchange of guarantee of safe haven for North

Vietnam merely for discussions which thus far have no form or content, during which they could expand their military operations without limit'.²¹ Palliser told Wilson of Cooper's belief that in its pessimism the message was 'pure Rostow' and that 'if it had originated in the State Department rather than from Walt, the tone would have been substantially different'.²² Despite the tenor of the President's message, Wilson was not discouraged, and pursued the topic of Vietnam with Kosygin several times that week. On Friday 10 February, Wilson informed the President that in public, Kosygin 'took a hard line on Vietnam and on all the sinful enormities of American policies, and a very gentle line on denunciation of China', but in private he was 'less tough on Vietnam, more selective in his criticism of America and quite uninhibited about China'. Kosygin regarded China as 'an organised military dictatorship' which sought to 'enslave Vietnam and the whole of Asia'.²³

Wilson wanted to make 'absolutely certain' that his understanding of the US position on peace talks was fully 'approved by the Americans'. He invited Bruce and Cooper to draft a letter to hand to the Russians, to ensure that it reflected the American position on the prospect of peace negotiations.²⁴ On 10 February, Bruce and Cooper transmitted to the State Department the peace terms that the British intended to pass to the Russians. The terms included the phase A–phase B formula: 'The United States will stop bombing North Vietnam as soon as they are assured that infiltration from North Vietnam to South Vietnam *will stop*'.²⁵ When the telegram arrived, Rusk was 'tied up in a lunch with the King of Morocco and the signing of a treaty with him', with the result that 'the meeting to formulate the requested response could not take place until about 3.15 p.m.'. At Johnson's instruction, Rostow told the Cabinet Secretary Burke Trend at Downing Street that Washington 'would transmit a reply but we could not quite meet the 10.30 (London time) deadline and they might have to transmit it in writing somewhat later'. Johnson 'had every reason to think nothing would be transmitted to Kosygin' until Washington had replied.²⁶ For reasons that remain obscure, Cooper and Bruce gained the impression that the formula was acceptable to the White House.²⁷ That evening, Bruce handed the 'validated' text to Wilson. In Wilson's account, the Ambassador is alleged to have said that the Wilson–Kosygin initiative was 'going to be the biggest diplomatic coup of the century'. This was probably Wilson's own thought, not that of the more realistic Bruce, but, regardless, the text was passed to Kosygin, and, by now, a copy had reached the White House. Fatefully, at 10.00 p.m. British time Rostow phoned London to say that Johnson wanted the text for Kosygin to be redrafted. A 'new text would come over the White House–Downing Street teleprinter, starting now, and should be the one to be used with the Russians', Rostow said. If the earlier text had been handed over, then 'the new text should be substituted'.²⁸ Cooper noted that in the new text from Washington the 'sequence of phase A and phase B had been reversed, and the whole formula had been distorted'.²⁹ The new text held that the United States would 'order a cessation of bombing of

North Vietnam as soon as they were assured that infiltration from North Vietnam to south Vietnam *had stopped*'. The attention of the British was finally 'drawn to the difference between their sequence and the one envisioned by the US in the President's letter to Ho'.³⁰ The new, tougher formula had to be given to Kosygin, who was by then catching a train for a visit to Scotland.³¹

Bruce and Cooper reported to Washington that Wilson and Brown, embarrassed and angry at the change of tenses in respect to the stoppage of bombings, subjected them to a 'stormy session' of complaints about the latest message from the White House.³² Bruce and Cooper were themselves perplexed, and struggled to explain the change to the British.³³ As Washington had not objected to the original version of the phase A–phase B formula earlier in the week, Wilson and Brown had 'assumed they were on safe ground'. But now the ground had 'shifted [from] under them'. They demanded to know why, if Washington had told Hanoi that the United States was willing to stop bombing only as soon as infiltration into South Vietnam had *already stopped*, 'why did we not inform them of this?'³⁴ Wilson was deeply embittered about what he described as the American exercise in 'switch-selling'. Cooper reported the Prime Minister's conclusion that:

Washington did not know what it was doing from one day to the next, or that Washington knew what it was doing but did not wish to keep the British informed, or that Washington was consciously trying to lead him up the garden path by tightening its negotiations posture while letting the British proceed on the basis of an assumption that Washington was in fact ready to reach a settlement.³⁵

The Prime Minister felt that 'his credibility ... was now badly damaged'. If he could not reach an agreement with Kosygin in their next meeting – at Chequers on Sunday – 'it would largely be the fault of the United States because of its shifting position'. He warned that he 'might be forced at some point to say this publicly' and to take a much more 'independent position with respect to Vietnam'. Anglo-American relations 'could never be the same', he said bitterly.³⁶ He also reflected that 'the situation had become so confused by the misunderstandings which had arisen that he felt there was an urgent need to re-establish a personal relationship with the President'.³⁷ But Bruce dissuaded him from flying to the White House to see Johnson: 'it would not be wise for the Prime Minister to dash off to Washington ... since it would appear to be an act of panic and hysteria'.³⁸

Wilson managed to restrain himself and to collect his thoughts. He expressed 'considerable anguish about the shift in tense'³⁹ in a telegram to the President despatched on Sunday 12 February: 'You will realise what a hell of a situation I am in for my last day of talks with Kosygin ... I have to re-establish trust because not only will he have doubts about my credibility but he will have lost credibility in Hanoi and possibly among his colleagues'. Wilson faced 'very great difficulties' on the 'vitally important question of whether' as he had 'told him a cessation of bombing depends on a prior secret assurance by Hanoi that

infiltration will stop', or 'will only take place after infiltration has stopped'. Wilson told Johnson that 'You will realise that on lunchtime on Friday [Kosygin] suddenly bit hard on what I said to him, namely that all that was required was a private assurance that infiltration would stop'. He 'bit on this because he clearly knew as I did not, that your message to Hanoi was the tougher version which requires a prior stopping of infiltration before bombing could cease'. Kosygin thought Wilson was 'telling him something new', while in reality Wilson was 'merely repeating what I had told him earlier with as I thought your authority'. Wilson could not 'get out of this position' by saying 'either that I am not in your confidence or that there was a sudden and completely unforeseeable change which as a loyal satellite I must follow'. He and Brown had discussed this 'dilemma for some three hours with Chet [Cooper] and David [Bruce]'.⁴⁰

In the absence of any real alternative, Wilson decided to stand by 'the document which I handed to Kosygin at 7.00 p.m. GMT on Friday before I received Rostow's message for transmission to Kosygin'. Wilson could only 'say to Kosygin that if he will go along with' the original version of phase A-phase B, 'and press it on Hanoi, I will similarly press it on you'. If Kosygin agreed, said Wilson, 'then I must press our line on you and if it is impossible for you to accept, we shall have to reason together about the situation which will then arise'. In view of the 'clear breakdown in communication and understanding which has occurred this week, and the need for the fullest understanding in the future, we ought to meet very soon'. Wilson sent another message to the President that day, describing in more detail the misunderstanding between him and Washington. He complained that if the White House was going to repudiate the original phase A-phase B formula, 'as indeed it was [repudiated] on Friday night by Rostow's telegram, I cannot understand why I was not told earlier'. Kosygin would find this matter 'even more difficult to understand'.⁴¹

Cooper tried to placate Wilson by telling him that 'the President and top Washington officials had been sufficiently concerned about his problems to have met through Saturday night'.⁴² Indeed, Wilson's two messages of 12 February were 'considered in the Situation Room' of the White House by Johnson, Rusk, McNamara and Rostow, though less out of sympathy for the Prime Minister's predicament than from the need to 'assure that the expected failure of the Wilson-Kosygin talks could not legitimately be blamed' on American policy. Finally, the President sent a telegram at 3.36 a.m. on Sunday morning, 'explaining temperately' the American position to Wilson.⁴³ Johnson dismissed Wilson's argument that 'the matter hangs on the tense of verbs'. Hanoi had received the phase A-phase B formula 'from the Poles' in 1966, but the North Vietnamese had not shown more than a 'flicker of interest for more than two months'. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese military 'build-up continues and they have used three periods of no bombing (Christmas, New Year and Tet) for large-scale movement and preparation of their forces for further military action'. Johnson stressed that 'we have had nothing yet from Hanoi. They receive our messages

– but thus far it has been a one-way conversation'. Many intermediaries had 'attempted, from time to time, to negotiate with us. Everyone seems to wish to negotiate except Hanoi.' Johnson wished that 'someone would produce a real live North Vietnamese prepared to talk', and complained that Kosygin had failed to transmit even 'one word from Hanoi'. The United States 'cannot stop the bombing while three (possibly four) divisions dash south from the DMZ [Demilitarised Zone across the 17th parallel] before their promise is to take effect'. The problem was that no peace formula 'can be satisfactory to us – and perhaps to Hanoi – unless there is clarity about two matters': firstly, 'the timing of a cessation of bombing, cessation of infiltration, and no further augmentation of forces', and, secondly, 'how assurance in the matter of infiltration will be established'.⁴⁴

Wilson told Cooper that he was 'mollified by the tone of the President's message and said he had "muted" the message he ... sent to Washington later in the morning'.⁴⁵ In this message Wilson expressed 'full agreement' to the President 'about the grave danger of a PAVN [North Vietnamese army] rush southward if there is an interval of even two or three days between the stoppage of bombing and the stopping of infiltration'. He had been 'considering an alternative way of securing the required guarantee, namely that the prior two-way assurance should contain a time-table if possible underwritten by or communicated through the Russians'. The United States might 'agree in advance to stop the bombing in return for Hanoi's prior assurance that they would stop the infiltration, say six hours or less afterwards'. Wilson would try his idea on Kosygin 'if the time were right'.⁴⁶ Wilson thus wanted 'one last chance at an A–B formula', to try to bring his peacemaking initiative to fruition.⁴⁷ Cooper suggested that in choosing this course of action the Prime Minister 'obviously felt that even if Kosygin rejected the formula, he would be better off in the House of Commons for this last minute attempt'.⁴⁸ Johnson, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, McNamara, William Bundy of the State Department, and Rostow met for discussions in the Cabinet Room of the White House at about 5.15 p.m. Washington time on Sunday.⁴⁹ Finally, Johnson sent a message at 7.00 p.m., midnight in Britain, where Wilson had been 'practically hanging on to his guest's coattails' to ensure that he stayed long enough to receive word of Washington's revised position.⁵⁰ The President attempted to assuage Wilson, telling him that 'you have worked nobly this week to bring about what all humanity wants; a decisive move towards peace ... I feel a responsibility to give you this further chance to make that effort bear truth'.⁵¹ Wilson, said the President, 'should go forward and try once again with Kosygin', telling the Russian that:

If you can get a North Vietnamese assurance – communicated either direct to the United States or through you – before 10.00 a.m. British time tomorrow that all movement of troops and supplies into South Vietnam will stop at that time, I will get an assurance from the US that they will not resume bombing of North Vietnam from that time. Of course the US build-up would also then stop within a matter of days.

This would then give you and me the opportunity to try to consolidate and build on what has been achieved by bringing the parties together and promoting further balanced measures of de-escalation.⁵²

At 9.30 p.m. Washington time on 12 February, Palliser and Cooper called Rostow, to say that Wilson and Brown had 'thrown their weight behind' the latest formula. Kosygin agreed to send it to Hanoi, but he complained that the 7 or 8 hours on offer were not enough. Half an hour later, Wilson pleaded over the telephone to Rostow, asking that the Russians and Hanoi should be given more time. Kosygin 'needed time to talk to his colleagues', and the Hanoi government was 'run by a committee and they were split between a pro-Chinese faction and others'. Rostow asked how much more time was needed, with Wilson suggesting twenty-four hours. Johnson deliberated with his advisers about how to respond to Wilson, suggesting cynically that they should give him 'a little palaver where he's really complimented and we can keep him aboard when he loses the battle and the war'.⁵³ Finally, Johnson 'personally dictated the message' which was sent to Wilson at about 1.00 a.m. Washington time on Monday 13 February.⁵⁴ He told Wilson that 'after careful consideration ... we are prepared to extend the time by six hours', to 4.00 p.m. British time. Washington could offer no more because the communists had 'had the possibility of responding to essentially this message for the three months' since they had first learned of it. If there was 'any interest in the A-B proposition, there has been ample time for them to agree or to come back with a counter-proposal ... A few hours either way cannot be significant.'⁵⁵

Wilson later informed Johnson that Kosygin had told him that he had no reply from Hanoi, but that Moscow was pursuing the matter. The British also passed to the White House details of 'an intercepted telephone message' from Kosygin 'to Moscow *en clair*' which suggested that Moscow was pressing Hanoi on the grounds that 'all they had to do was give a confidential, positive answer'. Once again, Johnson was obliged to assemble his team, at 8.30 a.m. Washington time on Monday 13 February. Concerned about continued communist infiltration of the South, it was decided that there was little hope of the Wilson-Kosygin initiative bearing fruit, and that military operations over North Vietnam should be resumed (the bombing pause had, on the advice of David Bruce, been extended for the period of the Kosygin visit to Britain). Wilson had exhausted Johnson's patience, with the result that the Prime Minister was to be told of the resumption of bombing 'on a routine basis' via the State Department, 'not via a message from the President to Wilson'.⁵⁶ Hanoi never responded concerning the revised peace formula which Wilson had passed to Kosygin. As Johnson commented later, 'how in the hell' could anyone say 'that you can have peace with somebody that has never even answered you?'⁵⁸

Wilson was greatly vexed by the phase A-phase B imbroglio, telling Rostow on 25 February that he 'resented' the fact that the White House had 'not cut him in fully in respect to the direct channel between Hanoi and Washington'.⁵⁹ On

24 February, Wilson even suggested that a full enquiry be made into the failure of the phase A–phase B initiative, along the lines of Richard Neustadt's account for President Kennedy of the Skybolt crisis of 1962.⁶⁰ However, Donald Murray of the Foreign Office, along with Paul Gore-Booth, Permanent Under Secretary, had reservations about the idea of Wilson re-opening with Johnson 'the whole question of what exactly went wrong'. Murray noted Patrick Dean's report that 'the President evidently believes that Hanoi is just not willing to talk at present'. Johnson 'probably also believes that, even if different but still US-endorsed proposals had been put through Mr. Kosygin to Hanoi during the fatal week, the reaction from the North Vietnamese would still have been an uncompromising "no".' Consequently a 'suggestion from the Prime Minister ... that he and the President might judge to be an "inquest" into what went wrong, might well increase the President's frustration and not in fact clear up the mystery'. If the President 'were to become irritated, the effect might be felt throughout Anglo-American relations, not only on the subject of Vietnam'. Moreover, 'if the question were reopened now, in the way the Prime Minister suggests, it is quite possible that news of an Anglo-American argument might leak'. Murray believed that Wilson should confine himself to addressing the matter in a 'heart-to-heart' with Johnson when they met in June.⁶¹

George Brown put views of this nature to the Prime Minister.⁶² Wilson replied on 15 March that he was sceptical 'about the likelihood of Walt Rostow having conveyed a full and accurate picture to the President of the very serious anxieties I expressed to him', and he suspected that Rostow 'was largely responsible for the misunderstandings during the Kosygin visit'. Wilson wanted Johnson 'to be in no doubt of the fact that we also are worried at the way things went during this week'.⁶³ On 23 March, Palliser concurred with a still-bothered Wilson that there was a 'need to get Pat Dean to clear the air with LBJ'. Palliser suggested that firstly 'we should arrange for Pat Dean to be very fully briefed by Donald Murray who has all this at his fingertips and with whom I have discussed it today; and that you can give him the personal touches that you want conveyed to LBJ'.⁶⁴ Wilson sent Dean to probe the phase A–phase B affair with the President. The Ambassador, who had had little direct involvement with the matter, shared the view that a post-mortem could only do harm. As Rostow told Johnson on 7 April, 'The truth is that Dean believes that Wilson should not be pushing things any further, and he is extremely anxious that his call on you not make things worse'.⁶⁵ On 10 April, the Ambassador saw the President. Dean reported Johnson's comment that there had been no 'breakdown in communication' between the White House and 10 Downing Street, despite what Wilson had alleged. The 'difficulty with Kosygin arose from the fact' that the British had 'given him a written communication when the President and his advisers were busy drafting a message for you to pass on'. In any future peace negotiations 'communications should only pass directly' between the White House and Hanoi. Shortly after Kosygin had arrived in London, 'the threat from the North

Vietnamese through the DMZ had suddenly become so great that the old Phase A–Phase B plan was no longer tolerable’. This, plus ‘the interposition of other people in the direct line of communications had caused the misunderstanding’. Dean told Wilson that the President’s comments ‘amounted to a clear admission that there was a change in the American attitude during the critical three days and that the Americans were at fault’ in not informing London. They were ‘genuinely preoccupied by the sudden and increased threat from the North’. They informed the British of this new threat but not that it had ‘altered their view about the Phase A–Phase B plan’.⁶⁶

On 25 February, Rostow had reassured Wilson that ‘the President and his top advisers ... fully appreciated the motives of the PM and the FonMin and thought their attempt had been magnificent’.⁶⁷ In reality, Johnson and his colleagues had doubted the wisdom of Wilson’s desire to broker a peace in Vietnam. Johnson wrote later that the Prime Minister:

seemed to feel that he and the Soviet leader could serve as mediators and bring about a settlement of the war. I doubted this strongly. I believed that if the Soviets thought they had a peace formula Hanoi would accept, they would deal directly with us rather than with a fourth party.⁶⁸

Similarly, Johnson told his advisers on 13 February that he:

had not expected anything to come of probes at this phase; and his anxiety was to separate Kosygin and Wilson and avoid their heading for Hanoi; or Wilson’s heading for Washington. He held to his fundamental view that successful negotiations – if and when they came – would have to be direct and bilateral.⁶⁹

The affair had also strained the President’s regard for David Bruce, leading him to say that ‘he wants to be a Goddamned peacemaker’.⁷⁰ There were also suggestions in Washington that Wilson’s involvement in the peace initiative was largely self-seeking. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Earle Wheeler, suggested to McNamara on 11 February that Wilson was ‘operating basically from a narrow objective of obtaining importance and prestige in the British domestic political scene; i.e., his “peacemaking” efforts are pointed primarily at maintaining ascendancy over his political opponents within and without his own party’.⁷¹ A State Department analysis also attributed questionable motives to the British: they were eager ‘to participate with maximum personal visibility in bringing peace to Vietnam – in early February alone Wilson proposed travelling personally both to Washington and Hanoi’. This zeal was ‘sometimes embarrassing to the US, which greatly preferred confidential dealings with a minimum of participants’. On the other hand, ‘the domestic-political value to Wilson and to Brown of such a role and the importance of their support for US policies ... made the US willing to bring the British into negotiation efforts’. Moreover, Kosygin’s visit to London made British participation nearly inevitable, the analysis suggested. If Washington ‘stood aloof ... the results could be harmful’ to the international standing of the United States. The analysis criticised

Wilson's overt references 'in Parliament and to the press to the transactions of Marigold and Sunflower [peace initiatives based on the phase A-phase B formula]. He did not criticise the United States but his comments 'gave those not previously informed reason to believe that something of substance had been afoot'. Wilson's remarks caused 'alarm' in South Vietnam and in the governments of 'Troop Contributing Nations' such as Australia. Furthermore, Wilson 'seemed to contradict the President, who on February 3 had said he had seen no action by the other side that he could interpret as "a serious effort to either go to a conference table or to bring the war to an end"'.⁷²

The State Department analysis noted that the 'battle of the tenses brought additional friction to the Anglo-American relationship, including emotional personal communications between Wilson and the President, Brown and the US Ambassador' and others, 'in which the British leaders claimed to have been put in a "hell of a situation" and questioned US intentions and consistency of policy in the search for a negotiated settlement'.⁷³ Cooper suggested that Wilson's zeal for peacemaking 'might have been somewhat dampened if he had known that Johnson, Rostow, 'and a few people in the State Department took a rather dim view of his eagerness to discuss Vietnam with Kosygin'. There was a 'sense that the British Government was pushing hard, perhaps too hard, to undertake the role of mediator'. There was 'another, less articulated but more deeply felt attitude ... that contributed to the failure of the talks', namely that 'the prospect that Wilson might be able to use American chips to pull off peace talks was hard for the President and some of his advisers to swallow'. If the time was 'now ripe to get Hanoi to talk, Johnson, not Wilson, should get the credit'.⁷⁴ George Brown reflected that the British efforts to broker a peace in Vietnam in February 1967 foundered partly because Wilson's relations with the President were so poor:

The Prime Minister's hot line to President Johnson was not as reliable as it ought to have been. I think that the fact of the matter was that Mr. Johnson didn't really like the Prime Minister much, and the hot-line from No. 10 that went allegedly directly to the President was inclined to go instead to Mr. Rostow.⁷⁵

The most recent appraisal, that of John Dumbrell and Sylvia Ellis, suggests that the initiative was 'almost doomed to failure, not least because of the negative and distrustful state of Anglo-American relations at this time'. There were other reasons, too, including a lack of clear direction on Johnson's part, Wilson's unrealism, and Rostow's scepticism as well as the ambivalence of Moscow.⁷⁶ It is certainly clear that the affair did strain an already fragile relationship between the Prime Minister and the President.

The 'special relationship'

On 1 January 1967, Cabinet minister Richard Crossman complained that the 'personal reliance on LBJ' evident in Britain's dull, 'Bevinite' foreign policy

'could be described as a peculiarly Wilsonian touch'.⁷⁷ Early in 1967 Wilson's commitment towards the American leader was still in evidence, to the extent that he even told the President of the circumstances of his meetings with Robert F. Kennedy, one of Johnson's political rivals.⁷⁸ Similarly, Rostow informed Johnson on 28 February that Wilson's office 'wanted you to know that as a matter of courtesy – but no more – the Prime Minister has agreed to see Mr. Richard Nixon when he goes through London'.⁷⁹ On 21 April, a State Department analysis suggested that Wilson attached 'the highest importance to his relations' with President Johnson 'and to a continuation of a close relationship between our two countries'.⁸⁰ However, the phase A–phase B affair had tested Wilson's commitment to the White House. On 2 April, he told Hubert Humphrey, US Vice-President, who was on a visit to London, that 'the key to peace' in Vietnam 'lay through the Soviet Union and the key to the Soviet Union lay with Britain'. He felt that in February he had had 'a real opportunity to act as a middleman between the US and USSR to reach a negotiated settlement'. Wilson said that he had been 'considering the possibility of moving toward the middle, between the two nations, on Vietnamese policy'. Humphrey responded that he should 'consider very carefully any change in the UK position', because this might 'jeopardise his relationship with the President'. Bruce reiterated this, 'urging that he keep in close contact with the President, being mindful of the close relationship between our countries and of the friendship of the President'.⁸¹ Two days later, Humphrey warned Wilson:

against doing or saying anything which could imply a shift in the British position away from Washington and towards Hanoi ... President Johnson admired and trusted the Prime Minister. He had heard him say several times to doubters or critics that if only a few more Americans had the courage of Harold Wilson the war would already be over. The President saw these matters in intensely personal terms. If he were given cause to think that, as he would see it, he was being 'betrayed' by the Prime Minister his reaction could be very violent indeed.⁸²

Later that day Palliser reaffirmed these views to Wilson.⁸³ The Prime Minister's comments to Humphrey and Bruce reached the President, who responded in a tone of mollification. On 10 April, Dean told him that Wilson wanted 'to be assured that the President saw his close relationship' with the Prime Minister 'as a very valuable asset in these difficult days', and that the 'apparent failure of communication' in February 'must not be allowed to prejudice the future utility of this relationship either personally or as between leaders of our two countries'. Johnson responded by saying that he had 'the greatest of respect' for Wilson and 'a great affection for Britain'. He and the Prime Minister 'could continue to work usefully together'.⁸⁴

The underlying strains in the Wilson–Johnson relationship attracted public comment. Bruce noted in his diary on 14 April that Palliser had called 'to say that the Prime Minister was concerned over an article' by the Labour MP Eldon Griffiths in the *Times*, which 'alleged dissatisfaction and lack of warmth on the

President's part toward the Prime Minister'. Under instructions from Wilson, Palliser asked Bruce if he could find 'any recent statements by the President laudatory of the Prime Minister'. Bruce assumed that Wilson expected to be 'questioned about this article in the House'. But there were 'none such' statements, 'for there has been no occasion for the President recently to make such pronouncements'.⁸⁵ On 28 May, the Washington correspondent for the *Sunday Times*, Henry Brandon, noted a recent 'deterioration in the personal relations between President Johnson and the Prime Minister ... both have somehow come to feel more cynically about each other as politicians'. Johnson was 'uncertain how much reliance to place now on the words of the British Government, on Mr. Wilson's own promises, and on past policy declarations and white papers'. The White House was 'disturbed even more' by the 'hint Wilson threw out recently in private that he is thinking of moving the British government more toward a middle position, presumably between Washington on one hand and Moscow and Hanoi on the other'. According to Brandon, 'the uncertain feeling that maybe Mr. Johnson is not as eager to find a negotiated solution to the war in Vietnam as he claims' had 'undermined Mr. Wilson's confidence' in the White House. Brandon suggested that there was a 'need to remove the misunderstandings and suspicions' festering between Wilson and Johnson.⁸⁶ Part of the difficulty of the relationship stemmed undoubtedly from the fact that while Britain had continued to seek a peacemaking role over Vietnam the fact remained that there was no prospect of a British troop commitment. In late April, Wilson and Johnson met briefly in Bonn at the funeral of the former West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer, where the President allegedly told Wilson that if only he would 'put troops into Vietnam' then his 'worries over sterling would be over'. Wilson responded that if he did so he would be 'finished'.⁸⁷ Johnson also asked Wilson if he was 'going crazy' by planning to pull troops out of Asia, where the communist threat was at its most potent.⁸⁸

Britain's turn towards Europe

The difficulty of sustaining the global role and the need to reinvigorate the British economy led Wilson from 1966 towards the idea of British membership of the EEC. The strains in his relationship with Johnson notwithstanding, this meant that the United States was becoming less central to his foreign policy outlook. An American analysis noted later that the 'conversion of Harold Wilson and the Labour Government' on the question of joining the EEC 'came late and suddenly but, when it finally did come, it was complete'. Wilson's intention 'to re-apply for membership ... announced on November 10 1966, enjoyed far broader support – in the government, within the political parties, in business and labour circles, and among the public – than did the first decision to apply, in 1961'. The 1966 decision 'reflected a recognition that Britain had been trying to play a role beyond its capabilities and had been over-extended for too long'.

While 'British spokesmen continued to point to the UK's extra European commitments and to talk about its remaining a world power and maintaining the special relationship with the US, there was no question that the commitment to gain entry into the EEC was complete'.⁸⁹ On 11 November 1966, Wilson outlined his thinking to Johnson. The Prime Minister said that he had 'never been one of the little band of so-called "Europeans"' seeking 'a tight little inward-looking group of countries concerned essentially with their own affairs'. He and Brown, in probing visits to European capitals, would make it clear 'that a forthcoming attitude towards the Kennedy Round' of tariff negotiations 'will be a significant earnest of their desire for British membership in a joint enterprise with them'. On the other hand – 'and this is perhaps the main reason why I feel that our present initiative is right – I believe that the situation in Europe has changed pretty fundamentally since 1962 and is continuing to change ... the prospects of building a new and wider community ... are now much more promising than they were'. However, this concept of 'an outward looking European community, designed to play the constructive role in world affairs that each of us individually is now finding too difficult, is bound to raise once more the fundamental issue of our relationship with the United States'. The 'prophets of gloom say that this remains as total an obstacle to our present approach as it proved for our predecessors. We shall see.' But Wilson expressed to Johnson 'the firm determination of my colleagues and of myself that there shall be no change in the fundamental relationship between and in our own basic loyalty to and belief in the Atlantic concept'.⁹⁰

Although Wilson had told the President that the Anglo-American relationship would not impede British membership of the EEC, in private he said otherwise. He suggested to the publisher Cecil King on 13 May 1967 that a more critical attitude towards American conduct in Vietnam would 'stand us in good stead in Europe, wouldn't it? And at the right time, too. You've got to think politically'.⁹¹ Wilson told his Cabinet on 6 June that the turn towards Europe meant that 'the concept of a special relationship between the United States and ourselves was ... undergoing a gradual modification, although close relations in the shape of continuing consultations on international affairs would no doubt continue'.⁹² On 8 May, Bruce, ruing Britain's relinquishment of its East of Suez commitments, wrote that if the British entered the EEC 'Neither Britain nor ourselves would lose anything substantial'. The 'so-called Anglo-American special relationship is now little more than sentimental terminology, although the underground waters of it will flow with a deep current'. The 'entry of the UK into Europe, via common institutions, should strengthen, not impair, our easy intercourse with it and its new associates'.⁹³ Johnson told Wilson on 13 November that he felt 'immensely heartened' by the British willingness to join the EEC, taking Wilson at his word that the initiative would help to 'strengthen and unify the West. If you find on the way that there is anything we might do to smooth the path, I hope you will let me know'.⁹⁴ Francis Bator noted in a press briefing

on 1 June 1967 that the President had 'on two occasions [in speeches] ... indicated that we are very much in favour of the British move' to join the EEC. Washington looked on 'with very great sympathy at the British application'.⁹⁵ However, compared to the question of the British stance East of Suez, the question of British membership of the EEC simply did not engage Johnson's attention.

Wilson's turn to the EEC was shown by his appointment of George Brown as his new Foreign Secretary. The Prime Minister suggested to Johnson on 11 August 1966 that Brown would bring 'a new kind of robustness to the foreign office and you can count on him as a staunch supporter of the Atlantic Alliance'.⁹⁶ Indeed, Brown did not oppose the idea of a close Anglo-American relationship; the State Department told Johnson on 10 April 1967 that in the Commons Brown had defended 'the Wilson government's policy of support for US objectives in Vietnam' with 'steadily growing effectiveness and recently, even brilliance'.⁹⁷ Bruce suggested on 6 May that Brown was, 'more than any other Cabinet member, except possibly the PM, anxious to preserve close comity with USG, and even more than the PM, sensitive to the fragility of our present connexion'.⁹⁸ However, Brown did not support Britain's position East of Suez, believing that British money was better spent at home and that the country should moderate its diplomacy by joining the EEC. On 13 October 1966, John Leddy of the State Department told Dean Rusk that Wilson had asked that the Administration should 'enlighten Brown on the importance of Britain's world role and thus hopefully dampen his enthusiasm for Europe'.⁹⁹ Wilson's odd request was probably designed primarily to bolster his own standing with the White House rather than for any other purpose, because Brown had never concealed his commitment to Europe, and, of course, Wilson had himself given Brown the post of Foreign Secretary.

East of Suez and the fifth summit

A State Department analysis early in 1967 reflected on Britain's international standing, noting that in July 1966 the Labour Government had 'announced a further cut of £100 million in overseas spending, much of it to come out of the military establishment'. The original Labour 'endorsement of a world role for Britain has now been considerably eroded', and Wilson had even argued in the House of Commons that Britain 'had neither the inclination nor the resources to go on being the world's policeman'. The Defence Review had 'coincided with a period of national soul-searching and with the severest balance of payments crises since the devaluation of the pound in 1949'. More and more British people were unable 'to find any real reason why their country should spend blood and treasure in far off places', and many also believed that 'Britain's future' lies in Europe.¹⁰⁰ In spring 1967 Wilson and his Cabinet, as part of the Defence Review, decided on the necessity of cutting Britain's current strength in the Malaysia-

Singapore area by half (to around 40,000) by 1970–71 and to withdraw completely from mainland Asia (Hong Kong excepted) by the mid-1970s. Articulating the Foreign Office's desire to preserve Britain's global influence so far as possible, Palliser told Wilson on 21 March that 'It is not for me to question the implications, in terms of foreign policy, that would flow' from major withdrawals East of Suez, 'since this is essentially a matter of policy, of paying our way and of getting the country back on its feet economically'. But Palliser drew Wilson's 'attention to the very serious presentational and practical implications ... we should be under no illusion that it is anything but the end of Britain's "world role" on defence'. The move could 'also be seen, unless it is very skilfully presented, as a reversal of the policy' that Wilson had himself often advocated publicly, including in his dealings with Johnson. For the sake of a policy 'which is not due to be fully implemented for another eight years we should incur immediately all the odium at a time when our main allies in the Far East are bogged down in the Vietnam War, and resentful of our failure, as they see it, to help them there'.¹⁰¹ Similarly, Paul Gore-Booth of the Foreign Office believed that 'there should be further interchanges between the UK, US and other governments ... before any final decision by HMG'. Although 'Foreign Office officials were not without competence to assess the exigencies of British party politics, must a July announcement be made, and also could not any determination on ultimate and complete withdrawal be "fuzzed" in public statement?'¹⁰² John Killick of the British Embassy urged Jeffrey Kitchen of the State Department that Johnson should 'absolutely knock the pants off' Wilson on the East of Suez question. It was 'important that the President really hit Wilson hard', to discourage Britain's contraction of the global role.¹⁰³

Conscious of hostility in Washington to further defence cuts, Wilson told Patrick Dean on 30 March that 'we had to face this problem' of Britain's international role 'sometime with the Americans and we should need to speak to them about it fairly soon'. He 'could not avoid doing so in May/June'. The question was whether 'discussion of this now between the two Secretaries of State would ease the way'.¹⁰⁴ Rather than tell the White House himself, Wilson sent Brown to outline the British plans. On 8 April, Patrick Dean offered Brown 'some ideas ... about how we might handle these difficult questions'. In the first place, said Dean, 'I am sure you will already know that though the Americans are not going to like what we intend to do, a great deal will depend on the manner in which we present our decisions to them'. In terms of substance, Washington would 'probably accept fairly easily that we shall be fully off the mainland of Asia by 1975 and halfway off by 1970', but, given the uncertainty over what would become of South Vietnam even after an American victory, Britain should make it clear that 'we also will have a capability of coming back into the area in circumstances in which we judge it to be our interest to support them'. If Britain could provide such an assurance, 'they will take our decision reasonably calmly'. In terms of appearance, 'an early announcement of our intentions will

be very much disliked and resented particularly if it is made in the next year or so with the election ahead and during a period in which the fighting in Vietnam may well get much worse'. Dean understood that there were 'strong pressures for an early announcement to be made this summer and for this reason it can be argued that it would be better to make it sooner rather than later', but he hoped that the Cabinet 'will agree that the terms and the timing of any announcement should not be settled until you have had a thorough discussion on all aspects of the matter to Mr. Rusk' and 'have had an opportunity to discover from him how the US Government see their own commitments and deployments in Southeast Asia in the post-Vietnamese war period'.¹⁰⁵

Yet economic and political pressures meant that Wilson could do little on the East of Suez question. Rusk commented that British plans for an announcement in July were designed to meet 'two objectives: making a gesture to Labour Party critics of present defence policies and at the same time demonstrating to the Six that, as part of its bid for membership in the Common Market, Britain is adjusting its world role and attendant financial burdens accordingly'.¹⁰⁶ After Brown had visited the White House, Bruce complained on 6 May that Britain's intention to make 'a unilateral determination, and announcing it in July, eight years in advance of its being carried into effect' was 'more likely to cause bitter controversy between the US and UK Governments than any other issue between us during the last few years'. If Wilson presented 'his decision as a *fait accompli* to our President ... and tried to justify it, and a July announcement, on the grounds of domestic-political pressures, he would be inviting, and in my opinion recklessly, a possible rebuke of titanic proportions'. The United States had its own 'domestic political difficulties in much more acute degree than those afflicting the Labour Party'. Moreover, 'the appearance of our being deserted ... in the midst of our Vietnamese involvement, by a Government assumed to be our most reliable ally, headed by a Prime Minister who had repeatedly declared himself an "East of Suez Man" was unwise, provocative, and absolutely unacceptable to us, to our public opinion, to our fighting allies, to say nothing of Singapore, Malaysia, and most of the rest of Asia'. Bruce believed that the Cabinet should 'take no binding decision until the PM had seen the President in Washington on June 2', feeling that Johnson might be able to persuade the Prime Minister at least to delay an announcement until victory was in sight in Vietnam. Wilson should 'keep his options open, and if he has radically altered his policy about previous East of Suez commitments, to say so when he sees the President – meanwhile to leave the matter undecided'.¹⁰⁷

Johnson was deeply concerned about British defence plans, with the result that he invited Wilson to visit Washington, rather than Wilson 'inviting' himself as was usually the case¹⁰⁸ (Wilson's trip to the White House would be his fifth since assuming power in October 1964). On 11 May, Johnson told Wilson that it was essential 'that we have an opportunity to talk before the decision is finally made' on East of Suez.¹⁰⁹ On 20 May, Johnson 'spoke at length'

to Henry Brandon about Britain's 'projected plans for military redeployment in Southeast Asia and made no disguise of his disappointment and disapproval'.¹¹⁰ Yet Wilson could not please the Americans even had he so desired. On 1 June, Francis Bator advised Johnson that domestically the Prime Minister faced:

increasingly sharp attack from all sides for:

- spending money in the Far East at the alleged cost of unemployment and stagnation at home – with Lyndon Johnson the only beneficiary;
- catering to the bankers, with deflation, tight money, unemployment, wage freeze and zero growth.¹¹¹

It would be 'exceedingly difficult for any elected politician to do all the things we would like Harold Wilson to do'. These included 'to stay in the Far East; back us on Vietnam; avoid balance of payments trouble and any risk of devaluation (whatever the costs in domestic deflation)' and to 'maintain a constructive stance vis-à-vis Europe (no further cutbacks in the BAOR, no giving up on entry to Europe, etc.)'. This 'simply does not add up to a workable platform for Wilson's 1969–70 elections', Bator concluded.¹¹²

On 1 June, Minister of Technology Anthony Wedgwood Benn wrote in his diary that he expected Washington to receive Wilson 'with all the trumpets appropriate for a weak foreign head of state who has to be buttered up so he can carry the can for American foreign policy'.¹¹³ Yet Wilson had himself requested the fanfare for his visit: on 30 May the State Department told Rostow that the Prime Minister had said that he was 'prepared to advance by a few minutes the time of his arrival in the event that military honours are planned on his arrival at the White House on June 2'. It was clear that Wilson, 'knowing that military honours will be given Prime Minister Holt [of Australia] on June 1, would like to receive the same honours on arrival'.¹¹⁴ Wilson was due to spend about an hour and half with Johnson in a private meeting, and that evening there would be a White House dinner for the Prime Minister.¹¹⁵ As Bator briefed the press, the two leaders had 'no fixed prior agenda; there is no formal list' of topics to discuss; 'These two men just get in a room and they start talking to each other about the problems they share'.¹¹⁶ On 2 June, Bruce noted in his diary that 'The President and the Prime Minister were closeted together for two hours while the rest of us waited in the Cabinet room'.¹¹⁷

The discussions were dominated by tensions in the Middle East, as Egypt had recently announced the closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping. Wilson wanted an international peacekeeping force to keep the Straits open, an idea with which Johnson was in broad agreement. However, the situation soon overtook this approach when on 5 June the 'Six Day War' erupted.¹¹⁸ The East of Suez issue also featured in the talks. Bator had recently informed Michael Palliser that the President would 'hit Wilson hard' on East of Suez, as the White House saw the British proposal 'as a kind of stab in the back as long as they are bogged

down in Vietnam', and the Pentagon could not understand 'why we need to close the options, political and military, nearly 10 years ahead'. Other figures in Washington 'profess to regard it as irresponsible politically and likely to be just as expensive in the long run by the time we have given economic aid in lieu and paid for our long-range transport commitments'. American policymakers 'believe that Britain is pulling out of her world role, and that nothing they do or say will do more than prevent this'. All 'they really hope from us ... is that we shall not announce our intentions now'. They were not 'very much impressed by the notion of a residual presence', and they certainly did not 'see it in any way as compensating for an announcement of our long-term intentions'.¹¹⁹ In his meeting with Johnson, Wilson tried to explain his position. He said that there was a 'growing mood of isolationism in the United Kingdom – a reversion to a feeling of "Little England" or perhaps "Little Europe"'. Consequently the British government had 'to reach, by July, their basic decisions of policy'. There was 'no doubt that they were right at aiming to achieve by 1970, a run-down of the forces in Malaysia to 50 per cent of their pre-confrontation level'. Thereafter, it would be 'a question of rationalising our commitments in the area and reducing our capability to match the reduction in commitments'. The Cabinet was 'not prepared to agree that we should maintain indefinitely a major base at Singapore or elsewhere if this meant the retention of large numbers of troops to protect'. Johnson countered by warning Wilson of a possible 'chain reaction which such an announcement would almost inevitably provoke – a reaction which could extend to the American troops in Germany'. Despite these admonitions, Wilson could not compromise.¹²⁰ It was 'clear', noted a subsequent American analysis, 'that the British were well along the road to a formal decision' to withdraw from East of Suez.¹²¹

Yet Johnson and his advisers still believed that the British might still be deflected from an early public announcement to this effect. On 6 July, Johnson told Wilson that 'I continue to be preoccupied with your East of Suez decision'. The countries of the Asian and Pacific Council were 'meeting in Bangkok with the prospect that they will register a growing sense of solidarity among the free nations of Asia'. Hanoi seemed 'to be calling home a number of its key ambassadors. Whether this means a policy review, we do not know'. Meanwhile, Burma faced 'new pressures from a China which continues in turmoil'. In Vietnam, the Americans and their 'fighting allies' had to address some 'difficult and critical manpower decisions'. This was not the time 'for Britain to make or to announce a decision that it is sharply reducing its presence in Southeast Asia'. Johnson urged Wilson to 'find some way of putting this matter off for a time and not to take a step which would be contrary to your and our interests and to the interests of the free nations of Asia'.¹²² On 11 July, the President told Harold Holt that 'I have weighed in again with Harold Wilson ... I believe that we have presented our case as forcefully as possible, and I trust it will have a real effect on the thinking of the British Cabinet'.¹²³

On 10 July, Palliser argued to Wilson that if a 'close' Anglo-American relationship was to survive, then London should 'consult' Washington on the East of Suez decisions rather than merely presenting belated 'information' on the matter. If the Americans were advised in detail of British intentions only 'a day or two before ... the White Paper they (and particularly the President himself) may feel decidedly aggrieved'.¹²⁴ On 13 July, Wilson did provide a thorough explanation to the President for the East of Suez position, although, as previously, without making any concessions. He said that 'we have been giving very deep and earnest consideration to this problem before I saw you last month'. The matter had been discussed with the leaders of Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia. All had bemoaned 'our longer term intentions and ... we fully understand the fundamental concern that is shared in common by you all'. The British would try to ease the concern by phasing the withdrawal 'over a period of years so as to reduce the likelihood of any lasting setback to the economies of the countries in the area; and our mitigating aid coupled with their own determination to help themselves will contribute positively to the kind of self-reliant future at which the whole area should aim'.¹²⁵ The tone of Wilson's letter suggested that the United States was just one of a number of concerned allies. Optimistically, however, Johnson told the press five days later that 'we have expressed ourselves as very hopeful that the British would maintain their interest in [East of Suez]. We are very hopeful that they will find it is their interest to do so'.¹²⁶

Johnson's blandishments to the British had exerted little effect. On 18 July, London's 'Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy' indicated that 'in the Far East, we have decided to reach a reduction of about half the forces deployed in Singapore and Malaysia during 1970-1971'. Numbers would be reduced from 80,000 to 40,000.¹²⁷ The President and his colleagues accepted the British decisions with equanimity, as they had little choice but to do so. As Dean advised the Foreign Office on 4 August, 'the Administration ... have accepted defeat, having pulled out all the stops during the period up to the announcement itself, with reasonably good grace'. Dean did not 'expect them to seek to retaliate or "punish" us in the short term', but he could not forecast the effects 'in the middle and longer term'. It would, 'of course, be very much against the interests of the Administration to play up our decisions by making anything of it publicly'. This would 'play straight into the hands of the Congress, and in particular of Senator Mansfield, in their present mood of urging upon the Administration all kinds of cutting back overseas'. In fact, it was 'a matter of some local embarrassment that a great deal of the favourable comment on the decisions we have taken comes precisely from those circles who wish to see the United States cut back abroad'. This comment 'took the form of urging the Administration to follow our example'.¹²⁸ East of Suez, as well as British economic troubles and Vietnam, would remerge in the next and final phase of Anglo-American relations under Wilson and Johnson.

Notes

- 1 Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964–1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 344.
- 2 PRO, PREM 13/1917, Wilson–Bruce conversation, 10 January 1967.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 NARA, Country Files 1963–66 (70 D 209), UK 1966 Jan–March, background paper for Rostow, 15 February 1967.
- 5 LBJL, NSF: Agency File, Box 46, State Dept. Vol. 9 7/1/66 (1/2), Harriman to Johnson and Rusk, 28 November 1966.
- 6 PRO, PREM 13/1917, Washington Embassy to Foreign Office, 2 January 1967.
- 7 PRO, PREM 13/1917, Wilson–Cooper conversation, 18 January 1967.
- 8 Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), p. 324.
- 9 PRO, PREM 13/1917, Wilson–Bruce conversation, 10 January 1967.
- 10 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2.21.67, 2.21.67, 'Sunflower'.
- 11 Editorial Note, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. IV, *Vietnam, 1966* (Washington: USGPO, 1998), p. 658.
- 12 Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 252.
- 13 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2.21.67, 2.21.67, 'Sunflower'.
- 14 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow Vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, 'For the President's Diary', 13 February 1967. Italics added.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2.21.67, 2.21.67, 'Sunflower'.
- 17 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, 'For the President's Diary', 13 February 1967.
- 18 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 15, Rostow vol. 25 April 1–15 1967, Rostow to Johnson, 8.00 p.m. 7 February 1967.
- 19 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, 'For the President's Diary', 13 February 1967.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2.21.67, 2.21.67, 'Sunflower'.
- 22 PRO, PREM 13/1917, Palliser to Wilson, 7 February 1967.
- 23 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower, 2.6.67, Wilson to Johnson, 11 February 1967.
- 24 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, pp. 356–7.
- 25 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 1967, 'Sunflower'. Italics added.
- 26 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow Vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, 'For the President's Diary', 13 February 1967.
- 27 Cooper indicates that there was no response at all from Washington, but this contradicts White House and State Department accounts of the matter. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, p. 360.
- 28 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, pp. 356–7.
- 29 Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, p. 361.
- 30 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2.21.67, 2.21.67, 'Sunflower'.

- 31 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, pp. 357–8.
- 32 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2.21.67, 2.21.67, ‘Sunflower’.
- 33 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2.6.67, telephone conversation between Bruce, Cooper and Benjamin Read, 11 February 1967.
- 34 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2.21.67, 2.21.67, ‘Sunflower’.
- 35 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower, 2.11.67, Chester Cooper, ‘Memorandum for the Record’, 12 February 1967.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 PRO, PREM 13/1918, meeting between Wilson, Brown, Bruce, Cooper and others, 11 February 1967.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 1967, ‘Sunflower’.
- 40 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower, 2.11.67, Wilson to Johnson, 12 February 1967.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2.13.67, Embassy (Cooper) to Rusk and Rostow, 13 February 1967.
- 43 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow Vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, ‘For the President’s Diary’, 13 February 1967.
- 44 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower, 2.11.67, Johnson to Wilson, 12 February 1967.
- 45 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2/13/67, Embassy (Cooper) to Rusk and Rostow, 13 February 1967.
- 46 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower, 2.21.67, ‘Sunflower’.
- 47 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow Vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, ‘For the President’s Diary’, 13 February 1967.
- 48 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2/13/67, Embassy (Cooper) to Rusk and Rostow, 13 February 1967.
- 49 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow Vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, ‘For the President’s Diary’, 13 February 1967.
- 50 Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, p. 365.
- 51 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow Vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, ‘For the President’s Diary’, 13 February 1967.
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 Transcript of Johnson–McNamara telephone conversation, 10.13 p.m., 12 February 1967, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. V, *Vietnam 1967* (Washington: USGPO, 2002), p. 135.
- 54 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, ‘For the President’s Diary’, 13 February 1967. See the transcript of telephone conversation between Johnson and Rostow, 11.17 p.m., 12 February, *FRUS*, vol. V, p. 156.
- 55 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 1967, ‘Sunflower’.
- 56 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow Vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, ‘For the President’s Diary’, 13 February 1967.
- 57 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 1967, ‘Sunflower’.
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- 59 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 1967, ‘Sunflower’.
- 60 PRO, PREM 13/1893, Wilson–Rostow conversation, 24 February 1967.
- 61 PRO, FCO 15/633, DV 10/37, Murray to Palliser, 6 March 1967.

- 62 PRO, FCO 15/633, DV 10/37, Brown to Wilson, 14 March 1967.
- 63 PRO, FCO 15/633, DV 10/37, Wilson to Brown, 15 March 1967.
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- 65 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 15, Rostow Vol. 25 April 1–15 1967 (1/2), Rostow to Johnson, 7 April 1967.
- 66 PRO, PREM 13/2458, Dean to Wilson, 'Vietnam and Kosygin's Visit', 10 April 1967.
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- 69 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow Vol. 21 Feb. 12–28 1967 (2/2), Rostow to Johnson, 'For the President's Diary', 13 February 1967.
- 70 Transcript of Johnson–Rostow telephone conversation, 11.03 p.m., 12 February 1967, *FRUS*, vol. V, p. 154.
- 71 Wheeler to McNamara, 11 February 1967, *ibid.*, p. 135.
- 72 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 27–14 Viet/Sunflower 2.21.67, 2.21.67, 'Sunflower'.
- 73 *Ibid.*
- 74 Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, pp. 355–6.
- 75 George Brown, *In My Way* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1971), p. 146.
- 76 John Dumbrell and Sylvia Ellis, 'British involvement in Vietnam peace initiatives, 1966–1967: Marigolds, Sunflowers, and "Kosygin Week"', *Diplomatic History*, 27: 1 (January, 2003), pp. 115, 149.
- 77 Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, vol. II, *Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons 1966–68* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), p. 181, entry for 1 January 1967.
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- 79 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 13, Rostow Vol. 21 February 18–21 1967 (1/2), Rostow to Johnson, 28 February 1967.
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- 83 PRO, PREM 13/1919, Palliser to Wilson, 4 April 1967.
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- 90 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 11 (2/2), Rostow Vol. 15 Nov 1–30 1966 (2/3), Wilson to Johnson, 11 November 1966.
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- 92 PRO, CAB 128/42/II, Cabinet minutes, 6 June 1967.
- 93 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 211, UK Memos XI 4/67–6/67, Bruce to Rusk, 8 May 1967.
- 94 LBJL, Francis Bator Papers, Box 19, Trilateral/British Bailout, Johnson to Wilson, 13 November 1966.

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- 96 NARA, President and Secretary of State Official Correspondence 1961–66 (66 D 294), Pres. Correspondence UK/Wilson to President, Wilson to Johnson, 11 August 1966.
- 97 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 15, Rostow Vol. 25 April 1–15 1967 (1/2), State Department to Johnson, 10 April 1967.
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- 103 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL UK–US, 1.1.67, 'UK East of Suez – Forthcoming Wilson Visit', 17 May 1967.
- 104 PRO, PREM 13/1454, Wilson–Dean conversation, 30 March 1967.
- 105 PRO, PREM 13/1384, Dean to Brown, Telegram No. 1111, 8 April 1967.
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- 107 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL UK–US, 1.1.67, Bruce to Rusk, 6 May 1967.
- 108 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 216, UK: Visit of Wilson 6/2/67 (2/2), Read to Rostow, 2 May 1967.
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- 117 VHS, Diary of K. E. David Bruce, MSSS:1B8303:60, entry for 2 June 1967.
- 118 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 399; Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, pp. 287–304; PRO, PREM 13/1906, 'Visit of the Prime Minister to Canada and the United States', 1–3 June 1967. On 8 July the United Nations (UN) began talks with Israel and Egypt about placing observers on their respective sides of the Suez Canal cease-fire line, a move which, as Wilson told Johnson, 'would be a good first step towards establishing a UN presence in the area'. Wilson to Johnson, 13 July 1967, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. XII, pp. 575–6. International diplomacy culminated in UN resolution 242 on 22 November 1967, which provided for Israeli withdrawal from the newly-conquered territories.
- 119 PRO, PREM 13/1906, Palliser to Wilson, 'My Washington Reconnaissance', 1 June 1967.
- 120 PRO, PREM 13/1906, 'Visit of the Prime Minister to Canada and the United States', 1–3 June 1967.
- 121 LBJL, State Department Administrative Histories, Box 1, Chapter 3 (Europe) Section D, 'Bilateral Relations with Western Europe: Great Britain'.
- 122 PRO, PREM 13/1457, Johnson to Wilson, 6 July 1967.
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- 126 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967-69, DEF 1 UK, 'East of Suez', excerpt from Presidential News Conference, 18 July 1967.
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One ally among many, October 1967–December 1968

The period from October 1967 to December 1968 began with the devaluation of sterling and ended with President Johnson retiring from office, and therefore constituted the last phase of the Wilson–Johnson relationship. Sterling began to slide again from October 1967, and to try to extract financial help, Wilson sought to pressurise the White House with immediate, drastic cuts in Britain’s defence posture. However, his claim to David Bruce, US Ambassador, that he needed to see Johnson to deal with Labour Party criticisms over Vietnam did not impress the Americans. They disliked the idea of foreign politicians visiting Washington for patently domestic-political reasons, and so denied Wilson his hoped-for transatlantic excursion. The White House knew that only a large bail-out might save sterling, but Britain’s prior cuts in foreign commitments meant that there was no real interest in providing help, and by now the Americans had grown confident that they might be able to handle the impact of devaluation. Johnson and his colleagues accepted with good grace the modest 15 per cent devaluation of sterling on 18 November, realising that Wilson had fought the prospect as long as possible. Devaluation did not then put a great strain on the Anglo-American relationship, though Wilson had worried about its impact on his standing in the eyes of the President. More seriously for the ties between Britain and the United States, economic troubles compelled the British to announce on 16 January 1968 an accelerated withdrawal from East of Suez and the Persian Gulf, despite vigorous White House opposition. The next month Wilson paid his last visit to see President Johnson. The talks were cordial enough, but the key Anglo-American issues were already played out. Moreover, the reports of the British Ambassador Patrick Dean indicated that the increasing exposure of Britain’s weakness and declining strategic value suggested that increasingly the country was but one ally among many for the Americans. Finally, in 1969 Wilson sought to establish a ‘special relationship’ with Johnson’s successor in the White House, Richard Nixon.

The devaluation of sterling

On 19 October 1967, National Security Adviser Walt Rostow told Johnson that as ‘part of a last ditch British effort’ to hold sterling at \$2.80, London had raised

the bank rate by half a per cent. Trouble had befallen Britain despite everything. In 1966 the British had 'moved strongly ... to support the pound: they deflated their economy, cut down foreign commitments and borrowed heavily abroad'. This programme 'worked well through the first quarter of this year: they were able to pay off more than \$1 billion in debt', but soon they experienced 'bad luck: disappointing exports, largely because of the recession on the continent; the Middle East crisis and the closure of the Suez Canal; and rising interest rates elsewhere while theirs were going down'. The British 'began to lose reserves and had to draw heavily on their line of short-term credits'.¹ In London, after deliberations, the Prime Minister, Burke Trend (Secretary to the Cabinet), and John Silkin (Chief Whip) concluded that they should seek American help to obviate the immediate prospect of devaluation, then negotiate with the Americans 'to see', according to Wilson, 'whether they would take the whole burden of the sterling balance from our backs'.² He advised Chancellor of the Exchequer James Callaghan that Johnson should be warned 'that we would be forced to take all, or most, of our troops out of Germany and withdrawal from the Far East, Singapore, etc, not in 1975, but immediately'.³ The threat would increase the likelihood of American help, as Wilson had anticipated that any offer of dollar assistance from Washington would be 'conditional on ... more support in the Far East'.⁴

The Prime Minister himself would deliver the warning during a visit to the White House. This visit would be presented as a mission to discuss Vietnam, in order to avoid fuelling the speculation and rumour that would exacerbate the sterling crisis. Wilson did not reveal his thinking even to David Bruce. Bruce noted in his diary that he was 'called at 12.30 a.m.' on 8 November 'by 10 Downing Street, to hear that the Prime Minister wanted me to go there immediately'.⁵ Bruce met a Prime Minister seemingly anxious about the fact that the official Labour policy of support for the Americans in Vietnam 'had become increasingly unpopular in the Party, the Cabinet, and amongst the people generally'. Although Wilson intended to 'maintain his own position on the subject as affirmed by him in his previous statements', he 'thought he could strengthen his authority greatly if he could return from a visit to the President and declare that, after a frank exchange of views about Vietnam, he was satisfied that his attitude toward the problem was correct and in the national interest'.⁶ Wilson's contention that he needed to see Johnson about Vietnam was certainly plausible, given the controversy about the matter in Britain. Bruce had noted on 29 October that when the Prime Minister had visited Cambridge University 'eggs and tomatoes were thrown at him, and cries of "right-wing bastard" and "Vietnam murderer" were uttered. His car was kicked, thumped and beaten upon, its roof dented, the radio aerial smashed, and he was only extricated by the efforts of the police'.⁷ In their early hours discussion, Wilson also told Bruce that his government was 'also under heavy attack against its economic measures ... and on account of the failure thus far of Common Market negotiations'. Moreover, he 'expected to

be fiercely attacked from within his own Party and, for other reasons, by the Opposition'. Finally, Wilson referred to 'the instability of sterling', but revealed little else on the matter.⁸ Bruce believed Wilson's assertion that he wanted to visit the White House to ease the pressure about Vietnam. He understood, too, that a Prime Ministerial visit for avowedly domestic purposes would annoy the President, who scorned foreign politicians acting in such a manner.

Bruce tried therefore to dampen Wilson's desire to cross the Atlantic, asking him 'whether the result he wished to achieve could not be reached by other methods of communication'. Wilson replied in the negative; 'a personal meeting with the President would be much more useful to him than anything else'. Bruce then cabled Dean Rusk, US Secretary of State, to say that 'It is obvious that, in [Wilson's] view, a meeting with the President would aid him in domestic-political terms'. Though himself unhappy with Wilson's proposal, the Ambassador said that he could 'not judge whether it would be undesirable from our standpoint' for a visit to take place. No one could challenge Wilson 'for the Party leadership, but his own colleagues could conceivably force him into another stance on Vietnam'. If a General Election was held 'under the present circumstances, my guess is that the Conservatives would win easily'. Bruce understood 'thoroughly why the President would not at this time wish to see him: the Prime Minister has only half a loaf to offer, but his continued though limited support seems to me desirable'.⁹ Bruce telephoned Rusk as well as cabling him, finding him unsympathetic. Rusk was in 'a dour mood ... caustic, even bitter, about the British "reneging" on their SEATO commitments and not sending troops to help us in Vietnam'. The Secretary 'got in touch with the President', who, as Bruce put it politely, proved to be 'entirely disdainful of the idea of receiving the Prime Minister'.¹⁰ Later that day Rusk complained to Patrick Dean about the Prime Minister's effort to inveigle a trip to the White House. The Secretary noted that Wilson, 'facing a Labour Party revolt over his support for the US in Vietnam ... had suggested to Ambassador Bruce the possibility of a quick visit to the United States to talk with President Johnson', but the White House 'would take a very negative view of a quick visit for this purpose at this time'. It was 'hard to see how the visit could help the Prime Minister at home unless he could be seen to be putting pressure on the US – a situation which we would not welcome'.¹¹

Wilson expressed some of his own concerns in a letter intended for Johnson. The letter confirms that the Prime Minister sought to threaten immediate military withdrawals in Europe and Asia unless the White House orchestrated another bail-out for sterling. Wilson said that in talks he and Johnson 'could dispose of' the topic of Vietnam 'in a few minutes, on a basis that would help me to hold the House of Commons and public opinion'. Wilson noted, though, that he had 'mentioned to David Bruce the urgency of my seeing you on another matter, namely the economic and financial sphere'. Britain faced a 'most critical situation where decisions of a very fundamental character will ... have to be taken

within three or four days'. If 'we have to take the decisions without top-level consultation it can only have the most far-reaching consequences for us, for you, for Europe, not only economically but in other ways'. There would be 'strong and possibly irresistible pressure for decisions on defence which could have the most grave consequences for the alliance and our common purpose'. Wilson would be 'loth to be forced to take these decisions, with all the possible consequences, without a consultation with you'. The issues were so grave that that 'they cannot be adequately dealt with at Treasury Minister level despite our great confidence in both of them and the constructive partnership between them'. But 'equally if we are to discuss this it is impossible for me to give this as the reason for my journey', as 'People would draw immediate conclusions and the effect on foreign exchange markets would be disastrous within hours'. Wilson again expressed his desire to see Johnson, saying that 'decisions will have to be taken which could affect all we have discussed and our common purposes for years to come. We could agree a cover story', such as Vietnam or the Middle East.¹² But the Prime Minister withheld his letter, probably because he now recognised that his chances of securing an audience with the President were not promising.

There were few suspicions that Wilson was concerned less about discussing Vietnam with Johnson than with raising the question of help for sterling, not least because of the secrecy under which Wilson was operating. Even George Brown, the British Foreign Secretary, was told only belatedly of the Prime Minister's desire to go to Washington. Wilson said later that he was 'very conscious that George, who knew nothing about our plans but had a rough idea that sterling was dicky, knew nothing either of my sending for Bruce'. On 9 November, Wilson enlightened him about the idea of seeing Johnson to secure financial help. Brown 'had some doubts', Wilson noted, 'whether anyone would believe the Vietnam story'.¹³ In the absence of a Prime Ministerial trip to Washington, the Americans were kept informed about Britain's economic situation via the British Treasury. On 12 November, the US Secretary to the Treasury, Henry Fowler, advised Johnson that the British were now 'at the end of the line, unless they have assurance of long-term credit soon'. The British had 'come in for help before, but they have never indicated so clearly that without help, they will be forced to take the plunge'. They were 'now scraping the bottom of the barrel'. Fowler suggested that 'it might be tempting to settle this perennial problem now and let sterling go'.¹⁴ This policy would be acceptable only:

If the devaluation were modest (10–15 per cent).

If everybody cooperated (the Common Market, Japan, Canada, and Australia held – and few devalued).

If Wilson were able to hold his foreign commitments – Germany and East of Suez.

If, and this is the big if, Wilson can maintain his government and the movement were not wasted because of internal British pressures.¹⁵

Fowler suggested, though, that even if these 'worked out ... the world might not believe a "modest" devaluation would be adequate and pressure on sterling

could continue'. He recommended a \$3 billion multilateral 'support package', orchestrated by the United States through the IMF, governments and private banks.¹⁶ Rostow supported this position, telling the President on 13 November that without an 'assurance of long-term credit' the British 'may have to devalue – perhaps within a week'.¹⁷

Though denied his visit to Washington, Wilson persisted with his veiled threat about a bail-out for sterling or immediate troop withdrawals across the world. On 13 November, Denis Rickett, a senior Treasury minister, arrived in Washington 'armed with instructions' – undoubtedly from Wilson – 'to make their flesh creep with talk of pulling out of Singapore (to keep control of the party) and [out] of Germany'.¹⁸ Yet this talk had less effect on the White House than Wilson anticipated. For a start, the British plans – announced in July 1967 – to withdraw from East of Suez by the mid-1970s seemed to have strained the White House's sympathies for London to the extent that there was little sustained debate about the idea of another rescue of the pound. At the time of the September 1965 bail-out, the Americans had intimated that further assistance would be less likely in a situation where the British were cutting back on their international commitments, and Wilson had in turn made it clear that Britain intended to remain a world power. Now, economic and political difficulties meant that whatever his personal feelings, Wilson's dedication to the East of Suez role could have little impact. Furthermore, although Johnson believed that devaluation had to be handled carefully to avoid an international financial crisis, he was more concerned to mitigate the aftershock of the measure than to dispense another bail-out.¹⁹

Philip Kaiser of the US Embassy noted in his memoirs that in 1964–67 Wilson's 'determination not to devalue the pound fitted nicely with his desire to strengthen Anglo-American ties, and to develop close personal relations with President Johnson'.²⁰ Consequently the Prime Minister was especially sensitive to the impact of devaluation on his ties with Johnson. On 17 November, Wilson sent Johnson a lengthy, candid, and 'very secret message' to say that 'the Government have decided to devalue the pound this weekend'. The President knew 'how resolutely I have sought to avoid taking this step', and of the 'hard and unpopular decisions we have had to take since we came to office, landed with a £800,000,000 debt'. These measures were designed 'not only to hold the pound, but also, more fundamentally, to transform the economy and the technological and industrial base of British society'. Great progress had been made, said Wilson, until 'the ground was cut from under us by events in the Middle East', which 'disrupted our trade and surcharged our imports'. There was also 'a continuous wave of speculation against the pound, which was aggravated by the disproportionate impact of the dock strikes here and the general rise in world interest rates'. Wilson continued to say that 'I wanted you, who have been so generous in your help and encouragement over these last few years and who yourself face such immense difficulties and problems, to have the full picture

of the political decisions we have been obliged to make'. The Prime Minister felt optimistic about the likely effect of devaluation: 'providing that, as we confidently believe, the pound can now again become a strong currency and our economy forge ahead in the new circumstances, I can assure you that, while we shall inevitably be making some reductions in defence expenditure, we shall nevertheless be able to maintain, both in Europe and East of Suez, the policies set out in the Defence White Paper, as I explained them to you at our last meeting', in June 1967.²¹

Wilson's office asked Patrick Dean to give the Prime Minister's message to the President 'at 1300 hours Washington time on Friday November 17'. The timing would ensure that it did 'not ... appear that the President was hearing the news' of devaluation later than did the IMF.²² The Johnson Administration knew that Wilson had resisted devaluation as long as possible, and reacted with equanimity: according to the President, the news was merely 'like hearing that an old friend who has been ill has to undergo a serious operation'.²³ At just 15 per cent the devaluation was a relatively modest one – a CIA analysis noted that it would have taken a devaluation of 25–30 per cent to remove any lingering doubts about the competitiveness of British goods.²⁴ Johnson told Dean sympathetically that he was 'putting his stack behind the Prime Minister'.²⁵ On 18 November, Wilson thanked Johnson for the 'open-hearted way in which you responded to my message'.²⁶ The President's cable of 23 November was another tonic for Wilson: 'my faith is deep that the British people have the will and the means both to pay their way and to continue to play the part they must in the world'.²⁷ Wilson also thanked Dean for 'his handling of the President ... a model of what I hoped it would be'.²⁸ Dean responded that 'One of the most satisfactory features of the whole business was the friendly and helpful attitude of the President, Joe Fowler, Dean Rusk and others from the very beginning'. The Ambassador knew 'of course that they had a very keen interest in the outcome, but even so they seem all to me to have gone out of their way to be as helpful as possible'.²⁹ Similarly, on 20 November Dean had told Michael Palliser, Wilson's Foreign Office assistant, that although the diplomacy of the British economic crisis had meant 'a pretty tiresome time' for the Embassy, 'One great thing to come out of it well is Anglo-American relations'. Regardless of the fate of Britain's application to join the EEC, an optimistic Dean could not 'help feeling that ... our ties with the Americans can and should grow stronger'.³⁰

Yet economic troubles did little for Britain's standing in Washington. A CIA analysis reported on 28 November that the devaluation of sterling had 'induced at least 20 smaller countries to devalue their currencies and set the stage for a run on the London gold market that by 24 November had reached panic proportions'.³¹ On 12 December another CIA analysis noted that 'The British Government is reported to consider its recent devaluation of the pound a failure and may adopt a floating exchange rate, perhaps within a few days'. If this were done, 'sterling could move downward in response to market forces until it

stabilised, probably at a rate much lower than \$2.40'. This would 'disrupt the international financial system, possibly causing an upheaval in world trade and economic recession in many countries'.³² On 4 June, Bruce wrote that devaluation had greatly undermined Wilson's political position: the Labour government's 'three-year effort to maintain parity of sterling – at the sacrifice of cherished socialist principles and promises – was a failure'. Wilson's 'subsequent bland refusal to admit failure has deepened mistrust and sapped public support, and the struggle with the unions over compulsory incomes policy has alienated many Labour Party loyalists'.³³ A State Department analysis from the same time contended that Britain's 'post-devaluation economic programme' could well prove inadequate, because of:

a history of repeated crises; organised labour's reluctance, if not unwillingness, to accept wage restraint; archaic labour and management practices; a stubbornly high level of import demand; high interest rates in the US and in Europe; Britain's precarious liquidity position; continuing nervousness about sterling; and the generally precarious international monetary situation.³⁴

Sterling was not devalued again, but as late as November 1968 Johnson and Wilson were corresponding about the problems faced by the pound.³⁵

East of Suez

British plans to withdraw from East of Suez by the mid-1970s, announced on 18 July 1967, had distressed Johnson and his colleagues to the degree that they were less inclined even to keep Wilson informed of developments in Vietnam – even though there were more than 400,000 US troops there in 1967.³⁶ On 15 August 1967, Michael Palliser complained to Philip Kaiser that Wilson's 'difficulties' with public opinion and the Labour left over Vietnam 'should be rather better appreciated' in the White House. There was much 'public concern' in Britain, expressed frequently 'in the press, radio, etc., to say nothing of the immediate and sharp reaction by a number of ... backbenchers'. American policy seemed to be moving 'towards a more hawk-like and potentially very dangerous form of escalation; and all this without any subsequent consultation' between the President and Wilson. The White House should not doubt Wilson's concern and his 'need for much fuller information about the President's current intentions and policy'. Kaiser retorted that there had been 'no fundamental change in US policy, and that the recent escalation of US bombing was merely part of the long-standing process of 'continuing to hit supply lines'. But 'however friendly' Johnson's 'personal feelings' for Wilson, the President might react 'sharply to any more formal approaches' for information 'in view of our recent decisions in the context of the Defence Review "East of Suez"'. Kaiser said that the 'East of Suez decisions caused deep resentment in Washington', and that this resentment 'might ... be responsible for the President's failure to keep in touch' with Wilson about Vietnam.³⁷

The planned withdrawals from East of Suez and President de Gaulle's veto in December 1967 of the British application to join the EEC meant that Britain lacked a distinct role in world affairs. De Gaulle had alleged that Britain's apparently close connections with Washington would mean 'continued US domination of Europe' if the British were permitted to join the Common Market. Britain 'would have to totally change its traditions, outlook and commitments abroad (such as Hong Kong and Singapore)'.³⁸ Yet British defence cuts had already undermined Anglo-American ties and seemed likely to do so further – Jeffrey Pickering has observed that 'the shock of enforced devaluation initiated a process which would eventually bring Britain's overseas role to an ignominious end. The change in sterling's parity ... instantly added £50,000,000 to defence costs annually', with the effect that further defence cuts would soon be necessary.³⁹ On 20 December 1967, Denis Healey, Minister of Defence, advised Wilson to be honest with Johnson when they next met, at a memorial service in Melbourne for the Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt (Holt had drowned on 17 December). Healey told Wilson that 'that no attempt should be made to disguise the fact that if there were to be large defence cuts arising out of the Government's present review, these were bound to affect the speed of our withdrawal from present positions and commitments outside Europe'. Wilson should not 'suggest that we were not really contemplating anything very substantial', and 'a firm warning of this kind should be conveyed to our allies and partners, since there would in practice be very little time for any real consultation with them about such measures as might be found necessary'. Healey suggested that Wilson 'should simply have to tell them, when the time came, what we proposed to do'. The Prime Minister agreed, saying that 'in his talk with President Johnson' he would 'put down a firm marker about the likely effect of the current review'.⁴⁰

Wilson failed to do so, though, and the two leaders merely discussed events in Vietnam.⁴¹ Anthony Howard of the *Observer* reported from Washington on 31 December that Johnson had originally 'hoped that Wilson would divulge his policy intentions – and lay himself open to the famous LBJ treatment of persuasion – on his ... visit to Washington, at one time expected to take place this weekend'. Instead, Wilson 'startled the President when they met in Australia by insisting that the trip he himself had suggested would not now be convenient until February'. This 'aroused White House suspicions that the Prime Minister was determined to present a *fait accompli*, both in arms contract cancellations and in a final British withdrawal from the Far East by 1971'. As a result of this 'draining of confidence' in Wilson, 'very little hope is now felt here ... of ... the \$750 million F-111 contract ... remaining unscathed' (the British had ordered fifty of these American-made jet fighters in January 1966). Moreover, 'the impression had rapidly gained ground' in Washington 'that the Prime Minister is more than willing to sacrifice Singapore as a sop to his left-wing rather than to make unpopular social welfare cutbacks at home'.⁴² Howard was mistaken to

suggest that Wilson preferred reducing defence commitments to making cuts in domestic programmes, but Washington's disapproval of the former meant that the Prime Minister was unwilling to face the Americans himself – not least because at the time of devaluation he had told Johnson that the British would maintain the remaining commitments outlined in the Defence White Paper of 18 July 1967.

The British Embassy's Annual Review for 1967 suggested that 'the withdrawal of a major part of our forces East of Suez and our announced intentions for Southeast Asia in the mid-1970s' meant that the White House 'will be liable to consult with us less and take us less into their confidence about areas of the world from which we are consciously opting out'. The United States would 'behave increasingly in a manner which reflects the fundamental inequality' of its relationship with Britain.⁴³ On 1 January 1968, Patrick Dean informed the Foreign Office of Washington's concern 'that we shall dispose with dangerous haste of the unique political and strategic assets which they regard us as holding in trust for the West through our presence, reduced though it is, in Europe, the Middle East, and in Asia'. Britain's demise, said Dean, as 'a leading financial and military power would create more than just a vacuum which they do not feel able or willing to fill themselves'. The White House understood its 'interest in Britain's redressment' and 'the psychological need for cuts overseas if domestic cuts are to be made effective'. However, Congress, which embodied 'American Puritanism' as well as 'hypocrisy', might think that the US was 'subsidising the British Welfare State while we are shifting more of our defence burden on to American shoulders'. Congressmen 'could make it very difficult for the Administration to provide the financial support we need when sterling is in trouble'. Dean also believed that further British defence withdrawals could encourage the United States to 'slide rapidly into neo-isolationism ... they will go their own way with less and less regard for the concerns and interests of other nations'. It would be a mistake 'to underrate the underlying strength of this mood in Congress and in the country at large and its inhibiting effect on the Administration notwithstanding the reassuringly close and friendly relations which exist between the President and the Prime Minister and the two Secretaries of State'. It was the mood of neo-isolationism 'rather than the loss of the physical contributions which we can make to the defence of American and free world objectives in the broadest sense that makes the Administration so sensitive to our actions'. Against the background 'of the reassessments which we have given in the past two years, and more recently in the context of devaluation, it will be essential and by no means easy to convince' Washington 'that there is still a distinction to be drawn between contraction and contracting out'.⁴⁴

Rather than face the Americans himself, Wilson sent George Brown to Washington to outline British plans. Brown told Dean Rusk on 11 January that 'Britain had lost the battle to avoid devaluation ... because they had been trying to do too much at home and abroad with too slender resources'. Since then the

Government had been considering 'what cuts in spending must be made to assure confidence and to avoid further devaluation', concluding that 'this required a switch of £1 billion, including substantial cuts at home'. A predominance of domestic cuts would be 'unpalatable', as it 'would involve an attack on some cherished social programmes, such as health and education'. Therefore the Labour government was 'forced again to look at defence expenditures overseas', and specifically to 'accelerate the rundown in the Far East ... there would be no bases on mainland Asia by March 31 1971, instead of by the mid-70s'. British forces would also 'leave the Persian Gulf by the same time'. Rusk expressed 'profound dismay' at the news, and he was 'particularly disturbed by the intention to announce these decisions'. If, 'pending its entry into Europe, the UK dropped back to a little England he could not help but feel that this would generate a descending spiral across the board'. If the 'teacher abandon[ed] the field, Americans would ask if no-one else was interested, why should they be?' Isolationism was 'growing in the US because of the feeling that Americans were carrying the problem alone'.⁴⁵

On 2 February, Dean noted the 'marked' impact on Rusk of the planned British measures: 'As a man with such close links with and deep feeling for Britain, he feels that he has seen the end of an era, and that as a result of our decisions the world will be the poorer and a more dangerous place to live in'. The Ambassador added that advance news 'mainly from the Malaysians, of what was in the wind had already reached the Administration and indeed public opinion, and the atmosphere was anything but good'. Brown's account 'only confirmed and deepened the mood of depression and even worse in the Administration'. Dean believed that the Americans 'realised that they were not so much being consulted as presented with a virtual *fait accompli*, and were in a gloomy way resigned to the outcome'. They 'pulled out as many stops as they could in order to deter us, but felt all along that they were probably wasting their breath'.⁴⁶ Johnson was among those who had sought to 'deter' the British from their course of action. He told Wilson on 11 January that he had 'just learned from Dean Rusk of your plans for total British withdrawal from the Far East and the Persian Gulf by 1971'. This was 'profoundly discouraging', as it amounted to a 'British withdrawal from world affairs, with all that means for the future safety and health of the free world'. The 'structure of peacekeeping will be shaken to its foundations', and the United States's own 'capability and political will could be gravely weakened if we have to man the ramparts all alone'. The President urged Wilson and his colleagues 'to review the alternative before you take these irrevocable steps'. Even 'a prolongation of your presence in the Far East and the Persian Gulf until other stable arrangements can be put in place would be of help at this very difficult time'.⁴⁷

On 15 January, Johnson reiterated to Wilson that 'the announcement of an accelerated British withdrawal both from its Far Eastern bases and from the Persian Gulf would create most serious problems for the United States Government

and for the security of the entire free world'. Americans would 'find great difficulty in supporting the idea that we must move in to secure areas which the United Kingdom has abandoned'. In particular, Johnson expressed concern about reports in the London press that 'the Cabinet has in fact decided to cancel the F-111'. The jet, 'because of its range and overall capability', would permit the forces of the United Kingdom to deploy to the Far East and the Persian Gulf 'from its own bases'. This might 'alleviate somewhat the strong reaction which will inevitably take place'. However, if Britain 'decided to forego the acquisition of the F-111, everyone here will regard this as a total disengagement from any commitments whatsoever to the security of areas outside Europe, and to a considerable extent in Europe as well'. It would also 'be viewed here as a strong indication of British isolation which would be fatal to the chances of cooperation between our two countries in the field of defence'.⁴⁸

Wilson responded at length to the President the same day: the 'heavy sacrifices at home would have been pointless without drastic retrenchment abroad'. This was not 'simply a matter of party politics – of keeping some kind of "balance" to force the unpleasant home medicine down the throats of our party supporters'. The issue was much 'wider than party politics – the politics of the nation and the sense of purpose of the British people as a whole'. The British were 'sick and tired of being thought willing to eke out a comfortable existence on borrowed money'. Recent weeks had seen 'an astonishing assertion of this kind of spirit throughout the nation and irrespective of party'. There was still a 'confused groping for the real role that Britain ought to be playing in the world; and it has been striking to observe ... not only the extent to which people are prepared to accept drastic sacrifice at home but also their demand that we must no longer over-strain our real resources and capabilities in the military field abroad'. But this did not mean 'a British withdrawal from the world', as the 'spirit that has been running through this nation in recent weeks is not that of "Little England".' It was instead 'a blend of exasperation at our inability to weather the successive storms of the past twenty years and determination, once and for all to hew out a new role for Britain in the world at once commensurate with her real resources yet worthy of her past'. This could not be done 'on borrowed time and borrowed money', said Wilson.⁴⁹

In the Far East and the Persian Gulf, Wilson continued, 'our present political commitments are too great for the military capability of the forces that we can reasonably afford, if the economy is to be restored quickly and decisively'. Britain 'must now take certain major foreign policy decisions as the prerequisite of economies in our defence expenditure'. By setting 'realistic priorities', Britain could strengthen its 'influence and power for peace in the world'. This idea underlaid 'the intention, conveyed to Dean Rusk by George Brown, to withdraw our forces from the Far East and the Middle East by the end of the financial year 1970/71'. But 'in the light of' concerns from the United States and other allies, 'we have decided to defer our withdrawal for a further nine months,

i.e. to the end of 1971'. This would 'still seem too soon' for Johnson, but it was 'a significant contribution to the time needed to help those in the areas concerned prepare for the day when we shall no longer have a military presence there'. So far as the F-111 was concerned, 'the only way we can achieve the really decisive economies that are essential in the hardware budget of the Royal Air Force, while still keeping effective and sophisticated capabilities in all three services, is to cancel the order for the 50 F-111 aircraft'. Wilson hoped that Johnson was 'wrong in assessing that this decision will be interpreted abroad as a disengagement from any commitments to the security of areas outside Europe or indeed largely in Europe as well'. The decision was not an 'indication of British isolation', as Britain would 'not be withdrawing from our three major alliances; and the general capability we shall retain in this country and on the continent can also be deployed overseas'. Wilson ended on a personal note: 'Believe me, Lyndon, the decisions we are having to take now have been the most difficult and heaviest of any that I, and I think all of my colleagues, can remember in our public life'. Those decisions were not taken 'in a narrow or partisan spirit', but because 'in the longer term, only thus can Britain find the new place on the world stage that I firmly believe the British people ardently desire'.⁵⁰

On 16 January, the Wilson government announced 'heavy cuts in public expenditure', including the accelerated withdrawal from East of Suez and the Persian Gulf. The cuts 'fell hardest on defence spending and military commitments abroad but they also hit some sacred socialist programmes, such as free medical prescriptions, education and housing'.⁵¹ On 17 January, Michael Palliser told Wilson of a conversation with Edward Tomkins, a minister at the British Embassy in Washington, who said that the White House felt 'double-crossed by the British Government in terms of the assurances given to them both in July and at the time of devaluation that the decisions then taken were not in conflict with basic foreign policy objectives and represented final decisions on our force commitments East of Suez'.⁵² On 31 January, Dean, lamenting the recent British announcement, asked Rusk 'if the President would ask Wilson to reconsider the decision to withdraw by the end of 1971 from Singapore/Malaysia and the Persian Gulf'. Rusk responded that 'there was nothing new to add to what the Secretary had told George Brown or to what the President had written in his two messages to Wilson, especially as none of these representations had been very successful'.⁵³ On 2 February, Dean noted that the defence cuts had 'without question been a watershed in Anglo-American relations', and that 'the Americans will with some justice be disposed to make their own dispositions without consulting or considering us'.⁵⁴

On 5 February, Dean reflected that although Anglo-American relations were 'not in the forefront' of American minds, there was still a degree of 'resentment, including on the President's part, that they were not really consulted but presented with *faits accomplis*'. This had 'hurt them deeply'. However, they accepted

that 'a new situation exists and there is no disposition to wish to express resentment in any practical way just for the sake of doing so'. Johnson would be 'less interested in detailed justification of why our decisions were necessary than in the positive aspects of our future policies which will be of help to him'.⁵⁵ That day the President expressed to the *Sunday Times's* Washington correspondent Henry Brandon his regret towards the British East of Suez decisions. Britain and the United States would 'always remain friends', but 'when our common interests shrink, the flow of communications and common business shrinks, too. What Britain did was unnecessary, unwise and not in the British interest'.⁵⁶ In June 1968 the State Department reflected that the Labour government had 'accelerated curtailment of world-wide commitments and clarification of its policy towards Europe', but the process was 'far from complete'. Continued 'frustration of Britain's new European vocation nourishes traditional British parochialism, resentment toward France, and suspicion of Germany'. The Conservatives had attacked the government's 'retreat from East of Suez', but before they could assume power 'the cutbacks will probably have gone so far as to be irreparable'. Britain's future was 'at best, a middle-sized European power, albeit one with a nuclear capability, a residual sense of extra-European responsibility and a continuing, if diminished, status as a favoured partner of the US'.⁵⁷

The last summit

Although on 8 November David Bruce had discouraged Wilson's efforts to visit Washington, the Ambassador soon became more sympathetic – probably because of the fortitude with which the Prime Minister was dealing with the critics of the US position in Vietnam. On 16 November, while discussing the possibility of a visit to Britain of Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, Bruce told the State Department that Wilson had 'obviously anticipated using a conversation with the Vice-President as a lever to pry open for himself an opening for a trip to the United States to see the President'. Bruce recommended that 'simultaneously with a notification to the Prime Minister ... of the Vice-President's inability to accept the engagement, the President [should] agree to receive him in Washington for a short conversation in December'. Bruce 'emphatically divorce[d]' himself 'from any charge of being influenced by the PM's representations on this account'. Seldom, 'if ever in recent times have the domestic pressures in Britain been as great as they now are against the Government's various actions which involve close cooperation with the United States in support for the most part of our major policies'. Wilson had so far restrained the situation by his 'firmness ... in resisting proposals for drastic changes'. Newspaper accounts and 'political gossip have been rampant for months here to the effect that Wilson has forfeited the confidence of President Johnson'. Bruce was 'convinced that it would be salutary, and in our national interest, if this meeting so ardently desired by the Prime Minister could take place'. Neither a Conservative government nor a

Labour one could 'quickly remedy present ills, and we must, perhaps for a long time, rely as far as we are concerned in these affairs on cooperation with us by the present Prime Minister'. It would 'be productive and helpful to have him personally explain to the President the nature of his problems, and how he proposes to deal with them'. Certainly, 'the President's views would be of great importance in shaping his tactics'.⁵⁸

On 4 December, Bruce told Wilson that Johnson 'would be glad to welcome him at any time'.⁵⁹ Wilson's sixth and, as it turned out, last visit to see President Johnson was arranged for 8 February. The idea prevailed among the Americans that the Prime Minister was using his trip not primarily as a means of settling any Anglo-American matters – for the key issues concerning Britain's role in the world had lapsed – but as a respite from his difficulties at home. Rusk informed Johnson on 3 February that Wilson's visit 'takes place against a background of increasing troubles ... at home'. A 'Cabinet battle in January over the cuts in governmental expenditure deepened the divisions in the Labour Party and further weakened Wilson's standing in the country'.⁶⁰ On 6 February, Bruce, while helping to draft the after-dinner toast for Wilson, said that he wanted the President to indicate that the visit had first been mooted some months ago. This approach would help to 'blunt British-US criticism of Wilson's visit as a "patch job to divert attention from domestic problems"'.⁶¹ On 7 February, Walt Rostow advised Johnson that 'Wilson is in trouble at home. His visit here is designed to boost his prestige in Britain'. The Prime Minister still commanded 'a comfortable majority in Parliament', but 'his failure to deal decisively with Britain's economic problems has lost him the confidence of much of his party and most of his countrymen'.⁶² A State Department analysis on 7 February continued this theme by stating that Wilson's visit:

comes at a time when he is under increasing pressure and criticism at home – from some members of his own Labour Party who are upset at the cutbacks in the planned level of domestic spending, especially in education and welfare programmes; from the Tory opposition, which is unhappy about the government's plans to accelerate withdrawals of military forces from the Persian Gulf and East of Suez, and from most of the press and public which have discovered a Wilson 'credibility gap'.⁶³

The analysis also noted that 'The public in general and Labourites in particular feel that Wilson has broken promise after promise'. Much of the national press was 'currently portraying Wilson as a discredited, broken, pathetic little man'.⁶⁴

Bruce, in Washington for the Prime Minister's visit, wrote in his diary on 8 February that Wilson 'and his train arrived from London last night'. The entourage included 'Mrs Wilson, Burke Trend, Denis Greenhill, Michael Halls, Michael Palliser, Gerald Kaufman (Public Relations Adviser), T. D. Lloyd-Hughes (Press Secretary), and Donald Murray (Head of Southeast Asia Department, Foreign Office)'. The 'road from the White House Northwest Gate to the Diplomatic entrance was lined with Army, Navy, and Air Force men, standing at attention with fixed bayonets'. Bruce said that 'I trailed along behind the President

as he met his guests in front of a battery of cameramen'. Wilson and Johnson 'disappeared into the Oval Office, unattended, from which they emerged two and a half hours later (2 o'clock)'.⁶⁵ Their discussions, though cordial in tone, could hardly claim great significance, with the two leaders discussing economic affairs and the war in Vietnam. Johnson 'made no attempt ... to go over the ground of British withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia, still less the Gulf'.⁶⁶ Bruce noted that the press 'made merry about the selections chosen by the orchestra for this evening's State Dinner'. Included was the song '*Road to Mandalay*, and one or two other examples that seemed especially inapposite' in the light of Britain's declining world status (Wilson himself noted that *Road to Mandalay*, 'words by Kipling, contained the first formulation of the phrase "east of Suez"').⁶⁷ On 1 March, Dean told Paul Gore-Booth, Permanent Under Secretary of the Foreign Office, that Wilson's latest trip did not excite much attention in Washington, but 'taken in low-key it was an undoubted success' – Wilson and Johnson had 'refurbished their personal relationship without any arid arguments about the British role in the world'. The President and his advisers were not 'really reconciled at heart to our latest decisions on Defence; all the evidence, though it is admittedly indirect, suggests that they are not'. However, the Administration preferred to 'see how they can work together with us in the new situation rather than merely raking over the coals'. Comment on the Prime Minister's visit 'in the country at large reflected generally the attitudes shown towards the defence cuts in the previous month'. It was 'friendly, sympathetic, and grateful for support, but inclined to question whether the relationship could be seen in the same terms as that of the Churchill–Roosevelt era'.⁶⁸

Although Wilson's meetings with Johnson had seemed to go well, a minor controversy soon arose. On 26 February, Michael Palliser informed Wilson of a recent *Times* article by Louis Heren, which intimated that Johnson did not hold the Prime Minister in high regard.⁶⁹ Palliser had asked David Bruce whether Heren's talk with Johnson had been 'preceded or followed by a talk with Rostow', who was especially unsympathetic towards the British, 'and whether the latter had in any way coloured what Heren had said'. Bruce 'concluded on the basis of his own knowledge of the President's point of view, that this must be the outcome of a personal talk with the President'. The Ambassador had 'himself heard the President express, in one form or another, most of the views set out in the Heren article'. Bruce was especially struck by the reference in the article to 'the "narrow gap" to be bridged over Vietnam', a phrase which Wilson had used in his speech at the White House. Bruce recalled Johnson's belief that 'talk of "narrow gaps" was superficial in the context of the present military situation and of the likely political difficulties in any eventual negotiations'. Palliser told Wilson that Bruce had 'conveyed a gentle warning that, so far as LBJ was concerned, too much continuing talk of "the narrow gap" could come to be equated with "Cuban buses" as a personal obsession directed against yourself'. Bruce had 'had a long talk with the President' before the British visit, and 'the

President had expressed the firm intention of expressing his grave concern at the accelerated British withdrawal from East of Suez'. Johnson had 'intended to do this privately to you and that he might well not say to anyone afterwards that he had done so'. The Ambassador 'had therefore been very surprised when you said that this matter had hardly come up in your talk with the President'. In short, Bruce believed that the Heren article was 'faithfully reflecting the President's views' when it presented the idea that 'the accelerated withdrawal' of British forces in Asia was 'mistaken'.⁷⁰

On 28 February, John Killick of the British Embassy in Washington also confirmed the veracity of Heren's article. The journalist had told Killick that in the interview Johnson had 'deliberately decided that he wanted to put across his line about the defence cuts in order to dispel any idea there might have been following his talk with the Prime Minister that he had not been worried by them'. Heren also said that 'although the President had throughout referred in perfectly respectful terms to the Prime Minister, he had the strong impression that in fact Mr Wilson's standing with him had markedly declined'. Killick concluded that Heren's article was 'without doubt based entirely on the President's own remarks and is *not* an amalgam of things the President said with remarks of others in the White House'. Heren affirmed that the President had actually said that 'if there is always to be an Anglo-American special relationship, the Prime Minister really ought to stop talking about "narrow gaps" to be bridged'.⁷¹ The matter soon subsided, though, and in July 1968 a Foreign Office analysis commented that 'Relations between the President and the Prime Minister are very cordial. Meetings which take place in Washington once or twice a year in Washington are valuable and should be maintained. The discussion is private, frank and uninhibited'.⁷² Yet for all the apparent congeniality 'at the summit', Britain's ties with the United States were in some ways unremarkable. On 1 July, Dean noted that the Americans, 'with so much else to think about ... have little time or inclination at present to remember their friends or to consider their worth to themselves'. British news rarely received 'many inches in the press today, but I believe we are holding our own quite well'. The 'shock' of the January defence decisions had 'largely worn off', and recent 'problems of the dollar have given thinking Americans more sympathy for the vicissitudes of the pound and the British economy'. British society appeared to be a 'rock of stability by comparison with France today, and some other European countries'. Britain's 'manifest support for NATO is a real encouragement at a time when voices are raised in Congress for the withdrawal of troops from Europe'.⁷³

Exit Lyndon Johnson, enter Richard Nixon

On 31 March 1968, Johnson, buffeted by domestic dissent and a mounting death toll in Vietnam, announced that he would not seek another term in office,⁷⁴ and the Republican contender, Richard Nixon, won the presidential election

on 5 November that year. On 13 January 1969, Johnson asked Dean to tell Wilson that 'one of his great comforts had been that he could always count on the UK during any crisis'. He was 'personally grateful for the warm and effective relations he had always had with the Prime Minister and other British officials'.⁷⁵ On 17 January, Wilson in turn thanked the outgoing President for the 'warmth of your welcome on each of my six visits to Washington and the depth and frankness of our talks', which had been 'of inestimable value to me, and I hope to you also'.⁷⁶ At the same time Wilson wanted to forge strong ties with Nixon, extolling to him on 5 February the need 'for a close and confident relationship between our two governments'.⁷⁷ Wilson had first met Nixon soon after assuming the leadership of the Labour Party in February 1963. Looking to the future, in January 1967 Wilson had also accepted his invitation to meet again – 'Of such are political relationships born', the Prime Minister noted. Nixon decided that he would visit Europe in the first few weeks of his administration, to 'demonstrate the importance he attached to the European link – in contrast to his predecessor, who gave the impression that all his interests were in the Pacific'.⁷⁸ The new President visited London on 24–25 February 1969. Wilson met him at London Airport, telling him on the way to 10 Downing Street that:

right at the outset of our relationship, I wanted to say to him what I had said to his predecessor at my first Prime Minister/President meeting with him, namely that I would not say anything about him or our relationships outside the conference room that had not been said inside, but that I would say a great deal inside that would not be repeated outside. Further, I would not feel it my duty to tell the outside what I had said to him – and to him only.⁷⁹

Wilson told the President about when he had 'said this to LBJ in December 1964 and briefly described the Cuban buses episode of the previous spring which had led to the acute suspicion which LBJ had voiced before my own visit'. Nixon 'roared with laughter at the story'. Wilson said that Johnson could reflect 'that there had been the fullest confidence in all our dealings and I had never at any point embarrassed him by statements or briefings outside'. On 'the one occasion' when Britain 'took a different line' to that held in Washington, 'namely the "dissociation" on the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong' in June 1966, 'not only had I told him on my previous visit that I would have to do this if the bombing occurred – which he accepted – but that when the occasion arose we had several exchanges before our statement was made'.⁸⁰ Wilson's effort to establish a close relationship with Nixon enjoyed only limited success, because no real rapport ever emerged between the two leaders. For example, Wilson suggested after their first handshake that they should address each other by their first names. Nixon's National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, noted that 'A fishy-eyed stare from Nixon squelched this idea'.⁸¹ Moreover, Britain was less and less regarded as a major power. Kissinger wrote that Wilson 'greeted Nixon with the avuncular goodwill of the head of an ancient family that has seen better times'.⁸²

Notes

- 1 Rostow to Johnson, 19 October 1967, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968*, vol. VIII, *International Monetary and Trade Policy* (Washington: USGPO, 1998), pp. 419-20.
- 2 Quoted in Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 476.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 475.
- 5 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:62, entry for 8 November 1967.
- 6 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967-69, POL 27 Viet S, 11.5.67, Bruce to Rusk, 9 November 1967.
- 7 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:62, Embassy to State, 16 November 1967.
- 8 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967-69, POL 27 Viet S, 11.5.67, Bruce to Rusk, 9 November 1967.
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- 10 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:62, entry for 8 November 1967.
- 11 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967-69, POL 27 Viet S, 10.10.67, Rusk-Dean conversation, 'Labour Party Revolt on Vietnam', 8 November 1967.
- 12 PRO, PREM 13/1447, 'Draft Message to the President', undated.
- 13 Quoted in Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, pp. 475-6.
- 14 Fowler to Johnson, 12 November 1967, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. VIII, pp. 434-6.
- 15 *Ibid.*
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- 17 Rostow to Johnson, 13 November 1967, *ibid.*, p. 437.
- 18 Alec Cairncross, *The Wilson Years: A Treasury Diary* (London: Historians' Press, 1997), p. 244, entry for 13 November 1967.
- 19 Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 316. On post-devaluation Anglo-American economic cooperation, see Rajarshi Roy, 'The Battle for Bretton Woods: America, Britain and the International Financial Crisis of October 1967-March 1968', *Cold War History*, 2:2 (January 2002), pp. 33-60.
- 20 Philip M. Kaiser, *Journeying Far and Wide: A Political and Diplomatic Memoir* (New York: Scribners, 1992), pp. 235-6.
- 21 PRO, PREM 13/1447, Wilson to Johnson, 17 November 1967.
- 22 PRO, PREM 13/1447, Palliser to Washington Embassy, 16 November 1967.
- 23 Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, p. 316; Kaiser, *Journeying Far and Wide*, p. 249.
- 24 Roy, 'The Battle for Bretton Woods', p. 46.
- 25 Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 457.
- 26 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 28, Rostow Vol. 51 November 16-25 1967 (2/2), Wilson to Johnson, 18 November 1967.
- 27 PRO, PREM 13/2058, Johnson to Wilson, 23 November 1967.
- 28 PRO, PREM 13/1447, Wilson to Dean, 18 November 1967.
- 29 PRO, PREM 13/2058, Dean to Wilson, 21 November 1967.
- 30 PRO, PREM 13/1447, Dean to Palliser, 20 November 1967.
- 31 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 211, UK Memos XII 7-12/67, CIA Intelligence Memorandum, 'Repercussions from Sterling Devaluation', 28 November 1967.
- 32 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 211, UK Memos XII 7-12/67, CIA Intelligence Memorandum, CIA Intelligence Memorandum, 'Continued pressure on Sterling and the Dollar', 12 December 1967.
- 33 LBJL, NSC Meetings File, Box 2, NSC Meetings Vol. 5 Tab 69 6/5/68 Current Issues

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- 34 'Directions of UK Policy', undated, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968*, vol. XII, *Western Europe* (Washington: USGPO, 2001), p. 620.
- 35 See Documents 210-213, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. VIII, pp. 580-2.
- 36 Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1945-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 246.
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- 39 Jeffrey Pickering, *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: The Politics of Retrenchment* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 164.
- 40 PRO, PREM 13/1446, Palliser to Broadbent, 20 December 1967.
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- 44 PRO, PREM 13/3551, Dean to Foreign Office, Telegram No. 3, 1 January 1968.
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- 46 PRO, FCO 7/741, AU 1/4, Dean to Gore-Booth, 2 February 1968.
- 47 Johnson to Wilson, 11 January 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. XII, pp. 608-9.
- 48 Johnson to Wilson, 15 January 1968, *ibid.*, pp. 609-11.
- 49 Wilson to Johnson, 15 January 1968, *ibid.*, pp. 611-14.
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 212, UK: Memos XIII 1/68-7/68, CIA Intelligence Memorandum, 'Prospects for Harold Wilson and for the UK Economy', 6 June 1968.
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- 54 PRO, FCO 7/741, AU 1/4, Dean to Gore-Booth, 2 February 1968.
- 55 PRO, PREM 13/2454, Dean to Palliser, Telegram No. 443, 5 February 1968.
- 56 Quoted in Henry Brandon, *Special Relationships: A Foreign Correspondent's Memoirs from Roosevelt to Reagan* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 231.
- 57 'Directions of UK Policy', undated, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. XII, p. 619.
- 58 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:62, Embassy to State, 16 November 1967.
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- 61 LBJL, Statements of LBJ, Box 265, Exchange of Toasts Between the President and Prime Minister Wilson, 'Meeting with Ambassador Bruce, February 6 1968 - 11:00 am'.
- 62 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 28, Rostow Vol. 58 Jan. 25-31 1968 (1/2), Rostow to Johnson, 7 February 1968.
- 63 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 216, UK: Visit of PM Wilson 2/7-9/68, State Department Research Memorandum, 'Wilson Plagued by Domestic-Political Problems on Eve of Washington Visit', 7 February 1968.
- 64 *Ibid.*
- 65 Bruce diary entry for 8 February 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. XII, pp. 615-16.
- 66 See Wilson, *The Labour Government*, pp. 496-503, and PRO, PREM 13/2455, for records of the talks.
- 67 Bruce diary entry for 8 February 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. XII, pp. 615-16. There is no evidence that Johnson had a hand in the choice of music, although the possibility cannot

- be dismissed. Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 497.
- 68 PRO, FCO 7/741, AU 1/4, Dean to Gore-Booth, 1 March 1968.
- 69 Louis Heren, 'Anglo-US Relationship Comes Under Strain', *The Times*, 23 February 1968.
- 70 PRO, PREM 13/2445, Palliser to Wilson, 27 February 1968.
- 71 PRO, PREM 13/2445, Killick to Maitland, 28 February 1968.
- 72 PRO, PREM 13/2158, brief on the United States for John Freeman, the Ambassador-designate, Washington, 23 July 1968.
- 73 PRO, FCO 7/742, AU 1/4, Dean to Gore-Booth, 1 July 1968.
- 74 Wilson had not been told in advance, although during their meetings in February Johnson had intimated that he was by no means certain of seeking a second term in the White House. See Wilson, *The Labour Government*, pp. 519–20.
- 75 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 212, UK: Cables and memos XIV 8/68–1/69, Memorandum of Conversation, 13 January 1969.
- 76 PRO, PREM 13/3006, Wilson to Johnson, 17 January 1969.
- 77 PRO, PREM 13/3007, Wilson to Nixon, 5 February 1969.
- 78 Wilson, *The Labour Government*, p. 580.
- 79 PRO, PREM 13/3008, Wilson's discussions with Nixon, 24 February 1969.
- 80 *Ibid.*
- 81 Quoted in John Dickie, 'Special' No More: *Anglo-American Relations, Rhetoric and Reality* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), p. 143.
- 82 Quoted in Clive Ponting, *Breach of Promise: Labour in Power 1964–1970* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 59.

Conclusion

Harold Wilson and Lyndon B. Johnson: a 'special relationship'?

This work has examined the question of Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson and Anglo-American relations 'at the summit', 1964–68. By exploring the mutual dealings of the two leaders, it seeks to examine their respective attitudes to the Anglo-American relationship and to one another; how they approached the matters of mutual interest and the extent to which their personal relationship was in any sense a 'special' one, and to evaluate broader developments in the ties between Britain and the United States. The introduction examined the literature and outlined the structures of the Anglo-American relationship, gave brief biographies of Wilson and Johnson and indicated the main content of the study. In the period October–November 1964, Wilson was quick to solicit American help in the economic crisis that befell the new Labour government. At the Washington summit of 7–9 December 1964, Wilson spoke of cementing a 'close' Anglo-American relationship, but Johnson regarded the conference as little more than a chore, and a means of dealing with the lingering NATO matter of the MLF. The months January–April 1965 saw Wilson's over-ambitious and poorly-received telephone call to the White House on 11 February to try to moderate American conduct in Vietnam, and the renewal of his relationship with the President when they met again in Washington on 1 April. The period May–December 1965 saw Wilson and Johnson strike an informal, secret 'deal' whereby the United States would support sterling in return for a British commitment to preserve the international role. Between January and July 1966 there was Wilson's reluctant but, given the feelings of the Labour left and an increasing proportion of the general public, politically necessary 'dissociation' from the American bombing of North Vietnam. The dissociation caused the most serious strain yet in the relationship, but the rift was overcome by the efforts of Ambassadors Bruce and Dean and by Wilson's affirmations of support for the UK's continued 'great power' role when he visited Washington on 29 July. The period August 1966–September 1967 saw Wilson's abortive 'phase A–phase B' Vietnam peace initiative, during which Washington's sharp reversal of position caused him to doubt the value of close ties with the White House. This phase also saw a more general decline in the Anglo-American relationship precipitated by British defence cuts East of Suez, and by the UK's increasingly pro-European orientation.

The year or so from late 1967 to the end of 1968 also had important implications for the Johnson–Wilson relationship, as it saw the devaluation of sterling and the demise of the remaining British commitment East of Suez. As 1968 ended, the White House was more inclined to regard Britain simply as one ally among many, rather than a state with whom there was some kind of 'special' relationship.

The Anglo–American relationship, 1964–68

There has been the suggestion that the Anglo–American 'special relationship' died or at least went into some form of diplomatic hibernation with the end of the Kennedy–Macmillan era in 1963, reemerging with the close personal bonds between Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.¹ Certainly, in the years of Wilson and Johnson the ties between Britain and the United States did undergo significant change. In February 1964, a Foreign Office assessment noted that 'Anglo–American relations are fundamentally good ... there is close consultation and cooperation over a wide field'.² In August 1964, the Foreign Office wrote that the Americans 'look to us as their major partner and as a world power with world-wide interests for practical cooperation in a wide variety of fields, from the development of joint defence facilities to the conduct of economic policy'.³ Yet the closeness of the Anglo–American relationship was not taken for granted. The February 1964 analysis had suggested that 'In the last analysis our influence on American policy depends on our practical contribution to the Western Alliance rather any particular feeling of United Kingdom/United States interdependence'.⁴ The British Embassy's Annual Review for 1964 warned that Britain would 'be increasingly treated on [its] merits and shall be regarded not so much for who we are as for how we perform'. Britain's 'influence will depend on our ability to solve our own economic problems and to bring an end to what seems to the Americans to be a position of chronic insolvency'.⁵ In March 1965, the valedictory despatch of Lord Harlech, the British Ambassador to Washington since 1961, warned that although 'We have a closer and more intimate relationship with the United States Government than any other country and our views are listened to with greater attention ... we ... will be judged increasingly by our performance.' For one thing, 'the myriad of close personal friendships built up at all levels during the war and immediate postwar years are a diminishing asset and nationals of other countries, if they care to make the effort, can establish almost equally close contacts'.⁶

Throughout 1964–68, Britain suffered from chronic economic difficulties, generated by an overvalued pound, uncompetitive industrial practices and leading to an inability to pay its way in the world. Economic troubles, alongside Labour Party opposition, prompted a retrenchment from the traditional role as a global power to one with strategic interests focused primarily on Europe. In the light of Vietnam, this process of retrenchment distressed the Americans. In

May 1967, US Ambassador David Bruce, ruing Britain's planned relinquishment of its East of Suez commitments, wrote bitterly that the 'so-called Anglo-American special relationship is now little more than sentimental terminology'.⁷ The British Embassy reflected in its Annual Review for 1967 that 'the withdrawal of a major part of our forces East of Suez and our announced intentions for Southeast Asia in the mid-1970s' meant that the White House 'will be liable to consult with us less and take us less into their confidence about areas of the world from which we are consciously opting out'. The United States would 'behave increasingly in a manner which reflects the fundamental inequality' of its ties with the UK.⁸ In February 1968, the British Ambassador, Patrick Dean, noted that the defence cuts had 'without question been a watershed in Anglo-American relations', and that 'the Americans will with some justice be disposed to make their own dispositions without consulting or considering us'.⁹ In June 1968, a State Department analysis reflected that Britain's future was 'at best, a middle-sized European power, albeit one with a nuclear capability, a residual sense of extra-European responsibility and a continuing, if diminished, status as a favoured partner of the US'.¹⁰ Secretary of State Dean Rusk noted that 'Operationally, the US and UK are working on fewer real problems. The concept of Atlantic cooperation could replace the special relationship.'¹¹

The devaluation of the pound and the retreat from East of Suez did not, however, mean that Britain suddenly disappeared below Washington's horizon; Patrick Dean noted in October 1967 that 'the Americans have no intention of dispensing with us nor have any wish to do so'. That was not to say that 'they are always satisfied with our performance (e.g. our defence policy East of Suez) nor we with theirs (the present anti-British mood of the Congress)', but it was 'extremely dangerous to conclude that the relationship is coming to an end'. There had been 'such developments in the past which at the time have seemed no less serious and perhaps even more so, and yet the relationship has persisted and survived'. Examples included 'Suez in 1956 and Skybolt in 1962'.¹² Dean noted that there was in Washington a degree of:

discontent or displeasure with certain aspects of our policies where we differ with the United States Government. Defence policy East of Suez has been the main cause of such expressions of view recently. But such things are a measure of the distress it causes the Americans when we, of whom this is expected so much less than of other countries, find ourselves out of line with them and leave out of account the very large and important positive factor of the many important areas in which we can and do still work with them on the basis of a very close identity of view.¹³

Apart from 'the working links between Ministers in these fields, which are necessarily less frequent and continuing', these 'important factors' were 'perhaps most manifest in the day-to-day work of this Embassy with its American opposite numbers at all levels from my own down to desk officers'.¹⁴ Rajarishi Roy has noted that during the international financial crisis of October 1967–March 1968 the two countries worked closely with one another to bolster the

international monetary system.¹⁵ In February 1968, soon after London's announcement of the hastened withdrawal from East of Suez, the State Department noted that Britain still had much to offer – Britain was 'still the third largest nuclear power in the world', with 'a small but high quality naval and air nuclear capability', plus a 'not inconsiderable 55,000 man British Army of the Rhine ... the third largest national force that is unquestionably committed to NATO'.¹⁶ In sum:

the UK will still have the capacity to be highly useful to the US. Britain still has a greater variety of responsibilities than will any other US ally. Its interests will still converge with ours more than will those of any other ally. At least for the next few years, it will continue to spend about £2 billion a year on its armed forces and to be the world's no. 3 nuclear power. It will still have unparalleled experience, expertise, and entree and will therefore be able to carry out undertakings of benefit to the US in diplomacy, intelligence and technology.¹⁷

Yet the British withdrawal from East of Suez did represent the end of an era in the post-war Anglo-American relationship, as the global system of military bases that had helped to make Britain such an attractive ally in the Cold War would soon be no more. The State Department analysis quoted above also noted that 'the defence cutbacks announced by Prime Minister Wilson on January 16 signalled the eventual end of Britain as a world power'.¹⁸ In June 1968, US Secretary of Defence Clark Clifford asserted that 'the British do not have the resources, the back-up, or the hardware to deal with any big world problem ... they are no longer a powerful ally of ours because they cannot afford the cost of an adequate defence effort'.¹⁹ It is evident that by 1968 Washington felt less regard for Britain's capabilities than it did four years earlier, and in that sense the 'special relationship' suffered a major blow. In July that year, the Foreign Office noted 'a recent tendency in the United States regretfully to write Britain off because we seem to them to be failing to fulfil our part in maintaining world stability in the defence and monetary fields'.²⁰ There was little evidence of such a tendency in 1964. Notably, this development substantiates the argument of C. J. Bartlett, who has suggested that 'British standing in Washington plummeted in the winter of 1967–1968'²¹ mainly as a result of the East of Suez decisions – although it must be added that previously there were doubts in Washington about the British capacity to maintain the world role. Saki Dockrill's observation that 'a close relationship with the USA did not necessarily mean that the other country had to have equal power and strength to the USA'²² is a plausible generalisation, but the fact remains that in the years 1964–68 American regard for Britain fell as British decline became all the more apparent.

Despite the evident and widening asymmetry of power there was a high degree of interdependence between Britain and the United States in 1964–68 – Thomas Schwartz refers aptly to 'an extraordinary degree of interaction, involvement, and influence between the US and British governments'.²³ This interdependence is confirmed, for example, by the frequent expressions of concern on the part of the

President and his advisers about the shaky British economy; Johnson told Chancellor James Callaghan in 1965 that economically ‘when you have headaches, we have headaches, too’.²⁴ To Washington, the devaluation of the pound threatened a major dislocation of the trading relations between the Western powers, while Britain had an interest in securing American support for sterling in order to counter speculative attacks. American policymakers also needed British support over Vietnam, preferably to include a contingent of troops, and they sought a continued British presence East of Suez. Both aims were very useful as a way of legitimising and underpinning American policy in Southeast Asia. In some ways, therefore, it seems that Washington was more dependent on London than vice-versa.

It is worth adding in this context that British economic troubles were probably the most fundamental of the key issues between Britain and the United States, as they placed Britain in the position of a petitioner for American largesse and undermined the likelihood of remaining a ‘world power’. For the United States, Vietnam was the most prominent foreign policy issue of the period, while for British policymakers it was an issue only so far as it generated domestic discord and led to strains in the Anglo-American relationship. East of Suez was of key importance to the British, as it was a question of their long-term orientation in world affairs. For Washington, the issue of British commitments in Asia was important so far as withdrawal from the region would lead to further attacks on the United States’s stance in Vietnam.

Wilson and Johnson: approaches to the Anglo-American relationship

As Philip Ziegler has commented, Wilson was keenly interested in world affairs and intended from the outset of his time in office to play ‘a large part in all the most important international problems’.²⁵ Commenting on prime ministerial dominance of foreign affairs, David H. Dunn has noted that the common tendency for ‘prime ministers to try to be their own foreign secretaries has ... resulted in less able ministers being appointed to these posts’.²⁶ While Wilson’s foreign secretaries – Patrick Gordon Walker, Michael Stewart and George Brown – were not necessarily lacking in ability, they were generally overshadowed by the Prime Minister. Gordon Walker, Stewart and Brown all supported the idea of close ties between Britain and the United States, but Wilson’s input was such that, as Richard Crossman commented, British foreign policy was characterised above all by the ‘peculiarly Wilsonian touch’ of a ‘personal reliance on LBJ’.²⁷ The Foreign Office backed up Wilson’s support for the continued close relationship with Washington and for the British ‘great power’ role, but independent of these factors the Prime Minister had his own, deep-seated commitment to the United States. David Bruce noted in mid-1966 that Wilson accepted the principle of continuity in post-war British foreign policy, central to which was ‘the long established friendly relationship with the US’.²⁸ Around the time of Bruce’s analysis, London was canvassing its prospects of joining the EEC, but Europe held

less attraction for Wilson than did the established close relationship with Washington. On a practical level, a close Anglo-American association would further his standing as a global statesman, enhance British prestige, and offer a source of economic help for Britain to maintain its status as a world power. Wilson's commitment to the American connection was also entwined with his reluctance to devalue sterling. There were other reasons for his intransigence in this regard – not least of which was the idea that within Britain Labour would be tagged the party of devaluation – but American opposition to the measure certainly influenced him.

His approach to the United States also had a distinctly personal element. He felt, as White House adviser Richard Neustadt pointed out in 1965, an 'emotional commitment to the US', which he 'personified ... in LBJ'.²⁹ At times Wilson seemed to take a naive pleasure in his dealings with the Johnson Administration, shown, for example, by his delight at the President's message of congratulation soon after Labour gained power and his excited anticipation of the summit meeting a few weeks later. For Wilson, the latter represented the consummate affirmation that Britain under Labour still had a seat at the 'top table' of international affairs. Clive Ponting's verdict that Wilson's enjoyment of political power was captured especially in 'the protocol of receptions in Washington' and 'meetings with President Johnson' certainly rings true.³⁰

Wilson was constrained by a notable degree of pressure with regard to the conduct of British foreign policy, including pressure from within the Labour Party. The Labour left was deeply unimpressed by Wilson's dedication to the White House and by the official government policy of support for the American position in Vietnam, and even if he had so wanted it would have been practically impossible to have committed troops without bringing down his government. Agitation within the Labour Party contributed to the 'dissociation' of 1966, and also helps to explain the Prime Minister's zeal for high-profile peace-making initiatives. There was also pressure from Labour politicians to bring an end to Britain's position as a global power, not least because the overseas spending that this entailed might instead be deployed at home to bring the country more into line with socialist ideals.

The Foreign Office was also a notable influence. As well as favouring Wilson's personal commitment to Washington, it supported the official policy of support for the American position in Vietnam; the United States was, after all, Britain's most important ally. There was, however, no desire to commit troops, as Britain had few direct interests in the region and the outcome of the war was, to say the least, always very uncertain. There was among the representatives of the Foreign Office a reluctance to see the end of Britain's global role, as this undermined the country's international standing especially in relation to the United States. Thus, Wilson's policies had to take into account the various influences – some subtle, some less so – emanating from the United States and the Foreign Office on one hand, and the Labour left on the other

hand. Nor could he easily escape the pressure of a declining economy when framing his policies.

Given the anti-Americanism of the Labour left and Conservative jibes that Wilson was making Britain the '51st state', it would surely have been expedient for him to have adopted a more independent position towards the White House. Roy argues that Wilson's 'willingness to consider the attitude of the United States in framing his policies ... earned him little tangible reward from the President'.³¹ There is much truth in this comment, but it must be remembered that Wilson was not entirely supine towards the Americans – opposition to the MLF, 'dissociation', the planned withdrawal from East of Suez, and the devaluation of sterling contravened American wishes. The Prime Minister was capable of a hard-headed, even cynical approach to the United States, as demonstrated by his attempt in November 1967 to threaten the White House with immediate, large-scale defence cuts both in Europe and in Asia in return for economic assistance to avoid devaluing sterling. Consciously or otherwise, this stance represented an attempt to redirect the mid-1965 American efforts to emphasise that American help for sterling would be less forthcoming if the British were to reduce their defence commitments.

For his part, Johnson was no novice in foreign affairs. As Senate Majority Leader in the 1950s, he oversaw the passage of major legislation in this field, and, as Kennedy's vice-president (1961–63), he made numerous trips abroad. However, with his vision of creating a 'Great Society' – helping to heal the racial divide and to eradicate poverty – the President was more interested in domestic politics than international affairs, and certainly had little commitment to close ties with London. As a Foreign Office analysis noted in May 1965, Johnson did not have 'any instinctive feel for Britain. As a Texan there is nothing in his background that suggests he should'.³² Although the Second World War engaged in Johnson a lasting respect for Winston Churchill, no other British prime minister seemed to win his admiration. So far as American policy was concerned, the President generally concurred with advisers such as McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow, who believed that American interests required the parity of the pound to remain at \$2.80 and that Britain must retain its international role. There were exceptions to this outlook, though, including the views of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Fowler who advised Johnson in 1966 that if Washington continued to pressure Britain to remain a world power, then British economic weakness would simply be exacerbated and prolonged: a 'weak ally is of no use to us East of Suez or anywhere else ... we must leave it to the UK government to decide what it must do, short of devaluation, to save its national position'.³³

Similarly, Undersecretary of State George Ball tried to persuade the President to try to discourage British claims of a 'special relationship' with the United States, by easing the pressure for a continued world role, refusing any further short-term financial assistance, and encouraging British membership of the EEC.³⁴

Johnson offered token support for the idea of British membership of the Common Market when in 1966 Wilson announced the intention to seek membership, but in truth he felt little real engagement in the matter. He was more concerned about the situation in South-east Asia, disregarding the advice of Fowler and Ball and continuing to press upon Wilson the idea that Britain should maintain the parity of the pound and above all that it should uphold its foreign policy commitments. After the 1965 commitment of US combat troops to Vietnam, the region was necessarily the centre of American diplomacy, and Johnson wanted a 'special' relationship with Britain only to the extent to which British policy suited American strategic and economic interests. By contrast, it seems that the linguistic and historical links between Britain and the United States led Wilson to anticipate something more intimate; as Anthony Wedgwood Benn put it in May 1964, he hoped to be able to 'telephone and fly over' to Washington 'as and when necessary'.³⁵ But Johnson disdained the idea of a relationship of this nature, dismissing the Prime Minister's telephone call over Vietnam in February 1965 and frequently expressing hostility to Wilson's visits, which were of scant practical value to the United States. The President's unsentimental attitude to Britain was shown by his concurrence with the view of advisers such as Bundy in the summer of 1965 that American support for sterling would be less forthcoming if the British were retreating from their global commitments, and his statement in 1968 in the light of the accelerated withdrawal from East of Suez that 'when our common interests shrink, the flow of communications and common business shrinks, too'³⁶ indicates his basic disinterest towards the British. If there was no clear and practical reason for doing so then the White House would have little inclination to remain in close contact with London.

The Wilson–Johnson relationship, 1964–68

Ambassadors Bruce and Dean both shaped Anglo-American relations 'at the summit', 1964–68. As the Foreign Office noted in July 1965, Bruce was 'a man of very considerable stature, and, of course, has the advantage of at least part of one ear of the President'.³⁷ Wilson described him as 'a giant among diplomats, with more experience and wise judgment than possibly anyone else in the diplomatic profession of any country'.³⁸ He also noted that Washington's 'confidence' in Bruce, 'both White House and Foggy Bottom level', was 'total', and doubted 'if in modern times any Prime Minister and American Ambassador have been closer'.³⁸ The Prime Minister frequently used Bruce as a medium of communication with the White House, and Bruce's eloquent and perspicacious telegrams helped to foster an understanding in Washington of Britain and its Labour government. The Ambassador was especially effective, for example, in helping Washington to appreciate the reluctance with which in June 1966 Wilson had 'dissociated' Britain from American actions in Vietnam, by conveying the delicacy of the Prime Minister's position between an increasingly fractious and

anti-American Labour left on the one hand and the White House on the other. However, Bruce's analyses were not always flattering; despite his affections for Britain he was always frank. In particular, there was almost a sense of betrayal at East of Suez measures,⁴⁰ deriving from the view that in the context of American troubles in Vietnam the move was ill-timed and irresponsible. Lord Harlech retired as British Ambassador to the United States in April 1965, and so figured less prominently in the Wilson–Johnson relationship than did his successor, Patrick Dean, who Wilson believed had ‘earned the same degree of confidence in the United States’ as Bruce had in Britain, thereby contributing to the ‘flourishing and warm relationship, not only between governments but between peoples’.⁴¹ However, Roy has argued that Dean had very little ‘cachet’ at the White House.⁴² While it is true that Johnson showed no disposition to cement the kind of close relationship with Dean that Wilson cultivated with Bruce, Dean's role did prove significant in mid-1966 when, like Bruce, he helped communicate the depth of Washington's distress over ‘dissociation’, and helped convey the fact of Wilson's essential reluctance to upset the White House. Much to Wilson's relief, Dean also helped mollify American reactions to the devaluation of sterling in November 1967 (although the devaluation was relatively modest in scale and was not entirely unexpected to the White House). In 1967–68, many of the Ambassador's reports to London predicted that the Anglo-American relationship would suffer greatly as a result of the withdrawal from East of Suez, although in his hand-writing he seemed more sympathetic to American concerns than with the problems of a struggling Britain.

Contacts between Wilson and Johnson included few telephone conversations. This was partly because Johnson showed little interest in telephoning Downing Street and because he discouraged Wilson from telephoning the White House. Johnson would use the telephone as an offensive tool in dealing with fellow politicians in the United States, and he therefore resented being ‘put on the spot’ when people turned the tables and called him. This attitude was shown by his response to Wilson's telephone call about Vietnam on 11 February 1965, when, as Wilson puts it, the President ‘shouted and ranted at me at the top of his voice’.⁴³ Wilson and Johnson corresponded often, on issues that included Vietnam, East of Suez, economic matters, plus numerous miscellaneous topics. While Wilson's letters were candid and sometimes suggested that he needed a confidant, Johnson's were less personal and more frequently drafted by his staff. The two men met regularly. As well as his visit to Johnson's White House in March 1964 as leader of the Labour opposition, Wilson saw Johnson at six more bilateral summits in Washington: in December 1964, April 1965, December 1965, July 1966, June 1967 and February 1968, as well as (briefly) at the funeral of Konrad Adenauer in Bonn in January 1967 and at the memorial service for Harold Holt in Melbourne in December 1967. The Washington meetings would usually include an hour or two during which the two leaders would speak privately – often about domestic politics – with further discussions held in the company of advisers.

Due to his personal commitment to Washington and to fears of the political impact in Britain if it ever seemed that he had lost the President's confidence, Wilson sometimes appeared preoccupied by a desire to see Johnson. This was especially the case when the Prime Minister wanted to repair the personal relationship after 'dissociation' in 1966. The White House initiated only two of Wilson's six prime ministerial visits: the summit of December 1964 and that of June 1967. In 1964, the Americans had wanted to bring the MLF to a conclusion, and two and a half years later they sought to bolster the moribund British commitment to the world role.

According to Wilson, meetings between prime ministers and presidents 'are essential and should be frequent. There is a great deal to be said for the growing informality which has been developed, so that they tend to be regarded as routine and not symbolising any great crisis or turn of events.'⁴⁴ David H. Dunn has pointed out that summit conferences often possess a 'symbolic importance'.⁴⁵ It was symbolic of the relationship between Wilson and Johnson that Wilson always had to go to Washington while Johnson never stirred himself to visit London. As well as enjoying the publicity of the summits and the relief they afforded from problems at home, Wilson used the meetings to try to educate Johnson on the rationale behind British policies such as those concerning Vietnam; this situation supports Dunn's assertion that leaders can use summits to perform an 'educative' role.⁴⁶ Wilson managed to deploy his political skills so that the President was usually inclined to voice a positive verdict of him after the meetings. Even after the summit of July 1966 – soon after 'dissociation' – Johnson expressed a more favourable opinion of the British leader. This was a notable triumph, given his reservations towards summit diplomacy and towards Wilson (so far as the British were concerned, there is not much evidence to support Elmer Plischke's view that Johnson 'apparently enjoyed his role as diplomat-in-chief').⁴⁷ Henry Brandon of the *Sunday Times* noted that Johnson felt that little was 'to be learned, even from informal personal contact' with foreign leaders 'that cannot be learned from reading diplomatic cables or the newspapers'.⁴⁸ While Johnson did not enjoy summit meetings, it is clear that he liked dealing with some foreign leaders more than others. There was, for example, a genuine and consistent affinity for German chancellors. Chancellor Erhard of West Germany was his favourite among the European leaders with whom he dealt.⁴⁹ In summer 1965, very soon after a visit from Wilson, Johnson told him that Germany was the most 'trustworthy' of the United States's allies.⁵⁰ As Johnson said himself in 1967, he was 'descended from German stock and lived in a German community in Texas. If he did not have the deep respect and love for the German people that he possessed, he would have moved long ago'.⁵¹

Johnson's reservations towards Wilson derived considerably from the idea that British leaders were especially inclined to visit the White House mainly to 'play to the gallery' at home; the public comments in Washington of Alec Douglas-Home early in 1964 over the British bus trade with communist Cuba were

seared into his mind. In April 1965 Johnson's sheer antipathy towards the prospect of seeing Wilson – exacerbated on this occasion by the memory of Wilson's telephone call on 11 February – was such that he even threatened in private to feign illness so that he could avoid seeing the Prime Minister. However, in the meetings Wilson did provide an especially sympathetic ear for Johnson. Although seemingly unappreciated, this aspect of the relationship surely provided some respite for a President increasingly assailed by domestic and international controversy over Vietnam. But in terms of substance, the Wilson–Johnson summits achieved little, apart from the negative result of ‘sinking’ the lingering and troublesome matter of the MLF in December 1964.

Johnson's Undersecretary of State, George Ball, argued that there is ‘nothing more dangerous than to rest the relations between states too heavily on the capricious interaction of diverse personalities’.⁵² The President's regard for Wilson ranged from lauding him as a latter-day Winston Churchill to dispensing what might be described as contemptuous ‘rough treatment’. This included efforts in March 1964 to browbeat him over British trade with Cuba; at the Washington summit in December 1964 over Wilson's handling of the British economy; the hostile response when Wilson telephoned the White House on 11 February 1965; and the general disdain for the Prime Minister during the period of ‘dissociation’ in mid-1966 and over the abortive ‘phase A–phase B’ initiative in February 1967. Wilson claimed that his dealings with Johnson were ‘very friendly and productive’.⁵³ By contrast, George Ball has argued that ‘Anglo-American relations were seriously impeded by the fact that President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson were temperamentally poles apart and did not basically like each other’.⁵⁴ Unsurprisingly, historians have tended to focus on the strains of the relationship.⁵⁵ Jeremy Fielding, for example, has commented that Johnson ‘did not hold a particularly positive view of his British counterpart. John Dumbrell refers to Johnson's apocryphal description of Wilson as “a little creep camping on my doorstep”, which Dumbrell claims had a “ring of authenticity”’.⁵⁶ Fielding agrees that Johnson had ‘an antipathy’ towards Wilson, but comments like this beg the question of whether the ambivalence of the personal relationship shaped the way the two leaders handled the issues of mutual concern, and the extent to which this personal ambivalence generated the decline in closeness between Britain and America, 1964–68.

Thomas Schwartz has suggested that Johnson and Wilson managed to ‘compartmentalise’ their relationship, learning to live with their differences over Vietnam in particular and cooperating on issues in which their views coincided.⁵⁷ Given Johnson's tendency to measure the value of allies in terms of their overall contribution to American interests, this thesis is less persuasive than at first it might seem. In the eyes of the President, the British were failing to pull their weight in the world, with the result that he was inclined to treat Wilson in a less than respectful manner whatever the issue. However, most of the ‘rough treatment’ thus meted out seemed to have little impact on the Prime Minister.

The White House's brusqueness with regard to phase A–phase B did anger him, but his disquiet was focused more on Johnson's advisers – especially the 'hawkish' Walt Rostow – than on the President himself. Wilson was consistently favourable in his attitude towards Johnson, although he was less willing to deal with him when bad news had to be dispensed – for example, he sent George Brown to Washington early in January 1968 to confirm the accelerated withdrawal from East of Suez.

So far as Vietnam was concerned, Wilson noted that 'From time to time, almost half-jokingly, hoping I would say yes, [Johnson] would ask me if I could not just put in a platoon of Highlanders in their kilts with bagpipes, despite their relatively limited military value.'⁵⁸ Wilson resisted these blandishments for a British troop commitment, however symbolic and small-scale, alongside the forces of the United States and allies such as Australia and New Zealand. The idea of committing troops had little support in Britain, and would jeopardise the country's 'neutrality' stemming from the Geneva Conference of 1954. Moreover, the political controversy in Britain that would no doubt have erupted had Wilson attempted to send British soldiers could well have damaged the Anglo-American relationship more than did his rejection of the American request. Wilson's peacemaking efforts such as the Commonwealth Peace Mission and the phase A–phase B initiative would help him overcome the anti-Americanism of the Labour left, obviate American pressures for British troops, and would boost his status as a diplomat. Johnson often doubted the likelihood of success of Wilson's peace moves, but he concurred because the United States's apparent willingness to participate in talks would help ease allegations of US-led 'aggression' in Vietnam. Notwithstanding the President's reservations towards negotiations 'by proxy', the British initiatives failed because neither adversary made any concessions that might have suggested a real likelihood of fruitful talks and because Britain's close links with the United States – and in particular Wilson's association with Johnson – meant that British neutrality was at best merely nominal.

Wilson and Johnson both supported the idea that Britain should remain a world power, but the country's economic troubles were so intractable that prolonging the role was simply not feasible. Partly to uphold the British global position, in November 1964, September 1965 and July 1966 the United States helped to bail-out sterling. Yet Johnson – and most of his advisers – seemed unwilling to accept that Britain's strategic over-extension exacerbated its economic troubles, and the President was unconcerned about the severity of the economic measures that Britain would have to adopt at home in order to preserve the foreign commitments. Furthermore, Johnson's pressures on Britain to retain the global role no doubt strengthened Wilson's already considerable commitment in this respect.

From the beginning of his time in office, Wilson realised the economic strain imposed by high defence spending abroad, but only reluctantly and belatedly

did he come to accept the necessity of a more modest strategic role centred on Europe if Britain was ever to attain lasting economic health. Even during the severe crisis of sterling in July 1966, he told Johnson that Britain had every intention of retaining its world power position. Additionally, when sterling was devalued in November 1967, Wilson stressed to the White House that there would be no acceleration of the timetable for withdrawal East of Suez. Both Wilson and Johnson helped to prolong what was in essence a played-out as well as expensive role for Britain. The ultimately less traumatic course would have been to accept sooner that the British world role was no longer viable, thereby reducing the need for the Labour government to resort to ever-harsher budgetary measures at home. The personal relationship between Wilson and Johnson cannot be described as ‘special’, although their mutual dealings were unlikely to prosper when British weakness was felt so painfully in Washington.

Notes

- 1 This view is shared by, among others, John Dickie, *‘Special’ No More: Anglo-American Relations: Rhetoric and Reality* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), pp. 133, 135; Michael Howard, ‘Afterword: the “Special Relationship”’, in Wm. Roger Louis and Hedley Bull (eds), *The Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations Since 1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 387–92; D. Cameron Watt, *Succeeding John Bull: America in Britain’s Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 144.
- 2 PRO, FO 371/174282, AU 105/2, ‘Anglo-American Relations: General’, author unknown, 5 February 1964.
- 3 PRO, FO 371/177830, PLA 24/7 A, Foreign Office Planning Staff, ‘An Anglo-American Balance Sheet’, 21 August 1964.
- 4 PRO, FO 371/174282, AU 105/2, ‘Anglo-American Relations: General’, author unknown, 5 February 1964.
- 5 PRO, FO 371/179557, AU 1011/1, ‘Annual Review for 1964 by Lord Harlech’, 1 January 1965.
- 6 PRO, FO 371/179558, AU 1015/18, ‘Lord Harlech’s Valedictory Despatch’, 15 March 1968.
- 7 LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 211, UK Memos XI 4/67–6/67, Bruce to Rusk, 8 May 1967.
- 8 PRO, FCO 7/738, AU 1/1, ‘United States: Annual Review for 1967’, 5 January 1968.
- 9 PRO, FCO 7/741, AU 1/4, Dean to Gore-Booth, 2 February 1968.
- 10 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 35, Rostow June 1–6 68 vol. 80 (2/2), ‘NSC Paper on the United Kingdom’, undated.
- 11 NSC meeting, 5 June 1968, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968*, vol. XII, *Western Europe* (Washington, USGPO, 2001), p. 625.
- 12 PRO, FCO 7/771, AU 2/2, Dean to Paul Gore-Booth, 25 October 1967.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Rajarshi Roy, ‘The battle for Bretton Woods: America, Britain and the international financial crisis of October 1967–March 1968’, *Cold War History*, 2: 2 (January 2002), pp. 33–60.
- 16 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1967–69, POL 7 UK, 2.1.68, State Department Research Memorandum, ‘What Now For Britain? Wilson’s Visit and Britain’s Future’, 7 February 1968.
- 17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

- 19 NSC meeting, 5 June 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. XII, p. 625. Clifford's predecessor, Robert McNamara, had resigned on 29 February 1968 as a result of his growing doubts about American policy in Vietnam.
- 20 PRO, PREM 13/2158, Foreign Office brief for John Freeman, Ambassador-designate to Washington, 23 July 1968.
- 21 C. J. Bartlett, *'The Special Relationship': A Political History of Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 118.
- 22 Saki Dockrill, 'Forging the Anglo-American global defence partnership: Harold Wilson, Lyndon Johnson and the Washington summit, December 1964', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 23: 4 (December 2000), p. 107.
- 23 Thomas Alan Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard, 2003), p. 232.
- 24 Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1581, T1/65-T298/65, Callaghan to Wilson, 30 June 1965.
- 25 Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Life of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), pp. 218-19.
- 26 David H. Dunn, 'What is summitry?', in David H. Dunn (ed.), *Diplomacy at the Highest Level: The Evolution of International Summitry* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 11.
- 27 Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, vol. II, *Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, 1966-68* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), p. 181, entry for 1 January 1967.
- 28 LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 12, Wilson Visit, Bruce to State, 11 July 1966.
- 29 LBJL, NSF: Name File, Box 7, Neustadt memos, Neustadt to Bundy, 7 August 1965.
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- 31 Rajarshi Roy, 'The Battle of the Pound: The Political Economy of Anglo-American Relations, 1964-68', PhD dissertation, London School of Economics, 2000, p. 338.
- 32 PRO, FO 371/179573, AU 1051/16, J. A. Thompson, 'Visits by President Johnson and Vice-President Humphrey', 31 May 1965.
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- 34 Ball to Johnson, 'Harold Wilson's Visit and the Opportunity for an Act of Statesmanship', 22 July 1966, *ibid.*, pp. 545-6.
- 35 Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963-1967* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 108, entry for 5 May 1964.
- 36 Quoted in Henry Brandon, *Special Relationships: A Foreign Correspondent's Memoirs from Roosevelt to Reagan* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 231.
- 37 PRO, FO 371/179615, AU 1904/2, Paul Gore-Booth to Patrick Dean, 21 July 1965.
- 38 Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1179, Wash. DC April 1970 NY 4 May 1970, University of Texas speech, 'Anglo-American Relations: a Special Case?', 30 April 1970.
- 39 Harold Wilson, 'How a prime minister and an ambassador almost stopped the Vietnam War', *The Diplomatist*, 35: 4 (April 1979), p. 30.
- 40 See, for example, Bruce's comments to Rusk, 6 May 1967, *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. XII, pp. 569-70; and quoted in Nelson K. Lankford, *The Last American Aristocrat: The Biography of David K. E. Bruce* (New York: Little, Brown, 1996), p. 330.
- 41 Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1179, Wash. DC April 1970 NY 4 May 1970, University of Texas speech, 'Anglo-American Relations: a Special Case?', 30 April 1970. The section about Dean is crossed out in the master copy of the address, but presumably only for reasons of brevity rather than validity.
- 42 Roy, 'The Battle of the Pound', p. 189.
- 43 Harold Wilson, 'How a prime minister and an ambassador almost stopped the Vietnam

- War', p. 31.
- 44 Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1179, Wash. DC April 1970 NY 4 May 1970, University of Texas speech, 'Anglo-American Relations: a Special Case?', 30 April 1970.
- 45 David H. Dunn, 'How useful is summitry?', in Dunn (ed.), *Diplomacy at the Highest Level*, pp. 248–50.
- 46 *Ibid.* Wilson has also commented that Anglo-American summits are useful in that they encourage a 'close relationship between senior British Ministers and senior American Cabinet officials, particularly Secretary of State, Secretary for Defence and Secretary to the Treasury'. Bodleian Library, Harold Wilson Papers, C. 1179, Wash. DC April 1970 NY 4 May 1970, University of Texas speech, 'Anglo-American Relations: a Special Case?', 30 April 1970.
- 47 Elmer Plischke, 'Lyndon Johnson as diplomat-in-chief', in Bernard J. Firestone and Robert C. Vogt (eds), *Lyndon Baines Johnson and the Uses of Power* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 277.
- 48 Henry Brandon, 'Why LBJ is so cool to callers', *The Sunday Times*, 25 April 1965.
- 49 Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe*, p. 231.
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- 51 Johnson–Kiesinger conversation, 24 April 1967, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. XV, *Germany and Berlin* (Washington DC: USGPO, 1999), p. 516.
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- 53 Harold Wilson, 'How a prime minister and an ambassador almost stopped the Vietnam War', p. 31.
- 54 Ball, *Diplomacy for a Crowded World*, p. 32.
- 55 The following present an essentially negative picture of the personal relationship between Wilson and Johnson: Dickie, 'Special' No More; Sylvia Ellis, 'Lyndon B. Johnson, Harold Wilson and the Vietnam War: a not-so special relationship?', in Jonathan Hollowell (ed.), *Twentieth Century Anglo-American Relations* (London: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 180–204; Ritchie Owendale, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Ponting, *Breach of Promise*; Robin Renwick, *Fighting With Allies: America and Britain in Peace and at War* (New York: Times Books, 1996).
- 56 Jeremy Fielding, 'Coping with decline: US policy toward the British defence reviews of 1966', *Diplomatic History*, 23: 4 (Fall, 1999), p. 639. Fielding refers to John Dumbrell, 'The Johnson administration and the British Labour government: Vietnam, the pound and East of Suez', *Journal of American Studies*, 30 (1996), p. 217.
- 57 Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe*, p. 232.
- 58 Harold Wilson, 'How a prime minister and an ambassador almost stopped the Vietnam War', p. 31.

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