

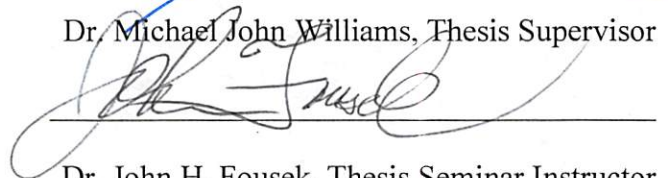
Afterlife of the Empire  
“Global Britain” and the Crisis of Liberal Internationalism

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# Introduction:

## ~ The Crisis of the Liberal World Order ~

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With the British electorate's decision to leave the European Union and the advent of the Trump presidency, it has become common for observers of international politics to declare that liberal world order that has dominated international politics since the end of the Cold War is in crisis – especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. Considering that Britain and America are two of the major vanguards of western liberalism, this predicament is a significant development in international history. It is natural to wonder, therefore, what has compelled these two polities – particularly Britain, as a smaller European country that depends on multilateralism for its security and economic sustenance – to flirt with illiberalism.

To understand why this is happening now, it is important to remember that the liberal political tradition emerged in the nineteenth century at a time when Britain's overseas empire expanded to its zenith. This means that liberalism and empire are intimately intertwined, even though there are several strands of liberal thought that critiqued and ultimately undermined London's imperial modes of governance. This reality presents a complex and contradictory historical tension that has shaped Britain's view of itself and role in the wider-world. Examining and analyzing the historical nature of this dialectic – especially in light of Britain's impending European Union exit – can help observers of today's political climate to glean how the current crisis of liberal internationalism is partially a function of the inherent contradictions within liberal – contradictions that stem from Britain's imperial past.

The study of the historical development of contemporary British identity reveals the tension inherent to the liberal tradition. Literature on this subject suggests that the overarching

British sense of identity has two broad and interconnected strands: *internationalism* based on the promotion of a liberal world order that is underlined by a unique and *indispensable* role for the British state and people. In other words, the British identity is predicated on being globally influential – a holdover from the imperial past that survived the decolonization period – and this has complicated the country’s role in the European integration project and influenced the United Kingdom’s relations with the United States and other English-speaking societies. Therefore, when analyzing British identity in light of results of the 2016 referendum on European Union membership, attention must be paid to the historical linkages between liberalism and British imperialism.

### **I. Research Question:**

This paper argues that Britain’s global sense of identity has contributed to the current crisis of liberal internationalism generally and the results of the Brexit referendum more specifically. In order to demonstrate this, one central research question is addressed: **how have the internal contradictions of British international identity – which has been historically cast in both liberal and imperial terms by political and intellectual elites – helped produce the United Kingdom’s current political moment in regard to leaving the European Union?** To help guide and focus the research, there are several subsidiary questions that must be assessed:

1. What were the key elements of the liberal-imperial dialectic that emerged in Britain during the long-nineteenth century? How did this tradition’s thinkers imagine Britain’s role in the emerging world order?
2. What elements of this liberal-imperial paradigm continued to shape elite British discourse on the country’s international identity, even after the decolonization period?
3. How have these historical ideas of British international identity complicated the country’s relationship with the European integration process?
4. How are notions of “The Anglosphere” – an alliance between Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States – and the Anglo-American “special relationship”

animating the current British leadership's political discourses as the country charts a new foreign policy path outside of the European Union?

On the surface, these queries may appear to only be narrowly applicable to one country off the northwestern coast of Europe. This is not the case, however; by linking Britain's current political moment to the intermingled histories of liberalism and imperialism, light can be shed on a thematic problem that is increasingly manifesting itself in core liberal societies: can a democratic polity – like the United Kingdom – remain broadly liberal when certain elements of its society feel that their sense of identity is threatened?

## **II. A Constructivist Approach to the Formation of British Identity:**

The thesis will primarily be a work of global and international history focused on how liberalism and imperialism have shaped contemporary British identity and contributed to the crisis of the liberal world order, of which the British electorate's decision to leave the European Union is an integral part. Such considerations are important to note because no state's foreign policy objectives occur in a historical vacuum, especially when that country's government is seeking to redefine its role in relation to other global players, which is exactly what is happening right now in London. An analysis of historically-conditioned sense of British identity is therefore required to make sense of the current British government's vision for a post-Brexit United Kingdom.

Constructivism, an analytic approach inherent to the academic discipline of International Relations, provides some helpful tools for this type of historical exercise. Constructivism broadly asserts that that the norms and rules of international politics are socially assembled; therefore, ideational factors are just as important as material structures and military power when assessing interstate behavior (Flockhart 84). When analyzing international politics, Constructivists focus on how each country formulates its identity within the broader world system and how that country's

role within that arrangement is informed by that identity. In the case of Brexit, therefore, Constructivism can help determine how the British public views their country's identity in relation to the European Union and the wider world and why that domestic identity has proven so problematic within a pan-European context. More importantly, though, Constructivism can help explain how Britain's leadership and foreign policy elite will use that identity to formulate their country's Brexit negotiating goals and future world role. As Tim Oliver, an International Relations scholar from the London School of Economics, notes, Constructivism can help explain why Prime Minister Theresa May's negotiating priorities seem to privilege political concerns – largely based on a British sense of global identity – over economic ones (Oliver 1).

This emphasis on Theresa May's thinking points to a key limit of the Constructivist approach – that it relies primary on how a sense of collective identity, not necessarily on how that identity is used and manipulated by individual policy-makers and societal factions. This is particularly relevant in the case of Britain, which does not necessarily have a collective sense of national identity in the early twenty-first century, but rather, several competing regional and class identities (Sanders and Houghton 275). These divisions are evident in how the country voted during the June 2016 referendum on European Union membership: Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Greater London voted to remain in the European Union, while the rest of England and Wales largely opted to leave. It would be hard to construe one unified identity for the whole of the United Kingdom from these disparities, but that is exactly what Theresa May – and previous prime ministers – have had to do when representing the country in international fora. Fostering a distinctively British sense of identity – rather than English or Scottish – through foreign policy has been particularly relevant for the British state during times of historical disjuncture – like the two World Wars, decolonization, the Cold War, and now Brexit. Given this, it is therefore necessary

to place primacy on how prime ministers and other elites have defined British identity on the global stage during moments of historical significance, which is exactly what supplementing Constructivism's focus on identity with a historical analysis of the evolution of British views on world order can do.

This two-fold approach is the theoretical lens through which this paper assesses how British identity has contributed to Brexit and an unravelling of liberal internationalism. The argument is structured around eight chapters, each dealing with a different historical period and theme. The first chapter deals with select academic debates about the nature of the current crisis of liberal internationalism and argues that liberalism's historical development has not sufficiently muted the more imperialistic aspects of the political tradition, which is one of the reasons why liberal internationalism now finds itself unravelling. The second chapter then explicates on this historical trajectory and shows how a colonial logic of appropriation, domination, and exclusion is constitutive of liberalism itself because the tradition developed within an imperial British context. The third chapter explains how the British state internalized liberal principles into its immediate post-Second World War foreign policy vision, which was largely shaped by wartime prime minister Winston Churchill's famous "three circles" model that argued London could shape a liberal and democratic world order if it simultaneously fostered close diplomatic ties with the United States, the Commonwealth and former colonial empire, and continental Europe.

The fourth chapter examines how this vision was complicated by the decolonization of Britain's overseas empire, which was largely sold to the British public as the final realization of the imperial mission to bring liberal principles to other parts of the world. A corollary to this story is that the loss of empire required Britain to reorient its economy and political system more toward the European integration project at the expense of its lingering ties to English-speaking



Commonwealth countries, like Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. This was not the most popular option among both the populace and political elite, which ensured that Britain's relationship with the European Community would always lack cultural depth. The fifth chapter picks up on this theme to show how Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher distanced herself from Europe to embrace a more Atlanticist foreign policy with the United States, in order to promote neoliberalism – or liberal fundamentalism – more aggressively across the world. The chapter also examines how Thatcher's legacy left an indelible legacy on Britain's sense of identity – so much so that Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair adopted many of her outlooks, most notably the desire to maintain strong ties with the United States. The chapter then argues that the tensions between Britain's commitment to Europe and the desire to pursue strong ties with the United States and Commonwealth ultimately undermined enthusiasm for European membership and encouraged right-wing Euroskeptics to increasingly endorse the idea of the “Anglosphere” as an alternative to the European Union. The “Anglosphere” – a proposed alliance of English-speaking states that are descendants of the British Empire – is frequently described as a liberal, democratic, and capitalist bloc of countries that is more in keeping with the values of Britain's political and economic culture than other European countries. The origins of this “Anglosphere idea” – which can be traced back to the late nineteenth century – is one of the oft-forgotten backstories of Brexit, and one of the side-effects of the exclusionary and colonial logic that is endemic to British liberalism.

The sixth chapter deals with the fallout of the June 2016 referendum, by analyzing how the government of current Prime Minister Theresa May has responded to the vote. In a series of speeches, Mrs. May has stated that she wants a truly “Global Britain” to emerge after the country leaves the European Union. Her words and metaphors are laced with themes of British identity that can be traced back to the liberal-imperial dialectic of the long-nineteenth century, as outlined

in earlier chapters, and new ideas about the Anglosphere. This will be demonstrated by an analysis of three key speeches – one about Britain’s relationship with the United States, another about the country’s commitment to liberal internationalism through membership of the United Nations, and a third that outlines a new relationship with Europe based on the country’s historical affinity for free trade. In doing so, the continuities between the “Global Britain” metaphor and earlier ideas of the Britain’s role in the world are made clear.

Finally, the paper will conclude with a two-chapter assessment of how viable the “Global Britain” vision is given the major economic, political, and diplomatic constraints Britain faces as it leaves the European Union and navigates a world less defined by the liberal values it helped to engender. Ironically, the British political class seeks to perpetuate a vision of liberalism that Brexit and the Anglosphere idea actively undermines – a tension that is found within the very DNA of liberal internationalism as historically conceived.

# Chapter 1:

## ~ Defining The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism ~

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### **I. Perspectives on the Crisis of Liberal Internationalism:**

**B**efore British identity's role in the current unravelling of liberal internationalism can be assessed, attention must be paid to the natures of the crisis and the liberal world order itself. There is a broad academic consensus on the features of this liberal order. Between the end of the Second World War and the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States successfully established a liberal order in the western part of the world with the assistance other core liberal states, like Britain, France, Canada, and West Germany (Jahn 45). This order can be called a liberal international subsystem and was organized around the principles of economic openness and cooperation, democratic accountability, sovereign equality, human rights, and republican identity (45). Though the states included in this subsystem never fully adhered to these liberal ideals – either in their foreign engagements or domestic policies – they at least all generally agreed to aspire to the shared goal of peacefully solving transnational problems through the maintenance of international institutions, like United Nations and burgeoning European integration project.

This consensus became more problematic with the Soviet Union's collapse and the end of the Cold War. Having no real challenger to its global hegemony, the United States attempted to expand the western liberal international subsystem across the whole world throughout the 1990s and early 2000s – a project that President George H.W. Bush dubbed the “New World Order.” By the turn of the century, however, it became evident that this venture to craft a truly liberal

international environment had failed, due the rise of sectarian violence and Islamist terrorism, the spread of authoritarian democracy in Eastern European and post-Soviet states, and selective humanitarian interventions in the name of liberal causes that exacerbated the aforementioned problems and sidelined human rights concerns. There is considerable academic debate as to why the liberal international subsystem failed to be exported across the entire globe, but these disagreements can generally be divided into two camps – those who blame American exceptionalism for the failures of liberal internationalism, while still supporting liberal principles and, secondly, those who blame some of the constitutive elements of liberal theory itself.

Two major proponents of the view that American foreign is at fault are Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry, who both broadly endorse liberal international principles in their writings, most notably in their co-authored book *Democratic Internationalism. An American Grand Strategy for a Postexceptionalist Era*. They essentially argue that the crisis of liberal internationalism is one of success, because once the United States and its ideas about economics and politics emerged dominant at the end of the Cold War, American leaders were then able promote their country's interests in an unfettered way (Jahn 47). These efforts usually ended dreadfully, since Americans tended to ignore other country's interests, cultures, and points of view due to the sheer power of their own country. This behavior was underlined by a belief in "American exceptionalism," which asserts that the American model of capitalism, democracy, and development is vastly superior to any and all alternatives and thus should be followed by the rest of the world if a liberal modernity is to be achieved across the planet (48). Ikenberry, Deudney, and other liberal internationalists contend that this hubris is the central flaw of the current American-led international order, since it blinds policymakers in Washington to the possibility

that not all countries in the world can follow America's path of development, democratization, and liberalization because of different cultural, social, and economic conditions.

Given this, scholars like Deudney and Ikenberry contend that a reformed type of liberal internationalism that jettisons American exceptionalism is the antidote to the current crisis. They argue that liberal international theory has plenty of tools to accomplish this, especially if it places greater primacy on social democracy to compensate for the inevitable economic inequality and dislocation that accompanies a transition to liberal capitalism (47). Their model has been dubbed "democratic internationalism," and hinges on a recognition on the part of Americans that their model of state and society is not applicable to everyone, and that the world's democracies must do more to learn from each other so that a more universal type of liberal democracy can be fostered. Under this conception, the core liberal democracies – like America, Britain, and other Western European states – should serve as examples to be emulated in culturally-specific ways in other countries instead of actively intervening in other states' affairs through militarized foreign policies and economic manipulation.

While these ideas are interesting in that they seek to provide a more expansive and culturally-nuanced type of democracy that could underpin a broadly liberal world system, other academics argue that it is too reductionist to blame American foreign policy for the failures of liberal internationalism – especially since the current crisis is a transnational problem that extends far beyond America's shores. Beate Jahn, a leading scholar of the theory and history of liberal internationalism, argues that the global distribution of these problems points to something much deeper about liberalism – internal contradictions within liberal theory that make liberal internationalism deeply unpopular both at home in core liberal states and abroad. This is evident,

he argues, with European populism, the Brexit vote, and the election of President Donald Trump in the United States.

All of these movements generally do not seek to reform liberal internationalism, but rather, to dismantle the majority of the achievements and principles that have underlined the American-led world since the Second World War.

Populists attack multilateralism and put ‘America, Britain, or France first’; they prioritize national over international law, citizenship over human rights, they cooperate with authoritarian regimes; they drop free-trade agreements, withdraw from free-trade blocs, and pursue protectionist policies; they attempt to block migration and travel, and thus build walls rather than bridges between states. Today’s populist movements, in short, are rebelling against the globalized liberal world order – and thus liberal internationalism’s greatest achievement (Jahn 48).

This political rebellion from within liberal polities themselves constitutes an additional element of the crisis of liberal internationalism that the perspectives of Ikenberry and Deudney do not account. By placing their emphasis primarily on American foreign policy, they overlook the parts of liberal internationalism that are dependent upon a domestic political consensus within liberal states themselves. Jahn’s assessment – while not ignoring American foreign policy’s role in the current crisis – delves deeply into the philosophical underpinnings of liberalism from a historical perspective to show that there is an intimate relationship between the domestic politics of core liberal states and the limit to which liberalism can be propagated internationally. He argues that today’s American-led liberal world order has stretched this domestic consensus to its limits, which helps explain why populist movements have popped up in the United States, Britain, and Europe. Given all this, Jahn’s line of reasoning is more appropriate for an analysis of the crisis of liberal internationalism that focuses on the historical role of one liberal state’s sense of national identity – Britain – than the one offered by Ikenberry and Deudney. The United States’ foreign policy based on a sense of American exceptionalism matters, but it is not the only part of the equation,

especially when one takes a more historical and ideational approach to the development of liberal internationalism.

## **II. The Origins of Domestic Liberal Theory:**

When looking at the historical roots of the liberal tradition, it soon becomes evident that there is a strong theoretical connection between domestic liberalism and international politics. Before this can be addressed, though, it is necessary to provide some clarity on what liberalism means within a domestic context, because this is the sphere in which liberal values were first imagined and applied. Domestically, liberalism typically defines a type of government that honors individual rights, encourages the ownership of private property, adheres to the rule of law, and facilitates the democratic participation of the general population (Jahn 48). These features form the general values that liberal societies try to foster, but also provide an aspirational basis for reform both domestically and internationally.

There is a certain degree of vagary to liberalism and its application, however, since it is not a unified philosophy; instead, liberalism is best described as a cultural phenomenon with no real founder. This means that it has been up to later generations of scholars to synthesize the tradition's meaning by reading back noticeably liberal ideas into the philosophical works and concepts from earlier periods. Nevertheless, scholars generally agree that seventeenth century English philosopher, John Locke, was one of the first major thinkers to bring recognizably liberal ideas together into a cohesive philosophy that directly inspired subsequent political movements (Jahn 48). Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, however, is the firm demarcation between the domestic and the international that Locke makes in his theories.

Locke's thought reacted to a series of seventeenth century European crises that had undermined the religious, political, intellectual, and economic status quo. He responded to these

changes by formulating a new conception of politics based on the so-called natural rights and freedom of man. In his influential *Two Treatises of Government*, he argued that these natural rights and freedoms could be secured if “every Man has a Property in his own *Person* and the *Labour* of his Body and the Work of his *Hands* (Locke 287-88). This desire to self-possess property and labor is what propels human beings out of their state of nature and into the social arena. But since property and labor are necessary for the individual person to sustain his or her livelihood, people are compelled to resist any social system that restricts their freedom to attain possessions and work. It is natural, therefore, for an individual to resist an absolutist government that does not guarantee these basic freedoms (Jahn 49). As Locke put it later in the *Two Treatises*, “Men are naturally free, and the Examples of History show that the Governments of the World... had their beginnings laid on that foundation and were made of the Consent of the People....the great and chief end therefore of government is the Preservation of their Property” (Locke 351). Even though these proposals were rooted in seventeenth century concerns, they nevertheless have shaped recognizably liberal thought up to the present day:

According to Locke’s theory, then, the three core principles of liberal thought are private property, individual freedom and government by consent. These principles still lie at the core of most conceptions of liberalism. Today they are embodied in the market economy, human rights, and democracy. Crucially, however, in Locke’s theory these principles are mutually constitutive: private property constitutes individual freedom, and individual freedom requires government by consent; and the main task of government, in turn, is the protection of private property, which completes the circle by upholding individual freedom (Jahn 49).

As can be gleaned from this summary of the core of Locke’s thought, liberalism is primarily imagined within a domestic political context and provides a normative framework by which a society can be judged. Locke’s England, however, did not adhere to these principles, which



ensured that his work had to develop a theoretical strategy for extending these values to the domestic British population.

### **III. The International in Early Liberal Thought:**

Locke's analysis of sixteenth century Britain is where the first noticeably international aspect of early liberal thought emerges. In keeping with Locke's theories, this international dimension is intimately tied to the principle of private property ownership as a vehicle of personal emancipation. In Locke's time most people in Britain – and elsewhere for that matter – did not own private property, which ensured that the English monarch and Parliament in Westminster exercised too much control over ordinary people. Since his theories argue that property is the basis for individual freedom against an absolutist political system, Locke believed that people in England, Scotland, and Wales needed to work toward a government that protected private property. As a first step, he asserted that full political rights should be extended to all property-owners – even if they were not members of the nobility – so that a greater degree of political freedom was fostered in Britain (Jahn 49). This move would not be enough, however, since Locke thought that all people are born with a natural right to own property.

Locke therefore thought that full political rights would have to be extended to ordinary Britons if the masses were ever to own property and be fully free in the liberal sense. Given that the circular nature of his theories, the ownership of private property for the majority of the populations was the only way that a sufficient degree of pressure would be placed on the Westminster government to enact liberal political and economic reforms, thereby realizing his normative vision (Jahn 50). There was a problem with this, though: where would all this land and property come from? Space was a limited commodity in Britain, and property that was already privately-owned could not be redistributed to the masses. Locke in turn suggested that commonly-

owned – or public – property should form the basis of redistribution, since it could then be used by the industrious labor of free individuals to be made more valuable both political and economically.

The problem of space in the British Isles, though, still placed limits on the amount of public property that could be privatized in order to promote liberal values. Since there was not enough land in Britain to go around, Locke looked beyond the domestic sphere to England's overseas colonies in North America, where he argued land was plentiful. As he put in the *The Two Treatises*, “there are still great Tracts of Ground to be found, which...lie waste and are more than the people who dwell on it, do, or can make use of, and so lie in common” (Locke 299). As such, Locke's writings and theories consistently defended policies of English colonialism, as a way of offloading the excess domestic British population to North America and other overseas destinations so that they could attain the private property necessary for full political rights in the liberal sense – even if this came at the expense of the native populations of those territories (Tully). This colonial aspect of his thought also establishes the role of the international for a domestically-liberal society and its external policies:

The solution to Locke's conundrum – that the constitution of liberalism required the spread of private property, and yet private property could not be redistributed because it had to be protected as the basis of individual freedom – thus lay in the international sphere. It lay in the possibility of appropriating people's property; and this in turn, required power politics. In other words, the constitution of domestic liberalism required a sharp distinction between two different political spheres: the domestic sphere, governed by the *rule of law* and *liberal principles*, and the international sphere, characterized by *power politics* (Jahn 51)

The tension between domestic liberalism and power politics abroad is therefore one of the constitutive contradictions in liberal theory as propagated internationally throughout history and helps explain why core liberal states – like France, Britain, and its former settler colonies,

including the United States – have often engaged in expansionary and aggressive foreign policies in order to foster a domestic liberal consensus at home. These policies are often cast in both idealistically liberal terms – such as the desire to promote democracy throughout the world, for example – but often underlined a realist impulse to further the material interests and rights of the domestic society. There is thus, from a theoretical perspective, an in-built colonial logic of inclusion and exclusion that underlines the liberal project to reshape the world – a “civilizing mission” within the very fabric of the dominant western political discourse.

**Conclusion:**

Given that many of the fundamental challenges facing liberal internationalism in recent years stem from domestic protests against the status quo – Trump in America, Brexit in the United Kingdom, the National Front in France – it is too reductionist to assume that the crisis of liberal internationalism is one purely of American foreign policy or the success of liberalism against competing alternatives. There is a link between the domestic politics and international relations of core liberal states that must be established. By looking deep into the theoretical writings of John Locke – the unofficial father of liberalism – it is clear that greater political freedom and economic opportunity at home was underpinned by power politics and colonial expansion abroad. This is because the privatization of public lands and property inevitably creates tensions and inequities within society – tensions that could limit the capacity of the liberals to achieve their reformative goals. Colonialism was the answer, since the appropriation of land and resources from abroad allowed burgeoning liberal polities, like Britain, to import economic benefits to enact reform while also exporting the tensions that resulted from those reforms abroad through colonization (Jahn 52).

The question then is how this dynamic played itself out historically to lead to the current moment – especially for Britain, as one of the world’s first liberal polities that is seeking to reorient

its long-standing foreign policy traditions and identity as it leaves the European Union. To contextualize these sweeping debates about liberal internationalism within a British context, the next chapter will explore more deeply the relationship between liberalism and Britain's colonial empire as a way to ascertain the extent to which each shaped the country's sense of identity before the Second World War and explore how the tensions within the liberal tradition have shaped global history.

# Chapter Two:

## ~ Liberalism and the British Empire ~

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### **I. Introduction:**

Today's liberal international system of theoretically sovereign nation-states is a recent historical development that emerged out of a centuries-long period of European colonialism and imperialism. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Western European polities like France, Britain, Spain, and The Netherlands were compelled into overseas expansion by the resource competition engendered by the burgeoning capitalist economy and the desire to connect with markets in East Asia, while sidestepping the Ottoman Empire's dominance of the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. This expansion took the form of colonization and territorial market acquisition – particularly in the Americas, Africa, and Southeast Asia. By the nineteenth century, the most geographically expansive of these colonial empires was ruled and administered from London, which also claimed to be the capital of an increasingly liberal society.

### **II. Theorizing the British Empire**

The British Empire, which at its height encompassed a quarter of humanity across large swaths of Africa, Southeast Asia, Oceania, the Middle East, and North America, was an intricate historical entity that is difficult to concretely conceptualize. In his 2012 book *Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1965 to the Present*, historian Denis Judd describes the totality of London's

imperial project as “riddled with paradox and contradiction.” Political theorist and International Relations scholar Duncan Bell expands on this theme when defining the empire:

British imperial expansion was never motivated by a single coherent ideology or a consistent strategic vision. Characterized by instability, chronically uncoordinated, and plagued by tensions between and within its widely dispersed elements, it was unfinished, untidy, a mass of contradictions, aspirations, and anomalies (Bell 11).

Given its incoherence and complexity, the British Empire has left a multifaceted legacy in its wake that is difficult to assess. As such, there are several competing scholarly perspectives on the degree to which British society and politics was shaped by the empire.

This multiplicity of perspectives is evident in the debates that rage over the “imperial turn” that has occurred in the field of British Studies since the late 1990s. According to historian Richard N. Price, the foundational assumption of the “imperial turn” is that the British state and its overseas empire were “mutually-constituted” (Price 602). As a result of this, scholars in this tradition contend that one must place primacy on aspects of British identity that were forged during the imperial era to properly understand the evolution of British politics, society, and culture. In other words, empire is the prism through which the development of all aspects of British modernity – whether they be philosophical, economic, financial, political, literary, or cultural – must be viewed.

This approach has its merits and has produced intriguing scholarship on how certain social developments – like the emergence of an evangelizing Christian ethos in the nineteenth century – drove the imperial enterprise. The “imperial turn” therefore has the power to paint empire as a crucial process of cultural formation. But the turn’s assumption that Britain and its empire are mutually constituted also obscures the other cultural and social forces that have shaped Britain. This is something that Price points out in his 2006 essay “One Big Thing: Britain, Its Empire, and Their Culture:”

What other elements, aside from empire, constituted British modernities [after the eighteenth century]? What is the significance of empire compared to class, for example? Where do we fit in issues like ‘customs in common,’ the law, the tradition of civic republicanism, ideas of ‘liberty’ and the constitution, the political economy, or the hostility toward...[European]...‘others,’ like the French?... How would we demonstrate that empire overwhelmed these other identities, subjectivities, and historical formations in defining British culture? (Price 611).

These questions about the complexity of modern Britain demonstrate why it is reductionist to view the historical evolution of British society squarely through the eyes of empire. There was too much else going on that shaped the country. What is needed, then, is an approach that draws on the strengths found in the “imperial turn,” but also considers the indispensable role of other social forces. Such a perspective would be better able to address how the meaning of empire was contested, debated, and reformulated as British society evolved.

Price’s essay offers an alternative – he thinks that scholars should treat the cultural representations of empire as social constructs. He argues that this approach fills the void that stems from the idea of mutual constitutiveness of empire (Price 624) and allow scholars to more clearly identify the processes that contributed to British modernity over different periods of time. For Price, the chief benefit of this *constructivist* method is that it is more sympathetic to Britain’s fluid political and philosophical trends (625), which often operated above the public realm in the domain of the educated, policy-making elite (624), but nevertheless shaped many social aspects of life in the country. This is because political and intellectual elites are often the ones with the most influence on how a society interprets its own development. Through this act of framing, they are able to formulate an identity out of competing sociopolitical forces and possibilities. In the case of Britain, these forces very much included empire, but also debates about how to best organize social and political rights in an increasingly complicated and interconnected world. The messy business

of empire made these questions all the more difficult and, by the late eighteenth century, British intellectuals and policymakers began to concentrate their attention and efforts on bringing order to the untidy empire. British political theory – especially the emergent liberal tradition that started with Locke – was naturally affected by this imperial preoccupation. As will be shown, this contributed to a complicated dialectic in which Britain’s culture, politics, society, and engagement with the world was defined in *both* liberal and imperial terms.

### III. Perspectives on Liberalism and Empire

Much like the British Empire itself, political liberalism is difficult to define because of its scope and multifaceted nature. As noted in the preceding chapter, almost all of contemporary western political theory – especially since the Cold War’s end – can be described as liberal. As a function of this, the mainstream parties in North American, European, and Australasian democracies all operate out of broadly liberal assumptions about the political world, even if those suppositions have produced a global system that is currently in crisis. What, then, given this ubiquity, is liberalism – especially in the British context?

In his 2009 book *British Liberal Internationalism, 1880 – 1930: Making Progress?*, historian Casper Sylvest argues that a uniquely British view of liberalism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and coalesced around the emergent democratic ideals of “free trade, receptiveness to public opinion, and good, limited, and parsimonious government (Sylvest 27). He also admits that the tradition quickly developed some glaring contradictions, because it became possible for British politicians of different ideological persuasions to claim the liberal mantle, precisely because the foundational tenets and text of liberalism are quite vague. This is a point that Duncan Bell, a British historian of international relations and political theory, elaborates on in his work on liberalism and empire.



Bell employs what he calls a “summative definition” of the liberal tradition. This conception takes into account “the sum of arguments that have been classified as liberal, and recognized as such by other self-proclaimed liberals, across time and space” (Bell 70). Upon first glance, this may seem like an imprecise definition, but according to Bell, the summative character is a strength that can “help make sense of discursive ‘overextension;’ and elastic usage of ... [the term liberalism] ... while avoiding unhelpful claims about pure essence and authentic form” (70). In that vein, this definition of liberalism allows Bell to acknowledge disagreements between individual liberal thinkers and figures, but also define British liberalism as a political philosophy that emphasizes “individual liberty, constitutional government, the rule of law, the ethical significance of nationality, a capitalist political economy, and belief in moral and political progress” (6). While this summative definition may not be useful for a nuanced analysis of liberalism’s philosophical assumptions, Bell’s strategy is effective for an historical examination, because it makes room for elements of liberalism that are commonplace today, such as respect for individual rights and the rule of law, as well as creeds from earlier times, like those of racial superiority, that are offensive to respectable liberal sensibilities in the early twenty-first century, but are still constitutive of the tradition’s philosophical underpinnings, as Beate Jahn observes.

To understand how liberalism and empire have shaped British identity, the historical path of British liberalism requires particular attention – even if liberalism from the past is tainted by racist justifications for colonial conquest. In many respects, historical treatments of the tradition contend that British liberalism emerged out of a tension between empire and the concepts of liberty and limited government. It seemed contradictory that a society which placed increasing emphasis on individual freedoms and rights could somehow sanction coercive rule and subjugation of peoples beyond its own shores. In his 1999 book *Liberalism and Empire*, political theorist Uday

Singh Mehta elaborates on how this anxiety manifested itself in British and European intellectual circles:

By the mid-nineteenth century among radicals and liberals, the conditions for good government had been recognized as intimately linked with the conditions of self-government, and yet someone like John Stuart Mill, who forcefully articulated this argument, it applied only to the Anglo-Saxon parts of the empire. At a more general level, from the seventeenth century onward, the British, the Dutch, and the French rightly conceived of themselves as having elaborated and integrated into their societies an understanding of political freedom, and yet during this very period they pursued and held vast empires where such freedoms were either absent or severely attenuated for the majority of the native inhabitants” (Mehta 7).

As Mehta’s analysis hints, liberal ideas – like responsible and limited self-government – were racialized as an intellectual justification for the social inequities that defined European colonial empires. This trend was particularly evident in the British Empire, where the establishment of predominately White (or “Anglo-Saxon,” as it was called at the time) settler colonies in North America and later Australia, New Zealand, and southern Africa provided a firm demarcation between imperial realms that were viewed as ready for self-governance and those which were not. To understand how this divide was grafted onto the empire, one must first understand the cultural and political environment in which British liberalism emerged from.

The temporal and locational origins of liberalism are subtle areas of disagreement between Bell and Mehta. Mehta argues that recognizably liberal ideas emerged in the eighteenth century in response to the writings of John Locke and British overseas expansion. He believes encounters with vastly different cultures that were eventually economically and politically subjugated to London – namely India – formed the impetus for racialized British liberalism. Mehta asserts that liberals came to believe that the British possessed a superior political and economic culture defined by Lockean principles of limited government, property rights, and free enterprise. They then used

this belief as a justification for British imperial rule over foreign persons, like in India and North America, in an earlier variation of the “civilizing mission.” He also points out that during the eighteenth century, it was Edmund Burke, the oft-labelled father of conservatism, who forcefully declared that Britain’s constitutional tradition was incompatible with overseas oppression. In this sense, Mehta argues that liberalism and empire shaped each other in a simultaneous process of development and evolution. Given that Mehta’s analysis as a whole takes into account how realities in Britain and India shaped the development of eighteenth century liberalism, his theory is in keeping with the imperial turn’s emphasis on the mutual constitution of Britain and its empire. It therefore overlooks some other forces that led to the development of liberalism, especially in the following century.

This is one criticism that Bell’s work levels at Mehta. Bell temporally places liberalism in the nineteenth century and argues that it was a uniquely British philosophical response to the sociopolitical forces that challenged the British state and empire during that period. In doing so, he rejects the notion that the empire and liberalism were mutually-constituted from the outset and instead casts liberalism as a *constructed* response to changing imperial realities:

The British Empire was forged long before the emergence of liberal political ideology: liberalism supervened on, while adapting to and supplementing, existing practices and procedures. A relentless focus on the assumptions, theoretical architecture, and political entailments of liberalism carries the risk of overlooking the deeper intellectual and political currents on which it drew and to which it was a response – perhaps above all the coevolving relationship between the modern state and global capitalism. In particular, I would contend that British liberalism was broadly coeval with the second settler empire. It was, in large part, a product of the violent dissolution of the thirteen colonies in North America, the revolutionary upheavals in France, and the tidal wave of economic, social, and political change that they unleashed. Perhaps, most importantly, the development of liberal political theory and the second settler empire was interconnected (371-372).

Bell's thematic interconnection between liberalism and the second settler empire found in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa is useful for conceptualizing how two disjointed phenomena contributed to each other's development. This dialectic between liberalism and the settler empire had significant political consequences as the nineteenth century went on, because it was used by elites to frame and construct the possible ways that British society could navigate a changing world order.

For a full understanding of how the construction of British imperial identity through the creation of the second settler empire was still compatible with the theoretical underpinnings of liberalism, a middle-way between the perspectives of Mehta and Bell is necessary. This is where Jahn's analysis from the preceding chapter comes in. The writings of John Locke do endorse colonialism in North America and elsewhere, as Mehta observes, which means that colonialism is a constitutive part of the liberal tradition. But the implications of this relationship were not fully realized until the long-nineteenth century, when the loss of the North American colonies and terror of the French Revolution elicited a new round of domestic liberalization within Britain itself and renewed imperial expansion abroad through the creation of second settler empire. (Burbank and Cooper 220-221). The British liberalism and imperial expansion that defined the nineteenth century was therefore a compromise between the absolutism of the past and the French revolutionary fervor, which shaped the contradictory international politics of the period – which simultaneously emphasized the ideals of freedom for some people and its denial for others (Jahn 54). In summation, then, both Mehta's and Bell's insights are crucial to study of how liberalism and imperialism shaped Britain's sense of identity vis-à-vis the rest of the world. But, in order to see how the liberal-imperial dialectic informs the types of states Britain has sought to foster close alliances with through its foreign policy entanglements, Bell's focus on the role of the settler

empire is particularly useful, because it reveals the extent to which the racialized colonial logic of inclusion and exclusion came to define British views of world order.

#### **IV. The Idea of Greater Britain and the Ideological Origins of the Anglosphere:**

Bell addresses the implication his ideas for field of international relations in his two main books – *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860 – 1900* and *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire*. In doing so, Bell links both liberalism and imperialism to the development of British identity and discourses about the British people's proper place in global affairs during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He broadly asserts that British liberals viewed these settler colonies, along with the independent United States of America, as places where liberal political ideals like personal freedom, the rule of law, self-determination, and republican governance could be fully played out. This contrasted sharply with the treatment of other imperial realms, namely India, where London employed more direct and autocratic governance measures. This disparity in practice and focus on the part of liberals allows Bell to conclude that settler colonialism and liberal political thought combined to create theories of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and a transoceanic British public during the nineteenth century – a public that was believed to embody a set of liberal democratic values that could reshape global politics. This transoceanic public based upon settler colonialism was dubbed “Greater Britain” by Victorian and Edwardian politicians, journalists, and academics and Bell deftly examines how this idea of a global English-speaking community has evolved through time to influence events up until the present-day. This is the real strength of *Reordering the World* and *The Idea of Greater Britain*, which allows these two books to draw insightful links between Britain's imperial past and the country's current standing in international affairs.

There are two chapters of *Reordering the World* in particular where Bell thoroughly explicates ideas relating to the concept of “Greater Britain” and their implications for today’s world. The first of these chapters is titled “The Dream Machine: On Liberalism and Empire,” in which Bell explains the relevance of settler colonialism to the imperial project. A great deal of Bell’s analysis in this chapter rests on how imperialistic notions of racial supremacy arose out of the liberal intellectual tradition, especially as it relates to settler colonialism. Bell explains how in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, policymakers in England tended to view settler colonies as an undesirable burden on the British state. Starting in the 1830s, however, liberal reformers took it upon themselves to disprove this sentiment with evidence from the emerging academic discipline of political economy (Bell 36). One of these reformers, political economist E.G. Wakefield, argued that colonies should instead be seen as places of economic growth and social development. After all, the incorporation of new lands in North America and Australia injected new resources into Britain’s burgeoning industrial economy and also provided physical space where Britain could offload its excess population (36), both of which would have tangible benefits to a liberalizing state. In time, these new views were accepted in Britain, especially among liberals, who thought that settlers in the colonies were successfully reproducing the likeness of Britain in these new territories (37). By the latter half of the nineteenth century, this idea had created a firm distinction – based on race – in the liberal mind between the settler colonies and other imperial realms, such as India.

In his work, Peter J. Cain, another scholar of the British settler empire, explains how liberal ideas were married with the colonial experience to create an ideology of settlerism based on liberal-democratic principles:

[The settler revolution] ...created a new vision of the future in both... [Britain and her colonies]. Not only did the belief in progress become widespread, but

also emigrants, once classified as failures, came to be represented as heroes or heroines battling triumphantly with elemental forces. Frontiers were that were once thought of as distant hellholes for thieves and murderers were imaginative transformed into gardens of Eden. Millions of people uprooted themselves and took to these new lands partly for the chance of a better economic future, but also because the frontier meant freedom from the cultural restrictions of the older societies. In the newlands, settlers could...[theoretically]...get away from the most hated of distinctions – privilege based on inherited wealth – and enjoy some degree of equal opportunity. With its acceptance of capitalism and hatred of inherited status, settler ideology was a freer and more confident form of the...[liberal] radicalism that animated nonconformity in Britain and became an...[integral]...factor of the popular liberalism supported by Richard Cobden and John Bright... [Unfortunately, though] ...settlers and their metropolitan relatives, usually had an abiding sense of the superiority of their own civilization and made, with depressing ease, the fatal transition from reveling in their material power to assuming that it betokened moral supremacy over the native races displaced on the frontier (Cain 104).

Under this racialized ideological view, the predominately white colonies of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were seen to possess the “standard of civilization” necessary for self-government based on liberal-democratic principles, whereas India would need to be governed more forcefully. As Bell does admit, there were plenty of liberals who hoped this discrepancy would eventually convince the British government to relinquish control over imperial possessions that could not be ruled through liberal means, like India, but this does not diminish the fact that many in Britain and her colonial empire started to view their role in the world in profoundly racial terms. As Bell points out, this development was a necessary prerequisite for imagining a “Greater Britain” that spanned the globe.

Before turning to how “Greater Britain” influenced Britain’s role in the world, it is important to address how the idea functioned in terms of the construction of British identity. Bell and Cain already demonstrated how liberalism and the colonial empire produced an ideology of settlerism, that was based both on white, “Anglo-Saxon” superiority over native peoples as well as principles of liberal democracy. Simply put, in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, white settlers

were seen as instruments that spread these liberal-democratic values across disparate global regions. In doing so, they were thought to have created a far-flung Anglo-world that represented the values and interests of British liberal democracy. Because of this, the British elite felt a certain ideational closeness to the settlers across the sea, who were still seen, in many ways, to be British – not Canadians, Australians, or New Zealanders. This is despite the fact that London's bond with the settler colonies was increasingly loose, with a large degree of self-government being granted by the mid-1800s. This perceived closeness with the self-governing colonies was used by the elites to reconstitute Britain's identity in international relations during the late nineteenth century.

By the 1880s and 1890s, as Britain's imperial and industrial dominance was challenged by new powers like the United States, Germany, and Russia, some British liberals began to advocate for an "imperial federation" to establish more permanent, institutional bonds between London and the settler colonies – a "Greater Britain" that could offset imperial decline (Bell 184). This was part of process of "recolonization" of the empire, and it reflected a larger elite project to foster an imperial identity among the domestic and diasporic British population to counteract the sociopolitical forces that were seen to have caused British decline (Cain 105). According to Richard Price, this period of British history demonstrates how elites could deliberately construct a more imperial identity for British culture when it suited their interests (615). The historical record bears this out, because before the late nineteenth century, British policymakers often regarded the empire as a temporary product of trade connections that would eventually fade away. But when this actually began to happen and British preeminence was challenged, there were anxious efforts to sustain the empire for the sake of British global influence. Reconfiguring the national culture to reflect imperial values was seen as the best way to go about this:

Politically, the late nineteenth century sees the powerful conjuncture of a challenged imperial status in the world with the breakthrough to mass politics.



The political culture had to respond to a mutating political economy that was placing Britain under military, fiscal, and cultural stress. The growing democratic forms of national politics threatened to drive sectionalist and class wedges into the political culture. Thus, the political subjectivity of the ordinary Briton was transitioning at this time from the differential subject to the assertive citizen with the prospect of gaining actual power within the political system. Empire was potentially a way of bridging those divides in electoral politics...and... this was one reason why empire was injected into British culture in a more profound way than ever before during this period...The end result was that, from the late nineteenth century to middle of the twentieth century, to be a British citizen also meant to be an imperial citizen. Before the late nineteenth century, such categories had very different meanings and values in the culture” (Price 615-617).

The literature therefore suggests that the idea of “Greater Britain” was deliberately propagated by an increasingly liberal British elite both domestically and internationally to offset perceived imperial decline. This resulted in British culture and identity becoming increasingly imperial at the turn of the twentieth century.

Naturally, this renewed imperial focus also affected Britain’s diplomatic relations. This is a point which Bell takes up in the second relevant chapter of *Reordering the World*, titled “The New Anglo Century: Race, Space, and Global Order.” He again explains how the “Greater Britain” concept advocated for an institutionally-deep political union between Britain and her settler colonies. Interestingly enough, the United States was often included in this imagined union, since liberal thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic thought Britain and America shared a broadly similar “Anglo-Saxon” culture and politically liberal outlook based on the rule of common law (Bell 191). Individuals like Andrew Carnegie, James Bryce, A.V. Dicey, H.G. Wells, and Cecil Rhodes were all supportive of some kind of Anglo-American reunification or alliance, which they hoped could secure the interests of the English-speaking peoples into the next century (192-94). In his 2011 book *The Anglosphere: A Genealogy of a Racialized Identity in International Relations*, Srdjan

Vecetic explains that the Anglo-American rapprochement is not surprising when the racialized settler ideology is considered:

From the perspective of state and national identity defined by Anglo-Saxonism, the most probable... [diplomatic partnership for Britain]... was the American alliance or, as Lord Balfour and Joseph Chamberlain sometimes called it, the 'race alliance.' The grip of Anglo-Saxonism was so powerful that British 'race patriotism' implied not only a 'race alliance' with America, but also a 'federation of race.' Thus, the boldest proposals for reversing Britain's decline called for a political integration with the 'cousins' and 'brothers' in the United States – a project usually known under the rubric of 'reunion,' but also implied in the ideas 'Greater Britain' and the United States of Empire... Equivalent proposals were not possible with respect to Germany or France, much less Japan" (Vecetic 27).

While some liberals were content with just a system of alliances, many other dreamed of a more formal system, where the seat of British power could be held in either London or Washington (188). This reveals that there was a large degree of fantasy involved in these visions (which was typical of the era), but they nevertheless informed Anglo-American thinking on a liberal world order into the next century.

According to Bell, visions of a federalized "Greater Britain" or an Anglo-American alliance animated five theories of world order during the first half of the twentieth century. These five forms are: the regional federation, imperial-commonwealth, democratic unionist, world federalist, and Anglo-American models. Some of these models, like the democratic unionist and regional federation, inspired the design of the future European Union, while others, like the imperial-commonwealth and Anglo-American, were more of a direct continuation of British imperial visions. What they all shared, according to Bell, however, was a commitment to broadly liberal-democratic political and economic principles and the desire to include both the United States and British Commonwealth (as the settler empire was increasingly called) within their frameworks. As such, the British and Americans were keen to take leading roles in providing

theories for a democratically liberal world order, with Chatham House being founded in London and the Council of Foreign Relations being set up in New York in the early twentieth century to address this topic.

By the middle-to-end of the twentieth century, the overtly racist undertones of such discourses had greatly diminished and there were fewer calls to federalize nations across large geographic distance (Bell 206). Nevertheless, Bell points out that earlier ideas of a “Greater Britain” still permeate British identity and politics today, particularly on the political right, where the notion of an “Anglosphere” alliance, involving New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and the United States, is often invoked as an alternative to the European Union. Therefore, in concluding the “New Anglo Century” chapter, Bell implores his readers to remember that much of today’s discussions about Britain’s future role in the twenty-first century world are the direct heirs of the imperial discourse on settler colonialism and Greater Britain.

#### **V. Conclusions:**

As far as the contemporary implications of Bell’s analysis of these ideas go, an understanding of how the liberal-imperial dialectic shaped British identity is important, especially since 52% of the British electorate voted to leave the European Union in June 2016. The referendum’s result can be seen as the culmination of a decades-long conversation in British political and intellectual culture about whether the United Kingdom’s geopolitical destiny lies with Europe or its English-speaking, Commonwealth connections. This conversation began in earnest after the Second World War, when it became clear that Britain’s time as an imperial power was coming to its end.

## Chapter Three:

### ~ The Construction of Britain's Postwar Foreign Policy ~

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#### I. Introduction: The Imperial Hangover and Churchill's Three Circles:

There is a consensus in the relevant academic literature that postwar Britain has an “imperial hangover” in regard to foreign policy and its international sense of identity. In his 2013 book, *British Foreign Policy*, political scientist Jamie Gaskarth analyzes how the imperial legacy informs the ideas that continue to animate London's place in the world. Gaskarth argues that the British Empire imparted the notion that being British means being globally influential and that this forms the core of the country's identity vis-à-vis other powers. This theme is taken up by political scientists David Sanders and David Patrick Houghton in their 2016 book *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: British Foreign Policy Since 1945*, where they note that successive postwar British prime ministers and political elites have crafted metaphors to describe their country's foreign policy in globally-influential terms. This is despite the realities of decolonization, persistent relative economic decline, and eventual membership in the European Union. With this framework in mind, Theresa May's “Global Britain” is the latest in a series of attempts to propagate a great power status for Britain that is arguably not in keeping with the country's current economic or material capabilities.

Oliver Daddow, a scholar of British politics and foreign policy, explains that Winston Churchill was the first British politician to formulate a post-imperial global metaphor to guide

Westminster's foreign policy (Daddow 27). Churchill's theory identified three key spheres of influence for the United Kingdom: The Empire and Commonwealth; a strong, united continental Europe that Britain would not be part of; and the transatlantic "special relationship" with the United States. By fostering partnerships and collaboration with these three realms, Churchill argued that Britain would become "the only country which has a great part to play...in every one of the world's free nations and democracies" (Churchill cited in Daddow 27). As Sanders and Houghton contend, Churchill's "three circles metaphor," as this framework is often called in the literature, is underpinned by a notion of British exceptionalism, fostered by the imperial identity of the past, that suggests Britain has special roles and obligations in international affairs that other countries do not (Sanders and Houghton 1). Since Churchill's "three circles" idea has captivated successive British leaders from Anthony Eden to David Cameron, the hangover of Empire has remained a psychological and political constant during the postwar era, because it is "difficult for [Britain] to retreat inwards – adopting a policy of isolationism rather than internationalism – once it has [imagined itself] to play [an integral] global role for two-hundred years" (Houghton and Sanders 7). The persistence of Churchill's "three circles" metaphor in the United Kingdom's foreign policy construction is therefore a strong affirmation of post-imperial notions of identity and is useful to understanding the key global regions and political developments in which the British policymaking elite believe their country has vested interests.

## II. **Realism and Liberal Idealism in Churchill's Three Circles Model:**

Given this identity, the literature explicitly suggests that Britain's postwar, Churchillian vision of world order is firmly rooted in the policy and political traditions that developed within the nineteenth century imperial system. Sanders and Houghton, as well as Jamie Gaskarth, argue that, today, the Empire's legacy manifests itself in the tension between *Realism* and *Idealism* in

British foreign policy (4). The British have always put primacy on what is deemed the “national interest,” including, most notably, the security of the British Isles and solvency of overseas investment and trade. This informs the Realist outlook, with many policies and diplomatic engagements flowing out of a calculus based on what is labelled a national economic or security interest, primarily projected through both hard and soft power tactics. The way that this Realism operates has changed over time; Sanders and Houghton specifically note that:

Britain once took a ‘wide-view’ of the world, in which the security of the Empire and its possessions across the globe were synonymous with the security of the homeland, a position that was no longer economically or politically viable after the 1960s – but the emphasis on power and interests [has remained] constant. To the extent that British foreign policy is still about the projection of power and influence... the three circles device maintains its core utility, since the latter is essentially a way of thinking about how Britain retains a major role in the world and remains a ‘player’ in the game” (4).

Since British national interests and power projection are often linked to Churchill’s three geographic regions, it is important to ask what makes Europe, the United States, and Commonwealth important to Britain. This is where the Idealism dimension of British foreign policy is useful.

British Idealism is linked to the types of values that the Westminster government wants to propagate and represent on the world stage. Churchill’s “three circles” metaphor includes a reference to these values due to his characterization of these regions as democratic (Daddow 27). The maintenance of a democratic system of states is therefore ingrained in Britain’s foreign policy traditions and inextricably linked to three geographic areas. This democratic Idealism can also be linked to the Empire’s legacy, since the philosophy of British Liberalism, typified by representative democracy and free trade, developed within the context of the imperial system. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Duncan Bell explores the complexity of liberalism’s relationship with the British Empire in his 2016 book, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism*

*and Empire*. In his analysis, he links both liberalism and imperialism to the long-term construction of British identity and discourses about the British people's proper place in global affairs. Of particular importance is the racialized Victorian idea of "Greater Britain," which argued that Britain and its English-speaking settler colonies in North America and Oceania – the so-called "Anglosphere" – were the democratic polities most likely to reshape the world according to liberal values.

The effects of the "Greater Britain" idea were not limited to the Victorian period; they informed immediate postwar visions of British identity and resonate even today due to the persistence of the "three circles" metaphor. Bell demonstrates this in his book through a focus on Britain's extended imperial decline during the early twentieth century. As Britain's industrial and global dominance was challenged during this period by new powers like the United States, Germany, and Russia, British liberals and imperialists started advocating for an "imperial federation" to establish more permanent bonds between London and the settler colonies – a "Greater Britain" that could offset the challenges of relative decline (Bell 184). Interestingly, the United States was often included in this imagined union since liberal thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic thought Britain and America shared a broadly-similar Anglo-Saxon culture and politically liberal outlook based on representative democracy and the rule of common law (Bell 191). Bell argues that visions of a federalized "Greater Britain" and an Anglo-American alliance came to animate British theoretical models of world order during the twentieth century.

Two of these models, the democratic unionist and regional federation, inspired British dreams that continental Europe could unify into a strong, democratic bloc, much like today's European Union. For Britain itself, however, an Anglo-American or Imperial-Commonwealth model, based on the unification of English-speaking global regions that feature strong cultural ties

to the British Isles, held greater appeal. These latter, British and American-centered models, are more of a direct continuation of British imperial thinking, but what all these ideas of world order share, according to Bell, are a broad commitment to liberal-democratic political and economic principles and the desire to include the United States, British Commonwealth, and continental Europe within their theoretical frameworks.

Churchill's "three circles" model is therefore a natural extension of the debates about the place of Britain and its people in world affairs that emerged during the age of Empire. In the postwar era, however, the main problem London's foreign policy leaders faced is how to effectively balance between the United States, Commonwealth, and Europe given Britain's limited resources while also remaining loyal to the liberal internationalist identity that the country has developed. This has required a constant reworking of the "three circles" metaphor in ways that have ended up privileging some of the circle's three geographic areas over others.

### **III. Britannia Eclipsed: The Origins of the Anglo-American 'Special Relationship'**

The literature focuses on how the notion of an Anglo-American "special relationship" has led to a complicated application of the Churchillian metaphor in ways that privilege transatlantic concerns over European and Commonwealth ones (Gaskarth 93). As Bell's analysis observes, the "special relationship" idea has its roots in the imperial discourses of Anglo-American cultural affinity and superiority. This ideational element was also reinforced by the Realist concern about Britain's gradual economic and industrial decline in the early twentieth century relative to both the United States and Germany, which made it increasingly difficult for London to finance imperial defenses against rival power centers (Houghton and Sanders 44). These cultural, identity, and security factors explain why the cultivation of close ties between Washington and London was a top Whitehall priority in the decades before the First World War and during the interwar period.



David Reynolds, a British historian of Anglo-American relations, explains that the United Kingdom's decision to court the Americans was also underpinned by the belief that the United States would be a more natural international partner than European countries, like France and the newly unified Imperial Germany, because of the very shared language and cultural history that Bell describes. Reynolds notes that Lord Robert Cecil, a Conservative Party politician and diplomat from the pre-First World War period, wrote to his Foreign Office colleagues in an official memorandum that there was "undoubtedly a difference between the British and Continental [European] view in international matters – if America accepts our point of view...it will mean the dominance of that point of view in all of international affairs" (Cecil quoted in Reynolds 2). Two crucial points can be gleaned from this.

The first is that British diplomats intentionally pursued close ties with the United States to offset the security risks associated with a relative decline of British power. Secondly, and more importantly, the British identified the Americans and not the Germans (and by proxy, other continental European) to be their preferred international partners, even though the United States was just as much of a security threat to Britain's long-term economic interests as Germany. As the Cecil quote alludes, this is because the United States, as a fellow English-speaking society, was thought to share the broadly liberal political and economic outlook necessary to perpetuate British views of world order. Implicit in this sentiment is the idea that both Britain and the United States represent truly *global* powers with the capacity to shape the norms and structures of international diplomacy to suit their shared, mutually compatible interests. Continental European concerns, on the other hand, are deemed as more regionalized and less influential under this view. These points demonstrate that Britain's closeness with the United States and ambivalence toward Germany and "continental" views on international affairs have their historical roots in a perceived cultural and

political compatibility with America and the desire to secure Britain's worldview and identity amidst the rise of potential alternatives.

Whitehall's desire for firm Anglo-American relations came to fruition during London's two twentieth century wars with Germany and her allies. During the Second World War in particular, British and American security interests converged as a result of the military and ideological conflict with fascist totalitarianism. This allowed for exceptionally close diplomatic, military, economic, and technological cooperation between Washington and London. This was due to shared language, which made it easy to integrate diplomatic and military staffs at a level that was impossible for other allies (Sanders & Houghton 51). Even if the two countries' top political leaders – like Roosevelt and Churchill – did not always agree as much as popularly imagined, these wartime working relationships proved invaluable during the years immediately following the conflict, since they facilitated smooth collaboration between the Truman and Attlee governments against the burgeoning Soviet threat before the formal forums of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization were established in 1949 (52). This period of close technical and diplomatic cooperation is therefore seen as the height of the “special relationship” in the academic literature and explains why Churchill placed the connections between London and Washington as a key cornerstone of his “three circles” vision of a democratic and liberal postwar world order.

#### **IV. Britain Aids America in Designing the Post-War International Order:**

The convergence of American and British foreign policies during the Second World War also allowed the United States and Britain to construct the international institutions, such as the United Nations, that have defined the postwar world order based on their broadly similar liberal ideologies. The Americans and British had not always been in ideological alignment on matters of global governance, but the sheer cost and devastation caused by the Second World War changed

this. According to Mary Nolan, the war convinced Washington and London policymakers that there would have to be a marriage of Anglo-American international outlooks if Europe and the wider world were to find peace. In her 2012 book *The Transatlantic Century: Europe and America, 1890-2010*, Nolan acknowledges that the wartime alliance did not just include Britain and the United States, but also asserts that the Soviets, French, and other partners did not push their views on international governance as aggressively since their focus was on rebuilding their seriously damaged countries and national morale. This dynamic ensured that it was Anglo-American liberal values that would animate postwar global governance:

Visions for the postwar order were global in scope, but designing them was an Anglo-American project. Both states were determined to avoid a repetition of [the League of Nations mistakes], a renewal of depression, and a continuation of its legacies of diminished foreign trade, economic and social insecurity, and a world economy segmented into closed currency and trading blocs. America's ongoing involvement in European economic and political affairs had to be assured and barriers to renewed aggression constructed. From 1941 on politicians, intellectuals, and the press in Britain and America called for strengthening international law, expanding rights and freedoms, building multilateral institutions, and modifying laissez-faire (Nolan 171).

From this list of shared policy objectives and values, it is easy to think that the United States and Britain had found enough common ground to foster the enduring “special relationship” dimension of Churchill’s “three circles” that is so often discussed. Mary Nolan admits, however, and that there were many disagreements about post-war planning ranging from the Atlantic Charter – the document that first specified what America and Britain were fighting for in the war – to the development of the United Nations system (Nolan 171). This is a story that Mark Mazower elaborates in his 2012 book *Governing the World: The History of an Idea*, and it is one in which a relatively weaker Britain had to accommodate emergent American internationalism to perpetuate its own vision of liberal world order.

Mazower casts the development of postwar order, typified by the United Nations system, as a transfer of internationalist thinking and leadership from London to Washington through the vehicle of the wartime alliance. Since the era of Woodrow Wilson, Americans had acquired a preference for a system of global governance based on international law and sovereign nation-states (Mazower 192). This contrasted with Britain's reliance on concert diplomacy, where imperial European powers balanced out each other's spheres of influence to create stability and order. The general desire to ensure America's involvement in international diplomacy after 1945, however, prompted a gradual change in Whitehall's thinking on these matters. This was underpinned by the realization that Britain's weakened military and economic resources would not allow London to wield the same weight in any kind of balance-of-power system as before (Mazower 199). This shift in sentiment was linked to a growing realization (if not necessarily, acceptance) that Europe's empires would be decolonized after the war. Mazower asserts that British officials also developed the belief that Europe and the larger world would need a stronger, more militaristic international framework to police the world during the subsequent period of peace, decolonization, and transition to nation-state (Mazower 194). In this light, American ideas of international law and bureaucracy looked appealing (Mazower 200) and some British foreign policy leaders, such as the wartime Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, were happy to help in its development. Because of this alignment of general views of world order, Mazower's analysis suggests that the closeness of Anglo-American relations during the postwar planning period was born out of a compromise of policy objectives and a willingness to adjust some aspects of British ideology.

Even once there was a commitment to the development of an international bureaucracy based on nation-states, the British and Americans still held divergent views on how

this should be accomplished. These stemmed largely from British desires to maintain a high level of global influence and American ambitions to use the future United Nations systems as an instrument of the State Department's foreign policy that was palatable to domestic audiences (Mazower 196). The British still initially pushed for a more bilateral, alliance-based structure for the new international bodies, where the United States and Britain could serve as global policemen on relatively equal footing. President Franklin Roosevelt was privately sympathetic to the need for the so-called "Great Powers" to yield the most influence in international governance, but also knew that the American public would only support such measures if they were part of a more expansive, global coalition that would work to solve problems in both peace and war (Mazower 197). As such, the name "United Nations," initially described the wartime alliance and British leaders – including Prime Minister Churchill – went along with this name and multilateral idea because it kept both the Americans and Soviets actively involved in post-war planning, even if their primary goal was further Anglo-American cooperation.

The British were in fact *so* keen to keep the Americans involved, that they even largely accepted the State Department's internal plans for the structure of the post-war United Nations, which added bureaucratic and legal elements – inspired by the American New Deal – to the League of Nation's framework of alliances and collective security (Mazower 199). The final post-war United Nations system blended the British approach to collective security and alliances, as typified by the Security Council, with the American desire for a development-oriented international bureaucracy framed around nation-states, as exemplified by the various United Nations organs and committees. This compromise was tenable, however, due to London and Washington's overall desire to foster a liberal international framework that was amendable to Anglo-American objectives.

As these details of Mazower's argument show, the United States was clearly the dominant partner in Anglo-American relations after the Second World War despite key British influences on the international architecture. The fact that the British had to readjust their own visions of post-war order so many times to accommodate American interests attests to this. This pattern seems to give credence to the idea that there was no "special relationship," but instead, an unequal alliance where the British gave into American demands to perpetuate a pretense of global influence that they no longer enjoyed. As Mazower mentions, though, Britain maintained a key international role through its seat on the United Nations Security Council and continued military prowess. David Reynolds expands on a similar sentiment to argue that a "special relationship" did develop in the 1940s that lasted through the early 1950s (Reynolds 4-5). This was based mainly on a continued (general) alignment of ideological outlooks, shared interests in the Middle East and Western Asia, and personal relationships between Washington and London's diplomats that developed during the war. These factors made cooperation between the two powers comparatively easy throughout the 1940s and 1950s.

**V. Conclusion: Between America and Europe and the Suez Crisis:**

Britain preferential closeness with the United States was also directly shaped by the country's experience of the Second World War as a victorious and unconquered Allied power, which in turn influenced how it related to the other two dimensions of Churchill's "three circles" in the conflict's immediate aftermath:

For the British, the ideological legacy [of the Second World War] was profound. After the Anglo-French entente of the Phony War, which many senior-policy makers saw as the basis of a permanent postwar alliance, the French were felt to have betrayed them in 1940 [with their surrender to Germany]. Britain therefore turned away from the perfidious continentals to its kin across the seas – the Commonwealth and the United States. Together, so it was felt, they won the war and it was only natural to look in the same direction for support and

cooperation in peacetime. Such deeply held beliefs colored British attitudes toward the continent for a generation (Reynolds 5).

It is important to note that during the time when this generation of Britons felt estranged from Europe, the continent itself embarked on the first steps of economic and political integration with very little involvement from London. Not only does Reynold's argument therefore elucidate why the British ended up privileging the transatlantic dimension of Churchill's "three circles" model over the European one in application, but it also hints at a key area of contention that would emerge between Britain and the United States – the issue of decolonization of the status of the Commonwealth in international affairs.

The Americans had a long history of animosity toward European empires and colonialism. As Reynold observes, this specific form of anti-Europeanism was inherent to the American ideology and functioned to differentiate the "the New World" from an "Old World" characterized anachronisms like monarchy and aristocracy (Reynolds 5). This anti-colonialism complicated Anglo-American relations in the immediate post-war decades, since the British and other European powers initially desired to retain some degree of control over their colonies. As historian Odd Arne Westad notes in his 2005 book *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, United States policymakers came to view colonialism as a threat to America's efforts to contain Soviet Communism's spread (112). Westad also asserts that Washington did not want the bankrupt post-war European governments (which were receiving American aid) to divert necessary funds for their own economic reconstruction to the maintenance of empire (112). These American viewpoints came in in direct conflict with British imperial policies during the 1956 Suez Crisis.

This diplomatic incident was precipitated when Egypt – a former British protectorate – nationalized the Suez Canal, which both the French and British used as a shipping route to their

remaining colonies and other British Commonwealth members. To protect these interests, Britain, France, and Israel joined forces to militarily intervene. Both the United States and the United Nations condemned this move, causing much consternation between London and Washington. In his June 2006 article in *Foreign Affairs* titled “The Special Relationship: Then and Now,” British historian Lawrence D. Freedman asserts that American and international alarm at London’s actions was a watershed moment for the “special relationship,” the decolonization movement, and British foreign policy.

It was the United States – standing up for the principles of international law and using its economic muscle to restrain foolish adventurism – that prevented the United Kingdom and France from seeing through the reoccupation of the Suez Canal after Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized it. The United States' objection to the use of force in this case undermined not only the British position in the Middle East, but also British self-confidence; it was taken as a warning of the speed with which the United Kingdom could find itself isolated. After Suez, the British resolved never to get out of step with U.S. foreign policy again. This was the point at which British governments began to be obsessed with the idea of a special relationship. It was apparent that the United Kingdom could not expect to play a major role in the world either independently of or in opposition to the United States. Its future strategy would be to trade loyalty for privileged access to Washington's foreign-policy making (Freedman 2).

There are two analytically key implications of Freedman’s statement. The first is that the British idea of a seamless marriage of Anglo-American objectives was obliterated; due to America’s post-war status as a super power, close relations with the United States could only be achieved if Britain *intentionally* aligned its own interests with Washington’s vision of the liberal world order. This should have been fairly evident given the nature of the wartime partnership, but this reality was made concrete with Suez. Secondly, it demonstrates that the United States was not going to tolerate European interventions that were designed to uphold colonialism. With these two points, “the special relationship” took on a new guise, where Britain served as a junior partner to the



United States in the defense of the liberal order whenever London deemed that their two countries' interests *significantly* overlapped.

# Chapter Four:

## ~ Decolonization ~

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### I. Introduction: The Aftermath of Suez and Road to Decolonization:

Given Britain's relegation to junior status in perpetuating the liberal world order following the Suez Crisis, London's ability to project power on a global level began to wane in the late 1950s and 1960s. The driver of this change was decolonization and the attendant weakening of the Empire and Commonwealth ties. Sanders and Houghton attribute the weakening of bonds across the Empire to the political effects of the Suez Crisis. Before Suez, Britain seemed on track to slowly and progressively relinquish control over its imperial realms. India and the Mandate of Palestine, in particular, were granted independence in 1947 during the "first wave" of decolonization. Crucially, India had opted to remain a member of the Commonwealth, which bolstered hopes that liberal visions of empire and world order could be reinvented for the post-colonial era. Given the illiberal measures that Britain employed during the Suez fiasco, however, these hopes were quickly dashed, as Houghton and Sanders observe:

A [significant] long-term consequence of Suez concerned the Commonwealth. The most ardent imperialists at home had always hoped that the Commonwealth would help Britain to maintain its postwar world role by acting as a kind of surrogate Empire. In the mid-1950s there had been several good reasons for supposing that the strategy might be successful: the cultural ties which bound the Commonwealth were still strong; trade interdependence was still high, bolstered by the monetary underpinning of the sterling area; and the participation of the Commonwealth Brigade in the recent Korean War suggested that Commonwealth governments were agreed that cooperation among the liberal democracies was...important in resisting the global threat of Communist expansionism. However, Suez meant that, although the Commonwealth survived as a formal institution, it lost what coherence it had possessed as an economic and diplomatic bloc (110).

India's Prime Minister Nehru was particularly incensed by the Suez affair and started the diplomatic moves that eventually fostered the anti-imperialist, Non-Aligned Movement by 1962 (Sanders and Houghton 110). Such developments intensified the pressure that indigenous nationalist movements in the remainder of the Empire placed on London. These movements critiqued Britain for the coercive and manipulative means that were used to maintain colonial control, which Suez seemed to embody. By the 1960s, therefore, it became untenable for a supposedly liberal power like Britain to continue to rule over a colonial Empire or aggressively enforce Commonwealth solidarity (115). A "second wave" of decolonization was announced during Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's "Wind of Change" speech delivered to South Africa's parliament in February 1960. This started a process of imperial retreat that resulted in full independence for all but of a few of Britain's smallest imperial realms by the early 1970s (133).

Second wave decolonization was also underpinned by structural changes within the British economy. By the 1960s, it was advanced and industrial European and American markets – not commodity-driven Commonwealth ones – that placed the most demand for British exports of goods and services (Buettner 73). This was a decisive break from past trends but served to reinforce the notion that the British domestic economy's real interests rested in North America and Western Europe – not the former Empire. In a similar vein, Commonwealth countries like Australia and New Zealand began to develop their own trade and institutional ties to East Asian and Southern Pacific countries at the expense of their British connections (134). Given these realities, British policymakers cut defense budgets that had been used to protect much of the former Empire, which culminated in a withdrawal of British forces from areas east of the Suez Canal by 1971 (124). The end result of these trends was the overall retreat from the Empire-Commonwealth dimension of

British postwar foreign policy and a greater emphasis on the American and European nodes of Churchill's theory.

## **II. Britain as a Member of the Western Liberal Subsystem – Not a Leader of It:**

Even though the Americans ideologically supported Britain's decolonization efforts due to their affinity for a global order based on international law and nation-states, the loss of empire made the United Kingdom a less influential, capable, and reliable partner for the United States. In the immediate postwar years, American foreign policy-makers had indeed hoped that Britain's Commonwealth connections would help London effectively burden-share on global security matters. Once decolonization efforts reduced the capabilities and reach of the British economy, however, Britain could no longer afford to do so (Sanders & Houghton 173). The Americans were also worried that the rapidity of Britain's imperial retreat would produce a "power vacuum in the [decolonized] world that the Soviet Union would only be too happy to fill" (Sanders and Houghton 132). This sentiment, when combined with Britain's sustained cuts to overseas defense spending, prompted former Secretary of State Dean Acheson to proclaim in December 1962 that Britain's time of playing a special role in the maintenance of the liberal order beside America and separate from Europe was over. This indictment, of course, ran contrary to Britain's longstanding goal of using the American alliance as a tool to perpetuate its other global interests. Nevertheless, by the mid-1960s, the Americans increasingly viewed Britain as just another European ally within the framework of the greater North Atlantic liberal subsystem and security alliance.

The weakened "special relationship" meant that the European dimensions of Churchill's theory was the most tenable option by the 1960s. After all, Britain's economic capacity was increasingly localized and it became progressively difficult to play a robust role in international affairs as a result (Reynolds 13). The American connection, however, continued to have an

influence on how the British adjusted their global and regional priorities. President Kennedy personally intervened with British leaders to convince them to apply for membership in the expanding European Economic Community (Reynolds 14). Kennedy's argument was that membership would halt Britain's postwar economic decline and therefore strengthen the United Kingdom's ability to be a reliable partner for the United States. Since it took nearly a decade for Britain to be allowed entry into the European Community – due primarily to personal rejections by French President Charles de Gaulle, who feared British membership would add unwanted American influence to the European project – the Anglo-American alliance continued to wane in importance for American policymakers during the 1960s and 1970s (Reynolds 14).

### **III. European Integration and the Persistence of the Liberal Commonwealth Ideal:**

For many Britons, the recalcitrance of the French and other Europeans in extending European Community membership to the United Kingdom reinforced their previously held notions that Britain's destiny was not with Europe. This continued distance from Europe ensured that Britain's sense of international identity remained distantly connected to the liberal-imperial "three circles" *leitmotif*, even after decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s (Reynolds 14). Elizabeth Buettner, attributes the persistence the "three circles" metaphor to the narratives surrounding British imperialism and decolonization that had been sold to the British public during the decolonization era. She notes that journalistic and cross-party political accounts of the period portray colonial independence as a smooth transfer of power that the Empire's liberal-democratic political traditions allowed for. Independence was not a radical break, according to this characterization, because liberal British ideals had made the "colonial subjects 'ready' for self-rule" ...which was no less than the "fulfillment of British hopes dating back to the nineteenth century" (Buettner 38 – 39). Such narratives intentionally glossed over the sectarian violence and

poverty that often-accompanied decolonization outside of the White Commonwealth and worked to “absolve Britain from [any] bloodshed that inevitably followed [from imperial retreat]” (39). This has had profound implications for British identity, since it allows the imperial-commonwealth connection to continue to exist as a viable avenue for London's efforts at global engagement.

This is particularly apparent in the context of the British public’s relationship with the European integration project, which was still viewed as the least desirable of Churchill’s “three circles” during the era of decolonization, as Buettner demonstrates using polling information from the time.

In a 1961 Gallup poll asking [UK citizens] which...[entity]...was [most] important to Britain, 48 percent of the respondents chose ‘the Commonwealth,’ 19 percent ‘America,’ and 18 percent ‘Europe’ (with the remainder opting for ‘don’t know’). But Britain’s EEC membership application gave rise to intense discussions that framed Britain’s Commonwealth and European commitments as necessitating a choice between the two. If anything, Britain’s overture to the EEC was not simply a tacit acknowledgment of the declining economic and political utility of the Commonwealth as a vehicle for British interests...but became yet another factor among the many centrifugal forces already undermining Britain’s... [foreign policy] ...cohesion (Buettner 74).

Given this disoriented construction of Britain’s international identity in relation to a post-colonial and post-imperial world, it is not surprising that Britain’s relationship to the European project remained awkward once it was finally admitted to the bloc in 1973. In his 2013 book *Britain and the European Union*, political scientist Andrew Geddes argues that the British-European relationship took on a purely transactional outlook once London attained membership. The goal was always to increase Britain’s relative economic strength by integrating with other advanced markets, so that the United Kingdom could once again become a more valuable partner for the United States and better able to engage with the Commonwealth and outside world. The result of this strategy by 1980 was that Britain was differentially engaged with all three of Churchill’s

circles, but the most economically valuable circle – the European one – was still not quite palatable to popular and elite notions of British identity due to the imperial legacy and historical disagreements with other European countries.

# Chapter Five:

## ~ From Thatcher to Brexit ~

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### **I. Introduction: Atlanticism and Euroskepticism Under Thatcher:**

Britain's difficulty with Europe – and reciprocal affinity for the United States – would intensify starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Margaret Thatcher became British Prime Minister and Ronald Reagan the American President. The two leaders shared a broadly similar right-wing political and economic vision – neoliberalism – that came to be implemented in both countries (Sanders and Houghton 175). Neoliberalism's broad tenets emphasized the absolute primacy of market forces and the dismantling of the collectivist welfare state, and Washington and London's ideological commitment to capitalism's rejuvenation ensured a “remarkable degree of Anglo-American cooperation” during the decade (175). Even though Neoliberalism also influenced the social and economic policies of other European Member States, it did so not nearly to the same extent as in Britain. This divergence in policy outlooks contributed to the sense of detachment that had characterized Britain's involvement with the European circle, especially given that some members of Mrs. Thatcher's ruling Conservative Party were more prone to Euroskepticism and imperialist nostalgia:

Although the Conservative Party under Edward Heath had demonstrated strong pro-European [foreign policy] tendencies in the 1970s, Euroskepticism remained well-represented on [the party's] back benches and ultimately become more pervasive after Margaret Thatcher assumed leadership. Concerns about defending Britain's sovereignty against European encroachment were commonly aired in the 1980s, with reservations about national subordination within Europe rising in tandem with the inauguration of a new chapter in the Anglo-American special relationship. Under Thatcher's governments, Britain distanced itself from Europe and prioritized Atlanticism – not only through a pro-American foreign policy, but also in mounting



ardent defense of one of... [the country's] ...remaining colonial...[holdings]: ... The Falkland Islands (Buettner 75).

Mrs. Thatcher's renewed Atlanticism and attendant hostility toward European integration is viewed in the literature as a resurgence of an interventionist Britain that has a "deep involvement in the world beyond Europe (Buettner 75). Despite decolonization, therefore, London's relative decline in global reach, and the country's eventual and reluctant turn toward Europe, some members of British society and policymaking elite never lost the appetite to perform a worldwide role that was imparted by the imperial past.

Due to her intentional revival of the Anglo-American "special relationship," Mrs. Thatcher was able to cast herself as an effective heir of Churchill's leadership style in regard to foreign policy. Events like the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War also worked in her favor, since they seemed to provide evidence for the superiority of the Anglo-American neoliberal model to all alternatives of social, political, and economic organization. Since Britain's relative economic strength and ability to project global power alongside the United States had not improved dramatically since the era of decolonization, Houghton and Sanders ascribe Britain's increased value to the United States to this ideological convergence and Mrs. Thatcher's personal leadership qualities (198). Thatcher's premiership therefore increased the importance of the leader's personal interpretation of Churchill's "three circles" metaphor and British identity to the formulation of British foreign policy priorities, in addition to the aforementioned intensification of Euroskepticism within the Conservative Party.

## **II. Blair's Liberal Transatlantic Bridge:**

The next British Prime Minister to define British foreign policy in terms of personal leadership style was the Labour Party's Tony Blair, who came to power in 1997. Tony Blair's international philosophy placed great emphasis on the maintenance of the liberal tradition, even

going so far to advocate for policies of multilateral military interventions in instances of gross human rights violations. As a committed Europhile, Blair believed that both the United States and integrated Europe, as areas where liberal democracy flourish, should work to ensure that the liberal tradition's values were perpetuated across the globe. He therefore stressed the importance of American and European unity and thought that Britain had a special role to play in mediating between the two sides as the essential bridge (Sanders and Houghton 3). This theoretical placement of Britain as a bridge between America and Europe essentially updated Churchill's metaphor for the dawn of the twenty-first century with the familiar goal of securing a globally-relevant Britain for the future.

Blair's leadership style and updated framework for global engagement imbued British foreign policy with a new confidence during the late 1990s with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's humanitarian interventions in places like Bosnia being viewed as extensions of uniquely British liberal values. This seems to give credence to the sentiment that the British could maintain global influence by shaping the values that crafted the norms of international politics in the early twenty-first century through its membership of the Euro-American transatlantic alliance (Gaskarth 118). Houghton and Sanders observe that this new role for Britain seemed to work for a while because America's President Bill Clinton shared Blair's conviction that both the United States and Britain had a moral duty to prevent human suffering through the perpetuation of the liberal world order (198). Given that London still faced stiff constraints on its military and economic capacities, Blair's bridge metaphor primarily made Britain a valuable junior partner in the United States' efforts to convince other countries – including European ones – to subscribe to the ideological preferences that justified America's international actions. This served arrangement served Blair well during the Clinton years according to Sanders and Houghton:

Even though the British government was...[still]... unable to provide the type of military support that it had in the 1950s, it could still bestow the appearance of 'multilateral legitimacy' on American-sponsored out-of-area operations. This was clearly valuable to Washington in its attempts to justify its own behavior to world opinion...and also provided Blair with the opportunity to burnish...[his]...credentials as the true 'heir' to the mantle of Winston Churchill (198).

Complications arose once George W. Bush replaced Clinton as President in January 2001. Since Blair's worldview and ideological preferences did not align as seamlessly with Bush's as it did with Clinton's, any type of balancing act between American and European opinions on foreign policy actions would become more tedious.

### **III. Iraq – The Tragedy of Blair's Liberal Internationalism:**

This became evident once the Bush Administration pursued an aggressive and global "War on Terror" in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. Pan-European opinion was initially sympathetic to the American cause, particularly in regard to Washington's retaliatory actions against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. But when Bush's government decided it would invade Iraq to remove the dictator Saddam Hussein from power, this support quickly crumbled across continental Europe. Blair, still ideologically committed to the "bridge metaphor," decided it was in Britain's best interest to support the United States and try to get the rest of the Europeans onboard with a United Nations Security Council resolution that sanctioned actions against Hussein's regime. Blair's attempt at Euro-American unity over Iraq came to naught, however, when the French President Jacques Chirac vetoed such efforts. Despite this setback, Blair made the choice to commit British troops to the United States' Iraqi incursion, effectively privileging American interests over European ones and demonstrating how untenable the "bridge" metaphor could be in instances of little policy,

ideological, and leadership alignment between the United States and Europe. Given the domestic unpopularity of the Iraq War, this flawed application of the bridge metaphor eventually forced Blair from office and largely discredited his brand of politics.

#### **IV. The Rise of the Euroskeptic Anglosphere and the Road to Brexit:**

The Conservative Party under the leadership of David Cameron returned to power in coalition with the Liberal-Democrats in Britain's 2010 election. Aside from the foreign policy mess left in Iraq's wake, the Conservative Party itself had to contend with its Euroskeptic elements that only grown more vocal since Mrs. Thatcher's tenure. Sanders and Houghton argue that the desire of several Conservative members of parliament to pull Britain out the European Union, as well the coalition government's slim Parliamentary majority, made it difficult for Cameron to successfully put his own stamp on British foreign policy the way that Churchill, Thatcher, and Blair had before him (189). The 2010 Coalition nevertheless continued to invoke Churchillian motifs in their 2010 and 2015 National Security Strategy documents, which together observe that "geographically Britain is an island, but economically and politically it is a vital link in the global network" (Sanders and Houghton 3). Despite the Iraq War fiasco and the history of Britain's problematic construction of a postwar foreign policy, this idea of Britain as the centerpiece of key global networks represented the latest reworking of Churchill's "three circles" metaphor.

Whether intended or not, this new metaphor's reference to multiple networks – and not just European ones – makes an implicit appeal to British Euroskepticism. This is because the idea of a networked Britain that is actively involved in the manipulation of many spheres of influence is the most Churchillian iteration of the "three circles" motif since it was originally conceived in the late 1940s. Conservative Euroskeptic politicians, like Boris Johnson, have seized on this new image to suggest that Britain could reorient its international position to privilege the Commonwealth and

other emerging global markets if it left the European Union. The Commonwealth element of this theory has also been adopted by the right-wing British press in recent years, in which collaboration with an “Anglosphere” alliance of English-speaking democracies is painted as a viable *global* alternative to further European *regional* integration. Since the countries most often included in this proposed alliance are the former white settler colonies of New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and even the United States, this particular vision of Britain’s potential role in the twenty-first century is the distant heir of the liberal-imperial discourses on settler colonialism and “Greater Britain” outlined by Duncan Bell. Elizabeth Buettner directly attributes the resurgence of this “Anglosphere” idea and attendant Euroskepticism to the persistence of Britain’s imperial identity beyond the era of decolonization, especially since the more violent realities of post-colonialism were not always accurately communicated to the British public:

Long after the Commonwealth ceased...[to Realistically be competitive]...as an alternative source of British loyalties and attachments after the era of widespread decolonization, resistance to ‘Europe’ as an unhappy alternative to great powerdom, remained a powerful force in British politics...[Therefore,] ...while British Euroskepticism has many roots, its trajectory demands to be firmly embedded within the...[the country’s]...domestic responses to decolonization and perceptions of the nation’s [post-imperial] condition. (77).

As Buettner’s analysis alludes, even though European Union membership has economically benefited the United Kingdom by integrating the country with other highly developed neighboring economies, Britain’s identity vis-à-vis the rest of the world – an identity laced with a cultural sense of British exceptionalism – has consistently made London’s turn toward Europe difficult to maintain in light the country’s perceived geopolitical alternatives.

Given increased Euroskeptic pressure from within his own party and the larger society, Prime Minister Cameron called for a public referendum on Britain’s European Union membership

to be held in June 2016 when the Conservatives secured a Parliamentary majority in the 2015 elections without the Liberal Democrats. The referendum fulfilled a Conservative Party manifesto promise made during the campaign, and Cameron hoped that a vote to remain in the European Union would finally silence the Party's anti-European backbenchers. Things did not go according to plan, with many prominent Conservatives, including Boris Johnson, campaigning to leave Europe despite the Prime Minister's preference to remain. Throughout the referendum campaign, Johnson and other proponents of a British exit consistently argued that "a global Britain" that embraces the liberal international order and reaffirms London's historic "network" beyond Europe would be the end result of a Brexit. When the British public narrowly voted leave in June 2016, these opinions seemed to be given greater popular credibility.

**V. Conclusion: Enter Theresa May**

Cameron was forced to resign as Prime Minister after his defeat in the referendum and was replaced by Theresa May after a brief Conservative Party leadership battle. Even though Mrs. May had campaigned to remain, she quickly shifted views upon becoming Prime Minister and vowed to deliver a successful Brexit. In doing so, she and her government have had to formulate new priorities for Britain's future relationship with the Europe and the rest of the world. Since the European Union remains the United Kingdom's largest trading partner, the Realist impulse in British foreign policy suggests that Britain maintain as close of trade links as possible with the remaining twenty-seven Member States, including finding a way to retain favorable access to the Common Market and Customs Union. It has proven extremely complicated to pursue this Realist priority, however, since Mrs. May also faces considerable domestic pressure from many regions in England and Wales to curb the levels of immigration and economic migration from continental Europe. Given these political constraints, May has instead opted to again rework the Churchillian

three bridges metaphor into a new motif – “Global Britain” – that theoretically allows the country to distance itself from the European Union politically and economically to pursue closer connections with other powers, like the Commonwealth and United States. In doing so, she is not only privileging ideational elements that are rooted in Britain’s imperial hangover, but also appropriating right-wing ideas, like that desire to create an “Anglosphere,” that dominated the referendum campaign. Sanders and Houghton’s analysis suggests that this is a natural response for a Prime Minister who must appease members of her own party who ardently support Brexit and also leave her own individual mark on Britain’s postwar foreign policy traditions, especially since the last Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, largely failed to do so. The history of Britain’s postwar construction of a foreign policy identity, as sketched in the last few chapters, and Theresa May’s personal political considerations are necessary to any understanding of how the Prime Minister’s latest iteration of the Churchillian “three circles” metaphor inform her government’s Brexit priorities.

## Chapter 6: ~ Global Britain ~

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As the historical overview conveys, Britain's past notions of global identity, particularly the "imperial hangover," have complicated Britain's European Union membership, especially since this identity has been married to the maintenance of close bilateral ties with the United States and cultural affinity for the Commonwealth. Behind this focus on partnerships is also a broad commitment to the multilateral maintenance of the liberal-democratic postwar order that the Anglo-American alliance helped create. The current British leadership is therefore drawing on these values and historic symbols to create an ideology of "Global Britain" to chart a path forward after Europe.

In her October 2016 speech at the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham, Theresa May boldly proclaimed that a truly "Global Britain is possible – and it should not be surprising that it is." She cited Britain's strong geographic location for involvement in global trade and finance, the comparatively far reach of the country's intelligence and military services, London's large web of diplomatic alliances, Britain's leading role in higher education, and the fact that the United Kingdom is the largest foreign investor in the American economy to support her point. The explicit message of Mrs. May's speech is that Britain is economically, politically, and culturally relevant and strong enough to be an independent actor on the global stage outside of the European Union. Her words employ the tropes of British exceptionalism that are inherent to the Churchillian "three circles" foreign policy tradition, as well as references to the need for close ties with the United States and other allies, including the Commonwealth. The European dimension receives less attention in her remarks, reflecting the reality that an exit from the European Union will greatly



alter and limit Britain's capacity to act in that historic sphere of influence. A practical need therefore does exist for Britain to intensify its political and economic connections with its other partners, and this is reflected in how the current government imagines their country's post-Brexit foreign policy.

**I. The Maintenance of Britain's Liberal Multilateralism:**

Prime Minister May has made it clear that, despite Brexit, she intends to maintain Britain's multilateral support of the liberal world order. This is the essential first step in containing the diplomatic fallout from Britain's impending European Union withdrawal, because it sends a signal that Whitehall policymakers do not want their country to become isolated in world affairs. It also affirms and perpetuates the underlying liberal philosophy in Britain's postwar foreign policy, which has consistently viewed the United Nations system – which Britain helped create in cooperation with the United States – as a cornerstone of the liberal order. It is not surprising then that Mrs. May reaffirmed Britain's role at the United Nations when she addressed the General Assembly in New York on September 20, 2016:

My pledge to this United Nations is simple: the UK will be a confident, strong, and dependable partner internationally – true to universal values that we share together...From the St. James' Palace declaration and the Atlantic Charter forged by Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt, to first meeting of this General Assembly in London in 1946, the United Kingdom has been an outward facing, global partner at the heart of international efforts to secure peace prosperity...[across the globe]...And that is how it will remain. For when the British people voted to leave the EU, they did not vote to turn inwards or walk away from any of our partners in the world.

This quote about the history of Britain's involvement with the liberal world order demonstrates that Mrs. May and her government view the United Nations as a vehicle through which Britain's diplomatic engagement with the rest of the world – particular with its key North American ally – can continue.

Aside from this continuity, however, May also interjects an element of her own personal political philosophy – one that places primacy on what she believes to be in the British peoples’ interests – into another part of the speech:

The challenge for those of us in this room is to ensure that our government and our global institutions, such as this United Nations, remain responsible to the people that we serve. That we are capable of adapting our institutions to the demands of the twenty-first century and ensuring that they do not become irrelevant... so when it comes to the big security and human rights challenges in our time, we need...our United Nations...to forge a bold new multilateralism.

The reference to a government’s need to serve its own people first subtly hints to one potential lesson to be learned from the Brexit referendum’s result; namely, that some Britons in the United Kingdom’s downtrodden, postindustrial regions used their vote as a protest against the socioeconomic status quo in both Westminster and Brussels, even if the causes of their frustration will worsen when the country leaves the European Union. Mrs. May, who wants to ensure that Britain remains actively engaged in the world affairs, understands that the British public’s continued frustration with the domestic state of the United Kingdom could place limitations on her government’s global ambitions. She therefore sees it as imperative that international institutions – like the United Nations and the European Union – engage in reforms to service the needs of national populations so that they, in turn, are more supportive of multilateral diplomacy and internationalism. In Britain’s case, such support is a prerequisite to any attempts by Westminster’s foreign policy elite to implement a “global Britain” in keeping with Churchill’s metaphor. This also supports the idea that liberal internationalism first and foremost requires that a domestic consensus for liberal values remains intact in core liberal states, which is precisely what the current form of liberal internationalism has failed to engender.

## II. Trump's Challenge to the "Special Relationship":

As such, Britain is far from the only country be afflicted by a populist revolt against liberal internationalism. Aside from the right-wing movements in other European Union Member States like France, and Poland, the United States – Britain's closest ally and the crucial pillar of Churchill's model – has inaugurated a president who came to office on an anti-establishment message that eschews much of America's involvement in international economic and political arrangements. President Donald Trump's political philosophy, though largely incoherent in application, marks a rather uncertain departure from the United States' postwar foreign policy traditions. For instance, the United States has largely supported European integration over the past sixty years, and, as the literature reveals, primarily values the "special relationship" with London so long as Britain is an economic and political position to further American goals within the broader liberal world order. This longstanding policy explains why former President Barack Obama controversially intervened in the Brexit referendum campaign to advocate for Britain's continued European Union membership, arguing that the United Kingdom is a stronger and more reliable partner for Washington within the pan-European framework

President Trump, who sees the Brexit referendum's result as an extension of his personal brand of politics, does not appear to be as concerned about the solvency of the European integration project as his predecessors. Whereas Obama said that a Britain outside of the European Union would be "in the back of the queue" in regard to a new bilateral trade deal with the United States, Trump has – at times – suggested that this will not be the case with his administration. Of course, it is still too early to ascribe real weight to the new president's statements, since his opinions tend to change quite frequently; nevertheless, the mere suggestion that the United States could actively help Britain remove itself from the European Union has caused panic in other European capitals,

according to New York University professor and esteemed political risk analyst Ian Bremmer. This is because such assistance would raise real concerns about America's continued commitment to the institutions that compose the broader Euro-American trade, defense, and intelligence alliance – if the United States supports one country leaving the European Union, what is to stop Washington from acquiescing to another Member State's exit? (4). These suspicions have weakened the transatlantic alliance's overall solidarity during Trump's first year in office, but for Mrs. May's team, which is more narrowly concerned with maintaining close ties with Washington once Brexit occurs, the change in attitude has been seen as a potential advantage.

Mrs. May's government has made it clear that they desire a new and deeper trade deal with the United States after Britain leaves the European Union. They reason that such an arrangement would soften the economic blow that Britain's exit will entail, so that the country can continue to afford a robust and multilateral global role. To assist in the preliminary stages of any trade talks, the British lobbied hard to ensure that Prime Minister May was the first foreign leader to visit President Trump at the White House after his January 2017 inauguration. When these efforts were successful, it was hoped that she could employ the traditions inherent to the postwar "special relationship" to convince the President to reaffirm America's commitment to the transatlantic alliance and multilateral diplomacy, both of which are important and longstanding elements of United Kingdom's foreign policy strategies, as previously outlined.

As part of this strategy to put pressure on the President to normalize his international views, Mrs. May gave a speech to the Congressional members of Trump's own Republican Party in Philadelphia on January 26, 2017 before she met with the President in Washington. In this speech, which featured the usual emotive appeals to the "special relationship," the Prime Minister took great pains to remind the Republicans of America and Britain's shared history of developing

the liberal world order – with explicit references to United Nations and North Atlantic Treaty Organization – that she is keen on perpetuating for Britain’s benefit. In doing so, her words portray Britain’s European Union exit as an opportunity for Britain to reformulate a global role in keeping with its postwar foreign policy traditions with the support of the United States:

As Americans know, the United Kingdom is by instinct and history, a great, global nation that recognizes its responsibilities to the world. And as we end our membership in the European Union – as the British people voted to do with determination and quiet resolve last year – we have the opportunity to reassert our belief in a confident, sovereign, and “Global Britain,” ready to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike...it remains overwhelming in our interests – and in those of the wider world – that the EU should succeed... But we have chosen a different future for our country... A future that sees us step up with confidence to a new, even more internationalist role, where we meet our responsibility to our friends and allies, champion the international cooperation and partnerships that project our values around the world, and continue to act as one of the strongest and most forceful advocates for business, free markets, and free trade anywhere around the world...this is a vision of a future that my country can unite around – and that I hope your country, as our closest friend and ally, can welcome and support...we have the opportunity – indeed the responsibility – to renew the Special Relationship for this new age. We have the opportunity to lead, together, again.

These references to webs of alliances, a broad commitment to capitalism and free trade, and the projection of values are all key ingredients of liberal internationalism that has underlined Britain’s partnership with America. And since Britain has traditionally played a junior role alongside Washington, – in keeping with London’s “three circles” approach to international relations – Mrs. May needs to ensure that the Americans under President Trump remain committed to these values if the United Kingdom is to effectively use that liberal order to maintain global influence after it leaves the European Union. This, again, is because the European dimension of Churchill’s model will not be as tenable for the United Kingdom after the Brexit process plays out, so Mrs. May will

need to rely more on the Anglo-American “special relationship” and broader liberal-democratic order, typified by the United Nations, to bring her “Global Britain” *leitmotif* to fruition.

### **III. “Global Britain’s” Relationship to the European Union:**

Aside from the Anglo-America connection and the liberal tradition, Prime Minister May and her government have also needed to address how a new “Global Britain” will relate to the European Union. Not only is a focus on Europe of economic necessity to maintain Britain’s overall solvency, but it is also in keeping with Churchill's desire to include an integrated Europe as a key part of the United Kingdom’s relationship with the world – even if Britain was not itself part of that integrated community. This specifically Churchillian vision of Britain's relationship with Europe – where the United Kingdom is a valued partner of the European community, but not itself a member – is the tradition that Theresa May has adopted. It is her hope that this more distant arrangement with the European Union – coupled with some kind of free trade deal – will allow Britain to foster deeper relations with other parts of the world, including, of course, the United States and Commonwealth.

Mrs. May first revealed some of the details of her vision for Britain’s new relationship with the European Union in a speech at London’s Lancaster House on January 17, 2017. In doing so, she casts the referendum’s result as a product of Britain’s distinct political traditions and culture; a distinctiveness that, according to the Prime Minister, has produced a sense of British identity that is markedly different from continental Europe.

Our political traditions are different...unlike other European countries, we have no written constitution, but the Principle of Parliamentary Sovereignty... we have only a recent history of devolved governance...and we have little history of coalition government. The public expect to be able to hold their governments to account very directly, and, as a result, supranational institutions as those created by the European Union sit very uneasily in relation to our political history and way of life.

The Prime Minister then links this distinctively British political identity to the United Kingdom's place in the world affairs in a truly Churchillian fashion, emphasizing the need for Britain to remain distant – but still cooperatively involved with Europe, even though the two entities share broadly similar democratic values. This type of arrangement, according to Mrs. May, is the necessary prerequisite for Britain to embrace the spirit in internationalism that has historically defined her country.

Our vote to leave the European Union was no rejection of the values that we share... It was no attempt to do harm to the EU itself or to any of its remaining Member States. We do not want to turn the clock back to the days when Europe was less peaceful, less secure, and less able to trade freely. It was a vote to restore, as we see it, our parliamentary democracy, national-self-determination, and to become even more global and internationalist in action and spirit.

With the focus on Europe's internal cohesion and security, this statement also blends the Realist tradition in British foreign policy with the more ideational focus on internationalism. Churchill himself stressed the importance of ensuring the continent's security, because European stability will allow London policymakers to turn their attention elsewhere to the maintenance of transatlantic and Commonwealth ties. A more secure Europe is also a better trading and economic partner for Britain, which reinforces the United Kingdom's ability to pursue liberal free trade policies. Mrs. May is therefore bringing these past themes into play for the present moment as part of her "Global Britain" motif. And given that this international identity for Britain is constructed out of themes and tropes that developed during the imperial past, the Prime Minister's vision for future Anglo-European Union relations is emblematic of the "imperial hangover" that is so often referred to in the academic literature on Britain's postwar foreign policy.

## **V. The Role of Trade with the Commonwealth and Anglosphere:**

Mrs. May's Lancaster House speech gives further evidence to the "imperial hangover" in British foreign policy when she explicates further on how a more distant relationship with Europe can reinvigorate Britain's more traditional ties beyond the continent. She again explains this in terms of Britain's international identity, which necessitates trade engagement on a global level that is in keeping with liberal principles, that of course developed out of an imperialist context:

It's not simply because our history and culture is profoundly internationalist, important though that is. Many in Britain have always felt that the United Kingdom's place in the European Union came at the expense of our global ties, and of a bolder embrace of free trade with the wider world... we want to get out into... [that]... wider world, to trade and do business all around the globe.

With this quote, Mrs. May explicitly acknowledges that one of British Euroskepticism's main roots is the idea that Britain betrayed its rightfully global role by agreeing to become a more regionalized actor within the European Union. This supports Elizabeth Buettner's earlier analysis that Euroskeptic British politicians were never forced to acknowledge that their sense of global identity is derived from an imperial past that their country's specific experience of decolonization has allowed to be unduly romanticized. As Buettner observes, this romantic attachment to the liberal-imperial past – and the countries that were a part of that past – makes it easier for Euroskeptics to continue to frame Britain's European Union membership as an obstacle to the liberal trade and business practices that they believe London has a duty to promote across the world. It does not matter to these Euroskeptics if today's European Union largely operates according to liberal, democratic, and capitalist principles; the very fact that the Union is geographical confined to a European sphere of influence renders the project insufficiently global for those with a nostalgic attachment to British imperial traditions. By appropriating this line of Euroskeptic thought, Prime



Minister May is therefore giving further fuel to the “imperial hangover” that has infected Britain’s foreign policy and identity formulation since the Second World War.

Given this appropriation of Euroskeptic motifs and her general reworking of the Churchillian “three circles” metaphor, it is not surprising that Mrs. May pits Europe against the Commonwealth, United States, and emerging market economies when discussing the regions where Britain could increase its trading ties:

We want to get out into the wider world to trade and do business. Countries including China, Brazil, and the Gulf States have already expressed their interest in striking...[free]...trade deals with us. We have started discussion on future trade ties with countries like Australia, New Zealand, and India. And...[President] Trump has said Britain is not at the ‘back of the queue’ for a trade deal with the United States, the world’s biggest economy, but front of the line.

Australia, New Zealand, and India are, of course, tied to Britain through the Commonwealth, so their inclusion in Britain’s post-Brexit trade and foreign policy framework is a natural extension of Theresa May’s “Global Britain” metaphor. The United States, despite not being a formal Commonwealth member, also warrants inclusion as a fellow liberal and English-speaking power that has historical links to Britain. Closer Commonwealth and English-speaking connectivity through the vehicle of free trade is also in keeping with “the Anglosphere” notion that has emerged in right-wing, Conservative Party discourses over the past few years. Not only does a subtle reference to “the Anglosphere” further the viability of Mrs. May’s metaphor with the more Euroskeptic wing of her party, but it also serves to thematically link her entire message to free trade liberalism. This theme is key to understanding why she references the non-Commonwealth countries, since free trade is the imagined tool that could integrate and further socialize these emerging markets into a system that benefits Britain and broader liberal world order that is supported by the web of alliances that Churchill first envisioned.

As mentioned before, though, Europe itself is still an integral part of Churchill's vision. This is not just limited to the hard security sense, but also includes an economic dimension that is reinforced – naturally – through ties of free trade. This is where Theresa May's vision becomes complicated since she wants Britain to maintain as close of free trade ties as possible with the European Union and with any future economic partner. To strike new free trade deals in the unhindered fashion that the Prime Minister hopes for, however, Britain will have to rid itself of the European Union's trade regulations and bureaucracy. This is why Mrs. May has made it clear that she is open to removing Britain from both the European Single Market and Customs Union. This action has been labeled a "hard Brexit" by analysts of Britain's upcoming departure, because such an arrangement would leave Britain with little to no privileged trading access to the European Union's internal market of goods, services, and capital. This would result in a significant shock to the domestic British economy, while also hurting the remaining twenty-seven Member States.

Given that this type of "hard Brexit" is rather undesirable, Mrs. May has suggested she that wants to negotiate a new tariff and trading partnership with the European Union based on an amended relationship with the Customs Union. This would be the wisest course of action for all parties according to the Prime Minister, and she addresses her views on this matter in one of the final turns of her Lancaster House address:

I want Britain to be able to negotiate its own trade agreements. But I also want tariff-free trade with Europe and cross-border trade there to be as frictionless as possible. That means I do not want us to be bound by the Common Commercial Policy...[or]...the Common External Tariff. These are the elements of the Customs Union that prevent us from striking our own comprehensive trade agreements with other countries. But I do want us to have a customs agreement with the EU. Whether that means we must reach a completely new customs agreement, become an associate member of the Customs Union in some way, or remain a signatory to some elements of it, I hold no preconceived position. I have an open mind on how we do it. It is not the means that matter, but the ends. And those ends are clear: I want to

remove as many barriers to trade as possible. And I want Britain to be free to establish our own tariff schedules at the World Trade Organization, meaning we can reach our new trade agreements not just with the European Union, but with old friends and new allies from outside Europe too.

Given these statements, it is clear that Theresa May ardently believes that her government can deliver a Brexit that makes Britain more internationalist and not less. From a political perspective, this “Global Britain” model suggests that she is doing this to put her own unique stamp on Britain’s postwar foreign policy traditions. She could also be trying to emphasize the liberal-cosmopolitan strands of British politics so that the country’s culture remains one centered on global engagement, despite domestic protests to the contrary. When viewed through a Constructivist lens, Mrs. May’s personal emphasis would be in keeping with the internationalist identity that the imperial legacy, liberal political tradition, and Churchillian “three circles” model has produced since the Second World War.

# Chapter Seven:

## ~ Global Britain's Strategic Incoherence in the Face of a Collapsing Liberal World Order ~

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### **I. Introduction:**

The broad contours of Theresa May's "Global Britain" are revealed through these speeches, and this metaphor creates a foreign policy strategy based on how its constituent regions and philosophies thematically reinforce each other. A commitment to the liberal international order is the strategy's bedrock. This explains why Prime Minister May has worked hard to assure the United Nations and other international bodies that Britain intends to remain fully engaged in the world. After all, as Mazower demonstrates, Britain is one of the states most responsible for the United Nation's creation and therefore has a vested interest in maintaining the solvency of multilateral diplomacy. And as Britain removes itself from one multilateral body – the European Union – it will need to further engage with the other options to has left to ensure British interests are effectively projected onto the world stage.

### **II. An Illiberal America Undermines Britain:**

A strategic and thematic commitment to liberal internationalism is all well and good, but the problem is that liberal-democratic multilateralism is currently under siege, in part due to the British voter's decision to leave the European Union. Of even more significance, however, is the current political climate in the United States, where an illiberal President now has the power to influence Washington's place in the world. The Trump Administration has expressed a general

skepticism toward multilateral diplomacy and a preference for a more militaristic foreign policy based on hard power tactics and economic protectionism. Prime Minister May has still chosen to include the United States in her “Global Britain” framework but has chosen to put pressure on the American governments’ other organs so that they can socialize the new President’s team into a more multilateral mindset. This is why Mrs. May was so keen to speak to the Congressional Republican Party about the shared values that have constituted Anglo-American relations since the Second World War, which, of course, includes a commitment to liberal internationalism. The Prime Minister therefore seems to think that the current American government can be still be a reliable partner for Britain, the United Nations, and other international bodies like the European Union if given enough prompting from its closest ally.

On some level, this is an understandable strategic policy, since a close relationship with the United States could ensure that some British interests are adopted by the world’s strongest political and economic power. The idea of a renewed “special relationship,” however, is unrealistic given the current circumstances. The British may be able to socialize the Trump Administration to a certain extent, but the President’s pseudo-nationalism is likely to remain his guiding principle. This means that Trump’s protectionist instincts could overrule any good will that he has toward Britain’s predicament. For example, even if the President does instruct his team to work with Britain on the development of a new Anglo-American bilateral trade deal, the arrangement’s terms are most likely to be heavily skewed in America’s favor. This would be a necessary feature if the President is to sell a trade deal to his domestic constituencies, who largely want the United States to reform free trade agreements to privilege domestic American workers.

Britain could also have no real ability to alter America’s terms, since the country might be in dire need for new deals if its exit negotiations with the European Union go badly. This reflects

the reality that, after it leaves Europe, Britain will be more dependent on the United States than ever before, even if Washington is not as committed to the maintenance of the liberal system that has historically benefited the two countries. Even if Trump was not the current leader, however, it is important to remember that America has always valued Britain the most when it was an active member of the European Union. So even if Trump's views are brought into alignment with more traditional modes of thought, he and his team may not end up seeing as much value in Britain as Mrs. May hopes. The Prime Minister needs some sort of backup plan, therefore, if productive and amicable relations with Trump's America are not as easy as she hopes.

### **III. The Anglosphere's Limits:**

The Commonwealth could provide the needed alternative to the United States and Europe and this is why the Prime Minister's "Global Britain" strategy includes the goal of increasing free trade ties with these predominately English-speaking countries. The Prime Minister's plan hopes that the common language and cultural ties to Britain will make New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and India more likely to engage in British efforts to foster free trade liberalism and a looser type of multilateralism. In addressing this issue, a February 2017 article titled "A Future of the English-Speaking Peoples," published by the New York Council on Foreign Relations, asserts that the Anglosphere alliance – something long dreamed about by some British and Commonwealth leaders – could come to fruition in some form in the future. The article, written by economists Eduardo Campanella and Marta Dassú, admits that due to Britain's aversion to supranationalism, such an arrangement could never be federal in nature as previous generations had hoped. It would instead be a kind of trading preference area between countries with broadly similar cultures and economic systems. This would be in keeping with Mrs. May's desire for Britain to engage with the world in a more loosely multilateral fashion than it currently can within the European Union. This

explains why she has adopted “the Anglosphere” idea as an integral component of her “Global Britain” leitmotif.

Even this strategy is problematic, however, because of the uncertainty caused by Britain’s European Union exit and rising illiberalism. The structural economic trends that first drove Britain to pursue European integration have not changed. As Sanders and Houghton’s argument in the literature review elucidates, Britain’s economic interests still chiefly rest in its trade with continental Europe and, secondly, the United States. As an extension of this structural reality, Britain’s economic capacity has been strengthened by European integration, making it a more enticing partner for the United States and other market economies as a part of that greater bloc. On its own, Britain will be far less desirable trading partner, regardless of whether it shares a language and cultural affinity with many other countries. This is especially true given the rising protectionist impulse that is currently infecting international relations. The uncertainty of a Trump Presidency and Brexit may compel countries to put their own narrow interests first to ensure a degree of political and economic stability at home. This could complicate Britain’s attempts to find new equitable free trade arrangements, more importantly, make it more difficult for the country to find replacements for the economic gains that it has derived from its membership in the European Single Market and Customs Union. Despite Mrs. May’s government’s best efforts, therefore, even a loosely multilateral “Anglosphere” alliance seems unlikely given today’s unpredictable international environment – which is moving away from an American-led liberal order to something far messier.

#### **IV. Conclusion: A Weaker, Less Influential Britain:**

These points demonstrate that there is a large degree of incoherence in the strategic application of Theresa May’s “Global Britain” metaphor. The problems largely stem from

Britain's imminent departure from the European Union, which, from a Realist perspective, will make it more difficult for the country to remain of high value for its other international partners. This will, in turn, reduce Britain's ability to perpetuate the internationalist identity that the country has developed over the past centuries and also dilute the capacity for British liberal ideals to inform global politics. This is because Britain's partnerships are the vehicle through which it can construct a globally influential identity *and* ensure its own security. Jamie Gaskarth takes up this point to explain that any notion of Britain as an international norm producer or geopolitical centerpiece will be obliterated without close collaboration with its European neighbors:

If we want to provide a more specific description of [Britain] as an international actor, then it may be...[most]...appropriate to see it as a leading networker and norm entrepreneur via the Anglo-European access of power. For all the global character of the Commonwealth and the UK's post-imperial ties, it is Europe and the United States that are the primary conduits for British influence...When Britain seeks to exercise a global role in isolation...it has tended to be rebuffed (Gaskarth 94 – 95).

Without offering tangible benefits for its key Euro-American partners, therefore, there will be little impetus for Britain to be a privileged actor or voice within a broader multilateral web of alliance and the country will cease to be a networker and provider of norms – a result that is the antithesis to Theresa May's vision of a "Global Britain".

Prime Minister May does, on some level, seem to understand that there is no real alternative for Britain other than Europe and America. This is why she is so keen to ensure that strong economic ties with the European Union persist despite Britain's exit. She must now convince the other twenty-seven European Union Member States to allow Britain some sort of privileged access to the Single Market and Customs Union that falls just short of full membership. This will be difficult, however, since Mrs. May wants Britain to be distant enough from these European institutions to strike wide-ranging and deep trade deals with other countries, while also close



enough to continue to reap the economic benefits that those institutions engender. This is a position that the other twenty-seven states have been loath to support, since it is rather unreasonable for a country that is not a party to the European Union's and regulations to demand access to the markets that those rules create. This, again, demonstrates how untenable the "Global Britain" metaphor could become once the United Kingdom's negotiated exit from Europe formally begins. By privileging metaphorical, ideational impulses over Realist calculations, Mrs. May's government is therefore perpetuating notions of British identity that are constructed from the country's imperial past instead of developing realistic policies to effectively deal with the diminished world role Britain will have outside of the European Union.

These limitations of this constructed, ideational view, particularly in regard to securing a new free trade deal that benefits the Britain, all pose acute problems for the tenability of Prime Minister May's "Global Britain." Leaders like Jean-Claude Juncker, realize this, but contend that it is unreasonable to expect that Britain can somehow have a more beneficial relationship with the European Union outside of the bloc than it currently has as a full member. Once it leaves, Britain will be treated as any third-party country would and it will be up to Britain's leadership to deal with the consequences. London's time of bending Europe to its own interests and designs will be over, and, as Tim Oliver and Michael John Williams observe, a remarkably different European Union based primarily on the interests of the core Eurozone members will emerge (Oliver and Williams 556). As a result of this, Britain's other key partners, like the United States and Commonwealth countries, will no longer have a need to look to London to help them engage with Europe. The United States, in particular, could increasingly rely on Germany for transatlantic dialogue since the Berlin government would be in an even more powerful position to influence pan-European security and economic policy than it already is (Oliver and Williams 564). All of

this will sideline Britain from the center of transatlantic and global affairs regardless of whether the current Prime Minister wants to draw on Britain's internationalist identity to foster an even more global role, which is ultimately to the detriment of the liberal world order.

## Conclusion:

### ~ Evaluating the Historical Role of British Identity in the Crisis of Liberal Internationalism ~

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This paper has broadly argued that the crisis of liberal internationalism that the world is currently experiencing has its roots in the contradictions that rest in the liberal tradition. These contradictions stem from the fact that liberalism developed within an imperial British context and has shaped the policies and identities of two of the world's historically great liberal powers – Great Britain and its former settler colony, the United States of America. Both countries have historically sought to use their global influence to create a liberal world system that reflected their domestic political values. Britain tried this first in the long nineteenth century, when its empire was the largest in the world, and the United States assumed this mantle after the Second World War, when it successfully created a liberal subsystem centered around the western security alliance. Washington then attempted to expand this system globally after the end of the Cold War – an effort which has largely failed and undermined trust in liberal values internationally and within core liberal states. The historical progression of the liberal international tradition broadly reveals that this crisis is one of success since the internal tensions within liberalism are now free to fully reveal themselves in the absence of a real ideological alternative. Taking all this as a backdrop, this paper explored how Britain's sense of identity shifted throughout modern history and produced some of the tensions that led to Brexit and the general crisis of liberal internationalism.

Britain's role in international history has great deal to teach about liberalism, the development of a multilateral world order, and the legacies of imperialism on domestic identity. The first recognizably liberal thinker – John Locke – focused his writings on domestic British

politics and his home country's burgeoning overseas empire. He argued that a free society based on the principles of limited government could only be realized if private property rights were extended to the majority of the population. Since private property was a limited commodity in the British Isles, Locke's writings endorse colonial expansion as a means to import economic goods to pay for political reforms and export political tensions – through an offloading of the excess British population – to the colonies.

Liberal reforms began to be enacted in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the number of property holders given political representation in the House of Commons dramatically increased. This process of liberalization, however, increased the inequalities within British society, since the newly enfranchised classes – who largely made their fortunes in overseas trade – appropriated more domestic wealth for themselves, which reduced the resources available to the rest of the population (Tilly). These inequalities were ameliorated, in part, through colonization in North America and Oceania, where colonists used the language of Locke's proto-liberalism to justify their claims to native lands (Jahn 40). Once America secured its independence from Britain, it continued to employ variations of these arguments until a cohesive ideology of settlerism that was supported by liberal politicians, philosophers, and economists across the emergent Anglo World (Bayly 86). This meant that this development was not present just in North America or the imperial metropole in London:

The same argument was also influential in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand well into the nineteenth century. Colonialism allowed the European elites to appropriate 'foreign' land, thus easing the economic burden on the domestic poor back in Britain. It also provided an opportunity for the poor to emigrate; and it allowed the government to export its poor, its criminals, its orphans, as well as to offer employment for the middle and higher classes in the administration of the colonies thus easing political pressure on domestic government. Most importantly for the subsequent development of settler nations like the United States, however, colonialism provided common political ground:

namely, an interest in expropriating foreign land, and hence a commitment to the principle of private property which justified this expropriation – for rich and poor alike – and thus bridged the gap between their otherwise mutually exhaustive interests (Jahn 40 -41).

The bottom line, then, was that liberal states – like Britain and its settler colonies – justified their colonial expansion and appropriation of native land as an excuse to secure greater economic and political freedoms for their domestic populations – an idea supported by one of the foundational texts of the liberal tradition, John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*.

Scholars like Duncan Bell, Elizabeth Buettner, and Uday Singh Mehta point out that this in-built dichotomy between liberal values at home and power politics of appropriation abroad fostered an ideology of racial superiority in Britain and its settler states. Duncan Bell, in particular, has taken the time to chart the roots in the contemporary “Anglosphere” idea in the racialized nineteenth century idea of “Greater Britain” – a transoceanic component of the British empire filled with white settlers that was thought to have the capacity to reshape global politics in a liberal direction. It is no surprise that this vision was full of contradictions since most debates about world order in the long nineteenth century were underlined by a logic of inclusion and exclusion that tried to make theoretical room for both sovereignty and imperialism (Jahn 54). Despite these contradictions, however, Britain, its settler colonies, and other liberal powers managed to create a liberal order characterized by a highly integrated global economy during the *fin de siècle* period, which ultimately imploded during the two world wars when there was no more room for territorial expansion across the globe and the political tensions engendered by a liberalized world could no longer be managed.

The two world wars that followed the Age of Imperialism undermined Britain’s power and capacity to take a leading role in global affairs. It would henceforth serve as a junior partner alongside the United States in upholding the western liberal subsystem once its empire was fully

decolonized in the 1960s and 1970s. However, centuries of imperial preeminence ensured that the decolonization of the British public's mind – especially in regard to the policy-making elite – never fully happened.

Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime prime minister, declared in the mid-1940s that Britain should still seek to play a preeminent role in world politics by fostering a strong transatlantic alliance with the United States, a deep partnership with an integrated European continent, and strong commercial and political ties with the Commonwealth. As Elizabeth Buettner observes, this vision was underlined by the domestic British belief that decolonization had been a success and that the former parts of the world that had been ruled by the British were now operating out of broadly liberal-democratic principles. All this worked to ensure that the British population continued to identify strongly with the liberal aspects of empire – an identity predicated on being globally influential and privileged, which was supported by the material benefits of being a part of the wealthy transatlantic security alliance.

The end of the Cold War ensured that the western liberal subsystem could now be extended globally. Ironically, however, this extension served to undermine the domestic – international divide that allows liberalism to function successfully in core liberal states, like Britain and America, ensuring that the imbedded contradictions from past centuries have begun to play out in contemporary forms (Jahn 57):

The demise of the Soviet Union and with it the absence of a serious external threat eroded the bipartisan consensus in liberal polities and led to the fragmentation of the political landscape, with extreme parties on right and the left gaining power. With liberal capitalism, the only game in town, the need for political and economic compromise in the domestic sphere was gone. The much despised 'cosmopolitan establishment' could now pursue its economic interest unimpeded across the globe. Further dismantling of welfare states was followed by austerity policies after the financial crisis of 2008, and economic inequality took on obscene dimensions. Instead of protecting domestic populations in core liberal states from inevitable

downsides of capitalism by importing and redistributing economic benefits from the international sphere, these populations now experienced the exact opposite: the export of investment and jobs into the international sphere...and the import of political tensions in the form of refugees and migrants... (57).

In the case of Britain, the erosion of a domestic liberal consensus helped spur protests against the European Union and a nostalgia for former imperial glory through the emergent Anglosphere discourse, which ultimately was a key factor that drove the country toward the Brexit vote. Having to negotiate a divorce from the European Union has only exacerbated Britain's already tenuous search for a foreign policy role after the end of empire – the so-called imperial hangover.

As a response to domestic unrest and the referendum's result, Theresa May's government has attempted to forge a compromise between competing notions of British identity. The current leadership must find a way to balance the populist demand for more protections from the downsides of the liberal world order with the British tradition of global engagement. The result has been the "Global Britain" *leitmotif*, which refashions Churchill's postwar framework in a way that incorporates some of the Anglosphere's ideational language more explicitly. This is unlikely to solve Britain's problems, though, especially as the world continues to move away from liberalism and American leadership. Given all this, "Global Britain," as currently conceived, is simply the product of a Churchillian foreign policy vision that was probably untenable from the start. Global pretensions should have declined with the Empire, but Britain's specific experience of decolonization and the continued salience of the "Anglosphere" idea have allowed them to persist despite the reality of events. The historical evidence reveals that during the postwar period, Britain was either forced to play a junior role alongside the United States after the Suez Crisis, culminating with the tragedy in Iraq, or a more regional European part within the European Union to maintain its global ambitions. Neither of these options completely satisfied Euroskeptic

yearnings for more internationalism, however, due to the construction of British identity as fundamentally global and tied to the English-speaking Commonwealth. For their part, British leaders, from Thatcher, to Blair, and finally to May are guilty of perpetuating this mythical identity to serve their own political ambitions, even as the domestic liberal consensus began to crumble around them. The metaphors have been altered, but the same theme has persisted – even after the British voted to leave the European Union. The “imperial hangover’s” legacy is therefore likely to inform Britain’s continued uncertain search for an international role and coherent foreign policy framework after it leaves Europe and for many more years to come.

Any study of this scale is inherently incomplete and worthy of scrutiny. The legacies of empire and tensions within liberal theory itself are far from the only explanations for Britain’s uneasy postwar search for a world role, the Brexit vote, and the current crisis of liberal internationalism more generally. The influence on non-liberal actors – both at home and abroad – as well as changes wrought by technologies on individuals, states, and societies all have a part in this story. This study, too, has privileged the English-speaking world far too much in its analysis. A more complete research agenda would include the perspectives of other post-imperial European societies – like France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands – and the way that their pasts have complicated their relationship with the European Union and western liberalism. Greater attention should also be paid to how Australians, New Zealanders, and Canadians view the legacy of settlerism and idea of “Greater Britain,” so that Washington and London do not always occupy the heart of this story. Duncan Bell’s work provides an impetus for this type of additional research into the former members of the Anglo World and the attendant implications for contemporary international relations.



Regardless of these drawbacks, the central contention of this paper holds – liberal internationalism is in crisis in part because core liberal states can no longer export the downsides of privatization to the outside world, which obliterates liberalism’s capacity to promote growth and equality within a domestic context. This development – particularly in Britain and America – challenges the fundamental notion of identity that many citizens hold about their state’s role in global affairs, which means some of darker aspects of the tradition that are compatible with racism, neo-imperialism, and a logic of inclusion and exclusion are more likely to be assert themselves and enter into dominant foreign policy discourse. Thus, it seems that in order for liberalism to be applicable to post-imperial and post-American world, many of its fundamental tenets need to be decolonized...

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