
Reviewed by Dianne Kirby, University of Ulster

Daniel C. Williamson has produced a concise, valuable monograph. It should prove very useful for teachers at school and university level, particularly those working on Anglo-American relations, the early Cold War, and the post-1945 British Empire, as well as on British and American history, international relations, and diplomatic history. The book also offers important lessons for present-day British diplomats and policymakers who seek to emulate Winston Churchill yet do not really understand how he did what he did and why.

The book presents four detailed case studies of contentious diplomatic standing, selected to provide key insights into the state of Anglo-American relations from 1953 to 1955. The choices are intended to provide an in-depth exploration of important diplomatic events that cover different geographical areas in order to enhance the scope of the investigations. The case studies also illustrate different types of disagreements in Anglo-American relations, ranging from issues of East-West détente to straightforward rivalry for influence in the Middle East.

The first case study deals with Churchill’s aspirations to reach some sort of Cold War accord between East and West through direct negotiations at the highest level on all sides. This subject has been dealt with by numerous scholars, including an impressive tome of nearly 600 pages by Klaus Larres, *Churchill’s Cold War: The Politics of Personal Diplomacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Williamson, nonetheless, succeeds in answering the questions he outlines as crucial to understanding the importance and implications of this event. Using an excellent mixture of primary and secondary sources, Williamson presents a logical and coherent account of the issues and debates that took place on both sides of the Atlantic to convey the intricacies and nuances of the diplomatic relationships at a variety of levels. He also provides solid insights into Soviet attitudes and responses. The conclusions reinforce existing scholarship, highlighting that although Britain and the United States were prepared to exploit the weaknesses of the other for their own advantage, each remained fully committed to the “special relationship.”

The next two case studies deal with aspects of Anglo-American relations in the crucial region of the Middle East, an area in which Anglo-American competition for influence could be intense in the early 1950s. One case study focuses on Iraq, long a British client state. The U.S. government’s intent to provide a grant of military aid aroused British suspicions that the United States wanted to replace the UK as Iraq’s major ally by assuming the role of principal arms supplier to the Iraqi military. Williamson examines British endeavors to protect their interests from what they perceived as the threat of potential U.S. competition as well as the growth of Iraqi nationalism and the attempts of the Iraqi government to exploit its strategic importance to the West. Williamson sees Washington as more concerned with regional security than displacing...
the British, with the Eisenhower administration regarding the Middle East as a British sphere of influence that London held for the West as a whole. Williamson shows how Britain sought to exploit the value of its position in the Middle East as an asset in containing the Soviet Union in order to maintain its empire in the region. The convergence of Washington's Cold War aims with the imperial aims of London helped the British position, especially because the Eisenhower administration was not seeking to replace the British anyway.

The next case study presents a clash between Washington's Cold War aims and London's defense of the British Empire and British oil interests. The Buraimi Oasis dispute—involving competing claims by Saudi Arabia and the British-allied Trucial States—reveals how a direct challenge to British imperial interests could cause serious disagreement between London and Washington. Williamson gives some consideration to different scholarly approaches to the dispute, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of various perspectives. He argues that the case study highlights the Churchill government's determination to protect its imperial and oil interests with or without U.S. approval and the way in which at this juncture, prior to Suez, Britain was able to pursue a policy quite independent of the United States. He also points to what he regards as the Eisenhower administration's “remarkable tolerance” for “British intransigence,” which he ascribes to Washington's hope that Britain would “still be able to be the principal guardian of the Middle East” (p. 101). In addition, Saudi Arabia was a regional ally, whereas Britain, albeit diminished, remained a formidable world power.

The final case study focuses on China and the threat of nuclear war during the first Offshore Islands crisis, which began in 1954 when the People’s Liberation Army began to shell the Nationalist-occupied islands just off the Chinese mainland. The British and U.S. governments disagreed on the best course of action. Williamson uses this final case study to illustrate British diplomatic independence, showing how the UK’s continued importance as a global power led the United States to moderate its policies to ensure the continued health of the Anglo-American alliance. From the evidence of the four case studies taken together, Williamson argues that British hopes of retaining the empire, as well as protecting Western Europe from the Soviet Union, relied on the support of the United States. London pursued its own interests without subordinating its agenda to that of its key ally because it proved adept at exploiting its value to the United States as a formidable shield against Communism.

In these days of semesterization and working students, there is no doubt that this type of book is both necessary and welcome. It is well researched and well written and covers the key issues and events with clarity and insight, while indicating different scholarly views and interpretations. The book will suit the time-management and economic priorities of the modern student.

*Separate Agendas* should also be essential reading for today’s British diplomats and policymakers.