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Diplomacy at the Brink: Eisenhower, Churchill, and Eden in the Cold War by David M. Watry

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Watry, David M. *Diplomacy at the Brink: Eisenhower, Churchill, and Eden in the Cold War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014. viii + 228 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

The so-called ‘special relationship’ which has highlighted American-British relations for two centuries was at a near-low point in the 1950s, according to David Watry, a history lecturer at the University of Texas at Arlington. Utilizing archival documents, public records, speeches, biographies, and secondary sources, Watry uncovers a strained alliance caused by personal disagreements, British colonial ambitions, and a rabid anti-communist approach by the Eisenhower administration which combined unilateralism with nuclear brinksmanship.

Diplomacy at the Brink contains eight chapters. In the first three chapters, the principal leaders of U.S. and British government are identified and their role in forming their respective nations’ foreign and military policy discussed. On the U.S. side, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles practiced an activist, ideological-based foreign policy which, rather than containment, sought to roll back or prevent communist gains worldwide. Watry reveals that Eisenhower sought and followed the advice of former World War II colleague General Douglas MacArthur, along with former President Herbert Hoover on several issues. Alternately, two-time Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Foreign Affairs Secretary and Prime Minister Anthony Eden are portrayed as attempting to retain British colonies in the face of declining military and economic power while favoring peaceful coexistence with the communist world. Although policy differences explained some of the schism between America and Britain, Watry makes the case that personal dislike between Eisenhower and Eden, and between Dulles and Eden, became poisonous as time progressed.

In Chapters 4 through 7, Watry deals with several international crises and how they were handled by the U.S. and British governments. In some cases, the incidents were initiated by one or both of those nations, while in other cases they were reacting to something started elsewhere. Chapter 4 presents evidence showing that President Eisenhower considered using nuclear weapons not only to end the stalemate in Korea, but likewise to prevent China against intervening in Indochina and Formosa. Chapter 5 depicts American military operations in Iran and Guatemala, the latter which led to a serious dispute between U.S. and U.K. leaders over which international group should investigate reports of violence.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Watry reviews the British role in the Suez crisis of 1956 and its aftermath. In response to the British military action in Egypt, the Eisenhower administration created an economic emergency in England which directly contributed to Eden’s downfall as Prime Minister.

In the book’s Conclusion, Watry seems to place more blame on the U.S. than Britain for the sorry state of the alliance in the 1950s. First, he claims that Eisenhower’s “brinksmanship foreign policy represented a radical rejection of America’s European-based diplomacy and Great Britain’s balance-of-power diplomacy” (p. 148). Second, he contends that U.S. unilateralism alienated friendly nations, “forcing it in the future to go it alone in wars in the Far East, the Middle East, and in the Western Hemisphere” (p. 149).

Several biographies of Dwight D. Eisenhower - including studies by Stephen Ambrose (1984), Chester J. Pach, Jr. and Elmo Richardson (1991), as well as Jim Newton (2011) - all deal with U.S.-British relations and cover some of the differences between the two countries. Alternately, David A. Nichols’ 2011 work offers a detailed case study of the Suez crisis and other events which transpired in 1956. Watry makes an important contribution to literature on the Cold War. Far from an unanimous, monolithic front in the fight against communism, his

research documents opposing viewpoints of Western leaders. In addition, his work demonstrates the impact that individual policy makers can have on national policy. Along these lines, Frank Costigliola asserts in his 2012 study that personal enmity among World War II allies contributed to the outset of the Cold War.

Interestingly, as far as his characterization of individual leaders, Watry paints Winston Churchill in the most positive light. Conversely, his Dr. Strangelove-type depiction of Eisenhower casts the President in an unfamiliar, negative shadow inconsistent with popular portrayals. Though he neither created nor ended the Cold War, Eisenhower's helmsmanship of American military and foreign policy during the 1950s turned out to be much more aggressive and successful than he is given credit for. The 'brinkmanship' strategy worked for him in combatting communism just as 'Star Wars' worked for President Ronald Reagan three decades later. The difference is that by the 1980s, the ideological orientation and practical aims of American and British leaders were consonant, and humans were used to living with the means of their own destruction.

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