John F. Kennedy and Harold Macmillan: Dependence and Interdependence

In the summer of 1968, nearly five years after John F. Kennedy's untimely death in Dallas on 22 November 1963, the young Charles Lysaght, who was beginning work on a biography of Brendan Bracken, was invited to lunch with Harold Macmillan at his home, Birch Grove, in Sussex. As ever with Macmillan, the conversation ranged widely, over publishing, politics and people. Macmillan was "wonderfully learned, full of ideas and literary and historical allusions," Lysaght later recollected. But he was also plainly lonely. When Lysaght got up to leave after lunch, Macmillan called him back and showed him instead into his study. Surveying the room, Lysaght noticed a photograph of Macmillan's American mother on his desk. Casting his eye further in the otherwise sparsely furnished room, Lysaght's gaze alighted on several prominent pictures of President Kennedy. Following his guest's eye, Macmillan "spoke wistfully and romantically of Kennedy's visit to him only a few months before the fatal day in Dallas."[1] It was a final encounter on which Macmillan dwelt many times during the later years of his life, capturing, in his mind's eye, the precise moment of the president's departure:

> hatless, with his brisk step, and combining that indescribable look of a boy on holiday with the dignity of a President and Commander-in-Chief, he walked across the garden to the machine. We stood and waved. I can see the helicopter now, sailing down the valley above the heavily laden, lush foliage of oaks and

[1] Charles Lysaght, "Dear Brendan and Master Harold" in Richard Aldous and Sabine Lee (eds.), *Harold Macmillan: Aspects of a Political Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 146.

> beech at the end of June. He was gone. Alas, I was never to see my friend again.[2]

Lysaght's experience of a wistful, melancholic Macmillan was far from unique. His official biographer, Alistair Horne, who visited Birch Grove regularly from 1979 onwards to meet his subject, noted that it was a house of ghosts. "In a place of honour in the library, where they had worked together during that visit in 1963, there was the rocking-chair, still draped with its plaid rug, bought specially for President Kennedy."[3] The tangible symbols of the rocking-chair and the photographs at Birch Grove were complemented by an impassioned private correspondence struck up between Macmillan and the president's widow, Jackie Kennedy, which carried on throughout the remainder of the former prime minister's life. The bereaved First Lady wrote again and again as she later recollected, "with no restraint at all on my emotions." The surviving letters certainly bear witness to that testimony. On the unique quality of the Kennedy-Macmillan relationship versus other previous or prospective presidential-prime ministerial relationships, Jackie was adamant:

> You were the only ones who cared about other people – who could look at yourselves with humour … You worked together for the finest things in the finest years – later on when a series of disastrous Presidents of the United States and Prime Ministers who were not like you, will have botched up everything – people will say "Do you remember those days – how perfect they were?" The days of you and Jack …[4]

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[2] Alistair Horne, *Macmillan, 1957-1986* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 517.

[3] Ibid., 606.

[4] Ibid., 577.

In her later testimony, Jackie Kennedy added one further factor beyond common purpose and character which she felt underpinned their relationship: the inspiration Kennedy had received in the loneliness of the presidency from having someone he could talk to almost as an equal.[5] Kennedy himself had earlier offered private testimony to the same effect: "I feel at home with Macmillan," he confided to the journalist Henry Brandon, "because I can share my loneliness with him."[6] However intangible this factor might seem, it is worth bearing in mind when we come to consider the functioning of their personal relationship during the key junctures of the Kennedy presidency, especially during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962.

From the moment Macmillan heard of Kennedy's assassination he viewed it as a defining moment in international politics. "It has been a staggering blow," he confided to his diary. "To the causes he and I worked for, it is a grievous blow. For Jack Kennedy's acceptance – of [the] Test Ban and of [the] policy of détente with Russia were really his own – I mean were not shared by any except his most intimate advisers."[7] Macmillan amplified these thoughts in his eulogy delivered to the House of Commons: "we mourn him – and this is perhaps the greatest tribute to Jack Kennedy's life and work – for ourselves, for what we and all the world have lost."[8] Macmillan deserves credit here for his candour. For all the emotion

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[5] Ibid., 579.

[6] Henry Brandon, *Special Relationships: A Foreign Correspondent's Memoirs from Roosevelt to Reagan* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 160.

[7] Harold Macmillan, diary entry, 26 November 1963 in Peter Catterall (ed.), *The Macmillan Diaries: Volume II* (London: Pan Books, 2014), 617.

[8] *Hansard*, Vol. 685, col. 35-44, 25 November 1963 (https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1963/nov/25/president-kennedy-tributes).

of his private correspondence with Jackie and his genuine sense of personal bereavement, he mourned Kennedy's passing principally because it seemed to underline the transience of their common achievements.

Throughout his premiership, the central plank of Macmillan's policy towards the United States had been the pursuit of Anglo-American interdependence. On one level, this represented no more than practical politics and economics. Macmillan was the latest in the line of prime ministers to confront the mismatch between Britain's global commitments and its relatively underperforming domestic economy. Anglo-American interdependence, in Macmillan's conception, offered the prospect of redressing this balance. If Britain could more effectively share its commitments with the United States, resources devoted to defence overseas might be conserved and investment in the domestic economy boosted. The classic statement of this ethos was provided by the Declaration of Common Purpose issued by Macmillan and Kennedy's predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, in Washington in October 1957:

> The arrangements which the nations of the free world have made for collective defence and mutual help are based on the recognition that the concept of national self-sufficiency is now out of date. The countries of the free world are interdependent, and only in genuine partnership, by combining their resources and sharing tasks in many fields, can progress and safety be found. For our part, we have agreed that our two countries will henceforth act in accordance with this principle.[9]

[9] The Declaration of Common Purpose, 25 October 1957, quoted in John Baylis (ed.), *Anglo-American Relations since 1939: The Enduring Alliance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 92-6.

At the heart of Macmillan's pursuit of interdependence was the Anglo-American nuclear relationship. The prohibitive cost involved in the development of the British independent nuclear deterrent made this a field ripe to his mind for burden-sharing. The Declaration of Common Purpose opened the way to the resumption of Anglo-American nuclear cooperation from 1958 onwards and to the agreement reached at the March 1960 Camp David summit for the supply by the United States to Britain of the Skybolt nuclear delivery system. Macmillan's parallel agreement at Camp David to allow the United States to site a Polaris nuclear submarine base in Scotland seemed to honour at least the spirit of interdependence. While Britain was promised an airborne missile delivery system that might prolong the life of its V-Bomber force, the United States would gain a vital forward base for its submarine deterrent force. Each party would thus depend in some respect on the other. But even at this stage there were doubts in London as to whether this informal bargain would be honoured. Skybolt was a highly complex, air-launched ballistic missile system the development of which offered no guarantee of success. Defence Minister Harold Watkinson was warned by his U.S. counterpart Thomas Gates in December 1960 that the technical difficulties of the project had been underestimated and that room must be left for the incoming Kennedy administration to re-evaluate it at a later date. Watkinson for his part underlined the political dangers for the British government were the missile to be cancelled by the United States without an adequate replacement being offered.[10] In his diary entry for 1 December

[10] Record of a conversation between Watkinson and Gates, 12 December 1960, MM54/60, FO371/173548, UK National Archives [hereafter TNA].

1960, Macmillan was candid about his fears: '"Skybolt" – are the Americans going to let us down and [if so] what can we do?'[11]

Over the coming two years as Skybolt's development ran into increasing difficulties the British government adopted the posture of an ostrich, refusing to contemplate the possibility of its cancellation. In the meantime the broader pursuit of defence interdependence of which Skybolt was the core component ran into increasing difficulties. In a conversation with Kennedy's Defence Secretary Robert McNamara at the British Embassy in Washington on 29 April 1962, Macmillan stressed that it would be important for British industry to win a fair share of U.S. defence orders in order to balance the large amount of money Britain would be spending in the United States on Skybolt.[12] But the Defense Secretary offered no such commitment. In fact a Pentagon briefing paper prepared ahead of his talks with Macmillan had argued that what the British were in fact trying to arrange was a "horse trade" in which the United States would open up the broader NATO market to British equipment by withdrawing U.S. items from sales competitions. This would represent an "arbitrary division of the market" as far as the Department of Defense was concerned. "We prefer competition as a means of selection, while the UK would prefer a negotiated division of effort," the paper argued.[13] Clearly there was a fundamental difference between the British and American views of what interdependence meant in practice.

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[11] Harold Macmillan Diary [hereafter HMD], 1 December 1960, dep.c.21/1, p.135, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

[12] Record of a Conversation at the British Embassy, Washington, 29 April 1962, PREM11/3648, TNA.

[13] Prime Minister's Visit to Washington, 27-29 April 1962, Position Paper, Weapons Research and Development, 21 April 1962, Folder UK Subjects, Macmillan Briefing Book,

The extent to which trust in American intentions regarding interdependence had broken down by the summer of 1962 was illustrated by two controversies. The first concerned the pressure exerted on NATO member states to purchase the U.S.-manufactured short-range surface-to-surface missile system, Sergeant, instead of the British-designed alternative, Blue Water. Macmillan bitterly described the terms on which the Americans offered to sell Sergeant as those "more commonly arranged for vacuum-cleaners and washing-machines." The American sales pitch to NATO members was irresistible and in mid-August 1962, Britain was forced to cancel the Blue Water programme at considerable cost. Macmillan later recorded that "Sergeant was imposed not preferred."[14]

Immediately after the Sergeant controversy came a further Anglo-American crisis over the U.S. sale of Hawk surface-to-air missiles to Israel. The Israeli government had initially expressed an interest in both the British Bloodhound and the U.S. Hawk missile systems. At first, both countries agreed not to sell such a system to Israel for fear of fuelling tensions in the Middle East. But in August, the Kennedy administration abruptly changed its mind. While the key reason for the change appears to have been one of securing domestic political advantage for the Democrats ahead of the mid-term elections, Macmillan immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was an underhand attempt to secure commercial advantage. The extraordinary bitterness of his letter to Kennedy on the matter shows the extent to which transatlantic trust had broken down over the operation of interdependence:

> I cannot believe that you were privy to this disgraceful piece of trickery. For myself I must say frankly that I can hardly find words to express my sense of

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4/27/62 – 4/29/62, Box 175, National Security File, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Mass. [hereafter JFKL].

[14] Harold Macmillan, *At the End of the Day, 1961-63* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 335-6.

> disgust and despair. Nor do I see how you and I are to conduct the great affairs of the world on this basis … I have instructed our officials to let me have a list of all the understandings in different parts of the world which we have entered into together. It certainly makes it necessary to reconsider our whole position on this and allied matters.[15]

While Macmillan's temper subsequently cooled somewhat when he was appraised of the real reasons for Kennedy's decision and when he was warned of the potential lasting damage to his relationship with the president if he did not moderate his tone, his conviction about U.S. double-dealing remained. At the beginning of October he confided to Foreign Secretary Lord Home that "I am bound to say the whole episode is a very distasteful one. It is not the importance of the matter but the complete falsity with which … the American Administration have approached it which sticks in one's throat. How can we have any confidence again in anything they say to us?"[16]

In Washington, a sense of incredulity persisted at the vehemence of Macmillan's reaction. Secretary of State Dean Rusk commented presciently that "when a married couple begin to talk about divorce, it is already too late." If Rusk likened the crisis to a domestic dispute which had passed the point of no return, the president's special assistant for national security affairs, McGeorge Bundy, preferred the language of the market: "nothing is harder for a merchant's feelings than to have to market a second-best product against alert competition," he told Kennedy.[17] Either way, it was clear that the Hawk saga had

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[15] Telegram, Macmillan to Kennedy, 18 August 1962, T.406/62, PREM11/4933, TNA.

[16] Telegram, Macmillan to Home, 1 October 1962, T.479/62, PREM11/4933, TNA.

[17] Memorandum, Bundy to the President, 19 August 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Vol.XVIII*, [hereafter *FRUS*], 63-4.

considerably exacerbated Anglo-American tensions over defence interdependence. Ahead of the visit to the United States planned by his new Minister of Defence, Peter Thorneycroft, Macmillan delivered a candid warning about what he saw as the need for Britain to play tough:

> When I launched "interdependence" with President Eisenhower, I think he personally was sincere. But lower down the scale his wishes were ignored. So it is with President Kennedy. The disgraceful story of Sergeant and still more discreditable story of Hawks for Israel prove this. Your predecessor stood up to Macnamara [*sic*] well. But we still had hopes the Americans would play fair. I fear that this is beyond their capacity. I think you should make clear to them that we are not "soft" … Americans respect strength and rather admire a "tough" attitude. If only we can "get into Europe" we shall, of course, have a much stronger position.[18]

The stage was thus set for the drama of Skybolt's cancellation. The suspicions engendered by the U.S. approach to defence interdependence were compounded by the belief in London that the so called "Europeanists" in the State Department were plotting to seize any opportunity to drive Britain out of the independent nuclear club. Macmillan's suspicions ran deep of officials like Under-Secretary of State George Ball, of whom he had earlier cynically noted that "Mr Ball is of course a danger to us, but we must keep him in play."[19] But whatever Macmillan's suspicions, when McNamara broke the bad news about Skybolt's likely cancellation to Ambassador David Ormsby Gore on 8 November 1962, his decision was

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[18] Memorandum, Macmillan to Thorneycroft, 4 September 1962, PREM11/3779, TNA.

[19] Memorandum, Macmillan to De Zulueta, 14 May 1961, Fol.245, dep.c.353, Harold Macmillan papers, Bodleian Library.

driven overwhelmingly by considerations of cost, efficiency and effectiveness. McNamara's recollection of the problems of the Skybolt system four decades later was blunt and to the point: "it was a heap of junk," he commented.[20]

In keeping with this view of the weapons system, McNamara was anxious to see the project killed off on both sides of the Atlantic. As George Ball described matters, McNamara had a "moral horror of inefficiency and waste. Skybolt offended him morally." In keeping with this approach, according to Ball, McNamara would have been quite happy to see the British offered the Polaris delivery system as a replacement for Skybolt without any political strings attached since it was clearly the most efficient substitute.[21] However, when Kennedy arrived at Nassau in the Bahamas for a summit meeting with Macmillan on 18 December 1962 his initial offer was essentially political in character. He put on record an offer to share the development costs of the Skybolt system equally with the UK even though the United States no longer wanted to purchase the missile. The offer was intended to demonstrate U.S. good faith, but was perceived as a transparent political ploy by Macmillan, who by this stage had determined to pursue the Polaris system instead. Although it has been claimed that the ensuing summit represented little more than a choreographed confrontation, in which both sides knew that a mutually agreeable deal for the supply of Polaris to the UK would be reached in the end, that is not how matters appeared to Macmillan at the time.[22] Faced with U.S. proposals regarding the terms on which Polaris might be supplied which he regarded as

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[20] Robert McNamara, private comment to this author, London, May 2003.

[21] Memcon with Under-Secretary of State George Ball, 24 May 1963, Folder Memcons U.S., Box 20A, Richard E. Neustadt Papers, JFKL.

[22] For this view see Marc Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 362.

wholly unacceptable, Macmillan resorted to the nuclear threat of pulling down the whole structure of Anglo-American cooperation worldwide. "This was too important a matter for ambivalence and it was no good trying to paper over a disagreement that was serious," he declared. "Much as he regretted it if agreement was impossible, the British government would have to make a reappraisal of their defence policies throughout the world."[23] That Macmillan's words had a large impact on their American audience is confirmed by the later testimony of Assistant Secretary William Tyler, who recalled:

> The "chintzy" atmosphere in the room where the conference took place; the smell of roses drifting in through the window; [an] intimate British country atmosphere. And Macmillan's dramatic statement in the midst of all of this – a drama out of scale – like being in a girl's bedroom with something going on that shouldn't be happening there.[24]

Tyler's recollection was pregnant with symbolism. The ambience of a cosy country home had been conjured by the senses of sight and smell only for Macmillan's dramatic statement to puncture the atmosphere, like an accusation of transgression. Whatever the drama of the moment, the prime minister's personal appeal had the desired effect. He had managed to cast the decision both as an existential one for the Anglo-American alliance and for his own personal political survival as prime minister. Four decades later, Defense Secretary McNamara still retained one clear impression of what he had learnt at the conference. When asked about Nassau, he commented, "ah yes: that was where Harold

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[23] Record of a meeting held at Bali-Hai, the Bahamas, 12 noon, Thursday 20 December 1962, PREM11/4147, TNA.

[24] Memcon with William Tyler, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, 1 & 14 June 1963, Folder Memcons U.S., Box 20A, Richard E. Neustadt Papers, JFKL.

Macmillan gave us our lesson in Cabinet government."[25] McNamara, who had been through a steep learning curve during the first two years of the Kennedy administration, coming to terms with political challenges that were novel to him such as dealing with Congress, had learned the essentials of the British system of Cabinet government. If Macmillan did not come home from Nassau with an acceptable deal on Polaris, his Cabinet colleagues would knife him. As Macmillan had earlier warned Kennedy: "I'm like a ship that looks buoyant but is apt to sink. Do you want to live with the consequences of sinking me and then with what comes after?"[26]

To the extent that Kennedy now compromised on the escape clause governing the circumstances in which the British might use Polaris for national self-defence in a time of emergency, he over-rode the warnings of key State Department officials such as George Ball about the dangers for European cooperation of a bilateral deal to prolong the life of the British deterrent. Moreover, he did so at least in part to secure Macmillan's political survival. For all the frustrations of Macmillan's pursuit of defence interdependence outlined here, the outcome of the Nassau conference did at least serve as a tangible illustration of the strength of the personal relationship between the prime minister and the president.

The personal relationship between Macmillan and Kennedy also played a role in furthering Anglo-American cooperation the other key field of nuclear relations during the early 1960s: the attempt to halt atmospheric nuclear testing. While Macmillan was determined in his pursuit of at least a symbolically independent British nuclear deterrent, he was almost equally passionate about the need for a nuclear test ban. Of course, there was an element of political expediency at work here. Macmillan did not begin his pursuit of an atmospheric

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[25] Robert McNamara, private comment to this author, London, May 2003.

[26] Memcons with William Tyler, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, 1 & 14 June 1963, Folder Memcons U.S., Box 20A, Richard E. Neustadt Papers, JFKL.

testing ban until after Britain had completed her own programme of nuclear tests in the middle of 1958, and also once it was clear there would be an alternative available in the shape of access to U.S. underground testing facilities. Nevertheless, it would seem unduly cynical to deny that there was at least some measure of personal conviction at work in his consistent advocacy of a test ban during the Kennedy presidency. Macmillan's personal abhorrence of war, born of his experiences in the trenches in the First World War, married to his conviction about the need for détente in the Cold War, and the particular dangers of escalation in the nuclear era, all conditioned his pursuit of a test ban between 1961 and 1963. As one of the two key Western leaders who would be charged with decision-making in any nuclear confrontation, Macmillan felt a particular burden of personal responsibility over the issue.

In terms of personal conviction, there seems to have been a genuine meeting of minds here between Macmillan and Kennedy. It is in this field where we can see the particular applicability of Kennedy's private observation that he felt at home with Macmillan because he could share his loneliness with him. The burden of responsibility, which Kennedy felt, can be illustrated by the account of his Science Advisor Jerome Wiesner, who recollected a discussion in the Oval Office with the president about atmospheric testing one rainy day in Washington. When Kennedy asked what happened to the radioactive fallout produced by the tests, Wiesner replied that it was washed out of the clouds and brought back down to earth by the rain. Kennedy asked, "you mean it's in the rain out there?" "Yes," replied Wiesner, after which the president sat in silence staring solemnly out of the window for some considerable time.[27]

[27] Wiesner, quoted in Glen T. Seaborg, *Kennedy, Khrushchev and the Test Ban* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 32.

If the president and prime minister's personal convictions were the same, the political contexts in which they operated were not. Kennedy was under significant bureaucratic and domestic political pressure to resume atmospheric testing when he came to office, with the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) stressing the risks to free world supremacy in the field of nuclear weapons if he did not. He had to be careful not to present opportunities for his political opponents to portray him as "soft" on the issue.[28] Macmillan by contrast worked against the domestic political backdrop of a small, island nation that was particularly vulnerable to nuclear attack, and where the opposition was urging nuclear disarmament.

The Soviet resumption of atmospheric testing at the end of August 1961, put Kennedy under considerable political pressure to respond in kind. In trying to persuade the president to delay, Macmillan had to tread an awkward line. On the one hand, he needed access to U.S. underground testing facilities in Nevada to test a new warhead for the planned Skybolt missile system. On the other, he was reluctant to agree to the president's request for access to British testing facilities on Christmas Island in the South Pacific for a possible resumption of U.S. atmospheric testing. In the end, Macmillan had little choice but to accept the inherent bargain. But for the champion of interdependence this was a case of being hoist on his own petard. On 25 April 1962, the AEC announced that the United States had carried out a nuclear test detonation in the vicinity of Christmas Island. Macmillan noted in his diary that "it is very sad."[29] Nevertheless, on a visit to Washington immediately after the announcement, Macmillan did show some understanding of the pressures on the president:

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[28] Kendrick Oliver, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Nuclear Test Ban Debate, 1961-63* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 19-20.

[29] HMD, 27 April 1962, dep.d.45, 115.

> On future policy – nuclear tests, disarmament, *détente* with Russia etc, the president is in agreement with us. But he is *very* secretive & very suspicious of leaks, in the State Dept or Pentagon, which are intended to frustrate his policy. He is all the time conscious of this, as well as of his difficulties with Congress. He looks to us for help – and this means not going too far ahead of him.[30]

It was the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 that helped to open the way to progress on the issue of the banning of atmospheric nuclear testing during 1963. The proximity of nuclear war pointed to the need to find ways of managing superpower relations and reducing tensions where possible. Encouraged by Ambassador Ormsby Gore, Macmillan took the initiative. In a letter to the president sent on 16 March 1963, he appealed to their common sense of duty and responsibility, floating among other ideas the possibility of sending personal emissaries to Khrushchev as a means of restarting talks.[31] While Kennedy remained cautious and mindful of the domestic political pitfalls of any fresh initiative he accepted Macmillan's idea of a joint letter to Khrushchev. Moreover, it was Macmillan's draft of this letter which formed the basis of final text rather than the much more cautious draft produced by the State Department.[32] While Khrushchev's reply to the letter was negative in tone, crucially he did express his willingness to receive in Moscow the high-level British and American representatives Macmillan and Kennedy had proposed. Although the British role at

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[30] HMD, 6 May 1962, dep.d.45, 120.

[31] Telegram, Macmillan to Kennedy, 16 March 1963, T.130.63, PREM11/4555, TNA.

[32] Telegram, Macmillan to Kennedy, 3 April 1963, T.162/63, PREM11/4556, TNA; Bundy to De Zulueta, 10 April 1963, Folder UK Subjects, Macmillan Correspondence, 2/1/63-4/15/63, Box 173A, NSF, JFKL; State Department to Moscow, 15 April 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, Vol.VII*, 676-8.

the talks convened in Moscow in July 1963 was limited, the prime minister's role in taking the initiative in March to restart the talks was important. Directly after the final Limited Test Ban Treaty was initialled on 25 July 1963, Kennedy wrote to Macmillan in glowing terms: "what no one can doubt is the importance in all of this of your own personal pursuit of a solution. You have never given up for a minute, and more than once your initiative is what has got things started again."[33] The signature of the Limited Test Ban Treaty represented one of the few tangible and lasting dividends of Macmillan's pursuit of Anglo-American interdependence.

If the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 had provided a spur to the relaxation, or at least the management, of superpower tensions, the crisis itself had also provided an interesting laboratory as to the functioning of the Anglo-American, and, by extension, the prime ministerial-presidential relationship at a moment of acute danger. Indeed crises have often provided useful barometers of the state of Anglo-American relations in any particular period, and of the strength of the submerged structures of cooperation that buttress the relationship between the two countries. So it was with the Cuban crisis. The backdrop to the crisis in terms of Anglo-American relations over Cuba was not promising. The U.S. campaign against the Castro regime led the Kennedy administration to put Britain under pressure to observe a trade embargo on Cuba. When Secretary of State Dean Rusk visited London in June 1962, there was what might be diplomatically termed a forthright exchange of views on the matter. While Macmillan observed that the whole idea of refusing to trade with communist countries was "ridiculous in itself" since these countries would soon learn how to make the embargoed items themselves, Rusk's reply was no less direct: "though the United Kingdom lived by trade its people needed security as well and must defend themselves against those who would like

[33] Letter, Kennedy to Macmillan, 26 July 1963, PREM11/4560, TNA.

to cut their throats."[34] The gap between London and Washington over the question of Cuban trade remained. When Foreign Secretary Lord Home visited the United States at the beginning of October, he found Kennedy personally unsympathetic on the Cuban issue. "The president said he simply couldn't understand why we could not help America by joining in an embargo on trade," Home reported to Macmillan.[35]

When the missile crisis broke, then, it might have been understandable if the president had chosen to bypass as far as possible the Anglo-American relationship and the prime minister in his handling of it. While it is true that Kennedy kept the discovery of the Soviet missile emplacements on Cuba as a closely guarded secret between 16 and 20 October, at lunchtime on 21 October, Ambassador Ormsby Gore was the first foreign official to be taken into his confidence. Thereafter, Ormsby Gore played a significant role during the crisis as a close confidant of the president and of his brother, the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy. Lacking Ormsby Gore's immediate proximity, Macmillan's role was confined to a series of telephone calls conducted via the newly installed scrambler telephone line between London and Washington, and to exchanges via the secure teleprinter line.

The extent of Macmillan's influence during the crisis has been much debated in the historiography.[36] As grist to the mill of the sceptics it would have to be admitted that nothing

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[34] Record of a Conversation after Dinner at 1 Carlton Gardens, 24 June 1962, PREM11/3689, TNA.

[35] Telegram, Home to Macmillan, 1 October 1962, PREM11/3689, TNA.

[36] For sceptical views see, L. V. Scott, *Macmillan, Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Gary D. Rawnsley, "How Special is Special? The Anglo-American Alliance during the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Contemporary Record*, 9, no.3 (June 1995). For a sympathetic view see, Peter Boyle, "The British Government's View of the

Macmillan said or suggested in any of these exchanges caused any significant shift in the president's handling of the crisis. So, Macmillan's suggestion in a phone conversation on the evening of 26 October that the president might want to consider offering to remove the U.S.'s Thor missiles stationed in Britain as part of a possible trade for the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba was casually dismissed by Kennedy with the words: "sure, Prime Minister, let me send that over to the Department. I think we don't want to have too many dismantlings. But it is possible that that proposal might help."[37] Nothing further came of Macmillan's suggestion.

On the other hand, it is also important to calibrate our judgement of Macmillan's contribution during the crisis on a scale of what was possible in the circumstances. It would surely have been highly unlikely that Kennedy would have changed course in a significant way on the advice of any foreign leader. Recognising the limits of what was possible, Macmillan did not seek to exercise influence of this nature. Instead, he concentrated his efforts, once it was clear that Kennedy had decided on a quarantine of Cuba, on reinforcing the president's instinct to seek a negotiated way out of the crisis. Beyond this, his other key contribution was less tangible, but no less important. He repeatedly expressed his sympathy for the position in which Kennedy found himself and his personal sense of empathy. This was a crisis in which consolation on the part of the one man with whom Kennedy could truly share his loneliness was as important as consultation. So, their first phone conversation on the evening of 22 October concluded with Macmillan telling Kennedy, "you must have had a very

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Cuban Missile Crisis," *Contemporary Record,* 10, no.3 (June 1996). For a more recent assessment which strikes a middle position, see Christopher Hull, *British Diplomacy and US Hegemony in Cuba, 1898-1964* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013).

[37] Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge; Belnap Press, 1997), 482.

hard time. I feel very sorry for you and all the troubles. I've been through them. I only want to tell you how much we feel for you."[38] In the hard-nosed world of international politics it is easy to dismiss such sentiments. But Macmillan's steadfast personal sympathy and support for the president may have been the most significant contribution he made during the crisis.

The resolution of the crisis through Khrushchev's climb down over the stationing of missiles in Cuba did not, however, resolve the continuing Anglo-American differences over Cuban trade that rumbled on. In that sense, the personal connection between the prime minister and president during the crisis itself might be seen as ephemeral. Nor did the missile crisis alter the broader course of Anglo-American interdependence, which, as the earlier discussion of the Skybolt saga has shown, had reached its own point of crisis by the winter of 1962-3.

If the nuclear relationship was one of the key components of this broader crisis of Anglo-American interdependence, Britain's relations with Europe were another. As Macmillan fumed about the U.S. approach to defence interdependence in the autumn of 1962, he had been driven to comment that "if only we can 'get into Europe' we shall, of course, have a much stronger position."[39] Looking back to the final months of the Eisenhower administration, the collapse of the Paris summit of May 1960, on which Macmillan had pinned his hopes for broader Cold War détente, was a decisive moment in his premiership. Indeed, Macmillan himself went further and termed it "the most tragic moment of my life."[40] The pursuit of détente had been the key plank for Macmillan's Cold War strategy during 1959 and 1960 and he had earlier undertaken his own "voyage of discovery" to the Soviet Union in

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[38] Ibid., 287.

[39] Memorandum, Macmillan to Thorneycroft, 4 September 1962, PREM11/3779, TNA.

[40] Horne, *Macmillan,* 231.

February 1959 to try to further his goal. But Eisenhower's refusal to apologise to Khrushchev, despite entreaties from Macmillan, for the ill-fated U-2 flight of Gary Powers, which had been shot down over the Soviet Union shortly before the summit, seemed to end all hope of further progress. It was a moment of epiphany for Macmillan. According to his Private Secretary Philip de Zulueta, "this was the moment he suddenly realised that Britain counted for nothing: he couldn't move Ike to make a gesture towards Khrushchev."[41] For de Zulueta, the failure at the summit was crucial in the development of Macmillan's concept of Europe. If Macmillan wanted Britain's voice to be heeded between the two superpowers, then he needed an alternative international power base.

Macmillan's shift in approach towards British membership of the EEC during the final months of 1960 represented in effect a hedging strategy. It did not involve the abandonment of the pursuit of Anglo-American interdependence. Rather, it recognised the difficulties that were becoming apparent with that approach, and sought to bolster Britain's international position by developing a parallel turn towards Europe. There was no necessary contradiction in this hedging strategy to begin with, since both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations expressed their support for British entry into the EEC. But further down the line it was apparent that the main obstacle to the success of Macmillan's approach would be the resistance of the French President Charles de Gaulle to the prospect of British entry into the EEC. Alongside his attempts to prepare the ground for the application domestically during 1961 and 1962, Macmillan also devoted considerable effort to an ultimately doomed attempt to woo de Gaulle. The key junctures from this point of view were the Macmillan-de Gaulle summits at Champs in June 1962 and Rambouillet in December 1962. At Champs, Macmillan was candid about his doubts over the future of the Anglo-American alliance: "Britain had a

[41] Ibid., 231.

great friendship with the United States but in 20 years' time Britain would be relatively weaker even than she was now by comparison with the United States," he told de Gaulle. Confiding further the background to his change of heart regarding the EEC, he stated that "he understood and sympathised with President de Gaulle's irritation with some aspects of United States policy… Previously he himself had been worried at the bellicosity of the Americans, particularly in the latter days of the Eisenhower regime."[42] What was needed to remedy the situation, he argued, was "a solid European organisation" so that the Atlantic alliance would become a partnership of equals. But despite Macmillan's entreaties, de Gaulle remained unconvinced about the British change of heart. "The idea of choosing between Europe and America is not yet ripe in your heart," he observed.[43]

By the time the two men met again at Rambouillet in December 1962, de Gaulle's domestic position had been strengthened considerably with the referendum victory on the question of direct elections to the presidency, and the electoral triumph of his supporters. Macmillan's own position by contrast, had been weakened by the unfolding Skybolt saga. So, de Gaulle was able to be much more direct about his opposition to British membership of the EEC. "It was not possible for the United Kingdom to enter tomorrow and … arrangements within the Six might be too rigid for the United Kingdom," he warned Macmillan. For his part, the prime minister described himself as "astonished and deeply wounded" by de Gaulle's

[42] Record of a Conversation at the Chateau de Champs at 3.15pm on Sunday 3 June 1962, PREM11/3775, TNA.

[43] The French record, quoted in N. Piers Ludlow, *Dealing With Britain: The Six and the First UK Application to the EEC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 121.

words.[44] Macmillan left Rambouillet convinced that de Gaulle would do whatever he could to block Britain's entry into the EEC.

The denouement for the British application came in the wake of the Nassau summit. At a press conference on 14 January 1963, de Gaulle delivered his veto of the British application, arguing that the Nassau agreement had proven his point that Britain would always choose cooperation with the United States over cooperation with Europe. While he adopted a stiff upper lip in public, Macmillan was candid about the extent of the foreign policy disaster in private. In his diary, he wrote that "the great question remains 'what is the alternative' to the European Community? If we are honest, we must say that there is none."[45] His words have lost none of their poignancy more than half a century later.

The collapse of the government's European strategy, coming on top of the frustrations of Anglo-American interdependence, was further compounded by the challenges evident in the third of the three circles that Churchill had identified as defining Britain's place in the world: the Empire-Commonwealth. Anglo-American differences thrown up by the process of decolonisation formed the third key component of the crisis of interdependence, which marked the winter of 1962-3. During the brief breaks in their discussion of the future of the British nuclear deterrent at Nassau in December 1962, Kennedy and Macmillan devoted their attention to the continuing crisis in the Congo, the chaotic decolonisation of which by Belgium had sparked civil strife, and the secession of the mineral-rich province of Katanga. By this stage, the British and American positions were a long way apart over the crisis, with the Kennedy administration advocating forceful action by the United Nations to reintegrate

[44] Record of a Meeting at the Chateau de Rambouillet at 10am on Sunday 16 December 1962, PREM11/4230, TNA; Macmillan, *At the End of the Day*, 354-55.

[45] HMD, 4 February 1963, dep.d.48, pp.67-8; Macmillan, *At the End of the Day*, 374.

the renegade province of Katanga, led by Moise Tshombe, into the Congolese state, while the Macmillan government advocated caution. Macmillan heaped scorn on the U.S. enthusiasm for intervention, observing bitterly that "of course if the United States would take over the Congo that would be very satisfactory. They could make Tshombe a maharaja with an American Resident."[46]

When the crisis had originally erupted in June 1960 under the Eisenhower administration, the bitter Anglo-American exchanges of December 1962 would have seemed highly unlikely. Initially, both governments were suspicious of the post-independence Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba, and did little to oppose the Katangan secession. Rather, they worked together to try to prevent the Congo becoming an avenue for the advance of Soviet influence into Africa. But while the U.S. concern was predominantly with the wider Cold War context, Britain also had to consider its local interests in the shape of the possible impact of the Congo crisis on the British colonies of Northern and Southern Rhodesia that, together with Nyasaland, made up the Central African Federation. Northern Rhodesia bordered on the Congolese province of Katanga, and the same commercial interests that favoured the Katangan secession also carried weight with the white settler leadership of the colony of Southern Rhodesia. This, together with the significant British investments in Katanga through the firm Tanganyika Concessions, gave Britain a direct stake in what happened on the ground in Katanga.

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[46] Memorandum of a conversation between the Prime Minister and President Kennedy, 6pm, 19 December 1962, PREM11/3630, TNA; Memcon, 6pm, 19 December 1962, *FRUS, 1961-63, Vol.XX*, 762.

The advent of the Kennedy administration wrought a change in the dynamics of Anglo-American relations over the Congo.[47] The president himself was committed to winning the battle for hearts and minds in Africa and he chose key officials, such as the Assistant-Secretary of State for African Affairs Mennen "Soapy" Williams, who were ideologically committed to the cause of anti-colonialism. An early high profile mission by Williams to Africa provoked an immediate response from Macmillan who warned Kennedy's emissary, Averell Harriman, that "if American sniping at British policy went on, bitter feelings would be aroused in the United Kingdom which would do real damage to Anglo-American relations."[48] Despite these tensions there was no immediate falling out over the Congo. When the United Nations forces in the Congo launched their first attempt to reintegrate Katanga in September 1961, both Kennedy and Macmillan agreed that the operation was ill-timed and should be halted. A second UN operation in December 1961 caused greater difficulties, with Macmillan intervening personally with Kennedy to request U.S. support in halting the action, which threatened to cause him significant difficulties with Conservative back-benchers who were sympathetic to the Katangan regime. Kennedy acquiesced, but was evidently not best

[47] For further discussion see: John Kent, *America, the UN and Decolonisation: Cold War Conflict in the Congo* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 32-59; Thomas J. Noer, "New Frontiers and Old Priorities in Africa" in Thomas G. Paterson (ed.), *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-63* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Alanna O'Malley, *The Diplomacy of Decolonisation: America, Britain and the United Nations during the Congo Crisis, 1960-1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 38-72.

[48] Record of a conversation at dinner at Admiralty House on Monday 27 February 1961, PREM11/4590, TNA.

pleased to be used by the prime minister in this fashion.[49] Macmillan himself felt that the only way to deal with the "half-baked liberals" in the administration on colonial issues was to appeal over their heads to the president.[50]

During the course of 1962, however, Anglo-American differences over the crisis widened considerably. The Kennedy administration wanted to bolster the central Congolese government now led by Cyrille Adoula, who was a sympathetic client. This would help prevent the Soviet Union expanding its influence in the Congo or more broadly in Africa. The Macmillan government, by contrast was opposed to the use of either force or sanctions to end the Katangan secession and deeply suspicious of U.S. motives. Macmillan fumed in his diary about the world copper market, believing that the United States wanted to impose sanctions on Katangan production to enhance the position of its own producers. Matters came to a head in December, with the United States lending its support to a further UN operation designed to end the Katangan secession. This time, Macmillan's intervention with Kennedy at Nassau made no difference. In response to prime minister's barbs about U.S. neo-colonialism, the president shrugged his shoulders and indicated that he felt the discussion had "gone about as far as it could."[51] The UN began its final operation against Katanga within a week of the end of the Nassau conference with United States support. This time, Katangan resistance crumbled quickly and on 15 January Tshombe announced the end of the secession. The outcome was a significant blow to British prestige in Africa and marked a clear parting of the

[49] Record of a telephone conversation between the Prime Minister and President Kennedy, 7.08pm, 13 December 1961, PREM11/3193, TNA; Ormsby Gore to Macmillan, 14 December 1961, ibid.; Lord Harlech, Oral History interview, 1964, JFKL

[50] HMD, 20 December 1961, dep.d.44, 82-3.

[51] Memcon, 6pm, 19 December 1962, *FRUS, 1961-63, Vol.XX*, 762.

ways in Anglo-American relations. The denouement in Katanga thus formed another component of the crisis of Anglo-American interdependence that marked the winter of 1962-3.

The Congo crisis was not the only instance where the Kennedy administration ultimately put its support for sympathetic nationalists ahead of the maintenance of a common front with Britain. The Anglo-American breach over the Suez crisis in 1956 had crystallised the conflict in the Middle East between a U.S. strategy primarily focused on the region's role in the global Cold War and a British strategy designed principally to protect its local interests. Despite Macmillan's efforts to repair relations with Eisenhower during 1957-8, these underlying tensions remained and were inherited by Kennedy. The question of how to engage with Arab nationalist leaders, especially with the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, elicited different responses in London and Washington. Kennedy struck up a correspondence with Nasser early in his administration and pursued a strategy of trying to co-opt Arab nationalism. Macmillan, meanwhile, despite his acquiescence in attempts by the Foreign Office to foster détente with Nasser between 1959 and 1961, remained fundamentally suspicious of a man whom he likened to Hitler.

This Anglo-American division was crystallised by the crisis that broke out in Yemen at the end of September 1962. Nasser became heavily engaged in the conflict, backing the republican regime that had overthrown the Imam. The royalist cause by contrast was supported by Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The Kennedy administration sought to broker a de-escalation of the conflict through a disengagement agreement between the various parties. A key component of the proposed deal was a British commitment to recognise the republican regime. But Macmillan dragged his feet, fearing that the Nasser-backed regime was a threat to the British position in Aden and the Protectorates of South Arabia. In private Macmillan was candid about the dangers the plan posed to British interests and prestige in the region.

Recognition, he wrote might "seem to have been forced on Her Majesty's Government by the Americans and may discourage the rulers and sheikhs in the Protectorate, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and the Gulf who (like all Arabs) will be tempted to join the stronger side."[52] Macmillan prevaricated until the Yemeni regime's expulsion of the British consul gave the government an excuse to withhold its cooperation with the plan. Macmillan had no doubt where the blame lay for the problems in the region. "For Nasser read Hitler and it's all very familiar," he scribbled on one document.[53] Without British cooperation the U.S. disengagement plan slowly unravelled. The state of Anglo-American relations over the region by the conclusion of the Kennedy-Macmillan period is perhaps best summed up the comment of Kennedy's National Security Council adviser, Bob Komer, that the United States "should beat up [the] UK to stop shafting us."[54]

Of all post-war British prime ministers, then, Harold Macmillan launched the most determined and systematic pursuit of Anglo-American interdependence. While others such as Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair certainly set great store by close relations with their presidential counterparts, Macmillan put his personal relations, first with Eisenhower and then with Kennedy at the heart of his policy. The results of this approach, however, were mixed. To be sure, there were some tangible successes. The Kennedy-Macmillan relationship was significant in overcoming the bureaucratic obstacles, which lay in the way both of the Polaris

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[52] Memorandum, "United Kingdom recognition of the Yemen regime," 12 December 1962, PREM11/4356, TNA.

[53] Macmillan's annotation on letter, Beeley to Home, 25 February 1963, PREM11/4173, TNA.

[54] Memorandum, Komer to the President, 20 September 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63: Vol.XVIII,* 710-13.

deal at the Nassau summit of December 1962, and the subsequent limited Test Ban Treaty of July 1963. But it would have to be concluded that his overall pursuit of Anglo-American interdependence ended in failure. The differing interpretations in London and Washington of what interdependence meant in practice resulted in a broader crisis in relations between the two countries during the winter of 1962-3. Nor did Macmillan's attempt to hedge against the unreliability of Anglo-American interdependence succeed. The de Gaulle veto of the British EEC application left Macmillan's strategy in ruins. In his diary he was candid about the extent of the disaster. "All our policies at home and abroad are in ruins," he wrote. "Our defence plans have been radically changed from air to sea. European unity is no more … We have lost everything except our courage and determination."[55] For all Macmillan's nostalgia in later life about his personal relationship with Kennedy, Anglo-American interdependence offered no answer to the fundamental question about Britain's post-imperial place in the world, a matter that remains fraught with debate nearly six decades later.

[55] Harold Macmillan, diary entry, 28 January 1963, in Catterall, *The Macmillan Diaries: Vol.II*, 539.