

Post-war fantasies and Brexit: the delusional view of Britain's place in the world

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Claims about Britain's past are made regularly in the referendum debate. But claims about Britain's historical place in the world – courageously standing alone, being outnumbered and outgunned but in the end outperforming everyone – are not based on fact, writes [Mike Finn](#). These myths could nonetheless have very real consequences: this is the self-image that the Brexit campaign portray and which many think they will revive by voting to Leave.



It is perhaps unsurprising that Michael Gove, who as former Education Secretary trumpeted the virtues of 'our island story' in the history curriculum, should have emerged as a leader of the Brexit campaign. Nor is it surprising that Boris Johnson, who penned a book to situate himself in comparison with Winston Churchill, should do the same. Both consider themselves to be historians of sorts, articulating Britain's place in the world in historical terms. But the visions of Britain's past they draw on are rooted in myth, not history, and this has implications for the decision they are asking us to take.

The 'standing alone' myth

For Gove and Johnson, Britain is the nation who stood alone in 1940, a great nation, heir to Anglo-Saxon culture and 'first in the world for soft power', owing to Britain's supposed 'invention' of representative democracy. For Johnson, Churchill was a man of 'vast and almost reckless moral courage', the encapsulation of all that is good about Britain, not least British pluck. As Gove puts it, those who believe that the prospect of Brexit is a terrible idea are actually arguing that Britain is 'too small and too weak...to succeed without Jean-Claude Juncker looking after us.' Johnson went further, comparing the European project to Hitler's attempt at territorial domination. Both agree that, as in 1940, Britain can, and should, stand alone.

But standing alone has been the exception, rather than the norm. Apart from those heroic months in 1940 and early 1941, Britain has faced the world – in war and peace – with allies. As historians of post-war Britain are only too aware, the 'financial Dunkirk' and imperial retrenchment in the years prior to the Suez crisis represented the beginning of a balancing act between Europe and the United States, which continues to this day. For several decades after the war, Britain, in David Edgerton's words, was keen to maintain 'a sharply-differentiated third place in world affairs'. The question was *how*.



A culture of escapism

Ever since, successive British governments indulged in *realpolitik* and self-delusion in equal measure. Macmillan famously courted American presidents, not least John F. Kennedy, in the belief that Britain could be 'Greece to America's Rome'. This attempt at defining a 'special relationship' owed much to British culture and snobbery; Americans might have the money and the power, but they didn't have the class or the guile. On those scores, nobody did it better than Britain.

In popular culture, this 'escapism' was represented by Britain's hero of the post-war era, James Bond 007. Bond was the living embodiment of Britain's self-delusion, superior in every way to his American counterparts. Successive generations of Britons internalised the Bond mythology; Britain might be outnumbered and outgunned, but in the end nobody does it better.

The Bond mythos runs through depictions of the UK armed forces. The performance of the Special Air Service in the 1980 Iranian Embassy siege seemed to highlight the vitality of Britain's 'specialist' qualities, so much so that there is now a 'special forces myth' in popular culture. Their supposedly-supernatural powers are invoked by the tabloids, politicians and pub pundits alike for any crisis Britain may wish to involve itself in. ISIS? [Send in the SAS](#). Or bomb them with [Brimstone](#), a special weapon that Britain has but the US doesn't. Nobody does it better.

But these historical myths and their influence on Britain's contemporary self-image have consequences. Britain's armed forces, heresy though it may be to say it, are not, as Michael Gove claims, 'the best in the world'. Today's Royal Navy has no aircraft carriers and it is questionable whether it can really consider itself a 'bluewater navy' given its lack of organic air support and dwindling numbers of escort vessels. At least in part this is due to [coalition cuts](#) which Gove was a party to.

The Royal Air Force, itself part of the 'British specialism' narrative due to its [undeniable heroism](#) against superior

numbers in the summer of 1940, now operates [clapped-out ancient Tornado airframes](#). Even before the recent vote to additionally intervene in Syria as well as Iraq, one RAF source told the BBC that operations from Cyprus were being conducted with [‘broken jets and tired...fed-up people’](#). And the two conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan, followed by subsequent defence cuts, have dealt huge blows to the army’s ability to operate autonomously.

In fact, British defence planning has increasingly [moved towards models of co-dependency](#) on allies for resources the UK simply cannot provide. But whether one takes a positive or negative view of such dependency, it is the reality. Our dependency also extends to intelligence-gathering – more than anywhere else. The US National Security Agency has maintained [listening posts on UK soil](#) for decades, whilst the US Air Force still maintains a significant presence. The rub is that Britain gets access to US intelligence and partners with the US on numerous technologies, from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter to Trident (though neither is free from controversy).

Of course, none of this would be in jeopardy – at least for now – in the event of Brexit. But it serves to undermine the mythology of Britain standing alone. It doesn’t, and generally it hasn’t. And in future it won’t. The Bond view of Britain’s place in the world, ‘our island story’, is nothing more than comforting ‘escapism’ as Cannadine described it. Britain is and remains as it was: a second-rate power trying to best maximise her influence against the challenges of a globalising world. And here the EU is far more of an asset than a weakness.

Conspiracy or choice? Why we joined in the first place

The closer defence partnership with the US fostered by the brutal subordination of the British at Suez in the 1950s was mirrored by Britain’s attempts to join the European Economic Community. The British government – for all its delusions – [knew](#) that Britain had to retain as much global influence as possible. When Harold Macmillan’s government attempted to join the EEC in 1961 this was not a reflection of Britain sacrificing her power, but an attempt by Britain to [‘to achieve national objectives they could not achieve on their own’](#). Outside looking-in wasn’t working; the Commonwealth could not compete with Europe as a market, and the greater European unity engendered by the war experience meant that as long as Britain remained on the outside, it was politically marginal in her own backyard – not least in the eyes of a United States who sought influence in Europe [through political structures and NATO](#).

The US, meanwhile, still retains its interest in Britain remaining in the EU, following President Obama’s [stark warning](#) to the British people. It is not possible to be an Atlanticist and a Brexiteer. Britain’s withdrawal from her largest economic ally will alienate her most powerful political one. Not for long will Britain survive as the oft-cited ‘fifth largest economy in the world’ if it chooses to walk away from the world’s largest single market. But there’ll be a quick trade deal, of course, or so we are told – even though both Obama and the German Finance Minister say otherwise. On this, the Brexiteers again are betting on Bond; *somehow* Britain will pull it off. Fantasy politics has a seductive appeal.

The macro-level of debate of Brexit is important, because it will decide people’s votes. But it is also the most nebulous and the most given to sentiment over sober judgment. It is the level most anchored in identity politics (which is important) and its subjectivities. But it obscures the many micro-level issues, such as the impact on the science base, the cost to Britain’s students, the impact on homeowners and those seeking to buy, those with pension funds, those in the armed forces, every British citizen’s life in some way or another. The failure to grapple with the Gordian knot of Britain’s place in the world, instead elected for the safety of self-delusion, has brought the country to this place.

When Brexiteers engage with the macro-level, it is customarily in terms of offering examples of other countries who apparently stand alone – but who on closer inspection turn out not to, or who in fact pay a tremendous price to get less from an organisation of which Britain is already a leading member. But nonetheless there is [evidence](#) that such Brexit claims are working. Brexiteers espouse what Niblett calls a [‘myth of sovereignty’](#), implying that the EU has been a sinister continental conspiracy when it was in fact an elective choice of successive British governments to give the country and her citizens more power. For decades, the EU has been an easy target to pass the buck for

British politicians keen to abdicate responsibility for their own choices.

This week, their ultimate abdication will take place. For several generations, Britain's politicians told themselves – and their publics – comforting lies about Britain's place in the world. Now, for reasons of a petty party squabble, the British public is expected to sort that out for them. The outcome of any Brexit, however, will more than likely be an ever-diminishing return on Britain's post-war fantasies.

About the Author

Mike Finn is Principal Teaching Fellow in Liberal Arts at the University of Warwick, and Honorary Research Fellow in Politics at the University of Buckingham. He is the editor, with Matt Qvortrup and Gillian Peele, of *The Referendum Effect* (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press, 2016). His previous books include *The Coalition Effect, 2010-2015* (edited with Sir Anthony Seldon, Cambridge University Press, 2015) and *The Gove Legacy* (Palgrave, 2015).



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