

Aug 29 2013

## Enoch Powell and the Cold War

LSE IDEAS

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**Enoch Powell, the British Conservative politician best known for his impassioned call for restrictions on immigration, also offered a distinctive perspective on the Cold War. Yet, amid the enduring public and academic fascination with Powell's so-called '[Rivers of Blood](#)' speech, these important aspects of his thinking – and the policy proposals he drew from them – have been comparatively overlooked.**

In some respects Powell, who had held the rank of Brigadier in military intelligence during the Second World War, took a view of foreign policy that placed him firmly within the Conservative fold. Like others, his thinking grew out of a [realist tradition](#), emphasising the inherent tendency towards conflict as states sought to increase their power in an international system that did not (and could not) possess any overriding authority able to maintain order. Embracing military power and economic might, the central aim of Conservative foreign policy was to protect and promote the national interest – a sentiment with which Powell, a fervent British nationalist, agreed.

Yet there were important differences in the ways that Powell applied his analysis. He did not accept the idea that the Cold War was a new, or distinctive, development. Instead he argued that what had happened after 1945 was the creation of a different global balance of power, characterised by rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. At the same time, Powell considered that there was a futility to great-power interventions around the world. After becoming Shadow Defence Minister in 1965, Powell told the Conservative Party Conference that the United States would struggle to exert effective power or influence in Vietnam because it was so far from its own geographical base. In a line of argument that also had relevance to Britain's own military commitments East of Suez, Powell went further, contending that US involvement would only disrupt the emergence of a new regional balance of power in South East Asia. Powell was critical of those who insisted on interpreting the Cold War, or international affairs more generally, in static terms.

During the 1970s, Powell contended that a very significant change was under way as he analysed the developing rapprochement between the United States and China alongside the longer-standing [Sino-Soviet split](#). Powell had been an early advocate of free-market economics and an opponent of state socialism but these international developments now led him to argue that Britain and the Soviet Union had become logical allies, even if they were not necessarily on friendly terms. This was a radical conclusion to reach, especially as Superpower tension increased in the early 1980s, but Powell nonetheless maintained it.

Powell's position also derived from his attitude towards the United States which became much more critical after 1979 – the point at which Margaret Thatcher came to power after talking up the '[Special Relationship](#)' over the previous few years. Powell's distrust of the United States dated back at least as far as 1943, when he had first met American officials in North Africa and taken the view that they were trying to dissolve the British Empire. Yet even after Powell had ceased to be an imperialist, and indeed became a critic of the slow speed and reluctant ethos of British decolonisation, he continued to be suspicious of US intentions.

This trend became most striking as Powell related his criticism of the United States to his [Ulster Unionism](#). He had become an Ulster Unionist MP in 1974 after leaving the Conservative Party due to his disagreement with party leader Edward Heath over British membership of the European Community and the reintroduction of a prices and incomes policy. Representing a Northern Ireland constituency, Powell argued that there was a particular American concern to put pressure on Britain to create an all-Ireland state, thus threatening the integrity of the British nation (which he defined geographically by the boundaries of the United Kingdom). Powell contended that the reasoning here was strategic: the Americans sought Irish participation in NATO in return for a united Ireland. This was why he frankly told voters during his 1983 general election campaign that the issue was: 'Is Britain to be a nation in her own right or the obedient servant and satellite of the United States?'

This argument also resonated in a context in which there was considerable public unease about the deployment of US [cruise missiles](#) in Britain. Powell had long been sceptical about the value of nuclear weapons – a position that jarred with many on the

Conservative right in particular who drew a very clear link between the maintenance of Britain's international position and its possession of an independent nuclear deterrent. In 1949, the year before he became a Conservative MP, Powell argued in the *Newcastle Journal* that 'the atom bomb in World War III may be like poison gas in World War II – a constant potential menace, but never an actual one'. As Shadow Defence Minister in the mid-1960s Powell publicly toed the Conservative Party line: the continued need for the British nuclear deterrent even though US-manufactured missiles were now needed to make it functional. At the same time, however, he increasingly identified himself with a body of opinion warning that nuclear weapons might prevent nuclear war but certainly not war in other forms. This was the view, for instance, of Sir Basil Liddell Hart, the military historian and theorist, and Solly Zuckerman, the government scientific adviser. Powell pursued the logic of this argument to press for an increase in conventional forces, including the Territorial Army. With his emphasis on geographical position, he argued that there should be two priorities in British defence: having a sufficient land army to restore any balance of power on the continent and an adequate navy to maintain control of the seas in the North and East Atlantic. In the early 1980s he also came out publicly in favour of British unilateral nuclear disarmament.

Powell is a notoriously difficult figure to place in post-1945 British politics. An examination of his foreign policy provides a reminder of why this was the case. Adopting the same starting point as others, he often arrived at very different conclusions.

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