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"For God's Sake, Act Like Britain!": Johnson, Wilson, and Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf Region, 1964–1968

"For God's sake, act like Britain!" Secretary of State Dean Rusk demanded. He was speaking to Foreign Secretary George Brown on the morning of January 11, 1968, and their discussion had become very tense.[1] Brown had traveled to Washington with the unhappy task of informing the Johnson administration that Prime Minister Harold Wilson intended to withdraw British military forces from the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia by the end of 1971, several years earlier than the Labour government and the Johnson administration had anticipated. Rusk was furious. His admonition spoke volumes about the United States' expectations of its closest ally and betrayed the Johnson administration's profound anxiety over the repercussions of Wilson's decision.

Brown, who had contended vehemently with his cabinet colleagues that Britain must continue to play an important role in defending Western interests east of Suez, found himself repeating arguments to Rusk that he had refuted in London. In the Persian Gulf, he told the secretary, Britain's "continuing presence was more divisive than unitary; withdrawal was important for its own sake, and this was the right moment for it."[2] Furthermore, his government's decision six months earlier to withdraw from Southeast Asia by the mid-1970s made Britain's presence in the Gulf less relevant. The Gulf region had served as a tollgate on Britain's imperial route from Europe to the Far East, and British naval forces in Asia had supported London's military presence in the Gulf.

Rusk would have none of it. Dismissing Brown's argument that the withdrawal from Asia and the Gulf would permit the Wilson government to devote more

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resources to important domestic programs, the secretary fumed that "he could not believe that free aspirins and false teeth were more important than Britain's role in the world." The usually gracious Rusk thundered that he was "profoundly dismayed" that Britain appeared to be retreating to a "Little England" posture. "The British had set the example and had helped us make decisions of will in World War II and in the postwar period." The secretary said "he was disturbed when the teacher abandoned the field." He continued, "Authentic isolationism was growing in the US because of the growing feeling that Americans were carrying the [burden of free-world defense] alone. . . . If the UK went down the trail of deliberate withdrawal the effects would be profound." The United States could not pick up Britain's responsibilities. From Brown's presentation, Rusk said, he detected "the acrid aroma a *fait accompli*" on the part of the Wilson government. The decision, he concluded dramatically, "represented a major withdrawal of the UK from world affairs, and it was a catastrophic loss to human society."[3]

His ears still ringing, Brown found himself harried further by Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs John Leddy. "You're not going to be in the Far East. You're not going to be in the Middle East. You're not even going to be in Europe in strength. Where are you going to be?" Leddy demanded.[4] Following his State Department ordeal, Brown sought out Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and National Security Adviser Walt Rostow, whom he told that "these were the saddest days of his life." His government's decision, he explained, represented an effort by Wilson to shore up his political base among the left wing of the Labour Party and to appease "the 'Little England view' of certain members of the Cabinet," as well as to save money.[5]

Dejected, the foreign secretary retreated to the British embassy "thoroughly sick with myself," convinced that his government was "doing irreparable damage which would probably never be put right."[6] Anglo-American relations, he concluded, "were now critical." Later, he composed a cable to London describing the day's grueling events. Foregoing the temperate language that generally characterizes diplomatic correspondence, Brown began, "I had a bloody unpleasant meeting in Washington this morning with Rusk."[7]

The foreign secretary's difficult experience in Washington left him shaken, but it serves to illuminate many of the most important issues facing U.S.-British diplomacy in the middle and late 1960s. Most importantly, it makes clear that Britain's engagement in the Persian Gulf and east of Suez played a large part in determining its value as an ally of the Johnson administration. Secretary Rusk's stern lecture to Brown underscored the apprehension felt in Washington that the United States was being abandoned by its allies at a time when its military and financial resources were being consumed by the conflict in Vietnam. Their discussion highlights the degree to which events in Southeast Asia impinged on U.S. and British policy in the Middle East as well as growing doubts in London that Britain's military presence in the Gulf served its political and economic