Introduction – The Approach Taken: Why Britain, France and the United States?

This book is about the trilateral relationship between France, Britain and the United States in the twentieth century. It aims to blend the disciplines generally known as ‘international history’ and the history of international thought to show how (mainly) the foreign policy elites of these three countries came to terms with the shifting balance of power in international relations (IR) over the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the ‘Fall of France’ in 1940. A further volume will take the story up to 1990, with a coda about developments until the end of the century. This book could therefore maybe have been entitled ‘What have the French ever done for us?’ Certainly a key focus will be on the way these elites conducted their foreign policy and how they reflected on the profound changes they saw in the world around them over a century unparalleled in its barbarity and violent change. Another will be on how the very conceptualization of IR itself shifted during this period as a result of the interaction between the three groups and their respective national environments. The hope is that taking this approach will shed some light on the evolution of thinking about IR by taking seriously not just writings about international (and national) politics but also what policy makers wrote and said to each other in immediate reactions to events.

The study of IR since 1919, both theoretically and its practice, has by generally common consent, been overwhelmingly dominated by British and then American thinking about how the world is and should be organized. This thinking and practice has helped buttress the rise of American power on the planet, the extension of what we call the ‘West’, the setting up of huge international organizations, and the spread of western practices like capitalism, and norms like human rights. These are all (largely) ‘good things’, so why question this hegemony? The obvious reason is that many of the norms are, outside the Western Heartland, more respected in the breach than in the observance. The liberal values that the United States and Britain have championed, and for which many of their sons and daughters have died and been injured, are not especially blameworthy in my view, the way they have been...
championed has often been rightly questioned. Current debates about intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, where Britain and the United States were cheerleaders, have led to similar debates and criticisms to those that greeted British Imperial intervention in the 1899–1902 Boer War.¹ Liberals are supposed to be on the side of the ‘people’, but too often they now look like bullies. Some of the most telling criticisms of recent Anglo-American actions have come from Paris. Reasonable doubts expressed by President Jacques Chirac in 2003, and a refusal to become embroiled in the Iraq invasion, were greeted by chants of ‘cheese eating surrender monkeys’ and demands to rename ‘French fries’ as ‘Freedom fries’ in the US Congressional cafeteria. Such childish reactions portray both a genuine outrage that one of ‘our’ most loyal ‘allies’ should question what Vujetic has termed the ‘Anglosphere’s² collective endeavour and a feeling of hurt about a rebuttal of London and Washington’s ‘liberal’ actions to guarantee ‘freedom’.

But the criticism of what many perceive an Anglo-American (or even just ‘American’) ‘new world order’ after 1990 or so goes even deeper. In the field of economic endeavour many radical groups and individuals, across the planet, believe that ‘Anglo-Saxon’ liberal capitalism has caused there to be as many losers as there are winners, thus creating social tensions and inequities on a staggering scale and often in the interests of a dominant class. At the heart of this belief is the view that between them nineteenth-century British and then twentieth-century American Governments have created an order that takes it as axiomatic that ‘free’ trade will lead to ‘interdependence’, and that ‘globalisation’ will ultimately benefit all peoples, a claim accepted by most liberal economists since the 1840s. But this view is widely contested, both in its underlying theory and in its praxis.³ As Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson have pointed out, pledges of solidarity by the Great Powers to the ‘Third World’ in the 1960s were largely not kept, and globalization’s expansion and benefits can and has led to a contraction of the same process regionally in parallel with a context of imperial decline and change. As the European and the Soviet and American empires have waxed and waned, so have the fortunes of the weaker members of both the ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, leaving a trail of disillusion in both for the promised benefits that economic liberalism will bring.⁴

This disillusion has been matched by a corresponding waxing and waning cynicism about the benefits of political liberalism. This is especially so outside the liberal heartlands of North America and Europe. Woodrow Wilson was seen as a messiah in much of Europe when he arrived for the Paris Peace Conference in late 1918, as he was in the then colonial dependences of the European Powers. One of the great stories of the twentieth century has been how Wilson’s promises about ‘self-determination’ have often turned to dust.⁵ Most importantly the liberal American dominance of the military and security spheres since 1945 has led to many wars and conflicts that have sapped the faith of both Western and extra-Western populations.