Aden had long been regarded as an important strategic asset in the
maintenance of Britain’s position as a world power. As late as May
1956, a junior minister, Lord Lloyd, had made clear that ‘for the fore-
seeable future it would not be reasonable or sensible or in the inter-
est of the Colony’s inhabitants for them to aspire to any aim beyond
that of a considerable degree of internal self-government’. The colony’s
strategic importance was such that the government could not ‘foresee
the possibility of any fundamental relaxation of their responsibilities
for the Colony’.

Paradoxically, as British power declined, this impor-
tance actually increased. Evicted from Egypt and Iraq, with Cyprus and
Kenya uncertain, the Aden base became increasingly important. In 1960
Aden replaced Cyprus as headquarters of Middle East Command and it
was described in the 1962 Defence White Paper, along with Singapore
and Britain itself, as one of three vital permanent military bases. It was
regarded as the key to the defence of British interests in the Middle
East, the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The problem was, however, that
the British position was coming under increasing challenge from Arab
nationalism, both in the colony itself and in its hinterland, the Arab
protectorates that made up the Federation of South Arabia. There was
every confidence, however, that by force and fraud this challenge could
be contained and that, in the words of a former Governor, Sir Tom
Hickinbotham, the security of Aden would be ‘maintained as long as
Britain remains great’.

The challenge to the British position came from two different direc-
tions. In the colony of Aden itself it came from the increasingly powerful
trade union movement with its left-wing nationalist leadership. This
threat, it was believed, could be contained by a combination of repres-
sion and improving living standards. The Arab working class would be
reconciled to the frustration of their national ambitions by prosperity, and more accommodating, moderate trade union leaders would emerge. This Fabian policy was soon recognised as having failed and some other means of containing popular agitation had to be found. The other challenge came from neighbouring North Yemen whose autocratic ruler, the Imam Ahmed, had long had designs on the protectorate states. His policy of confrontation with Britain involved periodic border incidents and the active encouragement of subversion and insurgency. These backward, semi-feudal regimes were regarded as particularly vulnerable and liable to collapse without British support.

Trouble in the protectorates had broken out as early as 1954, beginning what Gregory Blaxland calls ‘the Border War’, which continued into 1958. This conflict involved sporadic border incidents and uprisings that were dealt with by the traditional British methods of punitive expeditions and bombing. The trouble came to a head in 1957–58 when there were serious border clashes between British and Yemeni troops; Azraqi rebels ambushed and killed British soldiers before being subjected to punitive air strikes. Trouble continued with exchanges of artillery fire across the border. Then in April 1958 the Assistant British Adviser in Dhala was besieged by rebels in al-Sarir fort. A strong British relief column with air support drove the rebels across the border and air strikes were launched against Yemeni positions, destroying the Qataba barracks. After this demonstration of British power, the Imam decided that his confrontationist policy had proven too expensive and unproductive and an uneasy truce came into effect.

Aden and the Federation

At the same time as the Border War was successfully concluded, the British consolidated their position in the protectorates by establishing the Federation of South Arabia in February 1959. Initially six of the states of the Western Protectorate, Beihan, Fahdli, Aulaqi, Dhala, Lower Yafa and Upper Aulaqi, joined together in what was always a ramshackle affair, completely dependent upon Britain. None of the individual rulers would accept any of their number being given precedence, so all became members of the Federation government, the Federal Supreme Council, with a rotating chairman. Other states joined later: Lahej in September 1959, and Dathinah, Lower Aulaqi and Agrabi in February 1960. The Federation served as a useful buffer against North Yemeni influence, but was also regarded as a way to contain the Adeni working class. The various petty emirs, sheikhs and sultans were completely dependent