Looking back, we see the Empire at sunset in 1945.

The war had eliminated Britain as a mover & shaker on the earth.

The truth, hidden from most Britons’ sight, was that there were no Great Powers any more.

There were two Super-Powers....

The Soviet Union, because of its army
The United States because of its wealth.

... 2/3 of the gold reserves of the world
... the strongest Navy and Air Force on earth

... the technology to make atomic bombs

No enemy had ravaged its industrial and banking system.

We know this fact. But Britain didn’t.

Its old enemies were all fallen; its old allies were in ruins.

It was one of the Big Three – and on the Security Council, one of the
UN’s permanent five members, with a veto power.¹

And look at the scope, the power of Britain at the war’s end:

¹ Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat*, 459-60.
Its Navy had never been bigger\textsuperscript{2}

Its Royal Air Force had 55,469 planes and a million men.

The Empire took in more land than ever before, too.

... southern Persia

... Greece

... Libya

All at least had British troops occupying it, for the moment.

The Mediterranean, for the first time, really was a British lake.

There was not even a pretense of any other Navy that could meet it there, even if only to exchange salutes.

War had given some of its ailing industries the flush of health...

– textiles (parachutes and uniforms)

– shipbuilding

– steel and coal

It wasn’t a bleak future, certainly. In wartime, Britain had become

\textsuperscript{2} At 929 capital ships, 137 submarines, 485 patrol boats and landing craft, 70 Fleet Air Arm squadrons with their 1,336 aircraft; and 850,000 personnel. Peter Hennessy, \textit{Never Again}, 91.
one of the most advanced countries in...

- electronics
- cars and trucks
- aircraft

Given time, and if it could find buyers worldwide, it *could* take the lead there, and become the economic power it once had been.

But as the echo of brass bands died and as the military parade passed, even the Colonel Blimps must have wondered:

**could Britain take it?**

More than ever before, the one thing keeping Britain pre-eminent was empire.

*Most of its exports went there.*

If Britain sold cars overseas, it sold them there.

If it sold steel or textiles, it sold them there.

If it wanted to make the money to re-tool and give its new industries a fighting chance, it would need those buyers, for a generation or more.

If it wanted an army of any real size, it would need the recruits of colonies and Dominions.
And when it ran short on beef from Argentina, it could always count on South Africa...

that sent ships with 90-ton carcasses of whales.

Whale-meat was cheap and you could eat it.
   It tasted just like steak –
   if, that is, steak tasted like cod-liver oil.

(Gee, thanks, guys. Makes Empire really worth while).³

Lose the Empire, and it would rank among the lowly of the earth.

What’s more, it knew it.

So when Churchill and his Conservatives went out, and Labour came in, there was no pell mell rush to get free of Empire.⁴

England’s new leaders were not about to strip their country of what greatness it had.

³ Paul Addison, *Now the War Is Over*, 38-39. Another fish delight from South Africa was snoek. Which was highly nourishing and just plain disgusting. The fish didn’t look very handsome, either. Englanders tried a little of it, and decided that this was way far too much.

They wanted to stay as a Great Power, and, what’s more, America wanted them to be.

America couldn’t handle the Soviet Union all alone – anyhow, it didn’t think it could.

Someone else must hold the line in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Labour’s leaders were Socialists. They weren’t Communists – whatever panicky American congressmen thought.

Clement Atlee, P. M. – “a modest man with a great deal to be modest about”

Somebody once said of him that if “he got up in the Commons and announced The Revolution ... it would have sounded like a change in a regional railway timetable.”

Ernie Bevin – Foreign Minister, a beefy, blustering man, with a brass knuckle sense of how the world worked, and a deep distrust of the Soviet Union.

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This union leader would have felt pretty much at home in Lord Palmerston’s company.

He had that sense of a Britain that didn’t take lip from nobody, and struck hard when struck.

Behind his desk was the portrait of George III. 7

If you asked him after the war whether there was a superpower in the world, he’d tell there was – one.

And that was the Empire.

“I’m not going to have Britain barged about,” he growled.

That didn’t mean going it alone. Bevin wasn’t just Palmerston in a cloth cap. He knew that containing the Soviet Union would take friends ... and that for the moment, America was the biggest and one to hold onto.

What’s more, he knew that without American aid, Britain was sunk.

The only way to get that aid was to MATTER.

... to be so important in upholding order in the world that America couldn’t afford to let Britain go down the drain.

At all costs, then, Bevin was going to keep the empire going.

He didn’t want to give up India.⁸

He was darned sure Britain was going to run things in the Mediterranean.

The Middle East, with its oil, was crucial.

England was going to stay there.

It’d make puppet states of the Arabs.

It’d get drilling rights with the Persians.

It’d hold onto the Holy Lands.

Cyprus – Greece – Egypt ... all these were

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He made a strong pitch to make the British empire BIGGER by trying to get hold of the Italian colonies – starting with Libya

He threw British policy behind all the other European empires.

the Dutch in Indonesia

the French in Indochina.

If THEY could keep their empires, they might have strength enough to work with England; and together, that might be just force enough to stand up to the Russians and Americans as a Third Force.

And it shouldn’t surprise us, either, that NATO wasn’t America’s idea.

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B. A Bomb All Their Own

That was one reason why Britain got to work making a nuclear bomb all its own.

As Ernie put it: “I don’t want any other Foreign Secretary of this country to be talked at, or to, by the Secretary of State in the United States as I have just had in my discussions.... We’ve got to have this thing over here, whatever it costs. We’ve got to have a bloody Union Jack flying on top of it.”

Notice the point. It isn’t to counter the Soviet threat.

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It’s to be able to stand up, eye to eye, with the Americans.\textsuperscript{12}

Attlee and the other Labour ministers were doubtful.

They wanted to stop atomic research then and there ...

It seemed such a waste of money and materials.

100 million pounds when all was said and done.

But Ernie Bevin had his way.

As one person put it, he simply stopped the engine in its tracks, picked it up, and put it back, facing the other way.

The Air Ministry set to work mapping out strategic air routes across the empire, tying together 27 air fields, built specially for extra heavy bombers.

It might be the equivalent of the coaling stations and naval bases of Victoria’s day.

In Karachi, for instance, an aerodrome was planned out that could be used to send out planes, loaded with A-bombs to finish off 67 Russian cities – if World War III started.

Labour’s government couldn’t afford to let America take up the slack.

It had dropped the ball before – retreated into its shell after the first World War.

Who’s to say it wouldn’t go isolationist again?

When that happened, Britannia had to rule the clouds.

Besides, with an A-bomb, the Empire would stay one of the Big Three.

No conference would be complete without ‘em.

But you couldn’t have that string of air bases, unless you had colonies to put them in – one more reason for Empire.

And if you wanted to contain the Soviet Union, the best way to do it was to make treaties and alliances...

NATO
SEATO

... and supplement them with British possessions all round the globe.
II. PEOPLE’S EMPIRE

A. ANTI-COLONIALISM

In the glow of that postwar dawn, you might think nothing had changed at all.

England stood, as firm and strong and dependable as Big Ben.

It wasn’t a Tory who referred to “the jolly old Empire”. It was one of the top men in the Labor government.  

Just because you sing, “The Old Red Flag” doesn’t mean you’ll get rid of Empire Day.

It goes on – May 25th – regular as clockwork in the schools.

The only Red your kid in Socialist Britain is going to see is going to

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be the red that still marks every British colony in the school geography books and atlases.

The war was scarcely over before the Test matches started up.

And what could prove more that Empire was there to stay, there forever, than the first cricket team to tour England?

It was all-India....

Hindus and Moslems facing the wickets together

Its captain, the Nawab of Pataudi

(Oxford, you know, and long experience as a batsman in England). \(^{15}\)

Yet the world had changed. It had changed within the empire and without.

That first all-India cricket team to tour England was also the last.

A year later, there wouldn’t be an all-India to field a team.

Hindus and Moslems wouldn’t be meeting on the cricket fields. It would be on the *killing-fields.*

\(^{15}\) Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power,* 194.
Imperialism’s day had passed. Its defenders had dwindled.

The Britain that came to the peace table found that – disagree as they might on other things – the Soviet Union and America agreed, that there was no place for a British Empire.

The very Atlantic Charter that FDR and Churchill had signed, in their meeting aboard the Prince of Wales in 1941, pledged them both to

“the right of all people to choose the form of Government under which they live.”

During the war, America had been one of the sternest voices for letting India go, immediately.

And they pressed Britain, once the war ended, to give Hong Kong back to China.

... couldn’t they sell it to China, and the U. S. Treasury pick up the tab, say?

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16 Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat*, 463-64. How could Churchill, who, a year later would declare that he had not become Prime Minister to oversee the liquidation of the British Empire, go along with this? Because he didn’t pay much attention to implications. At the time, he assumed that the phrases referred to the subject nations under the Nazi yoke. It took time before he discovered that in Americans’ mind, it also applied to self-rule in India and the Empire in general. See Roy Jenkins, *Churchill: A Biography*, 665-666.

17 Jan Morris, *Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat*, 464-65.
... or what about turning it into a free port, under international control?^18

As for the Soviet Union, it breathed constant fire against the Empire – or any Empire but its own.

The Empire may have been tottering, but to Joe Stalin, it was the Power of Powers, stronger than ever before.

In the late 1940s, there were days when he really convinced himself that it was Britain, not the United States, that would be his

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... and that it was Britain that pulled the strings, and made the United States do what it was doing.

With America, the British only had to worry about prim lectures, cluckings, and the corrupting impact of consumer goods...

_Coca-Colonialism_

With Russia, anti-colonialism was a lot more dangerous.

Moscow became the breeding-ground for nationalist revolutionaries and the one place they could turn to for words of support, advice – even guns.

Generations of young Africans were schooled in Bolshie ideas in London itself by a West Indian working for the party, one George Padmore.

... among his disciples a Kenyan, Jomo Kenyatta, who was soon leading an uprising among the natives of Kenya

... and Kwame Nkrumah, who soon became the head of the

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19 Jan Morris, _Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat_, 467-68.
revolutionary forces in the Gold Coast\textsuperscript{20}

Communism indoctrinated the leaders of the uprisings in Burma and Malaya – and in both, the fighting began even before the war was entirely closed.

The trouble was, it wasn’t just Communism.

Everywhere, the examples of Ireland and India, the talk of the Japanese, of Asia for Asians, had bred a new, aggressive crowd of nationalists.

You could find it in British Guiana and Somaliland.\textsuperscript{21}

You could find it in the Pan-African Congress, that held its first meeting in 1945, just outside Manchester, in the town hall of Chorlton-on-Medlock, and in the resolution demanding independence for black Africa.

You could find it in Egypt, in Gamel Abdel Nasser and in Anwar Sadat, who had peopled protesting crowds against British rule.

\textsuperscript{20} Jan Morris, \textit{Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat}, 469.

\textsuperscript{21} Jan Morris, \textit{Farewell the Trumpets: An Imperial Retreat}, 470-71.
B. COMMONWEALTHMEN

England could sense the difference, though they couldn’t quite fathom it.

But it changed the whole language of empire.

Gone were “Dominions.”

In came the term “Commonwealth.”

Very different, that word.
The first suggests countries that you run – domains.

The second, partners in a common enterprise.

Built into the word is the notion that in some way they are equals or will be.

One by one, colonies are made into Dominions in the Commonwealth.

One by one, their institutions are remade to allow more popular participation.

Bit by bit, the different Dominions were allowed to drop the common, English form of law, for laws of their own.

Bit by bit, the Empire’s one over-arching court, the Privy Council’s Legal Committee, found that it had less to do.

Fewer cases were carried out of Commonwealth countries to home.
There would never again be a meeting of the Imperial Cabinet.

The India Office closed; so did the Dominions Office.

They were merged into a new one – the Commonwealth Relations Office.

The royal title no longer spread everywhere.

Each Dominion could give the King (or Queen) the title it wished.

Dominions were doing unthinkable things...

– becoming republics

– having presidents, rather than prime ministers (how very American!)

– making their own defense pacts with the United States

... ones that Great Britain didn’t belong to

C. KINDLY MASTERS

Labour did more than take away the mystery and the majesty of Empire.

It tried to make an empire that countries would WANT to stay in.

Far from divesting itself of Africa and Asia, it tried to improve them and build them up economically.

Till now, each Crown Colony was expected to pay its own way.
The poor ones stayed just that: miserably poor.

Their people died of disease, and never saw hospitals, roads, or schools.

Now, the Mother Country decided to give something back.

It did it through a new agency, the Colonial Development Corporation.

Taxpayer money paid for it.
It was to build roads and power stations and irrigation works in the colonies, the first step they needed, to develop economically.

It sent tractors and bulldozers and specialists from one end of Empire to the other.

This wouldn’t just be good for the Colonies. It would be terrific for Britain.

– losing an Empire in India, they would make a first-class one in the West Indies and Africa and the Far East.

– true enough, the misery in the West Indies needed fixing.

Sugar prices had tumbled to the basement.
There had been riots in the 1930s.

Those islands, where late the nabobs sang, were, as one commission reported, “the slums of empire.”

But empire-builders also imagined that the Indies could become a jackpot.22

So could all Africa!

Ernie Bevin would declare that with a developed Africa
“‘We could have the United States ... eating out of our
hand in four or five years.””

The US lacked supplies of vital minerals, like bauxite
and tin.

But Africa – no end of ‘em!

Turn central Africa into a thriving plantation economy, and
Britain would be fed better than it ever had been,
and without a single slice of American bacon or
a mouthful of bread made from Midwestern wheat.

And why get your peanuts from Georgia?

The Empire could grow its own in Tanganyika – “ground nuts,” they
called them.

(Tons of money later, the planners discovered that they couldn’t, after
all). 23

Far from being wiped out, Labour tripled the staff in the Colonial Office.

It spent five times as much as before.

23 Hennessey, Never Again, 221-222.
It recruited all the young men it could find.

Experts were sent out, to find what crop – what industry – the colonies could build on the best.

Every colony was invited to write up a complete, full plan for how it was to get developed.

And in every colony, the bureaucracy grew, to fit the new tasks

At its height, a thousand civil servants had run India. But the Labour government sent out 6,500 new men to handle colonial affairs in the field.

In fact, they were so enthusiastic that they made plans for building a newer, bigger Colonial Office.

There was room. Just off Parliament Square, a hospital had been bombed into a parking lot in wartime. Why not build a prodigious new building there

... 138,000 square feet to stretch one’s imagination in – a citadel, to protect their communications a library, a hall, a garage, storage space

... and, most important, squash courts in the basement.²⁴

²⁴ Hennessey, *Never Again*, 227-228.
III. CONTAINMENT

A. Malaya

But it took more than development programs to protect the Empire.

For its own sake, Britain embarked on a containment policy.

It had its own Voice of America

– America’s was doing unthinkable things, like actually employing Africans, on its stations that were beaming to Africa...

It might give the kaffirs unsettling notions.

– colonial broadcasting stations did the job

And, because they didn’t have radios most places, the Empire sold cheap radios to African households....

the so-called “saucepan specials” that cost a modest 5 pounds apiece.

... only five weeks’ wages, in a place like Northern Rhodesia!

In Malaya, British forces fought a ten year war against communist guerrillas.
B. Lessons in Lessening

The problem was, as the old song goes,

“My taste keeps telling me champagne,
While my pocketbook says beer.”

World power status is like a J. P. Morgan yacht:
If you have to ask how much it costs, you can’t afford it.

And Britain couldn’t afford to police the world.

Britain had spent its reserves in the war.

2/3 of its export trade from before the war was gone

A quarter of its stored wealth was gone, too

It was a creditor nation no longer. It owed, and owed plenty.

This was a drab, run-down Britain, not a land of plenty.

Export markets had been lost in wartime.

And they weren’t going to come back soon.
A lot of the factories that had made goods for export had been re-tooled to make war materials.

To pay for the imports that Britain simply had to have, it would have to increase exports by 75% above what it had been BEFORE the war.

So Britain’s economy had to be geared to making goods it could sell abroad – not to fill the stores at home with things people could buy.

The only way the Labour government could do this was with a whole lot of controls, to make sure that raw materials went to industries in the export trade.

England made plenty of colored and patterned china.

But if you lived in England, you could only get plain white china. No other kind was allowed to be sold in England.

With so little timber, regulations kept families in England from buying new furniture.

If a firm wanted to make a cricket-ball, it had to take out a special license.

And so even though the war was over, there wasn’t much of anything.

Clothes, gas, basic foods were rationed.
You were allowed an egg every two weeks...

Four ounces of margarine a week ...

Three ounces of bacon or ham a week

There hadn’t been a single banana in England since 1940.

All imports had stopped.

When the first ones reappeared, some kids had never seen one. They were as agog as if the banana had been a space alien.²⁵

Parties came and went, but food rationing wouldn’t end till 1954.

We shouldn’t overstate the hard times. If you were one of the poor or working classes, you never had it so good as under Labor.

There was a government health insurance program.

Where in Yorkshire, 31% of the working class lived in poverty before the war, it fell to less than 3% by 1950.

Unemployment just about vanished.\textsuperscript{26}

People lived longer, healthier lives.

But this isn’t ... well, it isn’t a Merchant-Ivory England, is it, with the manicured lawns and the “I say, anyone for tennis?”

Even when you thought about empire, you must have felt like a bum riding in a stretch limo, and wondering how you could afford it.

... especially when you looked at the Americans, who COULD afford it.

But the Catch-45 was, the less Britain was an empire, the less it could afford.

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
1919 – 3% jobless & 1946 – 1.7% \\
1920 – 1.9% & 1947 – 1.3% \\
1921 – 11.0% & 1948 – 1.3% \\
1922 – 9.6% & 1949 – 1.4% \\
1923 – 8.0% & 1950 – 1.4% \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{26} Compare it to the end of the previous war.

The loss of India meant an incalculable loss to the imperial army everywhere.

Remember, between 1914 and 1918, a million fighting men came out of India for the empire’s defense.

The holding of the Middle East depended on them.

Over 2.5 million were under arms in World War II.

There were so many Indian soldiers in Italy in 1945 that the British diplomats insisted on having India admitted to the Allied conference to decide Italy’s future.

In 1945, most of the troops sent to restore the French and Dutch colonial empires in Indochina and Indonesia were Indians.

They’d been used in Malta in 1877, to protect it, in case of war.

They invaded Egypt in 1882.

They were in the Sudan in 1883-84 and after that.

And in 1919, they had formed garrisons in...

Palestine
Iraq
Persian Gulf
Aden
Malaya
Hong Kong.
All of this the Indian taxpayer had footed the bill for.

But when India and Pakistan became independent, this force was gone.

Now any imperial army would have to be white – English – and paid for by English taxpayers.

All at once, the burdens of defense became that much higher.  

For the first time in peace, a National Service Act drafted 18-year olds.

Was there an alternative?

How about raising sepoys in Africa?

Clement Attlee’s government explored the possibilities of using the African colonies for a massive army.

Its experts figured that they could get 400,000 men that way.

But it would be a long way from a bargain.

Africans were harder than Indians to train, and took longer.

And they never would be anywhere near as good.

Besides, can you imagine a black person able to do the technical stuff in the Navy – or flying in the RAF?

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27 James, *Imperial Rearguard*, 11-12.
No, said the investigators, quite unthinkable.

And what WOULD the other colonies think?

Indian soldiers, now ... they were Aryan.

You base Negroes in the Middle East or Cyprus, and what colonies are going to respect, fear or obey them? It’s a recipe for race war!

(The experts might have taken a look at one place where black soldiers WERE used – our own West, and the U. S. Cavalry.

Funny thing; none of those problems ever came up.)

O-o-okay then, could the Dominions pick up the slack and build that Imperial army themselves?

The Dominions made clear that they’d do it ... over their own dead bodies.

They didn’t even want to send emissaries to London to work out a common security policy.

And several members of the Commonwealth, like Ceylon and India, said that in the Cold War they were neutral.
What do neutrals want with a big army – except to fight each other?

Australia couldn’t be bothered.

Canada gave at the office – its troops were all working for NATO and there were none left over for the Empire.

So when Britain summoned the white Dominions to help it man the Middle East, what did it get?

– jet fighters from New Zealand

– a few planes from South Africa

– some empty promises from everybody else.

Tasks that had been in Britain’s capacity weren’t ...

And wouldn’t have been, even if it had been as much of an economic powerhouse as in its glory days.

It was certainly no such powerhouse.

It wasn’t a Britain with money to spare for foreign adventures.

It was one where Labour had plenty of other expensive projects, ones that people wanted a whole lot more.

If anything, Britain needed to spend less on defense –
not two or three times more than it had before the war.

By spending even the amount it did, Britain crippled itself for generations.

While Japan and Germany were rebuilding their industries –
becoming spanking-new technologically ...

British industry was making guns, tanks, bombs, bullets.

By the time British export industries were back to making goods for
the world to buy, Japan and German firms had their feet in
the door.28

Demobilization

Far from making a bigger army, the Government set about trimming it.

That left very little room for maneuver, where the making and keeping of
empire was concerned.

From 1945 on, the British navy was cut back, demobilized, demolished as a force.
In 1945 the navy had 863,000
In 1948 its manpower was 147,000.

That’s a steep decline, but still 21,000 more than when the war began.

37 escort carriers had begun life as merchant ships.

They were built in the US.

Under Lend-Lease, they had to be turned back to America, as they were.

Many a warship had passed its prime, and was ready for the scrap heap.

20 cruisers from before 1935 ... demobilized
10 old battleships like the *Rodney* and the *Nelson*

61 destroyers of pre-1937 vintage
77 “Flower”-class corvettes²⁹

It was more than that.

**CODA: STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND**

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How strong Britain had seemed in 1945!

It was a very imposing mirage. But it *was* a mirage –

like a fellow who looks rich, because he drives a Rolls Royce,  
but hasn’t got a job and can’t keep up the payments.

Sooner or later the Repo-man is going to take it.

It took a chill wind for the Empire-builders to see the truth...

– the chill wind that blew in 1947, when Britain very nearly went broke

– the chill wind from Palestine and from India, where the Empire dissolved, that same year

Until 1948, the imperialists saw a terrific future.

After that, the doubts started sinking in.

The Colonial Office building never got built, after all.

It was premised on Last Year’s Future...

The bright young men who’d been sent out came back to England,  
and each time they came back, they could sense a change....

Empire wasn’t unpopular. It was just something alien.
... something irrelevant.

People didn’t talk about empire.

People didn’t think about it.

Nobody was asking how it could be expanded any more.

Nobody was making plans.

By 1950, both US and USSR were working full-blast to develop nuclear Subs.

Britain wasn’t. It stuck to the cheap way, the peroxide engine.
   It wouldn’t try to catch up till later.

   It was a hopelessly false scent, and only in 1958 did they drop the idea and go nuclear.\(^{30}\)

How badly off they were we can see in 1950.

61 destroyers and frigates
33 others that could be used to a limited extent

... to cope with a submarine attack by Russia that would consist of as many as 270 submarines.

And by 1984, it was 45 destroyers and frigates ...

against as many as 360

By 1951 the British government decided – and it was never reversed – that the biggest size aircraft carriers just weren’t affordable.

There would be smaller fleet carriers, but nothing along the scale of the US Navy’s.

As for the larger carriers, a dozen of them – well over two thirds of all the Supply that England had had – were disposed of, scrapped, or given to members of the Dominions.

New ones were being built, smaller ones.

But the simple fact is, in ten years, British governments had slimmed the potential carrier strength by a little more than half.32

The worst reason for the destruction of the Navy was the argument about being up to date.

Wars were going to be fought with missiles, nuclear weapons.

What Britain needed was its own nuclear program – the Polaris, say.


Since it couldn’t afford a conventional and a nuclear defense, one had to go.

And it was the conventional defense.\textsuperscript{33}

But of course, you can’t nuke villages in Ghana or settlements in the Caribbean with 50 megatons, and still have anything left to hold onto.

An empire needs forces that an empire can use – not as a world power but as a colonial power.

The change in military hardware was the kind of change by an Empire that isn’t planning on being in the Empire business much longer.

\textsuperscript{33} Richard Humble, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the British Navy}, 190-92.