THE AMERICAN CHALLENGE AND THE BRITISH NATIONAL PRESS:

1925-1930

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Philosophy
at the University of Leicester

by
Anna Engebretson
Department of History

December 2011
ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine the comment and debate on The United States and Anglo-American relations between 1925 and 1930, a period that has been identified as a low point in diplomatic relations between the two countries as well as one in which American cultural and commercial influence intensified to an unprecedented degree. The way in which the British press handled these pressures at a crucial point in the transition of power from Britain to the United States illustrates not just the way in which Britain came to understand the United States as a global power, but the way in which she defined herself in the new international power structure of the interwar years. Historians have traditionally dismissed the interwar press as a credible source from which to extract public opinion on the American question during these years. However, as this study will show, newspapers provide a valuable insight into the way in which the British public perceived the political, cultural and economic challenge posed by the United States, defined the terms by which this issue was publicly debated, and provided the causes and campaigns behind which Britons across all sections of society could rally to meet this challenge, laying the foundations for the more inclusive notion of national identity that would follow in the 1930s.
# LIST OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction 4
2. Chapter One 24
3. Chapter Two 62
4. Chapter Three 93
5. Conclusion 119
6. Bibliography 126
INTRODUCTION

‘INTRUMENTS OF DECEPTION’: PERCEPTIONS OF THE BRITISH PRESS IN THE 1920s

‘To respect each other’s civilisation is really the only lasting basis of amity; yet this is sometimes difficult, for, using the same language, we each get word of all the queer things people in the other group do and say. In fact, the Press, specialising in the unusual, makes it hard to read anything else, and each nation forms a grotesque picture of the other unchecked by that personal observation which restores proportion.’ Professor Dixon R. Fox, 1928.¹

In 1929 American magazine editor William C Lengel posed to his readers the question ‘Why Fight over Hollywood?’ The conflict he was referring to was not merely a debate over the quality of American-made motion pictures, but the serious and ongoing cultural and diplomatic tensions between Britain and the United States which, according to Lengel and many other observers on both sides of the Atlantic, had escalated to an alarming degree. Though the popularity and pervasiveness of American culture in Britain had provoked a public outcry that some Americans by that time quite openly relished, in early 1929 interaction between the two countries across political and economic as well as cultural spheres became increasingly hostile, and relations had sunk to possibly their lowest point in living memory. Worse still, whether realistic or not, the prospect of war between the two nations was now being openly and widely discussed in the national newspapers in both

countries. Lengel illustrated his point on the poor state of affairs with an anecdote, describing his encounter with one British editor of an American periodical in New York who became ‘overwrought with strangely un-British emotions while making a speech deploiring the war that was bound to come between our two countries. Why is it’, he asked ‘that the great preponderance of this talk about war comes from England?’ The answer, he declared resolutely, was ‘the British press.’ Lengel squarely blamed Britain’s national newspapers and their ‘obvious inferiority complex’ for encouraging the British reading public to contemplate the threat of an Anglo-American war. While Americans were concentrating on expanding their growing economic empire, raising their already high living standards and creating more wealth still for America, ‘practically every Englishman is convinced there is going to be a war between England and America. That is because every Englishman is taught to despise America and to hold Americans in contempt.’  

The suspicion of a deliberate undercurrent of anti-American propaganda in the pages of Britain’s daily newspapers was not confined to American journalists with an interest in trans-Atlantic relations. Some British journalists, and even members of Stanley Baldwin’s Conservative Government had blamed the ‘cheaper papers’, namely the Beaverbrook and Rothermere press which included two of the most popular newspapers with the highest circulation figures of the interwar period, the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, for helping to ignite a press war between Britain and America. Concern over the negative influence British press comment had on the Anglo-American diplomatic relationship increased so much so that when diplomatic relations began to deteriorate to their lowest point in late 1927, the British Ambassador to Washington offered to lend his services in a concerted press campaign of ‘peace propaganda’ in order to combat the threat posed by cross-Atlantic sparring via the two countries’ national newspapers.

---

In terms of the quality of American news in Britain’s newspapers, the national press had also been accused of an inordinate fascination with an extravagant, salacious picture of American society dominated by ‘Hollywood blondes and Chicago gangsters’, forgoing factual news stories for features on film stars or American fads. 3 Professor Dixon R. Fox condemned the poor quality of the American news reaching British readers in 1928, and the inordinate sway it supposedly held over public perception of the United States, writing that ‘the English reader sees an America containing little but street robberies, Ku Klux parades and bathing beauty contests.’ 4 This picture of American life was not fabricated by British journalists of course. The 1920s were a period in which American literature was coming into its own, and a time in which modernist American writers enjoyed exposing the grotesqueries and superficiality of their own society. As American literature and other cultural products began to gain popularity in Britain during the 1920s, British journalists and cultural commentators absorbed these ready-made analyses of American society in order to develop their own critical comment. One such American critic, H. L. Mencken, the popular American iconoclast wrote of the excitement and repulsion incited in him by American society in the 1920s in his third volume of *Prejudices* in 1922:

> The daily panorama of human existence, of private and communal folly – the unending procession of governmental extortions and chicaneries, of commercial brigandages and throat-slittings, of theological buffooneries, of aesthetic ribaldries, of legal swindles and harlotries, of miscellaneous rogueries, villainies, imbecilities, grotesqueries, and extravagances – is so inordinately gross and preposterous, so perfectly brought up to the highest conceivable amerage, so steadily enriched with an almost fabulous daring and

---

originality, that only the man who was born with a petrified diaphragm can fail
to laugh himself to sleep every night, and to wake every morning with all the
eager, unflagging expectation of a Sunday-school superintendent touring the
Paris peep-shows. 5

Following along similar lines, the British commentator and intellectual C. E.
M. Joad wrote *The Babbitt Warren* in 1926, written he claimed, in response not only
to the banality of American culture (the title was a reference to Sinclair Lewis’ 1922
novel *Babbitt*, a satire on the spiritual emptiness and cultural conformity of
contemporary American life) but also on what he viewed as the British press’s own
morbid interest in the subject. He prefaced his evidence with the declaration that the
‘anecdotes have in every case been taken, usually verbatim, from paragraphs in the
daily Press, which presupposes in English readers an inordinate interest in American
extravagances.’ Yet despite this rather dismissive appraisal of the value of such press
attention, Joad still begrudgingly admitted that ‘America leads the pack, and if we
want to know whether the pack is heading for heaven or hell, we shall be well advised
to examine the direction taken by the leader.’ 6 This last point was important because,
as was now fast becoming the consensus, one could not understand the new post-war
world in which they were living unless ‘he had some genuine acquaintance’ with the
United States in the 1920s. George Bernard Shaw wrote at the end of the decade of
the importance of understanding America in order to ‘arm an infatuated British public
against surrendering to such foolishness. When he lets off his word-fire at the United
States he often has a Britain of the future in his sights.’ 7 As tempting as it might have
been for Britain to dismiss the politically immature and culturally unsophisticated

United States, it was becoming ever more apparent that it represented a new model of power and prosperity for the twentieth century, and indeed a political and economic rival to be reckoned with.

Joad almost certainly had Britain’s popular newspapers in mind in his condemnation of the poor quality of American news, but in this assessment as in many others to follow the national press as a whole was often tarred with the same brush. Contemporary observers were by and large negative in their estimation of both the popular press and at times critical of the quality papers as well. The preponderance of news on American fads, films and society items followed the trend for human interest stories in general which grew rapidly in the interwar years, first in the popular press and gradually in the quality newspapers in feature stories and in the entertainment pages. At the same time the 1920s were also a decade in which such cultural commentators and the British public at large were bearing witness to an influx of Americanizing consumer products and cultural influences as had never before been experienced, most notably in the form of American motion pictures which glamourized wealth and challenged conventional morality, and this only reinforced the tendency to fixate on sensational crime and celebrity news. Guardians of British cultural standards were noticeably cowed by America’s tightening grip on the national imagination, and this heightened interest in American culture, running simultaneously with the bitter clashes in British and American political and economic interests of the period meant that vocal opinion on the new ‘American challenge’ were a constant element of public discourse throughout the 1920s and, as Lengel observed, came to an alarming crescendo in the final years of the decade. Those looking on at the spectacle of Jazz Age America in its ascendancy seemed to

---

be only half aware that they were witnessing an important moment in the transition of power between Britain and the United States, but this did not mean that the details of this transition went by unnoticed. The ‘inordinate interest’ the British press showed towards all things American was indicative of the importance placed on growing American power and influence, as well as the need for Britons to gain a greater understanding of the challenge posed. This thesis, examining American news, comment and debate in the British press in the second half of the 1920s, will explore the way in which British perceptions of the United States began to change, making its first attempts since the First World War to move away from the Hollywood-based stereotypes and Victorian-era ideas of the United States as an economically powerful yet culturally-backward ex-colony to a nation that was politically and culturally unique and independent, and one Britain must understand in the changing power structure of the early twentieth century.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Historical research on British perceptions of the United States in the 1920s has, in the past, depended largely on the literature produced by British intellectuals of the time. George Harmon Knoles, who was perhaps the first to address the subject directly in his study of British criticism on American society in the 1920s, consulted scores of books and essays written by Britain’s leading social commentators, concluding from this source material with a certain sense of irony that ‘they emerged with three general and contradictory conclusions: first, that it was evil; second, that it was too early to predict the outcome; and third, that what America had achieved was good and Europe ought to follow America’s example.’ 10 The upper and middle classes who produced this literature clearly had mixed feelings on the

10 George Harmon Knoles. The Jazz Age Revisited: British Criticism of America in the 1920s (Stanford University Press, 1955) p. 36.
merits of American culture and society, and more importantly whether its influence in Britain was something to be welcomed or deplored. More recently, Jonathon Rose has added to this picture by using contemporary literature and memoirs from the period to construct an impression of working class Britain’s perceptions of American society and democracy, in which the historian described a deep interest and affection amongst working class Britons who viewed America, quite at odds with Knoles’ findings, as a ‘promised land.’ ¹¹ Ross McKibbin and D. L. LeMahieu too have gathered a more holistic account of British perceptions of America in the 1920s, arguing that American influence in Britain was ‘aesthetic and not political’, going some way to explain how the indirect means of achieving this influence helped contribute to the confusion and questioning of the importance amongst the various sections of society. ¹² Additionally, as Catherine Armstrong has noted, a greater emphasis has been placed by historians in recent years on research into British perceptions and depictions of America as a way of exploring cultural themes throughout the twentieth century, which were often used by contemporaries of the period as a means of ‘shoring up British self-esteem’ as the Empire began to fall away and a new focal point for British national identity was required. ¹³ With regards to the Americanisation of mass culture in Britain, there is also now also a wealth of research on British public perceptions of cinema, music and advertising based on contemporary journals, fan magazines and trade publications but, as yet, little in the way of a detailed examination of criticism and comment found in the nation’s newspapers that encompasses the more serious facets of debate on the respective rise

¹¹ Rose wrote: ‘One of the sharpest ideological divisions between the classes involved their attitudes toward America. That country has always fascinated the proletariat as much as it has repelled the European educated classes, because it promised the former a measure of freedom and affluence that the latter was not prepared to grant.’ Jonathan Rose, The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes (London and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001), p. 353.
and decline of American and British confidence and achievements in this period has been produced.  

At a diplomatic and political level, Robert Self has outlined the way in which, at the beginning of the 1920s, the British policy-making elite still regarded the United States as part of an Anglo-Saxon ‘community of interests’, though this description of British perceptions was limited to this specific narrow section of society, and quickly disintegrated by the end of the decade. British politicians realised that they had ‘treated them too much as blood relations, not sufficiently as a foreign country’. By the late 1920s, as B. J. C. McKercher has illustrated in numerous studies on diplomatic relations between the two countries during this period, British politicians viewed the United States as a political and economic challenger in a ‘struggle for supremacy’. Contemporary accounts paint a picture of a Britain unable to untangle these conflicting views of America; British politicians were awakening to the realisation they could no long labour under out-of-date assumptions of the United States as a benign younger member of the Anglo-Saxon family while the British public were being enticed by the Americanising influences of Hollywood. These factors would all come into play as the crisis in Anglo-American relations at the end of the 1920s unfolded, and were documented day by day in the nation’s newspapers.

Yet in political and economic histories of the two countries during the 1920s, newspapers have been consulted most often for insight or evidence of links between politicians and the press, or indeed to make reference to the personal agendas of the larger than life proprietors of the time. Rarely are they used as a source material to evidence public

---


16 McKercher, *Anglo-American relations in the 1920s*
opinion or moods. The British national press of the 1920s, and indeed of the entire interwar period, is now remembered primarily for the excesses of the Beaverbrook and Rothermere papers, and for the way in which these newspapers were used to promote the personal whims of their proprietors. It is telling that the most enduring description of the interwar press was Stanley Baldwin’s condemnation of the Beaverbrook-Rothermere press, when he charged the two men of seeking ‘power without responsibility – the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages.’  

Francis Williams later condemned the ‘frivolities and excesses’ of the press in the 1920s, stating that the national newspapers ‘failed their generation… Their pretensions helped to convince the public that no large-circulation newspaper... was to be taken seriously.’ Despite these condemnations, newspapers still provide a valuable and underused resource in which to find a detailed account of public debate. In order to understand the interaction between Britain and America at this time, and the public’s opinion and understanding of this interaction, a consideration of the press as a ‘crucial arena for citizenship and democracy’, a powerful enforcer of national campaigns, causes and stereotypes is required. The changing dynamic of the Anglo-American relationship existed simultaneously with a dearth of quality news and analysis from the United States due in part, as Sian Nicholas has argued in her account of Anglo-American news and cultural exchange in mass media at large during the interwar period, to the limited resources dedicated to accurate news reportage from the U.S. and the general low regard with which American news was held for much of the decade. American news was dominated by ‘stereotypes... sensation and crime’ and historians have highlighted the fact, fairly so, that most newspapers relied heavily on news agency wires rather than devoting resources to foreign correspondents in the

---

United States. Yet the role newspapers played, according to D. C. Watt, was ‘of considerable importance’ when considering the way in which transatlantic debate on a national level was conducted during the 1920s. The British foreign correspondents and news agencies in America gathering items for consumption back home helped not only to advance the agendas of newspaper proprietors but also to ‘reinforce the biases already existing in public opinion’ as it was understood at the time. In other words, newspapers aimed to reflect back at their readers the opinions they already held.

B. J. C. McKercher has written of the particular limitations as well as merits of using newspapers as a gauge of public opinion in the context of Anglo-American relations in the 1920s, arguing that as the proprietors printed what they believed their readers to want, they were often the closest substitute for opinion polls we have for the 1920s. Mark Hampton has further supported this view, applying a market theory to the motives behind the editorial steer of the popular press. As the Press Barons ‘tended to see newspapers as commodities’ they aimed to give their readers the opinions they believed they wanted to read, thus casting themselves ‘as the voice of democracy’. Adrian Bingham has contributed to this argument, stating that newspapers were ‘right at the heart of British popular culture,’ and in the particular example of the popular press, provide a wealth of material that enables the exploration of a wide range of opinion and debate that, by the 1920s, reached millions of readers each day.


mirror in which to dissect public opinion at this time, in an age before Mass Observation, newspapers give perhaps the closest indication of at least the general parameters for public debate. Newspapers provide an insight that previous studies based on the cultural criticism of British intellectuals do not; they provide a day by day running commentary of opinion, news and human interest stories, a more casual, informal and conversational style of debate on contemporary issues, and they are written in a way that was expected to engage a much broader section of the British reading public. If, as Ross McKibbin has argued, examining Britain’s idea of America is important to the understanding of attitudes towards Britain’s international status and own national identity in the 1920s, newspapers hold an important place in this exercise in their role as facilitator of public debate on America, regardless of the reservations contemporaries and historians alike have expressed on the quality of the content. 

26 Serious examination has of course been given to the press and its role in international relations in the periods leading up to both the First and Second World Wars, but because the interwar period is most often remembered for the colourful personalities of the Fleet Street proprietors, the ever more ridiculous publicity schemes to boost circulation or, ironically, the Americanisation of British journalism, newspapers of the 1920s have been overlooked as a useful primary source material. 27

This thesis will attempt to illustrate that, as historians have often relied on the record of opinion left by contemporary political figures or intellectuals for an interpretation of the quality of the British press at this time, analysis of the value, accuracy and openness of press comment on America has been primarily, and unfairly, negative. This misinterpretation, I will argue, is due both to records of hostilities both between Stanley Baldwin’s second

---

Conservative Government and certain sections of the press, as well as the general low regard in which the popular press was held during this period which has since seeped into the understanding of the interwar British press as a whole. Closer examination of press commentary during these years on topics including American industry, cultural products and diplomacy uncovers not just a reactionary view of the United States as a political and economic threat, but just as often a curiosity in American society, a willingness to learn from its example and ultimately an effort to better delineate Britain’s changing role on the international stage in the context of America’s growing political, economic and cultural power and influence.

THE PRESS AND ANTI-AMERICANISM

A closer look at this mass medium is all the more important when one looks at the way in which newspapers of the period have traditionally been portrayed in studies on Anglo-American relations in particular during this period. British officials in the 1920s publicly accused certain newspapers of indulging in harmful anti-American rhetoric, always bubbling just below the surface of the editorial pages and ready to spring up at the slightest provocation. Robert Vansittart, the head of the Foreign Office’s American Department wrote in 1927, ‘I think all anti-American articles are regrettable because they irritate and do no good, since fighting the US press with their own weapons is like arguing with a cabman,’ and warned that the ‘sub-editor of one of the cheaper papers told me the other day that he could at any moment double his circulation by open hostility to America.’²⁸ Kingsley Martin implied that such fire breathing editorials were written in the interest of boosting circulation, that ‘it is war-like news which is valuable and the Press proprietor, whose business it is to please the

public, is always tempted to make peace look as much like war as possible and to find some other country which can be plausibly represented as a potential enemy. Historians have since carried this view forward and newspapers have rarely been considered as a source of real value in understanding contemporary British public opinion or debate on the United States. Whether in the context of Anglo-American diplomacy, trade relations or cultural exchange, press comment has usually been consulted in order to illustrate the most uncooperative, jingoistic opinions of the issue at hand.

Adding to this view are the well-documented tensions between the Baldwin Government and the popular press, or at least with the papers that formed the ‘Beaverbrook-Rothermere axis’, were always fraught as support from the Press Barons was as often as not dependent on their own personal feelings of loyalty, revenge or otherwise. Hugh Cudlipp perhaps described Baldwin’s relationship with the popular press best when he compared it to Lloyd George’s description of working with the Daily Mail’s dynamic proprietor Lord Northcliffe as ‘like going for a walk with a grasshopper’ and that Baldwin’s experience of Rothermere was even less companionable, ‘a pas de deux with a scorpion.’ The steady deterioration of Anglo-American relations in the second half of the 1920s was a sore point for many members of the Baldwin Government, and with a set of popular newspapers openly hostile to their efforts in both international and domestic affairs, the record of opinion left by policy-makers on the press’s attitude to Anglo-American relations quite understandably focused on the negative. Government officials openly accused newspapers like the Daily Mail and the Daily Express of being anti-American, while at the same time privately thanking other papers such as The Times for their support – a publication that was by no means innocent of the campaigns that have since come to be labelled ‘anti-American’. Francis

Williams criticised *The Times* editor Geoffrey Dawson’s close working relationship with the Baldwin government, and accused Dawson of using the paper ‘not to reflect public opinion of the day but to mould that public opinion so far as he could to conceptions derived from political loyalties and alliances…as a result *The Times* very often became an instrument of deception rather than clarification.’ Yet because *The Times* was a ‘quality’ newspaper, and enjoyed a close and friendly relationship with the government of the day, *The Times* was not included in contemporary accusations of anti-Americanism.

Labelling even certain elements of the national press as anti-American however, has in fact been unhelpful, and has obstructed the use of newspapers as a valuable source with which insight into a crucial point in time in the evolution of Britain and British national identity in the first half of the twentieth century can be found. Through the examination of press commentary on some of the key events in the political, economic and cultural exchanges between Britain and America in this period, both the ‘high tide’ of Americanisation and the low point in Anglo-American diplomatic relations, some important trends can be outlined. In the editorials, news stories and letters to the editor columns, one can see at once a growing dissatisfaction with Britain’s post-1918 achievements in both the political and economic arenas as well as gathering support for a national defence against the Americanisation of British culture. One can also see the way in which different newspapers, depending on their political leanings, looked to varying images of the United States as a symbol of capitalist success and democratic ideals and of an empty, cultureless and money-driven society. They saw in America both the leading hope for international peace in the twentieth century and a selfishly isolationist, politically backward nation refusing to accept the reality of her new responsibilities. It is no coincidence that the interwar press, which itself underwent a period of Americanisation with the coming of the age of the powerful capitalist

---

proprietors, ‘positively reinforced the status quo… presenting news that provided, ‘especially [for] its working class readership, with a certain form of reality which much favoured a social and political conservatism’. 32 This vacillating image of America was indicative of a period in which Britain was coming to terms with the political and social upheaval in of the First World War and where the country now stood in the aftermath.

**METHODOLOGY**

While in the context of this study - the examination of British perceptions of the United States as, above all else, a separate political and cultural entity - it is important to consider the political leanings of each newspaper due to the relevance to their comment and criticism, I have not held too strict an interpretation of each newspaper’s commentary along party political lines. I have focused attention on the following national daily newspapers: *The Times, Daily Mail, Daily Express, Daily Herald, Daily News, Observer* and the *Morning Post*, and have also included the *Manchester Guardian* as a non-London based, though still internationally recognised newspaper that provides useful comment with which to contrast the primarily conservative, London-based newspapers of the era. The majority of these newspapers, *The Times, Daily Mail, Daily Express*, and the *Morning Post* were to varying degrees conservative, which reflects the overall conservative tone of the press in the 1920s, the left-leaning *Daily Herald* and Liberal *Daily News* and *Manchester Guardian* balance this out somewhat, though as Colin Seymore-Ure pointed out, considering the ‘fluidity’ of the political parties and their relations with the press during the interwar period, a certain level ‘dislocation’ between the press and party system has been assumed. 33 The right-wing papers

32 Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1950* p. 524
did not wholly belong to the Conservative Party, the Labour Party frequently tried to distance itself from the more radical views of the left-wing papers, and though Liberal-leaning newspapers remained popular, this was not reflected in the fortunes of the Liberal Party during this time. At the same time, according to Stuart Ball, politicians in the late 1920s were less and less held in the thrall of newspapers as a keeper of popular political or party opinion.\textsuperscript{34} Only \textit{The Times} had both strong links with the prevailing government of the period along with a relatively high public regard. It is for this reason that, rather than aiming for an exactly even balance of left- and right-leaning publications, I have chosen a cross-section of some of the most widely read national newspapers as well as those newspapers run by editors and proprietors who took the greatest measures to wield influence over both politicians and the electorate at that time. The editorial columns serve as the key primary source to be consulted, as they were written specifically in order to outline the newspaper’s views on the given subject as well as to incite debate in further editorial features and letters to the editor. Though the quality of the coverage was sometimes questionable, news from America could be found in some form on nearly every page of a newspaper, and additional material has been taken from feature stories as well as cinema and book review columns that these newspapers serialised.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{CHAPTER OUTLINE}

The following chapters will examine the nature of public discussion and debate on the American challenge in Britain in the second half of the 1920s, revealing a wide range of opinion and criticism as well as an increasing tendency towards self-reflection on Britain’s


\textsuperscript{35} For example, the \textit{Observer} ran a series of columns in 1927 entitled ‘My American Impressions’ and the \textit{Daily News} printed ‘Uncle Sam Answers All Questions’ in 1925, a humour piece providing commentary on American society under the subhead ‘By An American’, thus confirming its authenticity.
new world role and comparative national character that would develop in the following
decade. The years 1925 to 1929 are covered in the chapters in chronological order, rather
than dividing newspaper commentary into economic, political and cultural themes, though
adhering to a straightforward chronological approach has lent itself to certain emphasis on
one of these areas in each of the chapters.

The first chapter will examine press coverage of American news in the years 1925 and
1926, with a special focus on news and opinion on trade relations and economic rivalry
between Britain and the United States that dominated the editorial pages during these years.
Newspapers often took their editorial cues when reporting on American industrial and
business practices from the special envoys sent by British companies, by the government or
by newspapers themselves to observe American methods and relay their impressions and the
lessons that could be learned from their observations. These envoys invariably described the
United States as a nation of boundless energy and optimism when it came to business, and the
profits generated by this enthusiasm were made apparent for British readers. Returning
visitors to the United States frequently referred to the American economic ‘miracle’ as the
example for Britain to follow to pull her economy out of its post-war slump. This chapter will
examine the opinions these articles and public speeches aroused in both the lead editorial as
well as the letters to the editor from readers eager to add their own opinions on the
comparative conditions of the two countries. The call for imperial protection, one solution
that had been discussed for decades by that point, was revived again by journalists and
readers by the middle of the decade; ‘Buy British’ campaigns also grew in popularity. While
the various publications supported a range of views of trade rivalry between Britain and
America, in late 1925 a number of newspapers would join forces, as will be discussed, to
restrict the purchase and exhibition of American-made motion pictures in a concerted
campaign of protectionism for the British film industry. During these years the most vital
threat posed by the United States was perceived to be primarily economic, and this chapter will focus on British views of the United States as a commercial rival, a profit driven society, and an economic threat to British interests at home and abroad. Issues including the settlement of the war debts, industrial conditions, trade rivalry and finally proposed the protectionist measures in the case of the campaign for a quota system to support the distribution of British-made films made up some of the most prominent American news stories during these years. This last issue, of the importance of preserving British filmmaking, is a useful episode through which to explore the way initial debate over protectionism in a specific industry spilled over into a range of other issues, not least the effect that mass consumption of these American films would have on the cultural life of Britain itself.

The second chapter will then focus on the years 1927 and early 1928, which were dominated by high-level political issues around naval disarmament that led to a crisis in diplomatic relations that built on the already festering trade war between the two countries. These years were dominated by political news on the Geneva Naval Conference in the summer of 1927 and the debate over belligerent rights and freedom of the seas in 1928, as well as a number of high profile incidents which helped bring diplomatic relations to straining point, including the leaking of the Anglo-French agreement, Coolidge’s inflammatory Armistice Day speech, the drafting of the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact and the frequent proclamations by officials in both countries that war was ‘unthinkable’. Organs of the press on either side of the Atlantic were at once commenting not only on the tensions between Britain and America, but on the way in which their counterparts were portraying the actions of the other, and trans-Atlantic press debate began to take on a significance of its own. It was no coincidence that at this time Stanley Baldwin embarked on a North American tour with the express purpose of countering negative comments in the American press on the political and economic state Britain was now in, and by the end of 1928 many
sections of the press began to take more seriously the weight with which their commentary held in the context of Anglo-American diplomatic relations. This chapter will outline the way in which the British press, mindful of its role in relaying British public opinion to the United States and the impact this had on diplomatic relations, began to make the first overtures to the United States in an effort to change the tone of Anglo-American press comment, adopting a more cooperative stance with feature stories, reviews and editorials designed to reinforce the view that, above all else, Anglo-American cooperation was vital to international political stability. Though news items on American culture and politics could still arouse sneering hostility in some papers, the ‘alarming and deplorable growth of anti-American feeling’ 36 that Robert Vansittart had identified in earlier press comment was now being overtaken by this new theme in the political leaders of most newspapers. While newspapers reported on the ‘vague statements’ of Austen Chamberlain who tried to reassure Britons that war with the United States is ‘unthinkable’, and that ‘preparation for war with the United States has never been and will never be the basis of our policy in any field’, this did little to quiet the emotional pleas from other commentators to add drama to the story. As one Reverend R. J. Campbell, who upon his return from a trip to the U.S. warned readers that ‘there is an element which hates Great Britain’, he pleaded, ‘let them say and do what they like. Let them attack what they like and build what they like, but let us refuse to fight them. Spiritual forces are always in the long run the uppermost.’ 37 Talk of Anglo-American war in these years marked the low point in diplomatic relations as well as a turning point in the way the press handled the American question. As the threat of conflict with the United States firmly gripped the public imagination, the British press made a concerted effort to bring to an end the animosity that had dogged Anglo-American relations throughout the decade. In the

37 Daily Express 1 April 1929
context of the struggle for naval supremacy no concession, it now seemed, was too great a price to pay for the reassurance that Anglo-American war remained ‘unthinkable’.

The final chapter will explore the aftermath and improvement in Anglo-American relations as covered in the press in 1929 in which several factors came into play to ease tensions in the diplomatic relationship. Herbert Hoover and Ramsay MacDonald replaced Calvin Coolidge and Stanley Baldwin, which helped if nothing else to refresh diplomatic resolve to address the long-standing causes of tension between the two countries and helped change the tone of debate with regards to the naval question. The depths to which relations had sunk in the previous year prompted not only politicians but the press as well to coordinate their efforts to pull the debate away from talk of war and back to a calmer and more rational assessment of the United States as a political ally rather than diplomatic foe. Perceptions of an American economic threat also receded in 1929 as the American economy went into decline and then crisis by the end of the year, and Anglo-American relations moved from their most fraught and hostile state of the twentieth century to a more cordial if also cautious understanding in a very short space of time. Britain began to come to terms with the her own changing fortunes and the re-balance of the Anglo-American relationship during these years, and though the American challenge receded greatly by the end of the decade due to a number of factors that will be discussed, Britain had already entered a period in which there was a noticeable determination to redefine British national culture in a more modest, more inclusive, and more cohesive way. The need for Britain to redefine her new role on the post-war global stage as well as a new mass culture that could compete with the ideas and values being imported from America began to grow in the second half of the 1920s. Newspapers, often inadvertently, recorded this transition.
CHAPTER ONE

‘A NATION NEWLY RICH AND A NATION CHRONICALLY POOR’:

ANGLO-AMERICAN ECONOMIC RIVALRY, 1925-1926

‘Overshadowing all stands Great Britain, blocking the path of American empire. Empire is building on sea supremacy, foreign markets, and control of raw materials...Without these the British Empire cannot continue dominant. Without these the American empire cannot rise. Hence the conflict.’ Ludwell Denny, We Fight for Oil

In November 1926, U.S. President Calvin Coolidge travelled from Washington to Kansas City to make the first commemorative Armistice Day speech to the nation. He chose this occasion to comment on the state of post-war Europe, and addressed a crowd of 150,000 people with a blunt assessment on the state of international affairs, stating that, ‘I am of firm conviction that there is more hope for the progress of true ideals in the modern world from a nation newly rich than there is from a nation chronically poor. Honest poverty is one thing, but lack of industry and character is quite another.’ Coolidge advised his fellow American citizens that while the U.S. need not ‘boast of our prosperity, I see no occasion to apologize for it. They tell me that we are not liked in Europe. Such reports are undoubtedly exaggerated and can be given altogether too much importance. We are a creditor nation. We are more prosperous than some. This means that our interests have come within the European circle

where distrust and suspicion, if nothing more, have been altogether too common.” 39

Coolidge’s speech was a stark expression of the extraordinary confidence that emanated from the United States in the mid-1920s, and the source of this confidence was thoroughly economic. 40 The extraordinary prosperity of the United States in the 1920s had become a fixture in the British national consciousness, and it inspired journalists, intellectuals and members of the public to both rhapsodize over its merits and to bitterly condemn the faults of modern American society. As one letter writer to The Times explained, Americans, he felt, were not simply ‘peculiarly devoted to making money, but to mopping up energy.’ 41 The profits that resulted from American-style capitalism were apparently the happy by-product of a population with energy to spare when it came to business. Yet not all Britons were so enamoured with American exuberance. In her study of the impact of American-style capitalism in twentieth century Europe, historian Victoria De Grazia pointed to American market culture, and its pre-eminence in international diplomacy, as a key factor in why Europeans began to look askance at the new America of the 1920s. ‘From any point of view,’ she wrote, ‘American society was a money society: divorces were settled with huge alimony payments; mergers and takeovers occurred, the public interest and the little guy be damned; the United States behaved dishonourably’. 42 This dishonourable behaviour came into sharp focus in the 1920s first when the United States failed to join the League of Nations in 1919, and then as controversy over the settlement of the Allied war debt dragged on through the middle years of the decade. This view prevailed across Europe as the Allied countries looked on American prosperity while at home they were struggling with the debts that remained

41 The Times 14 March 1928
outstanding to the United States. In Britain, many wondered at the gall of a nation steeped in wealth refusing to relinquish their ‘pound of flesh’ from the poverty-stricken populations in Europe.

The settlement of Britain’s war debt to the United States was one of the most contentious issues in Anglo-American diplomacy of the 1920s, and one that provides a useful introduction to the delicacy and complexity of transatlantic press commentary at this time. As this chapter will focus on the elements of discussion that made up the national debate over Anglo-American economic rivalry in the second half of the 1920s, the war debt controversy provides both an important introduction to how Britain came to view the United States as above all else a ‘money society’ as well as useful insight into the motives that drove different newspapers in the national press in the way they portrayed the United States. Robert Self has argued that perhaps no other issue of the interwar years had so detrimental an impact on friendly relations between Britain and America as the on-going controversy over the debt settlement of 1923, and the residual ill feelings between the two countries certainly coloured relations for the rest of the decade. Britain’s sudden move from the role of creditor to debtor nation as a result of the First World War was uncomfortable, and the insensitivity of American officials only intensified feelings of resentment and hostility toward what many in Britain perceived to be out and out American greed. The business of America was indeed business, and the cold and business-like approach to settling the monetary cost of the national trauma of the First World War forced Britain to reassess her views on a nation she had once looked on as a young, provincial and idealistic country that had sent forth Woodrow Wilson with his Fourteen Points only a few years earlier. George Harmon Knoles, in his study of British criticism on America in this period, wrote of the disillusionment felt in Britain after the war in which a ‘questioning, if not hostile, mood supplanted the earlier manifestations of

hope, and critics began to warn their fellow countrymen against the inroads of Americanism.  

The issue of the war debts threatened one of the ‘pillars’ on which Britain’s position as a world power rested; it ‘touched the basic question’, according to Frank Costigliola, ‘of who won the war and who would dominate the peace’. Britain had been the prime lender to the other Allies during the war, but these loans had been financed with the help of American funds and at the end of the war Britain had emerged owing the United States £850 million plus accumulated interest, a debt which the Americans were not willing to waive. Britain’s standing as a world creditor lay in the hands of an unpredictable and, in British eyes, politically immature foreign government, and appeals for cancellation of the debts on moral grounds were brushed off by Coolidge’s crass rebuke: ‘They hired the money, didn’t they?’ As Britain’s national newspapers reflected on the fairness of the settlement in the years that followed, a new interpretation of America’s relationship with Europe, and with Britain in particular, began to evolve. The way in which Britain and America understood their respective roles and responsibilities in relation to the war debts seemed to reveal the underlying national characteristics of both parties involved. American politicians and some organs of the American press portrayed Europe at large, not forgetting to include Britain in their summation, as ‘untrustworthy ‘welchers’ trying to evade their legitimate financial obligations’ while Europeans, including many in Britain, railed against an ‘Uncle Shylock’ hate figure, ‘callously demanding his pound of flesh from the prostrate bodies of exhausted

---

allies bled white by the war.’ 47 Looking back on the situation years later Robert Vansittart recalled America’s debut on the world stage, writing in his memoir of their blinkered approach to international affairs. He remembered that ‘the Americans had gone into the war because they were temporarily “mad with” the Germans. The rest of us fought for self-preservation. That was the gulf between us, and it was wider than the Atlantic... “Sore with” us they exacted debts while raising barriers against our trade. Europamude without having been there, they sought simultaneously to quit and pare the unreformed globe.’ 48 The view of the United States as a society driven by money, and one that posed a clear economic threat to Britain, had come to the fore in the middle of the 1920s and this chapter, examining the years 1925 and 1926 specifically, will explore the economic rivalry between Britain and America, and how and to what degree the changing perceptions of America influenced the path Britain saw before her in order to climb out of her economic slump and maintain a competitive role in international trade.

‘Uncle Shylock’ and anti-American rhetoric in the British press

Animosity on both sides of the Atlantic came to a head when, in August 1926 Britain was in negotiations with France on the Allied debt settlement and the difficulties of reaching an agreement brought into focus once again Britain’s obligations to the United States. Thomas Marlowe, editor of the Daily Mail, ran a series entitled ‘Cold Facts on British Debts’ accompanied by a cartoon of Uncle Sam re-imagined as ‘Uncle Shylock’. The American press, quick to point out that it was in fact the Daily Mail who had ‘howled for war’ just over a decade ago, duly registered their disgust at the jibe. Lord Rothermere issued a statement of

apology of sorts, saying that ‘The opinions are those of the editor and his staff; they are not mine’, and by September 1926 Marlowe had been made to resign from his post. 49 One MP attempted to downplay the seriousness of the negative press comment that followed in an address to the House of Commons, dismissing ‘the sort of vulgar talk that one finds in the ‘Daily Mail’ of this country’, adding that he hoped ‘that in the United States they understand what value to attach to that kind of thing.’ 50 James M Beck, the former US Solicitor General from 1921 to 1925, complained in a letter to his friend and editor of The Spectator John St Loe Strachey in late 1926 that ‘nothing is gained by these recriminations. They only serve to harden the really generous heart of America.’ 51 Strachey himself had written earlier that year: ‘How can we help hating Americans when they all tell us that they hate us and would like to see us humiliated before the rest of the world?’ Strachey assured Beck that the ‘notion that the English people regard America as a kind of colony is utter nonsense, though I daresay they are so tactless as to say things that sound like that’, making clear reference to the Daily Mail and other right-wing organs of the press. ‘As a matter of fact’, he added, ‘there is an over, rather than under, belief in the tremendous potency of America.’ 52 The damage, however, had been done and careful management of the situation was required to steer public attention away from the controversy.

The British Ambassador in Washington, Esme Howard, was keen to contain the incident, and suggested to both colleagues in the Treasury and the Foreign Office that a coordinated press strategy to tactfully put forth the official British line that the Government ‘signed an agreed settlement and... mean to stick to it’ be implemented. It was a message that had always gone down well in the U.S. and came to define the British position in the years

49 Time 27 September 1926
50 HC Deb 04 August 1926 vol 198 cc3071-9
51 STR/2/7 Beck to Strachey, 22 November, 1926.
52 STR/27/4/15b Strachey to Beck, 19 April 1926
that followed. The Times, always closely supporting the actions of the Government, argued that ‘it is difficult to imagine that any more general discussion on the subject... can lead anywhere’, and urged the country to move on from the issue altogether. Much of the rest of quality papers, primed by the Treasury, resigned to a line on the debt settlement similar to that of the Manchester Guardian, which declared somewhat morosely that Britain was simply ‘in the irresponsible position of a man who, having after much tribulation of spirit made up his mind to enlist, feels that the moral problem is at any rate finished with and that henceforward he has only got the comparatively simple duty of doing as he is told. After much wrestling with the moral, political, and economic problems raised by the war debts we at any rate made our settlement with America and mean to go through with it.’

Lord Beaverbrook and the political leader writers at the Daily Express, perhaps keen to distance themselves from the vitriol that was now being directed at the Daily Mail, pursued a line of opinion and analysis surprising in its relative positivity towards the U.S., avoiding outright anti-Americanism and instead opted for an anti-Baldwin argument, and used the issue to attack the Prime Minister personally. That these attacks came most aggressively from Lord Beaverbrook was typical of the long-running battle between the two, caused in part because of Baldwin’s reluctance to acknowledge the press baron’s own ambitions of power and political influence after the passing of his friend and former Prime Minister Andrew Bonar Law removed him from the inner most circles of influence. Beaverbrook also had a healthy distrust of the motives of the Government and some of its allies in the press. It was at this time that Beaverbrook wrote to his friend Robert Borden in Canada that Baldwin, with

---

54 The Times 05 January 1925
55 Manchester Guardian 21 December 1926
the aid of Geoffrey Dawson, was too much in thrall to American interests due in part to the influence of The Times proprietor Jack Astor. Their job, he wrote, was ‘to please Astor – which he does remarkably well – on points about which Astor cares such as kow-towing to the United States.’ The Daily Express blamed Baldwin personally for crumbling before the Americans, conceding to their demands without realising that the American press were purportedly preparing to coach their reading public into accepting universal settlement. The Express informed its readers that the Americans were readying themselves to agree to a reasonable settlement until the blundering Prime Minister ‘had in sudden fit of rashness or weakness’ agreed to settlement by which ‘Great Britain alone should pay. Finding the field abandoned in advance by the man they intended to befriend, the American editors folded their tents and retired to silent disappointment. They could not fight for a British Mission which would not fight for itself.’

The problem, so argued the Express, was not necessarily with the Americans, but with the quality of British leadership. Other than The Times, some sections of the press were becoming more and more vocal that British leaders appeared to be ‘less able than their predecessors a decade earlier’ to meet the challenges the U.S. now posed Britain, and that this lack of confidence did not bode well for the prospects of Britain protecting her leading position in the world in the face of such challenges. Had Baldwin’s Government not conceded to American demands, as they did so often on so many other issues, Britain would not be saddled with a burden on such a scale. This residual ill feeling helped fuel a wider debate as to the balance in Anglo-American exchange: What benefit did Britain draw from her repeated concessions to America’s blatantly self-serving demands over not only the

58 Daily Express 29 July 1924
repayment of the war debt, but also the Irish Question, adoption of the gold standard in 1925, trade and shipping rights or even that other long-running issue of the decade, the comparative size and calibre of their respective naval fleets which were so important for both nation’s international trade? 60 Was it really in Britain’s interests to acquiesce to American public opinion on issues so vital to her own political and economic security for the sake of maintaining Anglo-American harmony while at the same time the Americans held no reservations about invoking anti-British sentiment at home to achieve her own political or economic aims? Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain expressed his frustration in dealing with the Americans in private (Chamberlain wrote in one personal correspondence that ‘the American Government and people are living in a different continent - I might say in a different world. It is useless and worse than useless to criticise their insularity, blindness and selfishness and it is not compatible with our dignity to appear as suitors pressing for a consideration which is not willingly given’), but publicly he was still party to the concerted press campaign to ingratiate Britain to those who moulded American public opinion. 61 In 1925 and 1926 the British press, at least on high-level political issues, agreed to follow the prescribed strategy of carefully tending cordial relations with America, though not without first inserting their own criticism of the Government themselves for not holding a stronger line against American demands, portraying the real culprit for the debt burden Britain now carried as those British officials who agreed to it in the first place. Far from a unified front against ‘Uncle Shylock’, the national newspapers had instead extended the debate to Britain’s seeming inability to convincingly defend her interests against the rising tide of American

60 Aside from Anglo-American wrangling in the post-war years on wheat and rubber prices, which will be dealt with later, rum-running, or the transport of liquor into the United States after the Volstead Act prohibited its production, sale or transportation, was another trade issue that had caused tensions in the first half of the 1920s. The ruling of the Cunard v. Mellon case in April 1923, which prevented liquor from entering U.S. territorial waters, was met with ‘strong anti-American editorials’ in the British press. Foreign Secretary George Curzon declared it was ‘puritanism run mad.’ Quoted in Lawrence Spinelli, Dry Diplomacy: The United States, Great Britain, and Prohibition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 46.

political influence. It was not pure, outright anti-Americanism that fuelled such debate, but a deeper insecurity about the subordinate role Britain was unwittingly assuming toward the United States in the post-war years. This insecurity was felt most acutely in the context the economic rivalry between Britain and America; a competition in which, by the middle years of the decade, Britain was noticeably falling behind.

‘What’s wrong with British business?’: Investigations in American industrial methods

It has now become commonplace to view the First World War as a watershed in both British and world history, and this was most certainly true in terms of the economic and diplomatic relationship between Britain and American. Some onlookers predicted that, after 1918 there was ‘an Anglo-Saxon world dominion rising on the horizon’ and the question of which nation, Britain or America, would rule that dominion was still very much up for debate.  

Auckland Geddes, then-British Ambassador in Washington, wrote in 1920, ‘In my eyes the outlook is not pleasant and so far as I can see, if we cannot secure Anglo-American co-operation… we must prepare ourselves to think of a future in which we fight out with America the great question “Which is to be the leading English-speaking nation?”‘ Yet, instead of achieving the aim of joint rule over an Anglo-Saxon dominion in which Britain would play the dominant role, the two nations experienced a role reversal, at least in economic terms, that saw the beginning of a ‘long period of British financial dependence’ on the United States.

---

62 Quoted in David Dimbleby and David Reynolds, An Ocean Apart, p. 76.
64 ‘In 1914 the aggregate of British funds invested in the U.S.A. was some £800m. whilst American investment in Britain was equivalent to a mere £55m. By March 1919 British investment in the U.S.A. had shrunk to £600m. whilst outstanding American loans to Britain had risen to £1,027m. This transformation had come about as a result of the rapid growth of the positive balance of American foreign trade from $56m. in 1914 to $3,475m. in 1917.’ Philip Sidney Bagwell, G. E. Mingay, Britain and America, 1850-1939: a study of economic change (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1987), p. 240.
Differences in the scale and impact of demobilization in the two countries after 1918 certainly played a part in this imbalance - as the United States had only entered the war in the spring of 1917 American industry and agriculture had a far less sustained period of involvement in an all-out war effort. Britain, on the other hand, had experienced a massive mobilization of industry in which much of the modernization in manufacturing took place in the context of producing materials and equipment for the war, and in turn it took more effort to adapt to peacetime production. The end of the war in 1918 then marked a period of further uncertainty in Anglo-American diplomatic relations, due not only to the U.S.’s retreat from certain international responsibilities when Congress refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, but also due to the increasing ambitions of the United States as the new dominant financial and economic power. How Britain was to retain her international standing as the global centre for finance and main benefactor of the resources available across her vast empire in the face of American competition was perhaps the most pressing and constant question of the decade, and fed into a morbid fascination that some sections of the conservative press were all too happy to indulge.

Commenting on the reaction to American mass marketing methods in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century, Stefan Schwartzkopf went so far as to argue that in those first decades Britain’s ‘culture of self-observation changed into a siege mentality’, as journalists, government figures and industrialists coalesced in an effort to warn the British public of ‘the menacing activities of American industries in Britain and the danger of British consumers being enslaved by the aggressive marketing of American products.’ By the middle of the 1920s Britain was still struggling through an economic slump, plagued by labour disputes, high unemployment and low demand, while an influx of American goods in

---

both domestic and imperial markets were further restricting British growth. 67 Lord Rothermere was a leading proponent of this siege mentality, and outlined his views on the situation to Beaverbrook in 1924, warning that ‘the trade outlook in England... I think it is terrible. The purchasing power of our people will fall heavily and this will cause an advertising slump. Quite a number of papers will shut down.’ 68 Many including Rothermere blamed the outmoded state of British industry for compounding Britain’s economic problems and contributing to the instability after the post-war boom and bust; while new technologies and business methods were being tested in the U.S. to great success, major industries in Britain – steel, coal, ship building – were conducting business much as they had before the war and were losing valuable ground even within the Dominions to the American advances. Kathleen Burk explained the comparative slowdown in British industry as partly due to the different points each country inhabited in the timelines of their respective industrial revolutions. Britain had been first, but there were ‘disadvantages to being first’, most importantly a resistance to new processes and technologies. The United States also benefitted from the ‘catch-up syndrome’ by which ‘those from behind can build on the ideas and processes pioneered by the leaders and leapfrog them in the process.’ 69 In the case of Britain and America, the United States had taken over Britain’s lead in almost every key industry, and with the benefit of a much larger domestic market, was able to take advantage of the catch-up syndrome to an unprecedented degree.

The leapfrog effect was apparent to those who were there to observe it. In a personally penned Daily Mail editorial in 1925 Rothermere outlined his views on the comparative economic situations of Britain and America, declaring that ‘whoever visits the United States

68 BBK/C/283b Rothermere to Beaverbrook, May 1924.
and gets into touch, as I am doing, with the leaders of the industrial life of that great country finds himself confronted by one indisputable fact. Great Britain has already dropped so far behind the front rank of the world’s technical and scientific development that nothing short of a great national effort will enable us to catch up again.'

Such assessments weren’t confined to Rothermere’s downbeat Daily Mail editorials; leader writers, guest columnists and letters to the editor focused consistently on the twin problems of high unemployment and low consumer demand on the domestic front, and a failure to utilise the resources and consumer markets in the Empire to help bolster the British economy. ‘In almost every foreign market’, wrote one foreign correspondent for The Times in early 1926, ‘British trade was losing ground’ and the economic future looked bleak.

Perhaps the most damning assessment of Britain’s predicament came from America’s former Ambassador in London George Harvey, who wrote in the North American Review that ‘England’s period of productivity has passed. Her sole function henceforth can be none else than that of “middleman”.’

This comment, re-printed in the British press, aroused indignant cries of defence in the ‘letters to the editor’ columns of several newspapers for days afterwards.

But how to lift the post-war economic gloom that hung over Britain? The Beaverbrook and Rothermere papers pointed the finger of blame again at the Baldwin government, the ‘mis-leaders’ of the country, and the two press barons rejoiced in the potential implications: ‘Unemployment [is] certain to kill the second Baldwin Government’, Rothermere sneered privately. ‘It is doing so with lightning speed. Before the end of the year Baldwin will be one of the most – if not the most – unpopular politician in the history of Britain. Unemployment will assume startling and menacing proportions.’

Beaverbrook agreed, replying bluntly: ‘The public is satisfied that the Government is the enemy of

70 Daily Mail 15 Dec 1925
71 The Times 24 May 1926
72 The Times 8 Dec 1925
73 BBK/C/283b Rothermere to Beaverbrook June 1925
industry.” The Government was well versed in the Daily Mail’s and Express’ personal attacks on Baldwin, but duly noted a growing interest shown by the Daily Mail, Daily Express and other less hostile national newspapers in holding up the example of American economic success and her superior industrial methods in order to condemn the comparative situation in Britain. Minister of Labour Arthur Steel-Maitland wrote in the summer of 1926 that ‘considerable attention’ had been drawn to industrial conditions in the U.S. and that:

great public interest in the subject is indicated by... the fact that three newspapers have sent investigators to the United States and are making a special feature of their reports. In all these cases it has been stated, almost without qualification, that as regards systems of working, industrial relationships and the general conditions of the working classes, the position in the United States is far superior to that in this country and that there is much which could be applied here with advantage both to employers and employed.75

Reports on the state of American industry marvelled at both the productivity as well as the high living standards of her workforce. By 1925 accounts of British industrialists visiting the United States on observational tours began to fill the newspapers, some of whom were sent by the newspapers themselves. The Daily Mail sent eight British engineers to the U.S. to make their observations on American industrial conditions, and they returned with a report entitled ‘High Output and Higher Earnings. A Lesson from the U.S.’ which appeared late that year. The report provided figures for wage rates and wholesale prices that were ‘extremely suggestive and point a moral which every man in this country ought to take to heart.’ According to the Mail’s investigation, average wage rates in Britain were just 70 per

74 BBK/C/283b Beaverbrook to Rothermere 22 June 1925
75 CAB/24/180 Cabinet Memorandum by the Minister of Labour, ‘Enquiry Into Industrial Relationships in America’ 11 June 1926
cent against pre-war levels, as opposed to 128 per cent in the U.S. ‘In other words’, the Mail correspondent concluded, ‘the British workman was then slightly worse off than he was before the war [and]… the American workman was then about 75 per cent. better off.’ The great lesson to be learned from these figures, the Mail continued, was that ‘the American workman, not being nearly so restricted in his output by restrictions designed by his own trade unions to help him, is able to produce more and thus earn higher wages while at the same time, owing to large production, reducing the price of the article he produces.’ 76 The conservative press, often described as in the main to be ‘generally anti-American’ were first and foremost anti-unions, and were most often the publications with both the means and interest in sending correspondents to report on the relative harmony of the American labour situation, providing ‘enthusiastic accounts of the American economic miracle’ as a persuasive argument against socialism. With the exception of the socialist ideology of the Daily Herald, Fleet Street was in general a capitalist press, and showcasing the capitalist success of America fit well within most of the prominent Press Barons’ economic world view. 77 Far from being wholly anti-American, the conservative press reported admiringly that ‘capital and labour coexisted peacefully in America; the incipient class war confronting Britain was out of the question there.’ 78 The General Strike in 1926 seemed only to confirm Rothermere’s ‘gloomy forecasts’, and though he personally had entertained notions such as ‘Do we need a Mussolini?’ it was in the American example that the most palatable model for Britain was to be found for public consumption. 79 Dean Inge, a frequent columnist in a number of newspapers at the time, confidently reported in the Morning Post in the months

76 The figures reported were: For Britain: wage rates 150% 1920; 70% 1924 – against pre-war levels. Wholesale prices were 183% 1920; 74% 1924. For America wage rates 99% 1920 and 128% 1924. Wholesale prices were 126% in 1920 and 50% in 1924. Daily Mail, 2 December, 1925
leading up to the strike that ‘Socialism in America is nearly dead’. To read the pages of, for example, the *Daily Herald* in 1926, a newspaper that when running American news at all printed primarily correspondence from prominent American labour leaders, one would have certainly disagreed. However for the conservative press the United States offered a promising economic model for study. Following the American example might not only pull Britain out of her economic slump, but it might also save her from the Bolshevik threat amongst her workforce.

The differences in British and American industry and industrial relations were laid out for readers in terms of now-recognisable stereotypes. Britain was described as being stuck, with old-fashioned industrial methods, labour troubles and suffering from a lack of drive whereas Americans, with their boundless energy, technical and commercial innovations and their peculiar obsession with making money, were overpowering Britain in both international and domestic markets. The *Manchester Guardian* reported the findings of one ‘candid visitor’, a representative from the Drapers’ Chamber of Trade, who stated that ‘Personally I am pro-British all the time... I think we are quite as good as any in America. I think the service of stores I went into in America was deplorable, and it certainly would not satisfy our own stores. I don’t think we ‘boost’ ourselves enough in this country. We do not think enough of ourselves. We are too conservative and too reserved.’ Another urged Britons to ‘buck up’ and ‘do themselves justice. The Britisher cannot be beaten in industry, if he will only set about it’. An editorial column in the *Daily News* in 1925 argued that, ‘we are being beaten by our competitors, now that we have the field no longer to ourselves, largely because of the havoc wrought in our industries by the conservativism and lack of enthusiasm on the

---

81 *Manchester Guardian* 2 October 1927
82 *Manchester Guardian* 21 August 1926
part of owners and managers”. \(^8^3\) This sentiment was echoed in a similar feature story which appeared in the *Daily Express*, in which one businessman’s account of his American tour under the headline ‘Optimism Helps Trade. America’s Lesson for England.’ Motorcycle manufacturer Sir Harold Bowden wrote,

> I have just returned from a land in which optimism is regarded as an indispensable commercial asset to a country overwhelmed by a pall of industrial gloom... British industry to-day is encumbered with the dead wood of nineteenth century political dogmas. If the individual worker cared more for his personal possessions, he would, like the American worker, aim at buying his own motor-car and his own house, and have no time for the rhetoric of his political mis-leaders... Optimism is infectious. Let our employers cultivate it, and thereby break into that vicious circle of economic and psychological depression that is weighing us down. \(^8^4\)

The case for emulating American-style optimism was made clear by such editorials, encouraged not by anti-American sentiment, but a longing to achieve a similar transformation. Upon reading these accounts and viewing the American situation for himself, British journalist Beverly Nichols wrote a piece entitled ‘Wanted – An American Invasion’, while another journalist Sisley Huddleston declared to his readers that ‘In everything that pertains to material civilization the United States strikes me as being at least a generation in advance of Europe.’ \(^8^5\) Britain was lagging behind, but with careful study of the American system, it seemed, the answer to Britain’s economic woes could be found.

\(^8^3\) *Daily News* 30 November 1925

\(^8^4\) *Daily Express* 17 August 1926

\(^8^5\) Quoted in George Harmon Knoles, *Jazz Age Revisited* p. 38.
Trade rivalry: protectionism and retaliation

This fear that Britain might fall behind the United States was a central concern for some in Britain much earlier than the 1920s. ‘Haunted’ by fears of the decline of Britain as a world economic power, Joseph Chamberlain was to become the most prominent advocate of imperial preference aimed at consolidating closer commercial ties between Britain, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand protected by a high tariff wall. This ambition was defeated by Conservative Free Trade advocates in 1906, but the concept did not die in those years before the First World War, and by the mid-1920s the idea once again became fashionable as Britain looked to tap into the benefits of the resources and markets for manufactured goods that were not readily available at home but could be found in the Dominions. Some prominent figures in the Conservative cabinet, including Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs Leo Amery, continued the call for greater imperial economic unity throughout the 1920s as a way of counteracting the increasing dominance of the United States. Lord Beaverbrook, who’d played a minor role in Chamberlain’s Tariff Reform movement, would later revive the idea in 1929 with his Empire Free Trade crusade, which stemmed from his own personal aims of bringing British and Canadian trade closer together at the expense of the United States. 86

In 1925, however, it was becoming increasingly clear that Britain was indeed in something of a decline, while the United States was happy to ruthlessly pursue her own economic interests at Britain’s expense. This was a return to the perception of the United States as a rapacious, unprincipled economic rival that had, in part, fuelled Joseph Chamberlain’s Tariff Reform campaign in 1903, an attempt to consolidate imperial trade in

opposition to the looming American threat.\textsuperscript{87} After the refusal to negotiate on the war debts, American demands for free and open trade despite her own high tariffs, particularly the Fordney-McCumber Tariff which was passed in 1922 and generated no end of resentment in Britain throughout the decade, only caused further friction. Disagreements on commodity control over cotton, wheat, cinematographs and rubber all sparked controversy in the British and American press, and the old familial metaphors became all the more prescient. Austen Chamberlain’s accusation that Americans were living ‘in a different world’, quick to denounce her political responsibilities but always sensitive to the slightest hint of economic disadvantage like an impetuous upstart of the Anglo-Saxon family at which Britain was the head, were taken up by the editorial columns.

A prime example of this was the trans-Atlantic row over rubber prices. The war had shown rubber to be a necessary commodity for both industrial and military purposes and, when the war ended an automobile boom in America meant that the United States had become the world’s leading importer of rubber. Britain controlled around three-quarters of the world supplies with plantations in Malaya and Ceylon and, despite attempts to secure sites in Mexico and elsewhere, the United States remained at the mercy of British suppliers.\textsuperscript{88} When in the early 1920s over production caused prices to drop to a level where the costs of production were barely covered, the British Government set up an inquiry resulting in the Stephenson Plan in 1922 which curbed production and drove prices back up, from 16.3 cents per pound to $1.21 in 1925.\textsuperscript{89} Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, with the aid of tyre manufacturer Harvey Firestone, launched an angry anti-British campaign that received feverishly supportive press coverage in America with slogans invoking sentiments from the Revolutionary War. The U.S. intended to break the British monopoly that was so restrictive.

\textsuperscript{87} Frank Trentmann. \textit{Free Trade Nation} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
\textsuperscript{89} David Dimbleby, David Reynolds, \textit{An Ocean Apart}, p 99.
to American car manufacturers and Americans worked themselves up into an angry lather over the stranglehold Britain retained over the majority of world rubber. The American weekly *Liberty Magazine* depicted the United States as the ‘victim of British genius’ and told of Firestone’s efforts to establish rubber production in Liberia in order for the United States to ‘rescue herself from the monopoly across the seas.’

One American senator told Congress that ‘Great Britain has declared a trade war against the United States, taking excess prices for rubber, and supporting the Brazilian coffee monopoly. The gleeful laughter of the British has reached us. We must begin reprisals.’ As if to pick up the torch from their revolutionary forefathers, the Americans declared a trade war with Britain.

Reaction in the British press was scathing. The *Daily Mail* called the public outcry in the U.S. ‘ungenerous and unjustified’. The ‘joke’, according to the *Daily Express*, was on America: ‘It is better to be secretly envied than openly pitied. Our American friends have a keen sense of humour. The discovery of America that we can produce her tin as well as her rubber within our Empire may restore it even to Mr. Hoover. The joke is on Jonathan just as it used to be on John when he wanted dear wheat and dear cotton... The tin and rubber booms help us to pay that mountainous debt.’ The *Daily News* held a similar line, dismissing with amusement the American accusations that Britain had an unfair advantage in their rubber monopoly as ‘distinctly entertaining.’ British readers, the editorialist assumed, could not help but recall the previous occasions when the U.S. had extorted similar monopoly prices for cotton and wheat, to the serious detriment of the British economy. It would not be impolite, the editorial continued, ‘to suggest to the American business men that with these instances before them it is a little unreasonable of them to expect us to sacrifice a monopoly advantage.

---

91 *Daily News* 30 December 1925
92 *Daily Mail* 29 December 1925
93 *Daily Express* 31 December 1925
that after all has only been obtained as the result of risky pioneering and speculative investment. Apparently they are lashing themselves into impotent fury at the thought that “England is laughing at us up her sleeve.” If that is so it is at any rate the first time since the war that she has had the opportunity.’ 94 Just as Hoover recalled the spirit of 1776 in his campaign to boycott British rubber, so too did the British press recognise that the United States was calling for a trade war and duly took up arms. Despite *The Times*’ attempts to provide a soothing summary of the state of Anglo-American relations in the early days of 1926, referring to Hoover’s ‘hasty remarks’ as ‘symptoms of a temporary distortion... that affects opinion on both sides of the Atlantic’, a trade war had indeed been declared. 95

‘Boosting’ Britain’s industrial confidence would no longer be enough, and calls for protectionist measures were to become increasingly popular in many national newspapers. One letter writer to *The Times* justified the ‘Buy British’ campaigns operating in a number of British industries at the time to a nation which still subscribed to Free Trade principles by arguing that, ‘I... should hope that all convinced free traders, as I am, can give their whole-hearted support to the National Union of Manufacturers in their effort to promote the purchase of British goods... I fear that many purchasers are neither discriminating nor patriotic, and do not realize that value should be studied as well as price.’ 96 Such campaigns did have some success, as in the case of the automobile industry. One representative for Ford wrote back to the U.S. headquarters in early 1926 that ‘We have been defeated and licked in England’. The British press was blamed, again specifically citing the *Daily Mail*, which had begun ‘a direct battle against everything American... The odds against us are severe’. 97 Yet, if the impact of a policy of protectionism against American competition in the *Daily Mail*

---

94 *Daily News* 23 December 1925
95 *The Times* 07 January 1926
96 *The Times* 17 December 1925
could strike fear into the hearts of American manufacturers, they were to see retaliation to an unprecedented degree in the form of a coordinated national campaign in all the nation’s newspapers that would have an even more profound impact on the advance of American products in the British home market. In 1925 the British press formed a unified front against the American monopoly over the film trade.

**Protectionism and the British Film Industry: the defence against ‘Americanisation’**

Unlike some industries, American-made motion pictures suffered no such difficulties as those that had befallen the automobile industry. Motion pictures were indeed seen as a sort of battering ram, forcing open British markets for the influx of other consumer goods made in the U.S. One important reason American films were so successful in Britain where other products failed was the lack of domestic competition. Between 1914 and 1918 Britain’s war effort required every ounce of manpower and financial resource, and the once promising British filmmaking industry fell by the wayside - the same could be said to varying degrees of much of European cinema in general. By comparison American film production not only prospered but re-organised into a vertically integrated industry in which large scale conglomerates controlled both the production of films and at the same time owned the cinemas in which the films would be screened, thereby securing control over the distribution and exhibition in domestic and eventually international markets as well.  

Another reason was the superior quality of American films at this time, due in large part to the finance available in Hollywood to increase the quality of the productions and attract talent from all over the world. As a result, by the mid-1920s ninety-five per cent of films shown in Britain

---

98 Congress passed the Webb-Pomerone Act in 1918 it exempted the American motion picture companies from anti-trust regulations when exporting their films, in order to allow them to pursue anticompetitive business practices to dominate foreign markets, mainly in Europe. See Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, p. 289, 299.
were American, thanks in substantial part to American methods of distribution control (a practice known as block booking in which exhibitors were forced to purchase a package of films from one company in order to screen the most popular and profitable ones) securing, so warned the *Daily Mail*, an ‘octopus’ like strangle hold on British cinemagoers who numbered an estimated 20,000 each week.  

The cinema craze was a mass public experience, and inspired a devotion among film goers that revealed itself in surprising, un-British ways, whether it was fans mobbing Charlie Chaplin in 1921 when he attended the London premiere of *The Kid* or reports of a crowd of nearly 12,000 female fans flocking to the Shepherd’s Bush Pavilion in 1927 to attend the Rudolph Valentino Memorial Week after the film star’s death the year before. In view of such public interest in motion pictures nearly all the national newspapers began running regular film review columns and coverage of events in the motion picture industry early in the 1920s. Most employed their own film critic to provide a regular column – the *Daily Express* had its own influential film critic G. A. Atkinson and even *The Times* ran a daily column ‘The Film World’ as early as 1919, though J. L. Garvin at the *Observer* was less enthusiastic, declaring that ‘there will be no film column in the *Observer* as long as I am editor of the paper.’ To be sure, the views expressed in both the quality and the popular press were primarily ‘elitist’ in that these columns featured the opinions of journalists rather than reflecting public opinion as indicated by box-office figures. In a study of Americanisation and British cinema going in the 1920s, Mark Glancy has gone so far as to argue that newspapers provide ‘little guidance’ as to the popular tastes of cinemagoers and that while the national newspapers ‘increasingly discussed films during the decade, many assumed a fiercely anti-American stance, and Hollywood often served as the focus of their

---

100 *Daily Express* 26 July 1927  
scorn.’ Coupled with this limited range of opinion was the fact that, compared to the wealth of information available on cinema-going in the 1930s including audience surveys, municipal studies even an official report which appeared in 1932 entitled *The Film in National Life*, ‘the comparative dearth of materials on the 1920s suggests that cinema was held in much lower regard.’ 102 By contrast, anecdotal evidence of public opinion, as Jonathan Rose has argued, indicates a section of British society ‘enthralled’ with America, viewing American life through the medium of cinema as a sort of ‘promised land... because it promised [the working classes] a measure of freedom and affluence that [the educated elites were] not prepared to grant.’ 103 However, despite the often mismatched opinion of the actual motion pictures film critics were reviewing and readers were watching, the popularity of both Hollywood films and film review columns grew, as evidenced by the growing number of letters and readers’ opinions incorporated in the columns, and the number of film-related feature stories that made their way on to other pages of both the quality and popular newspapers of the 1920s.

While Glancy makes the important point that the national press were no accurate barometer of general public opinion on the type of films most people wanted to watch, or indeed illustrated clearly how the average British reader’s film tastes intermingled with their feelings regarding the potential threat of the Americanisation of British culture, this of course does not mean that newspapers provided nothing more than anti-American condescension. Nor did they limit their scope of criticism when it came to exploring the importance of the motion picture industry in British society. The press actually served to put the American films that audiences enjoyed into a sort of political context for their readers, raising the national consciousness of film as not just a form of mass entertainment but as a powerful

influence over national character and cohesion, of which film goers could not be passive
viewers.

The obsession with the United States as a producer and exporter of films was a key
issue in the British national debate on the defence against Americanisation in economic
terms. Lord Rothermere, for example, expressed a keen interest in the cinema, though not so
much for the entertainment of his readers as for the protection of what he saw to be a vital
British industry replete with propaganda opportunities that were being lost to the Americans.
With Rothermere’s encouragement the Daily Mail was one of the most vocal advocates in the
campaign for protectionist measures to be put in place around the British film industry in the
mid-1920s. Rothermere’s protectionist, and at times anti-American, sympathies fit easily with
the already present concern for an underachieving British film industry, and these opinions
materialised in 1925 in the form of a steady stream of columns and feature stories from his
editorial staff on the threat of American cinema. The paper frequently depicted British
cinema audiences as ‘victims’ of a concerted propaganda effort orchestrated by American
film producers, and the United States government no less, was ‘contaminating consumer
habits as well as national ideologies.’ 104 Though the issue of protection had its roots in trade
it was easily made emotive on grounds of the threat it posed to national culture and identity.
One editorial in the Daily Mail warned:

The evil of the present state of affairs is, as we have pointed out before, a
double one. An important industry is being stifled by foreign competition and
money is being sent abroad instead of being used at home, while the foreign
films that swamp our kinemas are too often of an exaggerated, alien, and

104 Haidee Wasson wrote of the Daily Mail’s ‘anti-American, protectionist’ attacks on the American film
industry in “Writing the Cinema into Daily Life: Iris Barry and the Emergence of British Film Criticism” in
undesirable nature... if children are constantly being shown films that bear no
resemblance to British conditions whatsoever, they are liable to get a distorted
view of life and to derive more harm than good from the pictures.  

Americans, for their part were ‘nearly gleeful’ over the unforeseen benefits of
becoming the world’s leading film exporter. One American journalist rejoiced at the concept
that ‘Trade Follows the Film’, going so far as to assert that American cinema ‘has awakened
desires in them for some of the things we possess. That is what has made the movie a factor
in trade and in our relationships. That is why trade begins to follow the film.’  

This theory, however, that American-made films created demand for American-made consumer goods
rested on more than just the advertising potential of the cinema, it also relied on the
Americanisation of its audiences.

The ‘New England’: the Americanisation of mass culture in 1920s Britain

A number of factors aligned to make conditions in Britain right for the creation of this
mass consumer culture by the late 1920s, or what J. B. Priestley called the ‘New England’.  

New media technology provided Britons greater access to American consumer culture
through cinema and the newly popular medium of the radio, efficiently disseminating potent
images and sounds directly from the U.S., and equally important were the improved living
standards among the lower middle and working classes, especially for young people. Most
wage-earners in these groups saw a significant rise in their real income, spending less on
necessities and retaining more disposable income than before the war. With the introduction
of the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1920 extending coverage to nearly all manual

---

105 Daily Mail, 14 December 1925
106 Saturday Evening Post, 7 November 1925, quoted in David A. Richards, ‘America Conquers Britain: Anglo-
American Conflict in Popular Media during the 1920s”, p. 98-99.
107 J. B. Priestley English Journey (London, 1934)
labourers, certainly those living in urban areas, young wage-earners from working class families were now free to carry less of their family’s financial burdens and keep more of their own pay packets to spend on leisure activities. This new freedom created the first real youth market, a powerful and desirable demographic that the popular press, if not the quality papers, attempted to woo with editorial content that catered to young people’s tastes and interests, and in this case the sheer number of cinema fans spoke clearly in the journalistic age of the capitalist proprietor. Beaverbrook, for example, who insisted he had no interest in cinema as an art form or as a potential investment interest, wasn’t about to ignore the demands of his readers. He outlined the situation clearly in a memo to staff in 1928, insisting to his editor that ‘Today’s Sunday Express… too much space is given to the Theatre altogether. There ought to be a limit to 2 columns or less imposed. Cinema should be increased… For every 10,000 who go to the Cinema, only 100 go to the theatre.’ For Beaverbrook, a strong believer in the idea that newspapers should reflect the interests of their readers, these figures spoke clearly. Whether he cared about the reasons for readers’ preference for American-made entertainment, and as a Canadian he may have had mixed feelings on the changes underway in British culture in general, he certainly cared about tapping into the interests of his readers.

Priestley famously wrote of the ‘New England’ or the ‘Third England’ that was emerging during the interwar years as belonging far more to the age itself than to this particular island. America, I supposed, was its real birthplace. This is the England of arterial and by-pass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas and dance-

108 David Fowler outlines in his study the marked increase in wages for young people aged 14 to 25 during the interwar period. Wages after the First World War went up by between 300 and 500 per cent for both boys and girls after the war, with girls and young women seeing the greatest rise in earning power. David Fowler, The First Teenagers: The Lifestyle of Young Wage-Earners in Interwar Britain (London: Woburn Press, 1995), p 111.

109 BBK/H/49 Beaverbrook to J.R. Gordon, 9 December 1928
halls and cafes, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor-coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools, and everything given away for cigarette coupons. 110

Most Britons in the 1920s were aware of this first recognised ‘wave’ of Americanisation, but many would have been made aware of the term decades before, with such sentiments making their way into print from the beginning of the century. 111 W. T. Stead wrote of The Americanization of the World in 1902, a book that anticipated many of the questions Britain would be asking just a few decades later, but in 1902 the primary threat posed by the United States was not political or cultural, but economic. In his book Stead quoted one Daily Mail journalist describing a day in the life of the average middle class Englishman as thus:

In the domestic life we have got to this: The average man rises in the morning from his New England sheets, he shaves with ‘Williams’ soap and a Yankee safety razor, pulls on his Boston boots over his socks from North Carolina, fastens his Connecticut braces, slip his Waltham or Waterbury watch in his pocket, and sits down to breakfast... where he eats bread made from prairie flour (possibly doctored at the special establishments on the lakes), tinned oysters from Baltimore, and a little Kansas city bacon, while his wife plays with a slice of Chicago ox-tongue. The children are given ‘Quaker’ oats. At the same time he reads his morning paper printed by American machines on

110 J. B. Priestley, English Journey
American paper, with American ink, and possibly, edited by a smart journalist from New York City.\textsuperscript{112}

This account was very much in tune with the way in which many, in the national newspapers and elsewhere, described what was even then being referred to as the ‘American Invasion’, but it was an invasion of American-made consumer products. Politically, the United States still held far less sway around the world than Britain, and culturally the U.S. was still very much in the shadow of Britain in terms of literature, art and other key indicators. At the time Stead was writing the concept of an ‘Americanised’ world, one in which American commercial successes translated into serious political power and cultural influence, still seemed relatively far away and the cultural and technological advances the United States had to share were by no means considered wholly negative. By the 1920s, however, the term Americanisation was used with a greater sense of foreboding. The Americanization of the World changed, according to Jessica Gienow-Hecht, from a ‘benevolent’ text to the ‘standard dictionary for anti-American complaints because... [it gave voice to] fears that America’s culture, standards, and way of life would overrun everyone else’s; that U.S. consumer products would extinguish other countries’ economies; and that a monster USA would simply devour European identities.\textsuperscript{113} Indeed, G. K. Chesterton protested the ‘passing of English life’ in the late 1920s in the pages of the Manchester Guardian, warning readers that ‘the English habit of life, the look of the English town, the whole tone of existence in this country is being altered entirely by the economic and commercial pressure of America’.\textsuperscript{114} Members of the public too seemed to enjoy submitting their observations of the Americanisation of Britain, influenced by the cinema and jazz; one

\textsuperscript{114} Manchester Guardian 17 December 1927
letter writer to the *Morning Post* complained that in his rural Derbyshire village one might observe ‘the indigenous small boy reproducing with powerful fidelity in his hours of song the syncopated nasal vulgarities so lavishly broadcast by the B.B.C., derived from Transatlantic sources.’ Moreover, though Chesterton and others may not have singled out a specific social stratum in their observations, they were clearly referring to the impact of American culture on the British working classes and, more specifically, those traditionally viewed as most vulnerable: women, children and young people. Both because of the means by which American culture seeped into British life - through the cinema, jazz and mass advertising - and because of the democratic ideals these cultural products encouraged, the educated classes regularly painted American influence and American cultural products as a threat to British national identity as well as decency.

It was in this context that the early calls for the protection of British cinema goers against the Americanising influences of Hollywood would first appear. The campaign would eventually be a success, bringing into effect the Cinematograph Act in 1927, and indeed lay the foundations for the British documentary film movement of the 1930s. Paul Swann, in his study of the documentary film movement of the interwar years, identified the movement as a reaction to the ‘colonial control’ of American motion pictures, as an attempt to project a national identity under threat of Americanisation.

The press however identified this threat and took action much earlier. The *Daily Mail* justified the measures, arguing that, ‘It is not question of ‘interfering with industry’; the issue is whether England’s soul and intellect are to be taken from her, as they will be if she is

---

115 *Morning Post* 7 January 1928
overwhelmed with alien films, representing alien ideas and habits.\textsuperscript{118} The concept of an English (or British) ‘soul and intellect’ or national character became popular in the 1920s and, according to Matthew Grimley, evolved at this time because it ‘fulfilled a number of needs. It had a didactic role, offering a way of educating a new democratic electorate in their civic duties.\textsuperscript{119} Even for the \textit{Daily Mail}, the commercial possibilities were secondary to the propaganda opportunities at stake. Cinema had, until the war years, been seen as a seemingly harmless, if vulgar, amusement, and a film’s origins relatively inconsequential; only when the medium developed into a sophisticated art form, capable of expressing complex ideals and capturing the imaginations of even the most disconnected in society and, more importantly, when the number of British cinema-goers grew dramatically alongside the equally dramatic extension of the franchise to all adult men in 1918 and all adult women in 1928, did its significance become apparent. The problem was of course, that cinema came into its own outside of Britain, and American film companies were able to develop their craft in a way that far exceeded other countries during the war years, and were able to move into the British market after 1919 with a product that took the British guardians of culture by surprise in its polish and sophistication. Suddenly Britain found herself lagging behind in this important cultural industry, and by the mid-1920s it was becoming all too apparent what was being lost.

In the space of less than a decade a significant proportion of the population regularly spent their leisure time enthusiastically following American stories, landscapes and personalities. John Grierson, who helped to establish the Film Unit for the Empire Marketing Board which was created in May 1926 and would be instrumental in helping to establish the documentary film movement in the following decade, wrote

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Daily Mail}, 2 December 1925
A practical monopoly over the dramatic strata of the common mind in which preferences, sympathies, affections and loyalties, if not actually created are at least crystallised and coloured… Cinema is recognised as having a peculiar influence on the ideological centres to which advertisement endeavours to make its appeal; this is not only because of the widespread and continuous march of the cinema, but because it is an ideal medium for all manner of suggestion… It seems that what people want more than anything of cinema is practical example and a renewal of vitality.120

The American invasion envisaged at the beginning of the century, in other words, had crept in through the cinema screen. It wasn’t just to Lord Rothermere’s jingoistic tendencies that this cause appealed, the quality papers too were equally concerned with the state of the British film industry. The merits of American films – the plots, production quality, the stars – were critiqued in the cinema listings and film reviews on the entertainment pages, but the political and cultural implications appeared in the editorial pages and in the Letters to the Editor sections, where the debate on American cinema quickly defined itself as one of international status and national identity. There was very little difference in the way a paper like The Times or the Manchester Guardian, relatively measured in their criticisms of the United States in diplomatic matters, defined the core threat of American films from the way a paper like the Daily Mail or the Morning Post, always given to more sensational scaremongering, or indeed in the way the ever singular Daily Herald defined it. Though serious competition with the cinematic output of the US was by now out of the question, the cultural importance of the dilemma was clearly laid out by both the quality and the popular press and drew much support from their readers. One letter writer complained on behalf of the readers of The Times that Britain was losing the propaganda battle to the Americans, as ‘anyone who has resided in the Colonies knows that our Colonials are becoming saturated

120 J. Grierson, ‘Notes for English Producers,’ April 29, 1927 PRO CO 760/37 EMB/C/2. Quoted in Paul Swann, The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-1946, p. 27.
with American ideas by means of the cinema screen. They see American topical until President Coolidge is more familiar to them than King George V.”

The ‘battle against American predominance’: the Cinematograph Act of 1927

The campaign the Daily Mail supported so enthusiastically actually began with a letter to the editor of The Times and the Morning Post on 20 June 1925, in which eighteen prominent figures including Lords Burnham and Riddell, Cecil Harmsworth and Mrs Philip Snowdon, called for government action to stave off the increasing dominance of American cinema. The letter explained

Important as is the commercial aspect of this problem, high national and patriotic interests are involved. No one who has followed the development of this new form of popular entertainment can be in any doubt as to the immense importance of films as a subtle means of propaganda, none the less powerful because it is indirect.  

Initial Parliamentary debate had been directed to Board of Trade President Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, but the argument from the start was clearly as cultural as it was commercial. Ian Jarvie classified the debates as having ‘less to do with art, more to do with nation building’ and the British press was instrumental in outlining the debate in these terms. It was no coincidence that those who had signed the 1925 letter requesting government action utilised newspapers like The Times and the Morning Post, both highly regarded among Conservative party members, to mobilise government legislation. The Times’ editorial page followed up the appeal a few days later, to point out that American film producers were fully aware of the political and commercial opportunities involved, which was why practices such

---

121 The Times 2 January 1925
122 The Times 20 June 1925
123 Ian Jarvie, Hollywood’s overseas campaign, p. 137.
as block-booking were so strictly enforced. The American producers, *The Times* elaborated, benefitted so decisively from their large home market that they could afford ‘with a superior smile at anything so trifling as a McKenna duty’ and were able to export as many films as could be produced on ‘clear profit... It is a loss of prestige, of influence, of opportunity, of representation in every field of human activity.’ Britain had forfeited to American film producers the power to propagate ‘versions of history, views of national character, commercial goods, and ideas’. All this was now at the mercy of this friendly rival.¹²⁴ Even the writer of *The Times’* column ‘Women’s Corner’ expressed a need for British films to be shown as positive propaganda, promoting the British way of life, concluding that

> Persons interested in calling attention to what is British instead of ceaselessly praising the foreigner at our expense must have been glad to read that more is to be done about British films...Many...do not read the papers except for sporting news, the serial story, and the fashions, according to sex - but they do go to the pictures. There they absorb the conscious or unconscious with their points of view and their standards.¹²⁵

Under pressure to take action, the Board of Trade undertook an investigation into the financial health of Britain’s film industry in early 1925, and by May of that year the issue was discussed in the House of Lords with initial questions being raised in the Commons.¹²⁶ Stanley Baldwin addressed the concern in June 1925, when he warned of ‘the enormous power which the film is developing for propaganda purposes, and the danger to which we in this country and our Empire subject ourselves if we allow that method of propaganda to be entirely in the hands of foreign countries.’¹²⁷ This was all the encouragement some sections of the press needed to blow the matter up into an out and out war against American film,

---

¹²⁴ *The Times* 23 June 1925
¹²⁵ *Sunday Times*, 20 June 1926.
allowing the issue to seep into news and feature stories as well as the editorial columns. In 1925 the *Daily Mail* stated confidently that a ‘Foreign War on the British Film’ had been declared. The *Mail*, in a typically conspiratorial turn, reported on a vote that had been carried out amongst cinema owners across the country measuring their support for restrictions on the exhibition of American-made films, with 679 voting against and 609 voting for measures to be taken. This was enough, the *Mail* argued, to give Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, President of the Board of Trade...

…every justification for taking a strong line and going ahead, since he knows that in the ballot which has just been held... almost half the exhibitors approved of special support for British film production, despite so many exhibitors are either foreigners or under foreign financial control... They are not therefore free agents nor are they acting in the interests of the British people, who, after all, have some right to be considered in the matter. We cannot as a nation afford to leave in foreign hands and under foreign control the most effective form of propaganda, such as the film undoubtedly is.\(^{128}\)

In a Cabinet Memorandum, Cunliffe-Lister agreed, writing that

I can hardly emphasize too strongly the importance of establishing a British film industry. In Great Britain and throughout the Empire, nearly every film shown represents American ideas, set out in an American atmosphere (and in American language)... cinematograph audiences everywhere are made up of the most impressionable sections of the community, and it seems to me of the

\(^{128}\) *Daily Mail* 2 December 1925
utmost importance that they should see at least some proportion of British films.\textsuperscript{129}

Throughout 1925, 1926 and the early part of 1927 the national newspapers unravelled the debate on how best to both boost the British film industry and put some sort of restrictions on the volume of American films that were making their way onto British screens. In early 1927 \textit{The Times} reported that the British film industry had made ‘some progress... in its unequal battle against American predominance' and informed readers that in the previous year British banks were showing greater interest in supporting the industry as a sign of promise. This support, \textit{The Times} urged, was of ‘national necessity. It is contended that it is, for example, through the influence of the American film that the American motor-car has secured its enormous overseas market.’\textsuperscript{130} Somewhat surprisingly G. A. Atkinson, whose often quoted remark that British cinema goers were ‘temporary American citizens’ who ‘talk America, think America, and dream America’, actually thought there was little point in protecting the British film industry until it could produce films worthy of protection, and instead argued that only once British filmmakers adopted American methods of both production and storytelling, the cause would be a lost one.\textsuperscript{131} Nevertheless, the Cinematograph Act was passed in 1927, initially requiring that British exhibitors ensure that at least 7.5 per cent of films shown were British-made, with that figure rising to 20 per cent by 1936. If nothing else, the 1927 Act, John Sedgwick has claimed, ‘at a stroke changed the risk environment facing those ambitious British producers who wished to challenge Hollywood’s domination of the British market.’\textsuperscript{132} With a more assured market, domestic film production duly rose from 96 films in 1929 to 228 in 1937, though the Act also gave rise

\textsuperscript{129} CAB/24/178 26 Feb 1926  
\textsuperscript{130} \textit{The Times} 1 February, 1927  
\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Daily Express} 18 March 1927, see also Mark Glancy, ‘Temporary American Citizens’, p. 461.  
to the Quota Quickie – cheaply produced programme fillers that, at their worst, played to empty cinema theatres. Ironically, the quota system also enabled the British film industry to develop a studio system similar to Hollywood’s, which would eventually bear fruit in the 1930s and particularly the 1940s. Though the coming of sound would renew the fears of Americanisation via cinema (the *Daily Mail* condemned the ‘talkies’ as ‘tawdry rubbish which is being foisted upon English audiences... The Americans captured the talk-films and utilised them not only to stultify the Act but also to strengthen their hold upon the supply of other films... English cinemas have become palaces of dullness’) the Cinematograph Act was a minor success and did serve an important purpose.\(^{133}\) Despite the wretched reputation of the quota films, these films did foster British talent that would flower in the coming decades, and the sharp focus on filmmaking as national propaganda helped foster interest amongst a broader section of the public, from investors to intellectuals and even to the British Government, particularly during the Second World War. This would result not least in the development of the Documentary Film movement which would produce such masterpieces in cinematic realism, turning into art the filmic depiction of the daily lives of primarily British working class people. Where the debate for the restriction of American films began with an elitist concern for their degenerate influence on working class audiences, it resulted in the formation of a creative industry keen to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of a broader and more inclusive definition of British culture as a whole.

This successful campaign, launched and unfolded in the British press, was a clear example of how newspapers joined forces to fortify one British industry against the American challenge as it materialised in the commercial as well as cultural spheres. Yet in some ways it enabled the Americanisation of some aspects of British life. The campaign called for public support and Government action to secure and develop a place for a domestic film industry to

\(^{133}\) *Daily Mail* 27 November 1929
promote British history, culture and values yet, ironically, in doing so it enabled the British
film industry to adopt Americanised methods of production and distribution as well as
encouraging the British public to seek images of British national identity through the shared
and standardised, or Americanised, medium of cinema. At the beginning of 1925 press
comment on the United States portrayed Britain as crumbling under the weight of American
economic and cultural forces; by the end of 1926 and early 1927 this mentality changed to
one of active defence against Americanisation, if not Americanised commercial systems.
However, as Anglo-American political events began to dominate the news by mid-1927, this
more aggressive stance helped contribute to a diplomatic stalemate, and an alarming
deterioration in Anglo-American relations that saw discussion of not just a trade war with the
United States, but public debate on an actual Anglo-American war.
Although I have worked here as newspaper correspondent for 14 years, I have found an England this week that was strange to me, an England whose feelings – at least those of the governing class, which is easy to sense – are difficult to explain. But it seems, at least to one observer, that the Coolidge pronouncement, though of course isolated, signalises a new difficulty and possibly a dangerous era in Anglo-American relations.  John L. Balderston, *New York World* 1928

News coverage on American affairs in early 1927 followed a pattern similar to that of the previous years. It was dominated primarily by news and commentary on American commercial activities, the build-up to the Cinematograph Act, and general interest stories including the ever-present accounts of British implications in rum-running in the Caribbean, American criminal court cases, features on American movie actors and coverage of the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, of which the *Daily Herald* ran the headline in August 1927 ‘Vanzetti and Sacco For Chair of Death’, and the newspaper went on to describe the thousands of onlookers waiting to hear the verdict ‘while the condemned men were sleeping peacefully in their cells... They were not awakened to hear the news.’ 134 There was also the story of Charles Lindbergh’s flight across the Atlantic, after which the newly crowned American hero was met by jubilant crowds and the U.S. flag, symbolically ‘hoisted over the Quai d’Orsay – the

134 *Daily Herald* 5 August 1927
first time in history.’ 135 Appearing that same year was the somewhat laughable story of Chicago Mayor ‘Big Bill’ Thompson, in an obvious appeal to the Irish vote in the city, attempting to prevent one school superintendent from ‘subverting pure-minded American youth to the damnable errors of British propaganda’ in the history books that facilitated their lessons. 136 The Observer rather flippantly referred to Thompson’s call to burn the offending material on the shores of Lake Michigan as the ‘Anti-British Comedy in Chicago’, but the bitter sentiment that was so evident in even this overtly ridiculous episode was indicative of the difficulties Britain would face in the coming months. 137

American news of this type continued up to the summer of 1927, and included Baldwin’s official tour of Canada which Britain had for years feared to be the vulnerable soft spot of the Commonwealth’s defence against the threat of Americanisation, and where the question of economic union with the Empire or with Canada’s ‘cousins to the South’ was now being discussed. 138 Baldwin was adamant that imperial ties be maintained, writing in a private correspondence that,

I made up my mind to go because something had to be done to counteract the poisonous stream of propaganda emanating from America... making out that England is decadent, played out, and not to be considered in a new world of he-men.... I was lucky enough to ‘get across’ - a vulgar but expressive idiom - and I know it has done good. 139

Baldwin was met with a warm reception in Canada, and returned to congratulations from colleagues on the success of the visit, but the tour was ultimately overshadowed by the

---

135 The Times 23 May 1927
136 Manchester Guardian 22 October 1927
137 Observer 23 October 1927
138 The Times 6 June 1928
more pressing concerns over the deterioration of diplomatic relations with the United States. The visit had in fact originally included stops in both Washington D.C. and New York, both of which were cancelled after the failure of the Three-Party Naval Conference in Geneva pushed already fragile Anglo-American relations further into outright hostility. As the conference came to a faltering end due to the inability of the American and British delegates to agree terms, many in the British Government blamed the U.S. administration, and the U.S. certainly blamed Britain for the failure, and several months of ‘barely concealed anti-American feeling’ followed in the British national press.¹⁴⁰

The British press had viewed the challenges posed by the United States as primarily economic in the first half of the 1920s, but by 1927 the press, along with British policy-makers, focused their attentions on the newly realised political muscle the United States was flexing in areas vital to Britain’s international standing - primarily and most importantly the push for American naval supremacy. Britain had made repeated concessions to the United States on a number of political and economic issues since 1918; settlement of the war debts had meant forsaking one of the mythical ‘pillars’ of British power, namely her role as a world creditor. Now American ambitions to build a navy on the scale of Britain’s were threatening the second pillar, Britain’s naval supremacy, and the concept of relinquishing this symbol of British international power status in order to secure so little consideration from the U.S. in return was difficult for many to rationalise. Winston Churchill outlined his view in a Cabinet memorandum at the end of 1928, writing that

however may have been done at enormous cost and sacrifice to keep up friendship is apparently swept away by the smallest little tiff or misunderstanding, and you have to

¹⁴⁰ Though Baldwin’s speeches were met by enthusiastic crowds, the tour was ‘diminished by this coldness with the United States.’ John Barnes, Keith Middlemass. *Baldwin* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 372.
start again and placate the Americans by another batch of substantial or even vital concessions.¹⁴¹

In book *The American Illusion*, British journalist Collinson Owen echoed this sentiment the following year, claiming that in Britain, ‘the ideal of Anglo-American friendship is our chief political aim, and to secure it England has made every possible variety of concession since the war, mainly in the name of an American idealism of which we hear much but of whose practical application we see little.’¹⁴² The confidence the United States had displayed so aggressively on the economic front in the middle years of the decade seemed to finally, by 1927, extend to the arena of high politics. Anti-British feeling in America seemed to swell at the slightest provocation and the American government, egged on by her national press, had set Britain and its navy in her sights as the main obstacle in achieving economic superiority.¹⁴³

Though historians have traditionally characterised the eighteen months following the Geneva Naval Conference in the summer of 1927 as a time in which harmful anti-American rhetoric in the British press was a constant threat, this does not constitute a full account of the public discussion on the American question as it appeared in Britain’s national newspapers at this time. The British press in fact took on some of the burden of reaching out to her American counterparts in an effort to improve transatlantic interchange. The *Observer*, for example, led the appeal for a more pragmatic assessment of American naval demands for the sake of closer political union with the United States, and many of the other national newspapers elaborated on this argument to varying degrees, with comment in the editorial pages emphasising for readers the vital importance of prioritising friendly relations with the

¹⁴³ David Richards. ‘America Conquers Britain: Anglo-American Conflict in the Popular Media during the 1920s.’ p. 97.
United States over maintaining naval supremacy for its own sake. Corelli Barnett has emphasised the influence a ‘constellation of moralising internationalist cliques, each with its ideas-peddlers, its contact men in high places, and its tame press’ had on the British Government during the naval debate of the late 1920s. It was opinion formers such as Lord Cecil, Gilbert Murray, Kingsley Martin, and their links with national newspapers including *The Times*, the *Observer* and the *Manchester Guardian*, whose calls for Anglo-American accord above all else that became the overriding theme of national debate.  

While the staunchest imperial isolationists resented the American naval challenge, the Atlanticists stressed the need for Anglo-American cooperation to secure stability in Europe. Significant advances made by these Atlanticists in the national press changed the expected parameters of debate on the American naval challenge in late 1927 and early 1928, and this chapter will examine the way in which the British national press began to attempt, more seriously than ever before, not only to understand the underlying motives and political culture of the United States but how this understanding was vital for the two nations to successfully achieve an amicable partnership. This shift in national priorities marked an important point at which the perceptions of Britain’s place on the global stage changed during the interwar years, and such press comment attempted effectively to replace in British minds the pillars on which the nation’s power rested. No longer the world’s foremost creditor nation and now facing a new threat to her existing naval supremacy, British power and security, so the discussion went, now rested on yet a different pillar – Anglo-American cooperation.

The Geneva Naval Conference and the decline in diplomatic relations

When President Coolidge instructed his ambassadors in London, Paris, Rome, and Tokyo in February 1927 to present their respective governments with the invitation to the Preparatory Commission for the Disarmament Conference at Geneva, *The Times* reported the invitation as an opportunity for the parties ‘to negotiate and conclude at an early date an agreement further limiting naval armament, supplementing the Washington Treaty... and covering classes of vessels not covered by that Treaty.’ France and Italy would eventually decline, but Great Britain and Japan accepted the invitation with the intent to resolve issues that remained from the previous Washington Naval Arms Limitation Conference in 1921 which had restricted capital ships to a ratio of 5:5:3 for the United States, Britain and Japan respectively, but left open a number of questions around limitations on smaller cruiser vessels and guns. The stated purpose of the Geneva Conference in 1927 was to decide limitations on the number and tonnage of cruisers, destroyers, submarines and auxiliary craft, and Coolidge announced that he planned to bring the parties together to effectively outline disarmament terms that would help to prevent another arms race which he considered to be ‘one of the principle causes of international suspicion and ill will’. However, by the time the delegates set about their preparations for Geneva the agenda had been overcome by the aggressive, nationalistic ‘Big Navy’ lobbyists in the U.S., and the Americans were now pushing for an expanded cruiser fleet to bring them to full treaty limits.

The United States had come out of the war in 1918 determined to protect her trade interests from the interference they had suffered during the conflict, and many in the United States, most notably a collection of politicians, industrialists and naval figures who constituted the Big Navy party, pushed for a more powerful American navy that could

---

146 *The Times* 11 February 1927
withstand disruptions from any potential future European conflicts. The most significant obstacle to American naval ambitions, however, was Britain, to whom the United States was obliged not to exceed the level of parity. The Americans, once so convinced, were confident they could achieve their demands despite British hesitation to enter a programme of ship building; but while Britain was loathe to relinquish naval primacy to the Americans, in the context of the financial straits in which she still found herself in 1927 a major programme of increased ship building was out of the question. It was to be a difficult task for the British delegation to negotiate cruiser limits that might enable the Americans to feel they were achieving their naval ambitions without obligating Britain to a costly building programme she could ill afford, and despite this contradiction of purpose, hopes in both the United States and Britain had initially been high. In the U.S., the Washington Conference had been assumed by some to be a new era of partnership between Britain and America to keep peace in the Pacific, guarding against Japanese ambitions of expansion. As far as Britain was concerned, after 1918 her naval relationship with Japan was at a crossroads. Japan had become a less attractive ally and in 1921 at the Washington Conference Britain decided that, in the choice between a ‘conservative Japan and the more liberal and internationalist United States’, an American alliance was considered the more palatable. 148

The proposals brought forward reflected the differing territorial and economic aims and responsibilities of the two nations. The United States needed larger vessels with 8-inch guns in order to effectively manage long journeys across the Pacific, now having been barred from fortifying naval bases in the Far East. The more hard-line naval interests in the U.S. were also pushing for an expanded fleet of cruisers based, according to some Anglophobe Big Navy advocates, upon ‘an anticipated war with Great Britain’, in order to ‘prevent

England and Japan from uniting against us on our side of the oceans. Britain wanted to maintain a larger fleet of light cruisers to patrol imperial trade routes to maintain communication and food supplies across the Empire. The importance of an agreement that would secure British naval requirements was crucial, and some members of the Baldwin Government sought support, particularly from their ‘confidential advisor and superior civil servant’ Geoffrey Dawson at The Times. The Foreign Office had anticipated that careful management of press comment in both countries would be required, with the Hearst press in America and the Beaverbrook and Rothermere press at home posing the biggest threat to the proceedings. Robert Cecil, Lord Cecil of Chelmswood, wrote to Dawson in the spring of 1927 on his preparation of an armaments limitation draft plan for the upcoming conference, asking that the editor support his cause,

If... there is no disarmament agreement that means fresh competition and eventual war under conditions which seem to me almost certainly fatal to the British Empire. Whether we succeed or fail turns on public opinion + in this as in other matters British public opinion leads the world. ...I need not say of what value the help of The Times will be if it can be given.

This influence, however, could not be exerted over the American press which in the days and weeks before the conference were viewing Britain with suspicion, and it was becoming apparent that British journalists would need to present comment on the naval conference with caution. According to the Daily Express’ American Correspondent, American public opinion towards the British and their challenge to American naval ambitions was ‘becoming slightly ridiculous. It is absurd when you meet an American from the Middle

---

150 Francis Williams, ‘Challenge by the Press Lords’, p. 176.
151 MSS. Dawson 72, Robert Cecil to Geoffrey Dawson, 12 March 1927
West to find that the first question he asks you is, “what about these cruisers?” 152 While the British press had been able to afford to brush aside the American habit of invoking the ‘Spirit of 1776’ in previous years when the only issue at stake was the comparatively less important issue of rubber prices, the use of such imagery when navigating an issue like naval competition was dangerous to say the least.

The British delegates at first had been prepared to concede on some issues, though Churchill led a charge against the concessions, expressing to the Cabinet that, ‘there can really be no parity between a power whose navy is its life and a power whose navy is only for prestige... It always seems to be assumed that it is our duty to humour the United States and minister to their vanity. They do nothing for us in return but exact their last pound of flesh.’ 153 Initial proposals were not successful and the conference was suspended for ten days to allow both parties to re-submit slightly altered proposals. The second round of proposals was again unsuccessful, and after a total of six weeks of wrangling no agreement had been reached on the cruiser question. The British naval delegates ultimately would not relinquish naval superiority while the Americans would not accept anything other than full parity, and Lord Cecil, disillusioned with the failure of the conference to achieve its initial disarmament aims, resigned. Much had actually been accomplished, including agreement over auxiliary craft, submarines and destroyers, but agreement over limits on cruiser tonnage and gun calibre between the American and British delegates proved impossible and the delegates left with no compromise, leaving the two countries in a diplomatic and naval ‘deadlock’. 154

During that time Dawson had been in private discussions with the Government, most notably William Bridgeman, First Lord of the Admiralty, who revealed the ill feelings toward the Americans amongst the some of the British delegation, confiding to Dawson that ‘we

152 Daily Express 27 June 1927
have put forward the only practical proposals, and if they [fail] to come to any agreement no
right-minded man in the world will put the blame on anyone but [the] U.S.A...’ and that the
Americans were ‘so disgustingly rich that they care little what they spend’, and therefore
from the outset the Americans had never had genuine intentions of anything other than
forcing Britain into an impossible situation. Privately Dawson was sympathetic to this
view, yet publicly, comment in The Times performed its duty in managing public opinion on
behalf of the Government, assuring Britons that the ‘failure to frame an acceptable formula
does not indicate a spirit of antagonism between the three Powers... There will doubtless be a
good deal of irritated talk about the Conference for some time, but responsible opinion in
America will not encourage recriminations.’ These efforts, however, had been
overwhelmed by nearly all other sections of the press, who welcomed the delegates home not
with anti-American recriminations as Lord Cecil and those at the Foreign Office had feared,
but with bitter scorn for their part in further injuring already delicate diplomatic relations and
fostering an atmosphere and situation in which the possibility of an arms race with the United
States loomed, further injuring already delicate diplomatic relations.

The Manchester Guardian declared the Admiralty ‘unteachable’ and condemned the
delegates’ ‘wicked and unpardonable denial of friendship which exists between two peoples,
a grave threat to the good international relations upon which security and peace depend, and a
political blunder of the first order’. The Daily Herald also blamed the Admiralty, though
from an alternative viewpoint, arguing that ‘disarmament is a question not for military or
naval experts, but for statesmen. That is one of the lessons – learned long ago by the Labour
Movement – which the failure of Geneva may help to ram home... The way to disarmament is

155 MSS.Dawson 72 William Bridgeman to Geoffrey Dawson, 1 July 1927
156 The Times 5 August 1927
157 Manchester Guardian 30 July 1927
the way of Socialism.\textsuperscript{158} The *Daily Express* added to the criticism of the Admiralty’s attempts to compete with the Americans, stating that,

There would be no harm if the Foreign Office were to speak to Washington in the following sense: - ‘Build as large a fleet as you please – we shall not worry. Have parity at sea with us by all means if you want it – the stronger you are the more we shall welcome it.... A dispute between the two countries over the size of their respective navies would be as ridiculous as if two friendly neighbours, with the best reasons for keeping on good terms with one another, were to quarrel over the number of their fire extinguishers.\textsuperscript{159}

If Britain and America were to share joint responsibility in patrolling the oceans in a new Anglo-Saxon world dominion, it mattered not, so the argument went, whether the Americans had naval parity with Britain or not. After the conference the *Express* continued along the same line, pointing to

a fact on which Americans may like to ponder is that the British people would not care a button if America were to build a fleet five times as strong as the British Navy. They have wiped an Anglo-American war off the slate as impossible and unthinkable, and in their estimates of the naval strength required for safeguarding the trade routes they never take the American Navy into account.\textsuperscript{160}

Despite the Admiralty’s insistence on the continuation of British naval superiority, and with Churchill purported to be in the midst of one of his anti-American phases, many of the leading national newspapers showed a great deal more willingness to entertain the idea of giving up Britain’s naval supremacy. Though their reasoning, which varied from paper to

\textsuperscript{158} *Daily Herald* 5 August 1927
\textsuperscript{159} *Daily Express* 5 August 1927
\textsuperscript{160} *Daily Express* 27 July 1927
paper, was also to lend support to popular disarmament aims of the British public as well as the reluctance to increase expenditure at a time of economic difficulties, it was ostensibly for the sake of securing good diplomatic relations with the United States that the British press condemned the Admiralty’s failure to secure some sort of an agreement at Geneva. Whether the British navy was still held by the public in the same regard as it was by the Admiralty is debatable, but the national press were clearly redrawing the list of national priorities for their readers on the naval question. The Admiralty were portrayed as outright villains in the Manchester Guardian and Observer, and were given small consideration in the popular press including in the lead editorials of the Daily Mail, Daily News and Daily Express insofar as their role in furthering the potential threat of a costly arms race with the U.S. Only the Morning Post defended the British right to her tradition of naval supremacy; but as the famous quip went, no cause was truly lost until the Morning Post supported it.  

161 As further diplomatic disputes relating to the naval question arose in the next twelve months, the question of where Anglo-American cooperation fell in Britain’s list of priorities would again come to the fore in the national press.

The time had come, so it appeared, when British naval superiority could no longer be a foregone conclusion. Should Britain try to dictate what should be considered a ‘necessity’ or a ‘luxury’, the United States would most certainly resent it. Then the Americans, the Observer warned, ‘may well build a supreme fleet – and, as a shrewd American recently put it, they will never forgive us for having (as they will think) goaded them into doing it’. The editorial went further, urging Britain to again, as in the case of the war debt controversy, to adopt the role of the responsible elder statesman because the ‘preservation of peace and the development of Western civilisation depend in large measure upon British and American cooperation. As difficult as the ongoing dispute with the United States was turning out to be,

161 Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, p. 239
Britain’s stake in the matter was so immense, she could not afford to run the risk of ‘not being understood by the people of the United States.’ 162

The Government, the press and public opinion: Anglo-American war?

As the competitive nature of the economic aspects of the Anglo-American relationship had begun to turn transatlantic press comment toxic in the early and mid-1920s, it was feared that the increasingly hostile rhetoric would spill over into political affairs, making diplomatic relations with the United States all the more fraught with potential dangers. To this end the Government now intensified its interest in the way the press handled the American naval question. As Philip M. Taylor has explained in his study of British publicity and propaganda in the interwar period, the role of newspapers as instruments of political power changed significantly with the advent of the First World War, during which public opinion had become an ‘increasingly important consideration in the formulation of official policy with the broadening base of political power.’ 163 By the end of the war an ‘elaborate machinery had been constructed’ involving the Foreign Office News Department, Lord Beaverbrook’s Ministry of Information and Lord Northcliffe’s enemy propaganda department at Crewe House, and though much of this network was dismantled after the war, the publicity and propaganda duties that remained were handed instead to the Foreign Office. It was the view in the Foreign Office that, as the national press provided so accessible an image of British public life and opinion for outside observers that, ideally, close cooperation between Fleet Street journalists and the Government would provide a deliberate, coherent and harmonious national profile that would make diplomatic relations easier to manage.

162 Observer 25 December 1927
B. J. C. McKercher has credited the efforts of the Foreign Office with the successful management of press comment after the failure at Geneva, helping to avoid an ‘Anglo-American press war.’ Yet, despite the British press’s relatively measured response, and perhaps because of the surprising turn on the British delegates themselves, official fears of a transatlantic ‘shouting match’ and the risk of this contributing to an escalated arms race between the two countries were not soothed. In fact, while the naval conference was still underway in July 1927, the British Ambassador to Washington, Esme Howard took this concern to US Secretary of State Frank B Kellogg, suggesting that the idea of a public education campaign be carried out in the British and American press as to the ‘absurdity of contemplating the possibility of war between the United States and the British Empire’. Kellogg referred Howard to Herbert Hoover who, after Coolidge’s announcement that he did not ‘choose to stand’ in the 1928 Presidential election, was now viewed as a potential front-runner on the Republican ticket. Hoover also had a long-standing interest in Anglo-American relations despite his involvement in stoking Anglo-American animosity during the rubber controversy, and agreed to further discussions with Howard. When the two met to discuss the proposed press campaign, they let the subject of their meeting fall by the wayside and managed also to discuss and hypothesise on potential strategies ‘each side would adopt in the event of war.’ The meeting, having veered so dramatically off course, seemed only to achieve the opposite of its intended effect. The Foreign Office advised Howard that such a propaganda campaign would likely be too heavy handed, and Howard demurred, conceding that it would ‘most probably only be oil on the flames of the fire-eating jingo and others who make the public insist on more and more armaments... it is certainly better dropped’, though he still insisted, something remained to be done to contain the ‘really dangerous

causes of friction that might lead to war’.\footnote{Howard to Sir William Tyrell, 12 October 1927, Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939, p. 385-86.} Howard took the Foreign Office’s advice, but speculation on his meeting with Hoover, and whether it was a warning sign that an Anglo-American war was no longer ‘unthinkable’, spread throughout the Cabinet and by November was being discussed openly in the press and the debate became public.

Just months after the Howard-Hoover meeting, as if to reinforce these fears, a book entitled \textit{Will Civilisation Crash?}, written by James Kenworthy M.P., was published in October 1927 outlining the recent failings of the Government to secure agreement over naval disarmament and the renewed threat of conflict, this time with the United States in particular. Britain and America were ‘heading straight for the same tragedy as 1914’, he claimed. Kenworthy had sent the initial proofs of his book to Churchill for his comments, to which he received the reply, ‘I find them most interesting and even startling. In fact they seem to me to bristle with grave statements upon the most dangerous and explosive topics. I should think myself it was no service to peace to dwell morbidly upon the nightmares of future wars’.\footnote{Martin Gilbert, \textit{Winston S Churchill, Companion Vol V pt 1: 1922-29}, p. 1041 (Churchill papers: 18/44 3 Aug 1927)} Luckily the press did not give much credence to this argument, and upon its release the \textit{Daily Express} quipped, ‘If the world’s hair does not stand on end – and the Englishwoman’s hair in particular – it will not be the fault of Commander Kenworthy, M.P.’\footnote{\textit{Daily Express} 28 October 1927.} However, in November of that year a meeting of policy-makers, academics and industrialists ominously named the Conference on War Danger was held at Westminster and was openly discussed in the British press which further drove home the concept that an Anglo-American war, if implausible, was not ‘unthinkable’. The \textit{Manchester Guardian} reported one attendee’s remarks that ‘America does not get a fair deal’ in Britain, while another ‘took the line that America was the most ruthless and imperialistic of nations, and... constituted a great danger in the event of future wars.’ One delegate warned that, should there be another world war ‘the
United States will not be on the same side as England.\textsuperscript{170} And while commentators such as Reverend R. J. Campbell pleaded for Britain to ‘go to arbitration a thousand times and lose rather than go to war’, it was clear that the ‘unthinkableness’, as the \textit{Daily News} described it, of an Anglo-American war no longer ‘fit the facts’.\textsuperscript{171}

Colonel Pope-Hennessy wrote from Washington to General Charles at the War Office in late 1927 that the failure at Geneva had prompted ‘considerable comment in the Press’ in the United States on ‘freedom of the seas’ that was hostile to Britain. He continued,

\begin{quote}
It is not correct to say that war between Great Britain and the United States is “unthinkable” since, in certain circumstances, such a conflict is not only possible but even probable; those circumstances being the application by Great Britain of her historic policy of blockade when at war with a third party, while the United States is a neutral as regards the original quarrel, since the United States is determined to maintain “the freedom of the seas”.\textsuperscript{172}
\end{quote}

As it was restrictions on U.S. trade that ultimately brought America into the last war, Pope-Hennessy was convinced that further interference in U.S. naval building could incite anger enough to rouse the United States to war once again with the country that invoked that interference, namely Britain. Though he ruled out the possibility of the U.S. and the British Empire being parties to the original quarrel at the centre of a conflict, he saw a very real possibility in America joining the opposing side in a future conflict if she saw it in her own economic interests to do so. It was feared that while those in the British government may have regarded this as fratricide, the American public with its politically prominent Anglophobe Irish and German communities and recent history of invoking anti-British sentiments in order to rally public opinion (as in the example of the rubber controversy),

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Manchester Guardian} 25 November 1927 \\
\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Daily Express} 1 April 1929, \textit{Daily News} 18 November 1928 \\
\textsuperscript{172} Pope-Hennessy to Charles, 10 October 1927, \textit{Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939}, p. 390-91.
\end{flushright}
would not have felt the same. Robert Vansittart believed it was the German-Americans who were the driving force behind America’s success, and went further, drawing a worrying parallel with Anglo-German relations in the lead up to the previous war. He wrote in October 1927:

When therefore a sincere and thinking Anglophile like [U.S.] General Preston Brown says that war with this country is not only not ‘unthinkable’ but ‘probable’, he speaks with understanding. War between the two countries would now be the most criminal in history; but a set of circumstances is not ‘unthinkable’ in which such a war might be something more ‘probable’. It is time to effect a revaluation.  

Talk of the Anglo-American naval deadlock would last well into 1928 and 1929, and the Big Navy party in the U.S. became a byword in the British press for nationalistic American naval ambitions. The Americans, so the British press understood, could afford to be as aggressive as they wished in their calls for increased naval power even if Britain could not afford that luxury. In December 1927 Coolidge issued his Message to Congress announcing forthcoming plans for further naval spending, on which the *Daily News* observed: ‘The one solid fact which emerges from President Coolidge’s Message to Congress is that America is very rich.’ Britain could effectively call the bluff of American naval ambitions, the editorial added, and that there was nothing to stop the United States from building as many ships as she liked except, it was hoped,  

the common sense of the American taxpayer, who has been rather rigorous in his scrutiny of this sort of expenditure in the past and is not likely to be less so in the future. It has generally proved a popular and easy thing to launch a big

---


78
navy programme in the States; and a much less popular and easy thing to pass the Bill to pay for it. So far as this country is concerned the number of ships which America chooses to build is no concern of ours.\textsuperscript{174}

One letter writer the next day remarked on the remote, aloof quality of the Coolidge message, writing that, ‘President Coolidge’s message to Congress reads oddly like a message from Mars. It has at once the sublime detachment and the supervisory benevolence that are the imagined attributes of superior beings on another planet, looking at the Earth across the gulf of inter-stellar space.’ \textsuperscript{175} Did Coolidge not understand the political responsibilities the U.S. had now acquired as the foremost economic power in the world? The task for Britain, it now seemed, was not to alienate the United States further, but to convince her of the impracticability of her isolationist stance if Britain’s hopes for international stability were to be realised.

\textbf{Further difficulties: the Kellogg Pact and the Anglo-French agreement}

It was at this point that the United States made an unexpected contribution to international diplomacy, which would try the patience of even those in the British press who were willing to appeal to the vanity of the Americans for the sake of improved relations. During the lead up to the Geneva Conference in June 1927, a story announcing the draft of an ‘American Locarno’ appeared in \textit{The Times}, giving the first news of the plans for the Kellogg-Briand Treaty to outlaw war.\textsuperscript{176} By the beginning of 1928 Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain was met with the challenge of how to manoeuvre the diplomatic obstacle course that U.S. Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg and French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand

\textsuperscript{174} \textit{Daily News} 7 December 1927
\textsuperscript{175} \textit{Daily News} 8 December 1927
\textsuperscript{176} \textit{The Times} 1 June 1927
had assembled, effectively intending to outlaw war as ‘an instrument of national policy’ with
the formalisation of the pact, an admirable but entirely unenforceable concept. Chamberlain’s
first instinct was to handle the treaty with suspicion, writing to Esme Howard in early 1928
that he did not ‘think that there is any reality behind Kellogg’s move... Kellogg’s main
thought is not of international peace but of the victory of the Republican Party. It is one more
instance of the common practice of the State Department to use foreign politics as a pawn in
the domestic game.’ Baldwin too, was privately unimpressed by the Kellogg proposal, as
one Conservative colleague recalled. Upon advising him of a League of Nations
representative’s view that Britain should take advantage of the political capital on offer with
the signing of the Kellogg Treaty, ‘as usual’, he remembered, ‘all I got in reply was a violent
attack on the Americans. “They are a hundred years behind us politically,” etc.’ In fact
Kellogg himself held no real enthusiasm for the pact, other than to curry favour with what he
referred to as the ‘goddamned pacifist’ lobbies that were enjoying increased political leverage
in mid-twenties America. Chamberlain and most others recognised this fact from the start,
though also recognised the unfortunate light in which Britain would find herself should she
not agree to sign such a treaty.

Those commenting in the British press, however, were in no way in agreement with
regards to the treaty, and while many of the more right-wing publications were openly
disdainful of just what the treaty or such cooperation with the United States offered, some of
the left-wing national publications looked at the signing of the Pact as an Anglo-American
alignment that would be symbolically important to the promotion of world peace, regardless
of the worth of the treaty itself. The coverage, which lasted until the signing of the treaty in

178 Thomas Jones, 8 February 1928 in Keith Middlemass, ed. Thomas Jones, Whitehall Diary: Vol 2, 1926-1930
August 1928, again brought into question the benefits of appealing to the political vanity of the United States as well as the reliability of America as a future ally. After the talks at the end of 1927 on the possibility of war with America, for many any sort of act that would show cooperation and solidarity was welcome, even if it was a treaty that most admitted wasn’t worth the paper it was written on.

The treaty received little support in the editorial leaders of the *Morning Post*, which was perhaps the most forthright in its criticism of American motives behind the pact, and frequently enjoyed pointing out the hypocrisy of an American proposal to end international aggression. ‘Although it is found impossible to hold a municipal election in Chicago without a certain amount of shooting,’ the *Post* jeered, ‘violence between nations is obviously obsolete, barbarous, and unnecessary’. In the lead up to the 10-year anniversary of the Armistice, the *Post* was against Britain signing up to what was perceived to be an American-penned condemnation of Britain’s effort in the Great War, and was only too willing to point to the irony of the occasion. ‘It is a little unfortunate that the State Department should have chosen... a moment when armed forces from the United States are engaged in the forcible suppression of Nicaraguan “bandits.”’  The *Daily Mail*, though more moderate in its criticism later in the year, agreed that the treaty proposal was ultimately grandiose nonsense. For a nation famed for its gangsters, bootleggers and Tammany Hall corruption to attempt to dictate to the rest of the world terms by which their political conflicts should be resolved smacked of hubris, but in the current political context not all commentators in the press were keen to point this out.

At the other end of the spectrum however, the *Observer* viewed the pact as vital to good relations with America, which were in turn vital to nothing less than securing

---

180 *Morning Post* 23 April 1928
181 *Morning Post* 6 January 1928
182 *Daily Mail* 27 August 1928
international peace. While H. A. Gwynne used the *Morning Post* as a platform to warn against the dangers of ‘disarming too far’, J. L. Garvin saw the pact as a symbol for closer Anglo-American cooperation and disarmament. As Chamberlain was still considering the pact, Garvin wrote that:

> The fundamental and unchangeable principle of the British peoples is that good relations with the American people shall come first, eliminating absolutely every possibility of war with the United States. It is infinitely important that our French friends and every other country in Europe and Asia should realize how finally and impregnably fixed is this principle, and the hopelessness of imagining that it can be modified in any conceivable circumstances... You can no more secure world-peace at Geneva without Washington than you can irrigate the waste places of the earth by working a parish-pump.

Garvin’s biographer David Ayerst wrote of the editor’s faith in the United States, that ‘Anglo-American concord was still for him “a feeling like the twin of patriotism”’, though added that he was still realistic about the prospects, understanding that most Americans did not share this feeling. The *Daily Express* too supported the treaty. Beaverbrook, informed that ‘the treaty would bind the signatories only not to go to war with one another, not to abstain from any war’, was sufficiently assured of the relatively harmless nature of the Pact and advised in a memo to his editorial staff that the Kellogg Treaty ‘should be supported by the *Daily Express* provided the Dominions agree to sign too.’

---

184 *Observer* 13 May, 1928.
186 BBK/B/28 Robert Dell to Beaverbrook, 17 March 1928, BBK/H/48 Memo to staff.
Debate on the signing of the Kellogg Treaty was a major thread in British press coverage of America up to the signing of the treaty in August, but in October 1928 a new crisis appeared that blew the naval debate open further. In August of that year information was leaked to Hearst correspondent Harold Horan detailing secret naval discussions between Britain and France in preparation for their next session at the League of Nations Preparatory Disarmament Committee with no formal warning to either Germany or the United States. The story broke in the American press that October, much to the horror of Washington, Berlin and indeed the Foreign Office in London, rumours circulated that it was Hearst himself who secured the document by covert methods and passed it on to Horan to leak to his American publications. Horan was arrested and later released by French police just as the story broke, bringing into full view the panic the leak had caused. 187 In the United States Austen Chamberlain, who had been managing the British side of the negotiations, was accused of being too pro-French and, alongside his perceived hesitation in removing the last British troops from the Rhineland, public opinion turned against him and press criticism in Britain, France, Germany and the U.S. mounted. Robert Cecil paid him the back-handed compliment that he had ‘achieved the nearly impossible feat’ of uniting public opinion simultaneously in all four countries, even if it was united only against Chamberlain himself. 188

It was true, the Anglo-French agreement was revealed to the British public via the Hearst press and it was put to the British press to question the government’s motives for such covert action after this revelation. All the while the agreement still remained officially ‘secret’. Thomas Jones wrote in his diary that, ‘Our people do not know what is involved in the tentative agreement with France, It has neither been published nor explained. The Americans will mislead our public still further as to the meaning of our conversations with

---

the French. The Government was put on the defensive, with all sides of the press wondering how such an incident could occur. The Daily Express’ editor Ralph Blumenfeld reflected on the confused state of affairs in a correspondence to Beaverbrook a month earlier of a conversation with Robert Vansittart, who had informed him that there was no secret agreement with France, that ‘there was no prospect of a general agreement, and British and French delegates put up a formula which is substantially the one printed in the United States, and they submitted it to all the powers as a basis for consideration only… He thinks that the mystification has arisen from the fact that merely a formal denial of a secret agreement was issued and nothing more. But the more formal denials they make the less they are believed. Again, the British Government was judged poor in its handling of the issue by most sections of the press, primarily due to the secrecy with which the talks had been conducted. One journalist fumed,

Why the Foreign Office have for so long sought to keep secret the terms of the provisional agreement with France on naval construction is a mystery which has still to be explained...Who is chiefly responsible for this exhibition of arrant stupidity – milder words would be unsuitable – we do not know… Meanwhile, there has been good comedy in France. An American newspaper correspondent has been arrested and expelled for publishing a secret document relating to this farcical pact. The obvious hero of the affair is that most notorious of American newspaper owners, Mr. W.R. Hearst… Could anything be more ridiculous – especially as there has never been any secret worth preserving?  

189 Thomas Jones, 1 October 1928, Whitehall Diary, p. 144  
190 BBK/H/48 Blumenfeld to Beaverbrook, 22 September, 1928.  
191 New Statesman 13 October, 1928
The editor of the *New York Nation*, O.G. Villard, wrote to Lady Astor that he was ‘utterly disheartened at the bungling of your Government’ on the secrecy of the naval agreement ‘because it has had a most unfavourable effect upon public opinion in this country. I do not see how it could have been handled in a way more calculated to arouse suspicion and distrust here. I am afraid it all but ties the hands of those of us who have been opposing the aggressive policy of the naval people.’  

A few days later, Thomas Jones wrote again in his diary that, ‘the American Ambassador has sailed to fight his senatorial campaign and will support the Tariff and also tell the New Yorkers that European Governments have learnt little from the last war and are busy preparing for the next, and that the U.S.A. had better leave them to stew in their own jealousies and intrigues. At any rate that is the impression he left with me the other day. It has taken a lot to convince him that there is no new secret alliance between us and France.’ The greater worry, however, was Coolidge’s reaction to the revelation of the Anglo-French compromise. Coolidge had been, according to one historian, ‘on a slow burn’ since Geneva the year before and news of the secret agreement ‘caused him to explode.’ Coolidge now hated the British so much that he was refusing to even speak to Esme Howard, despite the Ambassador’s understandable concern over the President’s upcoming Armistice Day speech.

**The struggle for world leadership: Coolidge’s Armistice Day speech 1928**

As if to end his term in office much the way it had been throughout, Coolidge gave one final scathing Armistice Day speech in November 1928 in which he declared the United

---

States’ need for the largest navy in the world and included deliberate attacks on Britain regarding the ongoing naval dispute.

In the United States the *New York Times* declared that the speech foreshadowed ‘a gigantic struggle between America and England for world leadership.’ *The Times* in London provided a similar opinion for British readers, stating poetically that ‘in the United States the stone which the President dropped into the pool of foreign affairs will cause ripples likely to widen for some time to come.’ Almost immediately press comment on the speech took on a broader interpretation of the event. While letters to the editors of British newspapers on the speech filled the comment pages the lead editorials instead focused on the way the British press as a whole, and indeed the American press, were interpreting Coolidge’s Armistice Day message. The American *Time* magazine measured the British response stating that ‘the words spoken by President Calvin Coolidge, last fortnight, stirred a deep tidal wave of English indignation... seldom before have so many hundreds and then thousands of letters poured in upon The Times – famed Safety Valve of Empire Passions.’ And though the magazine did not support the President’s highly inflammatory statements outright, the journal did note that ‘Patriotic U.S. citizens rejoiced that the President had so well summed the entire situation in five words of one syllable each: ‘If they had our chance...’’ The *Daily Mail’s* Washington correspondent summed up for British readers American press reaction to the speech, providing snippets from a number of New York newspapers both supporting and denouncing Coolidge’s statements, but agreed that ‘headline writers of the American Press[interpreted the speech] as ‘a rebuke to Europe.’ Perhaps the most inflammatory quote in the Mail’s piece came from the *New York Evening Post,* whose leader exclaimed, ‘We want Europe to know that we are tired of her complaints and

---

195 Quoted in Ludwell Denny, *America Conquers Britain: A Record of Economic War* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1930)
196 *The Times* 16 November 1928
197 *Time*, 26 November 1928
criticisms, and that we are going to play the game on a little more business-like basis from now on.’198 Coolidge had, warned *The Times* Washington correspondent, given credence to the American Big Navyite and Chairman of the Naval Affairs Committee Fred Britten’s condemnation that European diplomacy was the ‘soul of trickery... The feeling has always been there in a more or less nebulous state – Mr. Coolidge has solidified it.’199 Anglo-American relations had now reached their lowest point, a point at which the hostile rhetoric that appeared in each country’s national press became an important factor for discussion in and of itself.

After Coolidge called for American naval supremacy in his Armistice Day speech the British Government ‘reeled.’ Robert Craigie, head of the American Department of the Foreign Office, circulated a memorandum to the Cabinet outlining the vital diplomatic issues with which Britain now had to contend because, as he pointed out ‘war is not unthinkable between the two countries. On the contrary, there are present all the factors which in the past have made for wars between the States.’ Craigie wrote:

Great Britain is faced in the United States of American with a phenomenon for which there is no parallel in our modern history – a State twenty-five times as large, five times as wealthy, three times as populous, twice as ambitious, almost invulnerable, and at least our equal in prosperity, vital energy, technical equipment and industrial science. This State has risen to its present state of development at a time when Great Britain is still staggering from the effects of the superhuman effort made during the war, is loaded with a great burden of debt and is crippled by the evil of unemployment. The interests of the two countries touch at almost every point, for our contacts with the United States –

198 *Daily Mail* 13 November 1928
199 *The Times* 16 November 1928
political and economic, by land and sea, commercial and financial – are closer and more numerous than those existing with any other foreign State. 200

In the midst of the crisis Stanley Baldwin called for an end to the suspicions between Britain and America in November of that year to the House of Commons. ‘President Coolidge said it was always plain that Europe and the United States are lacking in mutual understanding’, Baldwin told the Commons. ‘I think President Coolidge is right. I think there is lacking, as between Europe and the United States, mutual understanding.... American statesmen do not know European statesmen, European statesmen do not know American statesmen, and there is no personal intercourse’. The press, whether it was the right-wing British press or the Anglophobe Hearst press in the United States had become carried away with what amounted to a somewhat confused and contradictory press war that saw the Americans accusing Britain of covert agreements to undermine American naval power, and with the British revealing the domestic crisis in confidence that was being played out at home, both accusing the Americans of a hypocritically imperialist agenda while at the same time castigating her own Government for not handling the situation better. Baldwin called for a concerted effort on Britain’s part to diffuse these tensions, urging that those ‘who may be called upon either to speak about America in foreign politics or about our relations with America should really get to understand, by studying it, the political system of that country and how she carries out any work connected with foreign relations.’ 201 Baldwin’s speech was widely reported in the British national newspapers and did indeed signify the beginning of a marked change in tone in the direction of debate on the American naval challenge in particular and Anglo-American relations in general.

200 ‘Outstanding Problems Affecting Anglo-American Relations’, 12 November 1928, FO 371/12812
In the months and weeks that followed, the more extended commentary on the speech was surprisingly muted with a surprising degree of self-examination. The *Manchester Guardian* reflected on the implications Coolidge’s speech in one editorial, stating that while Coolidge’s arguments were ‘as lame as those of any European statesman’ the intent of his comments on America’s aloof stance toward Europe were not incorrect. So long as an ‘armed peace broods over Europe’ the only way to bring America in line with Europe and the League of Nations was for its own members to make the League a success. ‘America was moving towards and is now moving away from Europe. But the responsibility for this change in direction lies primarily at the door of certain European Governments, and not least conspicuously that of Great Britain.... But if Europe wants American help she must pay the price. The price is not one we need be ashamed to pay.’ \(^{202}\) The defiant remarks in Coolidge’s speech, that America could and would build the navy it needed and that Europe needed the U.S. more than the U.S. needed Europe, was a point that the British press could not argue against, no matter how rude the tone. Lord Birkinhead spoke to the press on the matter in November 1928. ‘I thought there underlay in that speech a spirit of patronage and a capacity for giving advice to Europe and to England,’ he said. ‘My answer to the President of the United States would be that we ask nothing from them except good will... our answer is ‘Build as many cruisers as you choose, but no British Government will ever, in the face of the advice of our Admiralty surrender the right to build the number of light cruisers which we are advised is absolutely necessary to protect the Empire for which we are responsible.’ \(^{203}\) The *Observer*, always quick to root out the best of intentions in American actions, excused the tone of the speech arguing that ‘Europe’s reaction to Coolidge’s Armistice Day speech interests but does not alarm America. It may be ventured that the horrified Paris and London newspapers would have had no such speech to shock them if Coolidge had not been

\(^{202}\) *Manchester Guardian*, 13 November, 1928.

\(^{203}\) *Daily Mail*, 15 November, 1928.
genuinely startled by the sudden revelation of the Anglo-French parleys, followed by details of France’s vast military plans.\textsuperscript{204} These Atlanticist views began to overshadow the initial horror expressed after the Coolidge speech, both in Britain and America, as the ripple effect predicted by \textit{The Times} took hold.\textsuperscript{205} The United States had, due to the bitter reaction abroad to the speech, begun to adopt a more conciliatory attitude that would bear fruit in 1929 and 1930, and Britain, attempting to shed the long-standing quasi-familial assumptions in Anglo-American relations in which the United States was treated as ‘either a ‘simple-minded country cousin’ or as a ‘wayward adolescent son’ who still required patient guidance from an older, wiser Britain.\textsuperscript{206} Baldwin’s calls for those in a position to influence foreign policy, which included the British press, to study the United States and understand her culture and political system were now heeded, and a flood of novels, essays and feature stories began to appear in the national newspapers aimed at educating Britain on America.

After the series of unfortunate diplomatic incidents and the on-going public interest in contemplating the possibilities of Anglo-American war, attitudes toward the United States and the Anglo-American relationship in the British press altered drastically. In the aftermath of the Coolidge speech British newspapers in November 1928 seemed to devote their lead editorials and feature columns to nothing but the dire state of Anglo-American relations, taking it upon themselves speak both to readers and to the United States directly on behalf of the British public, setting out to achieve what British politicians had apparently failed to do – to take away the misinformation and misunderstandings on both sides of the argument. Lord Riddell, owner of the \textit{News of the World}, hosted a similar tour of American journalists at the beginning of the diplomatic crisis in July 1927, to whom he declared that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{204} \textit{Observer} 18 November 1928
\item \textsuperscript{205} Carolyn Kitching, \textit{Britain and the problem of international disarmament, 1919-1934} (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 118.
\end{itemize}
‘the best road to peace is publicity’. Just weeks after the Coolidge speech, as if to confirm this new sense of purpose in the British national press, a group of British journalists set off on a similar tour of the U.S. as the guests of the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, with the primary purpose ‘to become acquainted with the American people and American ways of living’. Ralph Blumenfeld, the American-born editor of the Daily Express and President of the Institute of Journalists in 1928, led the delegation of British editors ‘to learn about America first-hand at a critical time’ in Anglo-American relations, after the revelation of the Anglo-French naval agreement and the fallout of the Coolidge speech. One American trade journal reported that Blumenfeld’s speeches to the New York Advertising Club and the Carnegie Foundation ‘did much to clear the controversy caused by false reports... and helped to bring about a better feeling.’ Upon their return, Blumenfeld reported that each of the delegates had returned ‘a pro-American’, and expressed hope for greater understanding between the national press in both countries. By the close of 1928 Anglo-American relations were at their lowest point possibly in living memory, with comment and debate in the national newspapers openly fretting on the potential disaster of an Anglo-American war. It was at this point that Britain began to undertake in a soul searching exercise that saw policy makers as well as public commentators re-examine British priorities in the face of growing American political and economic pressure. Robert Craigie’s Cabinet memorandum in 1928 had acknowledged the difficulties in dealing with what the British Government perceived as the juvenile pretences of American policy makers, but pushed home the fact that ‘the advantages derived from mutual co-operation are greater for us than for them’, and that in order to reap the political and economic benefits of the strong historical and cultural links.

207 Daily Express, 29 July, 1927
208 The Times 28 November 1928
209 BLU/2/8 ‘The American Press’ journal October 1928
210 The Times 15 December 1927
between the two countries Britain would have to adopt a new approach. Blumenfeld and other British journalists would take up this cause in late 1928, and as external events helped to change the context in which the Anglo-American relationship was to operate and to remove some of the primary causes of diplomatic tension in 1929, the level anxiety over the American challenge diminished noticeably.

211 ‘Outstanding Problems Affecting Anglo-American Relations’, 12 November 1928, FO 371/12812
Socially, politically, and financially, America has become of immense importance to England. She influences us now in our daily lives to an immense extent; far more than does any other nation. But though England hears so much about America, she learns nothing... America is to-day England’s greatest subject of interest. We are America-conscious to an extraordinary degree – and remain ignorant of the subject to almost the same degree. Collinson Owen, 1929 212

A new approach and a fresh start in Anglo-American relations seemed possible by 1929, as Coolidge decided not to stand again for office, and Ramsay MacDonald led the Labour Government into power after ousting the Conservatives in the General Election in May of the same year on a rather uninspiring campaign of ‘Safety First’. The Anglo-American crisis began to calm in 1929 and, due to a number of political and economic factors, the American question was by 1930 to be for the immediate future considered ‘resolved’. 213 In his first statements immediately after the election MacDonald professed that one of his chief aims when he came to power was to make significant improvements in the Anglo-American relationship reflecting the perceived national mood for greater cooperation that was being outlined in the national press, and with the help of the also newly-elected President Hoover, was able to foster more cordial relations with the United States removing

some of the causes of transatlantic tensions and address some of the major issues at the heart of the Anglo-American diplomatic crisis.

The British press ran with this lead enthusiastically, with editorial after editorial presuming to speak on behalf of their readers almost directly to their counterparts in the United States, stating that Britain’s primary goal was Anglo-American cooperation above all else, reinforcing the earlier press comment that had singled out a successful Anglo-American relationship as a central pillar to British national security. As the public outcry over Government handling on the naval issue illustrated, press and public opinion had moved against the Baldwin Government’s management of the country’s policy on the United States. *The Times* summed up the state of Anglo-American relations at the end of the tense months of 1928, declaring that the two nations had passed through a period of ‘useful unofficial anxiety’. Useful, so the editorial declared,

‘for the betterment of Anglo-American relations, which have indeed been passing through one of those unwelcome stages... A series of minor difficulties has not always been handled with skill or contemplated with patience; [but] if ever the American and British peoples seemed to be drawing apart, the temporary estrangement usually led to a reaction stronger than the original movement.’

As the mood for reconciliation with the Americans intensified, and as the General Election loomed, the *Observer*, ever hopeful of stronger ties between Britain and America, predicted that there was in 1929 ‘happily, every chance for a fresh start in Anglo-American affairs’. Not since the Great War had it been ‘clearer than at this moment that Anglo-American relations are by no means a question by themselves, however momentous in that character.’ The American question, the *Observer* declared, was no less than ‘the question

---

214 *The Times* 1 December 1928
bound to decide for good or evil the future of the world.’ 215 In order to achieve this, many British journalists claimed, it was necessary to address the existing negative stereotypes by which most Britons interpreted American policy and society at large, and to understand the underlying motives that were the driving factors of United States as a political and economic world power. America was now becoming Britain’s ‘greatest subject of interest’ with analysis of, and references to, American culture, commercial and political activity appearing on nearly every page of Britain’s national newspapers in one form or another.

Yet just as this shift in mood began to get underway, as the decade of the 1920s closed the question of America, or the American ‘challenge’, gradually dissipated and the United States as a subject of scorn, hope and fascination began to fade and Britain turned both inward and again to her Empire. This was due to a number of factors which helped to remove sources of tension between the two countries: the elections of Herbert Hoover in the U.S. Presidential election of 1928 and of Ramsay MacDonald in the British General Election of 1929 if nothing else helped refresh top-level diplomatic relations, removing the old prejudices of the previous governments led by Coolidge and Baldwin. Paul Doerr has argued that though historians rarely attribute the outcomes of General Elections to foreign policy issues, the case of the contest between the existing Baldwin Government and Ramsay MacDonald’s Labour Party in May 1929 was as an exception to this general rule. Attacks on Austen Chamberlain’s record at the foreign office during the Anglo-American crisis were used successfully by Labour candidates as an indication that the Government was too pro-French, not serious about disarmament, and still prone to secret diplomacy as evidenced by the bungling of the Anglo-French agreement in 1928. 216 When the Labour Government outlined their foreign policy not long after assuming power, MacDonald seized the opportunity and placed a more effective American policy at the top of his policy agenda.

215 Observer, 2 December, 1928
Other factors contributed to the improvements in Anglo-American relations and the resolution of the American question, at least in terms of the United States being viewed as a political and economic threat by 1930 as well. Just as both countries underwent the change in leadership that bode so well for closer ties, the U.S. was also experiencing early indications that the economy on which American prosperity rested was not on the firm footing that so many believed. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 effectively brought to its knees the economic miracle at which Britain had once marvelled, and by 1930 the country was plunged into a full scale economic depression the likes of which Britain would luckily avoid. As the 1930s progressed, and the United States was facing economic disaster, much of the U.S.’s commercial gains of the 1920s seriously eroded leaving Britain to focus on other matters at home, in Europe and in the Empire. Due in part to this extreme economic misfortune as well as to the change in leadership, the central diplomatic tensions over America’s naval plans also receded and with the U.S. no longer able to afford a major ship building programme one of the most central diplomatic conflicts of the decade was more easily resolved as well.

This chapter will examine the way in which this transition played out before the British public in the national press from 1928 to 1930; the way in which America moved from both the primary threat as well as leading example for Britain’s post-war economic issues to a nation that was teetering on the edge of viability, receding back to her pre-war role of a significant by still ‘partially developed nation.’ Britain’s own transition from hostile rival to cautious but clear-eyed ally at the end of the 1920s, as evidenced in the nature of the editorial comment in newspapers during these years, had a profound impact on the way in which Britain came to see herself in the interwar period, making this period in Anglo-American relations all the more significant. The failure of America to continue on the upward trajectory of the 1920s with the advent of the economic failure in 1929 helped to relieve some

217 George Harmon Knoles, *The Jazz Age Revisted*, p. 16.
of the pressure on Anglo-American relations, and Britain was by the 1930s able to focus inward towards domestic issues as well as on her Empire.

**MacDonald and Hoover: renewed diplomatic relations**

One key contributing factor to the thaw in Anglo-American relations at the end of the decade was the election of Herbert Hoover in November 1928. Coolidge, in his trademark New England parsimony that rankled British ears, had echoed the sabre-rattling of the Big Navy lobbyists in his final Armistice Day speech, arguing for American naval supremacy in the most blunt and aggressive terms. Hoover on the other hand, had made it clear he did not want to run the risk of a renewed naval race and at the height of the Anglo-American crisis the change in figureheads did undoubtedly help to refresh the image of the United States in the British press. Hoover, whose approach to international relations was outlined in the British national newspapers as less isolationist or aloof than his predecessor, was seen as a sign that bode well for prospects of improved diplomatic relations for 1929.

The changeover from Coolidge to Hoover was initially anticipated with some trepidation by British journalists who remembered his anti-British campaigns during the rubber controversy in 1925, but after Hoover’s first reassurances after the election he was welcomed warmly by the press after years of struggling with the sparse, dry rhetoric of the out-going President, whom Churchill had once famously described as a ‘New England backwoodsman’ who would eventually slink back to the obscurity ‘from which only accident had extracted him’. Geoffrey Dawson considered Coolidge to be ‘the most unimpressive of men’. 218 After the 1928 Armistice Day Speech his name had been jeered in the House of

---

218 MSS.Dawson 71 fol 59, Dawson to Sir Drummond Chaplin, 25 November 1924,
Commons, a detail reported in both the British and American press. As if to consolidate his stance, in his years in office Coolidge had made no attempt at understanding the British situation or at improving relations with Britain, and once told the British Ambassador’s wife that he would never visit Europe ‘because he could learn everything he needed to know by remaining in America.’ Hoover, by contrast, had had a history of war work in Europe, particularly during his time securing food relief for Belgian civilians during the war. In the immediate aftermath of Hoover’s landslide victory in the 1928 election S. K. Ratcliffe wrote that the ‘change from President Coolidge to President Hoover will mark a transition of incalculable import for Britain and the British system. The Republican Administrations since the fall of Woodrow Wilson have stood for a negative policy in the affairs of the Old World’. Now, with the coming of Herbert Hoover Britain anticipated the prospects of working with a world class statesman. ‘There is nothing of the amateur about him,’ Ratcliffe continued. Hoover had

a knowledge of the world, and of Governments, unapproached by any preceding American President... With reasonable good fortune he should be President for a double term, eight years. It may therefore be said, without a tinge of exaggeration that, from March 1929, the pivotal figure of our Western civilisation will be Herbert Clark Hoover.  

Hoover, for his part, had widely publicised his intentions of taking a personal interest in tending to Anglo-American affairs in particular, and one of his first gestures towards a more amicable relationship with Britain was the appointment of the pro-British General Charles Dawes as the new ambassador to Britain. The Herbert Hoover who had so viciously

---

219 Ludwell Denny, American Conquers Britain
fought to break British control over the rubber market with his anti-British ‘1776’ campaign had apparently changed to an Anglophile, and both the British Government and the national press were both keen not to let this new opportunity pass them by. In a similar gesture, the British press seemed intent on ignoring Hoover’s previous mischief making during the rubber controversy, and instead re-introduced him to the British public, as the *Manchester Guardian* did in November 1928, as the ‘Supreme Organiser’, focusing on his Quaker upbringing and his responsibilities during the war as Food Administrator for the U.S. Government. Hoover, the *Manchester Guardian* exclaimed,

> whose personal record is, of course, blameless, has a deservedly high reputation for that business efficiency of which modern America is proud. The rest of the world may be assured that to the great problems of pacification and disarmament which deeply concern it he will bring the same energy, clear sight, and sturdy common sense. 222

Hoover was, according to *The Times*, ‘no stranger... gratefully known to Europe and the British Empire as the incomparable chief of civilian commissariat in wartime, and as a man, widely travelled and with business experience in East and West, who will bring knowledge at first hand to bear on many foreign problems.’223 The new American President was portrayed as pro-Britain, pro-Europe and a new ray of hope for Anglo-American relations. The *Daily Express* noted an apparently immediate change in America as soon as the U.S. Presidential elections had wrapped up, stating that

> After the excitements of the Presidential election American opinion seems to be settling into a welcome state of tranquillity on many things – among them Anglo-
American relations. This reaction or repercussion should be noted over here, if only for the guidance of British policy from now onwards. \(^{224}\)

Anticipating an end to the aggressive, hyper-sensitive isolationism of the Coolidge years, Hoover was greeted as a breath of fresh, and more amenable, air by the national press in Britain. As if to solidify these diplomatic gains, a change in leadership in Britain was anticipated with some hope when in May 1929 Labour won the British General Election, replacing Baldwin with Ramsay MacDonald. He too received a warm welcome even from the conservative sections of the British press, if not necessarily for the prospects of having a Labour Government again in charge of domestic affairs, then at least for the removal of the old figures blamed for the current Anglo-American animosity that was now attached to the legacy of the Baldwin Government.

When he took office MacDonald declared from the outset that he had closer Anglo-American cooperation at the top of his agenda. Though he reluctantly handed the lead at the Foreign Office over to Arthur Henderson, he reserved control over American policy for himself. With his experience in the disarmament debate in the previous two years and the more cooperative atmosphere created by the election of Hoover and the appointment of Dawes, MacDonald saw opportunities for himself to be viewed as ‘the perceived healer of Anglo-American wounds.’ \(^{225}\) Historians have since argued against this ‘received version’ of the improvement in Anglo-American relations in 1929, a version that credits MacDonald with making the vital breakthroughs in naval talks that paved the way for the resolution, and in fact cite the foundation work done in the final months of the Baldwin Government as being

\(^{224}\) *Daily Express* 27 November 1928

\(^{225}\) B J C McKercher, *The Second Baldwin Government*, p 197. Carolyn Kitchin has also commented on this division in British American policy, or the ‘two foreign policies’, in which Anglo-American relations benefitted from MacDonald’s ‘personal approach’ in *Britain and the problem of international disarmament*, p. 116.
most important in the resolution of the naval question. Even the idea of another attempt at an official visit by the Prime Minister to the United States, from which MacDonald would reap the benefits so completely for himself, had been launched during the Baldwin Government’s final months. Meeting with one American official in late 1928, Baldwin ‘practically pleaded for an invitation to go to America’, writing that ‘I want to go to American and if you would give me any excuse I should go. It would mean a lot.’ Nevertheless, it was MacDonald who made the trip. It was also his enthusiasm for Anglo-American agreement on the naval dispute that led to the initial talks with Craigie at the Foreign Office, Dawes and Hugh Gibson, U.S. arms limitations negotiator, as well as a tentative agreement on the cruiser question that had plagued the earlier conference. The talks helped lay important groundwork for an agreement, and established additional plans for a further naval conference to be held in London in 1930. MacDonald had orchestrated these talks with a view of making a visit to the United States as soon as possible, but wanted to be able to set off safe in the knowledge that these preliminary peace offerings were in place. Of these talks MacDonald cautiously boasted to the press that

we have entered into conversations. I do not think that we can call them negotiations exactly. We are both cautious nations. We are not going to run like a bull at a gate and then, after we have prepared the stage and asked you all to come and witness these great negotiations, discover in the middle of it that we have begun without completely understanding each other, and then have to tell the whole world we have failed. Therefore, like sensible people, we have said to each other “Let us see why these negotiations we had entered into hitherto have failed. If we can discover why they

have failed, can we discover a way out, so that there will be no longer failure, but success and agreement?" 228

With this careful management of public expectations, MacDonald, armed with the initial success of these talks, made an even more successful and well-received journey to meet Hoover in late October 1929, and the two leaders made great efforts to show their solidarity.

The tour was followed closely in the British press, with photos of the Prime Minister being greeted with a ticker tape parade in New York and granted the Freedom of the City before cheering crowds, stories of MacDonald’s visit to Hoover’s Blue Ridge Mountain Retreat during which the two leaders walked along streams, sat on a log and discussed diplomatic relations, and reports written by MacDonald’s daughter Isabel giving her impressions of American parties, transportation and women’s dress. It was a public relations coup, and the press were hungry for ‘something substantial every day’. Politics would be dominant focus, but journalists were advised to pay close attention and record the more personal details of the ‘human scene’, seizing on any items that might illustrate the friendliness between the President and the Prime Minister. 229 MacDonald reportedly referred to Hoover as a ‘dear old Quaker’ and, upon his return MacDonald told the press, ‘My visit to the United States... has given me great satisfaction. I believe sincerely that my meeting with President Hoover and my conversations with him and with other United States statesmen have brought our two peoples close together and improved enormously their mutual understanding.’ 230 Though he had not achieved any formally binding naval agreements during his visit, The Times declared that ‘what has been achieved already may prove to be a

228 The Times 11 Sept 1929
230 Manchester Guardian 2 November 1929
greater value than any formal agreement. The frankness and friendship of the relations which have been established between ourselves and the United States will not only facilitate the success of the approaching conference and the other negotiations, but should in themselves contribute to the cause of peace throughout the world.\textsuperscript{231} The Daily Herald echoed this sentiment, stating that ‘none but a simpleton could have imagined that he would do so. He went, in his own words, ‘to shake hands with Mr. Hoover. And that he has done. If Mr. MacDonald has succeeded in establishing such a friendship, if he has succeeded in breaking through and brushing away those webs, then he has done more than if he had signed a score of formal treaties.’\textsuperscript{232} The appearance of strength in the personal relationship between MacDonald and Hoover helped soothe wrangled nerves in the British press, and almost immediately replaced the negative focus in the press on Big Navy ambitions, on Coolidge’s messages ‘from another planet’, and went some way in symbolising a new era in Anglo-American relations. With the success of the London Naval Conference in June 1930 these hopes, for the time, appeared to be justified.

**Educating the reading public**

After the low point in Anglo-American diplomacy in late 1927 and throughout 1928, a new theme appeared in British press comment on the United States, one in which journalists and editors attempted to monopolise on the changing tenor of the Anglo-American relationship and educate their readers on American culture and society in a more realistic, nuanced manner. The recent crisis had highlighted for many the fact that the United States could no longer be regarded as an extension of Britain in terms of history, culture and ethnicity, but as a truly foreign country and that, in part due to the poor quality of American

\textsuperscript{231} The Times 2 November 1929
\textsuperscript{232} Daily Herald, 2 and 9 November 1929
news up to that point, British voters and policy makers were operating under false assumptions based on exaggerated stereotypes. Robert Vansittart had speculated on the foreign-ness of Americans, citing the German-American as a ‘biological gamble’, and with the ‘Anglo-Saxon element’ of the population ‘down 25 per cent’ he attempted to draw worrying if far-flung parallels with 1914. The press too emphasised the alien aspects of American society, as in the Daily Mail’s amusing report on the phenomenon of ‘Peers Who Marry U.S. Heiresses’ and the imminent ‘biological ruin of the House of Lords’ anticipated on the horizon. Reports from foreign correspondents on American culture and society had appeared in some form for years before and indeed during the crisis in diplomatic relations, as in the example of Wickham Steed’s ‘American Diary’, which was serialised in the Observer in December 1927, but by November 1928 the editorial pages of Britain’s national newspapers filled with comment and analyses on the United States. One letter writer to The Times posed the argument that ‘we can help to some extent during the coming year by doing greater justice in thought and conversation to America’s friendship; by making ourselves familiar with her problems, her many political, industrial, and personal ties with Europe and Great Britain, her many achievements in the realm of international helpfulness, and her great position as a dominant factor in world relations.’ S.K. Ratcliffe, a British journalist and lecturer who was at the time also serving as the Manchester Guardian’s Washington Correspondent and writing for the American magazine the Nation and Anthaeneum wrote a number of editorial pieces on the United States and argued that ‘the American nation is shaping new forms of the social life, and it is absurd to dismiss so vast and varied a movement’. He was given ample space to do so in the Observer as well, in which he reviewed a number of books in one editorial piece, all devoted to answering the question ‘What is this America?’ These works included The America of To-day by J. A. Spender, The

---

233 Daily Mail 22 November 1928
234 The Times 30 December 1928
American World by Edgar Ansel Mowrer, Bigger and Better Murders by Charles Merz, and The Star-Spangled Manner by Beverley Nichols. The works Ratcliffe reviewed introduced British readers to the delights of Aimee McPherson (an infamous vaudevillian gospel preacher in California), Anita Loos (film scenario writer and author of the recent hit novella Gentlemen Prefer Blondes) and ‘the only pleasant and human interview with President Coolidge I have ever seen’.²³⁶ Ratcliffe noted the trend for such writing amongst British journalists, explaining that

More and more English people... are eager to find trustworthy answers to this question. And of one thing at all events I am altogether convinced, namely: that during the coming Hoover Administration it will not do for the British Government and public to be led into any serious misreading of the American national movement, purpose, and policy. We need and shall need the best-informed and the wisest guides.²³⁷

Such book reviews were often expanded into large editorial pieces and were often referred to again on other pages in the lead editorial column or in the letters to the editor sections of the paper. And the trend for polemics on Anglo-American relations was popular among American journalists as well as British ones. The Daily Mail reviewed one book in which the author asked rhetorically in 1928, Are the English Civilised?, elaborating further: ‘English writers, actors, statesman and lecturers – particularly lecturers, and they are all lecturers – consider themselves qualified by one brief visit to the United States, or none at all, to tell us we’re not civilised; so I feel perfectly free, without further apology, and on the basis of three visits to the British Isles, to remark: ‘You aren’t so darn civilised either. In fact

²³⁶ Observer 18 November 1928
²³⁷ Ibid
you’re not as civilised as we are.” The lead editorial picked up on these American observations, speculating on ‘How Others See Us’. The newspaper benignly assumed that Daily Mail readers

will derive both entertainment and instruction from the American article, part of which we print on this page – it is always interesting to “see ourselves as others see us.” In a discussion of our claim to be civilised we shall pass lightly over the indictment of the discomforts of our country; civilisation is not a matter of central-heating or taxicabs. Our kindly critic sweetens his pill with some very handsome compliments on our stability, our respect for law, and our political liberty. We could probably have digested it undiluted; but the friendly intent is none the less welcome for that.  

The popularity of such essays was indicative of the shift in where British newspapers intended to lead public opinion on the American question. Where once the lead editorials focused on American trade or naval competition, they now discussed the Anglo-American relationship in broader terms, and explored the role each party played in that relationship. This realisation, that the United States was indeed a thoroughly foreign country with which Britain would now need to deal on equal terms, was the driving force behind such editorials and would lay the early foundations for the similar public education exercises that would be vital to Anglo-American cooperation during the Second World War.

The Stock Market Crash and the end of the trade war

Just two weeks after MacDonald returned from his American visit, a second event further diverted British attention from the American crisis. The end of the 1920s U.S. prosperity boom ended with a crash as Americans, who had so eagerly gambled on the stock
market with enthusiasm and ignorance in equal measure, saw fortunes disappear, banks closed, and millions eventually lose employment. The American economic miracle, in a matter of months, nearly evaporated before Britain’s eyes.

Early indications that trouble was ahead were apparent in the summer of 1928, when speculating in the domestic economy and rising interest rates resulted in lower lending abroad, including to Europe. A second shockwave from the U.S. was felt in the summer of 1929 as the level of domestic economic activity experienced a sharp downturn which would act as the final blow that caused the collapse of the American and international economy that led to the Great Depression. \(^{240}\) Yet, at the beginning of 1929 fears of an ‘American invasion’ in the British domestic economy were still strong. Britain was considered a primary market for American commercial interests, and with nearly half a billion dollars invested there, American companies were openly or covertly buying up shares of key British industries to the alarm of British industrialists. \(^{241}\) One widely discussed incident in the spring of 1929 was the American attempt to buy up British General Electric and the chairman, Sir Hugo Hirst’s, resistance to the buyout in the form of a ‘100 per cent British’ publicity campaign, which was followed with interest in the national newspapers. The chairman of General Electric of America, Gerard Swope, had ambitions to buy up the entire British electrical manufacturing industry, and made progress with the buyout of British Thomson Houston and Metropolitan Vickers in 1928, which he did through the use of British industrialist Dudley Docker as a front so as not to arouse anxiety in Britain to the fact that an American company now held the controlling shares of the company. Members of the Government were made aware ‘a group of American financiers that were busy buying up British electrical companies and Baldwin


had talked to both the Governor of the Bank of England and Cunliffe-Lister at the Board of Trade on his concern over the situation. 242

This buyout plan was eventually revealed in the national press, by which time Swope had started to buy into British General Electric, and the industry was alerted to the threat. Hugo Hirst took the ‘extraordinary step’ of having all foreign shareholders disenfranchised and defended his actions on the grounds that the move was made in order to bring public attention to the need to protect an important British industry from being taken over by the Americans. 243 Cables from Hirst outlining his argument for such measures were reported day by day in the daily press, as in The Times, in which he called for action to be taken to prevent the ‘seriously damaging effect from the trading point of view.’ 244 The Daily Express reported that at an emotionally charged meeting to decide the fate of Hirst’s ‘100 per cent British’ policy, the chairman was ‘reduced to tears’, with hands outstretched, pleading with his shareholders to vote in favour of the restrictions, restoring British control over a British concern. 245 Hirst was eventually forced to drop the policy as pressure from the British press ordered him not to ‘inflict injury on British finance in the name of patriotism’, condemning Hirsts ‘Bolshevik’ actions, and though ultimately General Electric would be saved, Swope was free to buy up most of the rest of the market to form Associated Electrical Industries. 246

The press, it seemed, had less of an appetite for such protectionism than it might have had only a few years earlier where American investment in Britain was at stake. Beaverbrook, for example, deplored Hirst’s attempts to interfere with the freedom of capital, despite his suspicions of the United States, which he referred to as the ‘devouring

243 Ibid.
244 *The Times* 11 March 1929
245 *Daily Express* 14 March 1929
246 *Daily Express* 6 April 1929
Republic.” 247 The financial press led, and the national dailies followed, on the view that maintaining American investment was vital to the stabilisation of Britain’s economic position. After a wobble in the American economy in the summer of 1928 rattled the confidence of some American investors, and with Britain’s particular dependence on export earnings and overseas investment, her exposure to the risks of an international slump was made all the more apparent. While American foreign investment continued to be strong the weaknesses of the British position had remained hidden, but the root causes of this perceived stability were not. 248 Britain’s economic fortunes were decidedly linked to those of the United States.

To this end the press had a keen interest in the sustainability of the American economic boom, and in a marked turnaround from the hostile rhetoric of previous years, the press showed remarkable restraint and genuine concern. The Times reported on a survey produced by the Committee on Recent Economic Changes, of which President Hoover was chairman in May 1929 which proved ‘conclusively’ what had been long held theoretically to be true, according to the editorial, ‘that wants are almost insatiable; that one want satisfied makes way for another’. The America of 1929 had developed a new a uniquely American type of civilization; one in which the primary needs of food clothing and shelter had long since been met, and one in which the main economic driving factor in the U.S. was now the desire for luxuries. It was, according to the editorial, evidenced by the way ‘in which services come to rank with other forms of production as a major economic factor.’ 249 Despite the envy with which some Britons viewed the ‘economic miracle’ in the United States in the 1920s boom years, some voices in the British press were urging caution. Again The Times, commenting on the passage by the U.S. Senate on the Farm Relief Bill to provide for

247 Robert Boyce, British capitalism at the crossroads, p 418.
248 M. W. Kirby, The Decline of British Economic Power, p. 56.
249 The Times 16 May 1929
American agriculture what the Fordney-McCumber tariff had for manufacturing, argued that ‘the economic balance of which President Hoover and his associates in the survey speak does not exist... the passage in the report which members of Congress should read is clearly that which warns against “ignorance of economic principles”, against “selfish greed”, and particularly against “methods of artificial price advancement which puts one commodity out of balance with other commodities”.’  

Warning signs were becoming apparent and the British press was taking note that prosperity to which her own economic stability was so closely linked now appeared on to be resting on unstable ground.

For the first time American consumer credit and speculation on the stock market was being taken into account, with contradictory opinions on the stability of America appearing in the months leading up to the stock market crash in late 1929. One British industrialist, reporting in January 1929 for *The Times* on the role consumer credit played in American economic growth in the past decade, warned of the ‘chaos and disaster’ that had been prophesied for the United States because of the extent of her high consumer credit levels had been exaggerated, and reminded readers that ‘it is largely a result of the systematic use of credit for production and distribution that America had reached a condition of prosperity which was the envy of the world.’  

Yet as early as November 1927 warnings that Britain should not to be taken in too wholeheartedly by the ‘American Illusion’ were gathering support, as evidenced in a letter to the editor of the *Daily News*:

> I am an old business man with a burden on my mind. Will you lift it off? I read that the most prosperous country on earth is the U.S.A. I also read that the hire-purchase system is so prevalent there that hundreds of millions of dollars are always owing; that many have their earnings mortgaged for two years...

---

250 *The Times* 16 May 1929  
251 *The Times* 23 Jan 1929
ahead; and that if the banks demanded cash for the hire-purchase paper which they hold many crashes would be caused... Unless I am in my dotage – I am 76 – I think this is not prosperity, but a big bubble which will burst someday.252

Lord Beaverbrook noted rather prophetically the way this phenomenon had revealed itself in the pages of American newspapers. In 1929 he wrote to his colleague E. J. Robertson at the Daily Express of his interest in the amount of space allocated in the advertising as well as editorial sections to real estate notices and advice. ‘Evidently the New York papers, by specialising in Real Estate, have worked up a very large advertising clientele in that classification. It would, I think, be right to say that more Editorial space is given by the New York papers to Real Estate than to the Theatre and Pictures put together.’253 Robertson replied to Beaverbrook that, with land values across the U.S. changing so quickly ‘practically every second man you meet speculates in Real Estate.’254 The Morning Post also noted the phenomenon, writing months later 1928 of the ‘5,000,000 Dabblers’ on Wall Street. Americans had taken the practice of gambling on the stock market to heart, and up to that point had been doing so with marked success, but with worrying results. The Post reported that for some time financial authorities had been trying to do something to ‘put the brakes on the frenzied speculation’, but without success. In the face of the higher interest rates charged for Stock Market loans, heavy exports of gold, and the large expansion of stock brokers’ loans, ‘signs plain enough for an experienced speculator to shorten sail, the public has continued to buy, buying anything and everything dealt in by Wall Street.’ For British observers, it was the participation by the public that is the most disturbing feature of the stock market boom. ‘There can be only one ending to this insanity’, warned the Post, it was bound

252 Daily News 28 November 1927
253 BBK/H/66 – 21 January 1929, Beaverbrook to E. J. Robertson
254 BBK/H/66 – 29 January 1929, E. J. Robertson to Beaverbrook
to end in a crash and, ‘as usual the public will have the stocks and the professionals will have
the money, and the public will rue the day when it was beguiled into Wall Street.’ The
image of a sort of money fuelled feeding frenzy on the stock market fitted easily with British
perceptions of the American money society, ‘a nation in which the dollar clings more
lightly.’ However, as it was becoming increasingly clear how interlinked the British and
American economies indeed were, Britain could no longer afford to simply condemn the
American preoccupation with speculation and profits as she had earlier in the decade.
Economic stability in the U.S. was crucial to economic stability in Britain.

When the stock market collapsed in October 1929, the British press initially held their
faith in the American economic infrastructure. Lord Birkenhead’s view on the state of Wall
Street after the collapse was reported in The Times, who reassured readers that ‘the resources
of that continent were so vast and its population so enterprising that it possessed a degree of
resiliency which he was sure the world had never been in a position to equal.’ President
Hoover in particular was praised for his handling of the crisis. The Observer too was initially
cheerful when regarding America’s ‘temporary’ set-back when it exclaimed ‘A few weeks
ago America experienced a set-back to her prosperity. Its temporary character was
undisputed. Confidence had over-reached itself: when it had paid the proper penalty for its
excesses, stability would return itself! Happily for America, President Hoover was not
content merely to wait and see.’ The newspaper credited the American President with actions
for which history would eventually find him lacking, that of organising a ‘systemic voluntary
co-operation’ between private business and public authority.’ The editorial went so far as to
hold America up, once again, as an example, this time for ‘organising for work’, in a way that

---

255 Morning Post 2 April 1928
257 The Times 30 November 1929
successive British Governments, through years of unemployment and economic slump, had not.\textsuperscript{258}

The \textit{Daily Mail} reported that Americans were holding their heads after the crash ‘bloody, but unbowed’, that Americans were ‘getting wise to themselves’ after the soaring profits on Wall Street came crashing to an end at the end of the year.\textsuperscript{259} The \textit{Mail} praised the Hoover Administration in December 1929, commenting that the Americans had been so ‘alert and watchful’ and that Hoover’s approach, rather than to ‘fold his hands and do nothing’ was to help business conditions through voluntary co-operation with a minimal disturbance to trade. The \textit{Mail} continued: ‘The United States, of course, is in an exceptional position among the great nations of the world. It is so wealthy and has such vast territory and natural resources that any set-back in its industry can be only temporary and the prelude to a certain recovery... Let us hope that the British Government will not be too proud to imitate President Hoover in his policy, and to realise at last that the only satisfactory medicine for the present distress here is to be found in such economy and such a reduction of taxation as he has secured for Americans.’\textsuperscript{260} A \textit{Daily Express} New York Correspondent J W T Mason sent Beaverbrook clippings from the \textit{New York Sun} commenting on the British press’ coverage of the stock market crash on November 13, writing that the proprietor might be interested in monitoring whether the ‘dominant utilitarian spirit of action in the United States will be able to meet the stock crash... The extreme concentration on materialism, in a creative sense, which Americans show, so largely to the neglect of other factors in life, may result in unexpected ways being found to stimulate industry, despite the Wall Street debacle.’ \textsuperscript{261}

\textsuperscript{258} \textit{Observer} 9 December 1929
\textsuperscript{259} \textit{Daily Mail} 3 December 1929
\textsuperscript{260} \textit{Daily Mail} 4 December 1929
\textsuperscript{261} BBK/H/65, Mason to Beaverbrook 29 November, 1929
However as the crisis deepened in 1930 the ‘temporary set-back’ was now being viewed as a condition from which America was less and less likely to recover. ‘There is little reason’, warned *The Times*, ‘to doubt that permanent unemployment is today the lot of an always growing number of American men and women.’ The problem, so argued *The Times*, stemmed from mechanization and it ‘remained to be seen how far and how perilously the machine has run ahead of the man’.  

British newspapers were making efforts to understand the mindset of America after the crash, as in the example of reproductions of President Hoover’s doodling during a meeting which appeared in the press. One columnist for the *Observer* opined, ‘I suspect it is a by-product of Mr. MacDonald’s visit. Nothing but the prolonged contemplation of a world out of joint could have produced those tangles and rectangles, those imperfectly concentric circles, those sinister cobwebs, and wheels that look like something from the Book of Daniel. Are all our subconsciousnesses as low-spirited as that?’  

The picture for the United States, of course, would turn out to be that bleak, worse than the one that awaited Britain who, by 1934 was the first major world economy to surpass her 1929 levels of industrial production and see a decline in overall unemployment. Almost as quickly as the economic tables had turned against Britain after the war, so they turned in her favour after the stock market crash and the United States began looking to Britain for answers to her own economic problems. When Franklin Roosevelt replaced Hoover in 1933 he introduced the New Deal reforms that were drawn up borrowing some ideas from British policy including the social security programme he admitted he had introduced based partly on pre-war British welfare reforms. For the time being American-style capitalism seemed to be bankrupt, and the United States, no longer the economic model for the world, began once again to follow Britain’s lead.

---

262 *The Times* 8 May 1930  
263 *Observer* 8 December 1929
The Return of Imperial Unity and the Ottawa Conference 1932

The final step for Britain to extract herself from the bitter Anglo-American trade war of the previous years called for a re-alignment in British economic policy, and by the end of the decade attention moved once again to hopes for achieving imperial economic unity. Calls for the Americanisation of British industry now appeared to be obsolete, however despite the crisis in the American economy there was still reason for Britain to be concerned with consolidating her economic power in the rivalry with the United States. Upon Baldwin’s defeat in the General Election in 1929, an opportunity for Lord Beaverbrook to once again take up his campaign for imperial trade unity arose. With the Conservative Party in disarray, Beaverbrook, with the support first of Rothermere and later with other key conservative figures, was able to launch the briefly successful Empire Free Trade crusade in the Daily Express. Beaverbrook’s crusade, which revolved around the central policy of the acceptance of food taxes, appealed to other newspaper proprietors who gave their support in their editorial pages. His objective, it appears from his correspondence of the time, was to create an imperial market similar to the one already operating in the United States.

J W T Mason wrote to Beaverbrook in late 1929 expressing his support not just for the crusade but for Beaverbrook’s leadership of the proposed party. Mason urged that if only Beaverbrook could convince British voters that the crusade would not increase the price of food then ‘the victory will be won.’ He added, based upon his observations in the U.S., that an ‘agricultural cartel’ in Great Britain, ‘perhaps somewhat like Chairman Legge of the American Federal Farm Board has in mind for the United States – might serve the double purpose of creating prosperity for the farmers and showing the Empire at large how your

cartel principle would work in actual practice.' Jerry Calton wrote of this link between Beaverbrook’s ambitions for imperial unity and America, and how his Canadian background helped contribute to a ‘split personality’ in which his twin allegiances to both Canada and Britain were able to fuse. The Empire Free Trade Crusade aimed to create a free trade zone, with London and Montreal at its centre, protected by a common tariff wall ‘mirroring as it sought to oppose the paradigm and enemy, America.’ The proprietor had even confided to J. L. Garvin at the Observer that it was in fact ‘American pressure [which had] roused his imperial ire.’ As the correspondence between Mason and Beaverbrook illustrated, there was a fear amongst some in Britain that as the United States was ‘dumping’ agricultural produce at below cost, enabled by Federal Farm Board subsidies. Beaverbrook in particular was concerned about the impact this would have on Canadian agricultural activity, and considered his plan of a trading unit ‘greater in every respect than the United States of America’. Calton again has highlighted the thinking behind the scheme, stating that Beaverbrook’s plan was fundamentally to emulate American economic policy in order to oppose it. He sought to ‘introduce the busy insights of Henry Ford into the stately firm of Rolls Royce and the breezy diction of Time magazine into the more receptive climes of Fleet Street [remaking] Britain and her appendages along the lines of the American model he had pledged to oppose.’ Just as he and Rothermere had sent British envoys to investigate American industrial methods for the purposes of applying those lessons learned to British industry, so now he was attempting to apply similar lessons to British and Imperial economic policy.

Beaverbrook gathered support from other conservative papers. Rothermere showed his support through Daily Mail editorials such as ‘Empire Free Trade: Stop Foreign

265 BBK/H/65 – 28 Oct 1929
267 Calton, Jerry M., ‘Beaverbrook’s Split Imperial Personality’, p. 35
Dumping’, which appeared in late 1929. HA Gwynne at the *Morning Post* was also supportive, and Beaverbrook wrote to Gwynne in early 1929, intending to convince him that the policy would not ultimately raise food prices, stating that the Americans had ‘set adrift vast supplies of food-stuffs – including that huge quantity of Canadian wheat… We can, by this one effort, divert these supplies to ourselves; and thereafter, with assured and steady markets, Imperial resources will so develop as rather to bring prices down rather than raise them.’ Gwynne agreed, reflecting that the pressure from the United States was ‘immense and increasing’ and that such measures would not only save British trade but protect the Dominions from an unwanted flood of American food stuffs and manufactured goods. The campaign would ultimately result in a doomed attempt to launch a new political party, named the United Empire Party, intended to promote Beaverbrook’s protectionist causes and to ‘put zip into Conservatism’. However, though the party’s attempts to gain a parliamentary seat in 1930 were ultimately unsuccessful, the interest and support the campaign achieved had lasting effects over the next few years.

By the end of the 1920s, and after the American economic collapse, the Anglo-American tensions that had preoccupied Britain throughout the decade began to recede, and the repeated attempts to appease the Americans fell by the wayside as a top national priority. With a history of concessions made to the Americans with no discernible favours being paid in return behind them, in 1931 Britain felt justified in leaving the gold standard and adopting a sterling strategy aimed at bolstering trade and putting the country on the road to recovery. In 1932 Britain then agreed a deal with the Dominion nations that guaranteed preferential tariff rates between countries that would encourage trade in foodstuffs coming in to Britain and manufactured goods going out to the advantage of all the parties.

---

268 *Daily Mail* 10 December 1929  
269 Beaverbrook to HA Gwynne, 24 January 1929 BBK/C/148  
270 Gwynne to Beaverbrook, 27 January 1930 BBK/C/149  
271 Paul Ferris, *House of Northcliffe*, p 292
involved, apparently moving then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Neville Chamberlain, heir to
the Chamberlain vision of imperial unity, almost to tears. After the Slump of 1929-1932
ended in Britain, years before the United States began to see any signs of recovery, British
industry and investment began to expand once again and Britain in fact achieved one of the
highest industrial growth rates in the world throughout the 1930s leaving America, and the
American challenge, at least temporarily behind. Britain and the British press had, for at least
the next decade until the Second World War, successfully resisted the American challenge
and was, at the start of the new decade a changed but more resilient world power in
comparison to the United States. 272 Throughout the 1920s Britain had felt that the United
States had not ‘played the game’, honouring British concessions with reciprocal gestures,
boasting that America was ‘too wise to govern the world [America] would merely own it’. 273
Yet after the economic collapse in 1929, it became clear that the United States had not
solidified her economic gains that had resulted from the First World War into political and
strategic power that would have helped her to recover from the economic crisis of 1929-1932.
American would not regain her place as the leading world power until after the Second World
War. Britain still had such power, and as the causes of Anglo-American diplomatic tensions
receded at the end of the 1920s, Britain was able to exploit this situation with a stronger
world position and a clearer delineation of the Anglo-American relationship into the 1930s.

272 B J C McKercher, Transition of Power, 31
273 Ludwell Denny, America Conquers Britain: a record of economic war, (New York, Alfred A Knopf, 1930)
CONCLUSION

‘The best way to maintain friendship is not to cover up misunderstandings by what has been called ‘Hands-across-the-sea-flapdoodle,’ but to expose the causes of the misunderstandings.’ daily mail 274

Ross McKibbin claimed that ‘the history of England’ in the 1920s was also ‘the history of the English idea of America’, so vital was the United States in defining Britain’s relative world role and identity in the context of America’s growing power and influence. Britons could not fail to be aware of the American ascendancy of the 1920s, but how they formed their opinions on American culture and society was ‘unpredictable and subject to contrary circumstances’, the most significant perhaps, he argues, was the existing feelings those people had towards Britain’s changing status on the international stage. 275 The period was also marked by significant change in the Anglo-American balance of power, and a key stage in perhaps the first great hand-over between prime international powers in modern times. Within a generation or two Britain, the political and economic centre of a vast empire, was overtaken by the United States in economic terms, and was threatening to do so in terms of political power and influence. As Ludwell Denny had boasted, America had, in effect, ‘conquered’ Britain, and this happened without war or any of those imperial holdings ever actually changing hands. Admiration of the American economic model was mixed with a growing realisation that the United States was no longer a friendly competitor but a real threat to British interests around the world. The United States did indeed seem to ‘own’ the

274 Daily Mail 13 May 1927
275 Ross McKibbin, Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1950 p. 523, 526
world without ever having to bear any of the burden of imperial responsibility Britain had
shouldered.

In the context of the Anglo-American relationship, the years 1925 to 1930 have been
identified by historians as significant in a number of different ways. Diplomatic tensions
mounted in the middle of the decade over successive disagreements on international trade,
protectionism and naval parity, and the period has been cited as one marred by a bitter
struggle for supremacy, one in which the British public was faced with an American
‘invasion’, an American ‘challenge’, and Britons were pushed to find an answer to the
American ‘question’. The difficulties present in the Anglo-American diplomatic relationship,
coupled with the equally distressing phenomenon of unprecedented Americanisation in
everyday commercial and cultural activity meant that the crisis in relations in the second half
of the 1920s was not solely a high-level policy dispute but a full-on clash between the British
and American nations at large. This challenge now constituted a vital threat to British
political and economic security, yet the growing economic power of the United States
inspired in many a contradictory ambition to, on the one hand protect Britain from the
American economic challenge, but on the other to emulate the successful American model as
well as make a concerted effort to secure a closer, more cohesive Anglo-American
relationship that would act as a peaceful, civilising force in the world.

These tensions in the late 1920s marked the point at which the transition of power
from Britain to America was first set in motion and a time during which the old Victorian-era
stereotypes both nations held against the other were breaking down in order to make way for
new ones. These changes were galvanized in no small part by the British national press, as
the transition unfolded day by day in the pages of Britain’s national newspapers. The
journalists who reported and editorialised on the transformation taking place could not have
had an accurate view of the long-term consequences of the changes taking place, yet to study
the way in which the American challenge was being debated for the consumption of the
British reading public sheds light on not just the motives for the actions taken during the
diplomatic crises, but the way in which Britain sought to fortify herself against the growing
American hegemony.

Historians have, in the past, primarily consulted the records left by politicians or high
profile, well-connected writers and intellectuals involved in the issues of the day in order to
gain an understanding of British attitudes to this transition of power. Rarely have newspapers
been examined in depth. The British national press in the 1920s, a product of the new
journalism that first developed at the end of the nineteenth century and by the interwar years
was characterised as the era of the capitalist Press Baron has been historically condemned as
a corrupt mixture of consumerist mediocrity and politically fickle, subversive activity against
the ruling elite. For this reason, British newspapers of the interwar period have often been
neglected as a useful source material in understanding public opinion and perceptions of an
issue so vital to the changing status of Britain in the 1920s. While a wealth of material has
been left by contemporary observers on the jingoistic tendencies of the popular press that
have lead some historians to draw the conclusion that the press as a whole was anti-American
and leading the charge in the clash between Britain and America, closer examination of the
editorial content in a range of newspapers reveals that this is not entirely the case, and to
assume so would be to overlook a complex and informative debate that provides an important
narrative voice on the shifting balance of power as well as a gradual delineation of Britain's
changing global status as it happened, day by day, in the 1920s.

It has not been claimed that the opinions outlined in Britain’s national newspapers
were perfect mirrors of public opinion, but as has been argued by other historians of
journalism, newspapers of the 1920s at least aimed to be representative of their reading
public, and therefore printed news and opinions believed to appeal to their readers own
views. Rather than pursuing the Victorian ideals of an educational national press, newspapers in the twentieth century aimed to represent and indeed reinforce their readers’ interests and opinions. In applying this view to press commentary on the American question, it is reasonable to assume that newspapers were not simply platforms on which their editors and proprietors could pursue their own political agendas on a grand scale; their comment was tempered by their perceptions of the types of opinions and prejudices they believed their readers to want. Before the era of Mass Observation and the documentary film movement in the 1930s, newspapers provide perhaps the closest indication of, if not public opinion, then at least the parameters of public debate, the topics that were being discussed day to day by the British public, available at that time. Newspapers set the topic for public debate on a daily basis. By examining a wide range of national newspapers, it is possible to bring together an interesting contradiction of opinions on the American challenge of the late 1920s, and indeed on defining and strengthening Britain’s own national identity in the new, Americanized century. Newspapers attempted to rally their readers around specific causes or campaigns that would not only fortify the barriers against the American threat, but also, sometimes inadvertently, change the nature of the collective British national identity. Additionally, by consulting a wider range of publications to include those in the popular press, a fuller picture of the way in which Britain understood the American challenge can be found.

Although the official record of British press opinion during this period is most often represented by The Times, other newspapers including the Observer, the Daily News, and even the much-maligned Beaverbrook and Rothermere press, the Daily Express and Daily Mail, provide a surprising range of opinion and analysis on the Anglo-American transition of power. Publications such as the Daily Mail and Daily Express have been blamed in histories of the period for helping along the deterioration of Anglo-American relations in the late

---

276 Mark Hampton, Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950, p. 130
1920s; indeed they were all but named in accounts of the ‘press war’ between the two countries and prompted British and American officials to plot a peace propaganda campaign in order to undo the damage of their perceived anti-American rhetoric. Closer examination of these and other popular newspapers shows relatively little evidence of such anti-American comment, and is indeed shows a much broader range of opinions on the U.S. that includes positive comment on American business practice as well as more negative opinion on the way the British government handled the American question. While the Daily Mail, for example, is often singled out for its aggressive calls for protectionist measures against the American trade rival, the same newspaper printed a high profile series of articles investigating American industrial methods in order to, essentially, Americanise British industry.

The clearest example of this was the campaign for the protection of the British film industry. The issue was rooted in trade, and followed on months of reports in newspapers across the political spectrum from the Manchester Guardian to the Daily News, the Daily Express and the Daily Mail in which British journalists and businessmen openly compared modern American business practice to Britain’s, and found Britain lacking. British newspaper readers encountered commentary on a daily basis on the country's flagging industries, with the sometimes contradictory proposals of adopting American methods or, as so often endorsed by Lord Rothermere and the Daily Mail, setting up protective barriers against the influx of American consumer and cultural products being suggested. While some in Britain felt frustrated, as G. K. Chesterton did in 1927, that affairs had come ‘to the point of defending our native land and damning all Americans to hell’, 277 the masses of industrialists calling for the Americanisation of British industry and the hundreds of thousands who for a

277 Manchester Guardian 17 December 1927
few hours every week became ‘temporary American citizens’ at the cinema felt, if only occasionally, otherwise.

In the case of the protection of the British film industry, the coordinated press campaign which saw a meeting of minds amongst high profile cultural and political figures, as well as the editorial staff of The Times and the Daily Mail, wasn’t just a break from Britain’s free trade traditions; equally, it fostered public debate on whether or not Americanisation might have some positive benefits in Britain, as well as why aspects of American culture that were being transmitted through motion pictures fulfilled a need amongst ordinary Britons that was not otherwise being met by British mass culture. It was no accident that, in the aftermath of the successful campaign for the Cinematograph Act of 1927, the British documentary movement blossomed with its poetic depictions of the rural countryside and working class British life. Though class struggle would remain a feature of British society in the 1930s, and indeed in the context of British cinema the working classes were still not afforded the esteem they would receive in later years, the development of a national cinema in Britain did foster a new consciousness of this section of British society.\(^{278}\)

The press’ influence in both public debate and national policy also manifested itself in the surprising turn against the Government’s and particularly the Admiralty’s handling of disarmament negotiations with the United States in 1927 and 1928. Far from ratcheting up the anti-American rhetoric to the point of an outright transatlantic press war on the naval crisis, the response in most newspapers was by and large defined by a conscious choice of Anglo-American cooperation over the maintenance of British naval supremacy. Less conservative newspapers, particularly the Observer and Manchester Guardian, with their prominent Atlanticist editorials, as well as pragmatist voices in even the more conservative

---

\(^{278}\) One interesting study in the trends of British films of the 1930s points to an overall increase in the proportion of British films featuring working class characters and settings by the end of the decade. See Stephen C. Shafer, British popular films, 1929-1939: the cinema of reassurance (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 35-37.
newspapers such as the *Daily Express*, provided early editorial comment on the importance of the Anglo-American relationship, which would foreshadow the special relationship that would be vital during the Second World War. Examination of the British press during the second half of the 1920s also reveals the slow re-alignment of British foreign policy, in which Anglo-American cooperation was being discussed, for the first time, as a key national priority.

Finally, such study of the national press’ handling of the American question in the 1920s highlights Britain’s changing perception of itself during these years. Before J.B. Priestley wrote his *English Journey*, the Mass Observation movement attempted to document the thoughts and activities of the general public, and British film makers began to produce illuminating documentaries of a vast array of British subjects, newspapers documented the beginnings of the gradual shift of from Britain to the United States as the leading global power, and began to turn inward to examine what constituted Britain's national identity in this context. Newspapers, despite their imperfect reflection of contemporary public opinion, provide the clearest indication of how Britons of the 1920s discussed Britain, her national identity, and her role on the international stage. It was, as evidenced by the mixed feelings of admiration of the success of the American model as well as recognition of the need to secure a friendly Anglo-American cooperation, the slow resignation to the changing international power structure, in which Britain was no longer at the lead.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

The Beaverbrook Papers, the Daily Express. Parliamentary Archives.

The Lloyd George Papers, Parliamentary Archives


Austen Chamberlain Collection, University of Birmingham.

Geoffrey Dawson Papers, Bodleian Library.

John St Loe Strachey. The Spectator, 1898-1925. Parliamentary Archives.

Printed Primary Sources


Contemporary Journals


Contemporary Works


Denny, Ludwell. 1928. We Fight For Oil. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.


Priestley, J. B. English Journey. Ilkley: Great Northern Books Ltd.


Newspapers and Periodicals

Daily Herald

Daily Express
Secondary works

Articles


Books


