

CURRENT BOOKS

SCHOLARS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows and staff of the Wilson Center

SUCCEEDING

JOHN BULL:
America in Britain's
Place, 1900-1975
by D. Cameron Watt
Cambridge, 1984
302 pp. \$34.50

Between 1900 and 1975, Great Britain gradually withdrew from its role as the world's greatest maritime power. The United States took up the British mantle. Watt, a University of London historian, focuses not so much on the "straightforward history" of that transfer of power but on "how this process was perceived and understood" (or misunderstood) by the leaders of both nations. His controversial thesis: that "policy-makers in the United

States played a major role in bringing about the decline of Britain, although those who saw the decline consummated did not understand what they were doing and regretted it when they realized what they had done."

Since 1940 in particular, the "special relationship" between the two countries has too often been characterized by U.S. refusals to heed British advice. American leaders were as unwilling to back Britain's hard anti-Soviet line during 1944-45 as they were to support a British "Monroe Doctrine" for the Middle East during 1944-46—with bad consequences in both cases, Watt believes. When the British did succeed in getting their points across, it was by "patient, ad hoc, issue by issue discussion," especially during the Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin years, which coincided with the Truman administration. Only by what he calls "interpenetration," by working individually with American colleagues, could British interests be preserved. But even this process broke down between 1953 and 1956, with Britain's attempted invasion of Egypt in 1956 as its nadir. It foundered again during 1963-64, after Harold Macmillan's departure from office and John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Particularly troublesome to Watt is what he calls America's "sentimental anti-colonialism." He finds naive the American assumption that its goal during World War II was to assist "popular democracies" (in India, Indonesia, New Guinea, and Vietnam). This faith in government by consent of the "people" blinded Washington policy-makers to the fact that colonial independence movements might reflect less the will of the "people" than that of "a native group of would-be authoritarians struggling to replace a European group of actual authoritarians."

Ironies abound. America's painful disenchantment, during the Vietnam War, with its own earlier view of Southeast Asia meant that when Britain finally did relinquish its responsibilities east of Suez in 1968, America's dissatisfaction with its ally increased. "America was suffering the worst defeat in her history in Vietnam, her forces stretched to the limit, her budget desperately unbalanced. Britain's withdrawal was seen by many as a simple betrayal."

—Prosser Gifford, Deputy Director