

PEACE FOR OUR TIME

I. THE IMPOTENCE OF OMNIPOTENCE

A. THE UNUSABLE EMPIRE

What tremendous power the British empire still seemed to have, in 1939!

It was really the only actual *world* power.

Japan was a regional power.

Germany, a European power.

It had no overseas colonies at all.

As for the European countries with colonial empires...

Spain?

Portugal?

Belgium?

World powers that size you get in Crackerjack boxes.

Even France's colonies, had just half the people that the British empire had.

But looks are deceiving. The Empire was desperately fragile.

India was nearly uncontrollable.

The dominions weren't colonies. They could walk out of the Empire any time they liked.

They could sit out any war they didn't think they could win.

Ireland and South Africa were in the Empire only in name.

Palestine was a drain, a headache, and a festering sore.

On *bad* days, it was even worse.

Cyprus was restless.

Oh, there were quiet bits of empire – the West Indies, say, or Africa...

No rebellions there, no uprisings, no immediate risk.

They were a long way from being ready to turn into independent nations.

They also weren't much help.

India, now... you could get an army of 260,000 there, ready for use.

– as long as it was one of last century's wars!

It had no artillery. No tanks.

[*yer welcome!*]

It was fit for police actions – nothing else.

As for its air force... throw that against the Luftwaffe?

And its navy ... against what could you throw it that
it wouldn't break?

Well, if not ships nor men, how about money?

Could you hock your empire in the pawnshop for the supplies you needed?

On the ledgers, Britain was good for it.

Its overseas investments topped 3 billion pounds in value.

But turning Argentine railways or subsidiaries of British firms into
cash couldn't be done as easily as pawning your watch.

In fact, in the first year of World War II, the Treasury couldn't
sell enough assets to raise 100 million pounds

That, in a major war, was no better'n loose change.

B. WAR FOR EMPIRE: INCLUDE US OUT?

If we want to see where appeasement came from, we'd find a big part of the answer
in the very nature of Empire.

By the 1930s, Britain owned more than ever before.

But it was like a consumer, who's bought more goods on his credit card than he can afford.

He can just barely keep up with the interest payments.

Paying it off ... out of the question.

Military planning didn't just focus on the tight little island.

From the Mediterranean, it spanned half the globe.

... the submarine bases for Asia were in Hong Kong

... the great naval base and dockyards were at Singapore

... there were refueling bases for the Navy in the Red Sea
Ceylon
the Maldives
the Nicobars

... to get east, the Navy had to have Suez secure, too

But to protect Suez, Britain needed a friendly
Egypt
Palestine

For reinforcement of the air force, Egypt was indispensable.

And that doesn't even count the bases in the Mediterranean –

Alexandria
Malta
Gibraltar

Knock out just one or two of these links, and the whole strategic network is out of business.

Britain will be next to helpless to protect its Empire in the East.¹

An outstretched Empire meant an outstretched commitment – stretched so thin that Britain couldn't use the power it DID have...

So much of it went into just holding onto what it held.

Naval planning was ready for war with any one major world power.

Against, say, a Japan, or a Germany, it could win at sea, hands down.
The lifelines to the Empire would not be cut.

That was all well and good. But what if there were TWO major world powers that joined hands against Britain?

In the early 1930s, that seemed the remotest of possibilities.

By the end of the 1930s, it didn't look remote at all.

¹ W. David McIntyre, **The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942** (New York: Archon, 1979), 217.

Rising Sun

The picture in East Asia had changed, dangerously, since 1921.

Japan was growing all too quickly.

Dreams of “Asia for Asians”, talk of a “Co-Prosperity Sphere” danced in leaders’ heads.

What liberal rulers had run the country in good times were put out when the economy went sour.

Some were put out for good, by hit-men for the militarists.

By the early 1930s, Japan was in the hands of empire-builders and generals and admirals.

They found an excuse and set off a war to grab Manchuria, the northeastern province of China.

A new puppet government took charge of a made-to-order country, Manchukuo.

But it was Japan that pulled the strings – and drew out the natural resources.²

² A swell rendering of the story and of the rise of Japanese militarism to power can be found in Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 203-225.

That was for starters. In 1937, a shooting incident set off a full-scale war to conquer all of China.

Within months, they had driven the Chinese army out of Peking.

Locusts were like nothing, compared to what the Japanese did to the farms in the countryside.

Towns were stripped to the bare earth.

Hospitals – schools – burned to the ground.

The ruins of Shanghai when they were done reminded visitors of Tokyo after the 1923 earthquake.

Houses were gutted of lead pipes and brass fittings, and copper fittings and iron nails...

Japan needed it all for war machinery.³

It had planned to host the 1940 Olympic games.

It cancelled them, because the metal for the bleachers would

³ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 457-59.

be enough to build another battleship.⁴

Cities of a million people and more went up in flames.

And worst of all was “the rape of Nanking,”
once the heart of the Ming Dynasty and now the
capital of China.

As soon as bombers and bombardments had done their work, the
Japanese army marched in. Every man they found with
calloused hands or knapsack marks on their shoulders was
put to death at once.

Machine guns allowed them to kill prisoners in wholesale
crowds...

but packs of savage dogs worked, too –

and dousing prisoners in kerosene and setting them on
fire

and burying them alive.

Many Chinese civilians were used for bayonet practice.

Killed: at least sixty thousand unarmed civilians.

Raped: at least twenty thousand women, many in broad daylight.

⁴ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 634.

Soldiers drank themselves blind by night and broke into houses, dragging out any woman there, raping them as often as forty times in succession. Age was not object.

Many were made “comfort women” for the military brothels that the Japanese army set up.

Babies were simply bayoneted.

The survivors in Nanking – the half not turned to ashes – were left with nothing, to sicken and starve, amid clouds of hungry dogs and black crows, looking for a good meal.⁵

But the war in China didn't go all that well.

It should have been so easy to subdue that vast, backward domain.

Just 70,000 miles of high road – just 10,000 miles of railway track

Chinese didn't even speak the same language.

In one province, there were 108 different dialects.

The dialects were so far apart that often when English folks came into China and talked English, the locals assumed it was just one more Chinese dialect.

Since they couldn't TALK it, they would WRITE down what they were trying to say, in Chinese characters.

And of course the English couldn't read that...

which proved that – like most Chinese –

⁵ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 459-61.

they were illiterate, too.

Some Chinese lived on rice. Others lived on noodles.

90% of the half a billion Chinese were peasants, tied to the soil
and to all the other dangers of peasant life:

Famine
Flood
Pestilence
Civil war

... and being played in movies by
Paul Muni⁶

Their leader, Chiang Kai-Shek, presided over a government of bullies,
bandits, tax-collectors, and warlords.

He certainly put on a good show.

His Blue Shirts, modeled on Storm Troopers, saluted
him and carried his authority wherever their
guns could take them.

He brought in German military advisers to modernize
the army – and teach it to goose-step.

He even had a Himmler of his own, with a Chinese
Gestapo.⁷

⁶ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 640.

⁷ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 641-42.

And the decrees poured out of his office:

No more spitting
 No more smoking
 No more drinking or over-eating
 No more foot-shuffling
 No more using lipstick
 No more setting off firecrackers.

Boy Scouts were turned into Boy Spies, to inform on their
 parents and other people.

Squads of bully-boys would then beat up wrongdoers.

The decrees applied to everybody except his wife ...

who smoked menthol cigarettes (English ones)
 painted her face
 Imported lingerie from Paris
 and used a very tasty perfume

... and never, never got beaten up for it.

Every year, she spent \$4 million Chinese dollars on
 toilet articles, including a medicinally-impregnated
 toilet paper that sold at \$20 a sheet.⁸

Chian, on the other hand, lived with a monkish austerity.

He didn't smoke, and didn't spend on himself.

And he dressed in a plain tunic.⁹

⁸ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 643.

⁹ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 643.

He was a ruthless handler of opponents.

“Rather slay a thousand innocent men than let one Communist escape,” he would insist.

And he very nearly DID exterminate them all.

All the same, it was one depressingly bad government.

Gangsters and shakedown men ran the revenue policy.

The government ran the drug traffic, and tried to get a full-scale monopoly on it.

After all, if you want to make morphine or heroin,
Chinese opium, worldwide, was the opium of
choice.

Who ran the drug trade? Who d’ya think?
the Opium Suppression Bureau.

Want to buy your fix? The place to go is the local
de-toxification clinic.

(Just ask a cop, if you don’t know the way.

They run the joint; they’ll be glad to point it
out to you).¹⁰

¹⁰ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 643-44.

Chiang never could put down the civil wars raging across the
land. His writ didn't run beyond five of the provinces
along the Yang-Tze River.

The Communist armies weren't destroyed. The ones who survived were
hardened, and they found a leader as unlike Chiang as anyone could
ask, in Mao Tse-Tung.

They were still around in 1937, when Chiang Kai-Shek fell into their
hands.

Mao thought of putting him on trial at first.

Instead, he forced the Generalissimo to terms:

end their own war, and unite to drive out the Japanese.¹¹

It was a brutal war. To get the Japanese out of central China, Chiang
blew up the dikes along the Yellow River.

Four thousand villages were swept away, in its path.

Millions of Chinese died or were left homeless.

But so did the Japanese.

The floods caught their tanks and artillery.¹²

¹¹ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 644-48.

¹² Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 649.

Mussolini sent flying instructors to China...

Who moonlighted by flying over strategic districts, taking photos, and then selling them to the Japanese.

Soviet pilots and planes helped the Nationalists, who got all the planes, while the Communists got all the books.¹³

Japan could take any city it wanted.

It could command China's industry and railroads and electrical generating power.

But that did no good at all.

China was like a blanket, and the roads and highways were only seams on it.

Japan could hold the railroad depots.

They couldn't hold onto the peasants.

The cities they took were burned-out shells.

China wouldn't make terms, and wouldn't surrender.

It was, as one Japanese leader put it, like an earthworm.

¹³ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 648-50.

You could cut half of it off, and kill that part, but the other part
was still out there, and still wriggling.

A scorched earth policy – a drowned earth policy ...

All these could put the price tag for victory higher than the
Japanese with their “blood-spot flag”¹⁴ could afford.

The one western power that felt the heat worst was Britain.

America and the Soviet Union hadn't any friends in Japan.

American economic sanctions stirred rage.
Soviet Bolshevism inspired fear.

But these giants were too big and strong to kick in the shins.
America was half a world away, anyhow.

Britain, now ... it was as close as Hong Kong and the international
sector in Shanghai.

¹⁴ So referred to in Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 649.

It was a whole lot richer.

It was vain, the way a big empire can be.

Like the English woman who landed on
Japan and said to her host:

“Ah, so, this is Kobe. Tell me, who is our
Governor-General here?”

And with its hands full in Europe, it looked a lot weaker

– in other words, Prime Cut.¹⁵

Look out from Tokyo on the map ...

– to the rich natural resources of Malaya

– to the string of commercial strongholds like
Singapore
Hong Kong

But Britain strikes closer to home than that.

Just about half the foreign investment in China is British
250 million pounds worth

¹⁵ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 638-39.

Its shipping dominates the seas. Even the Japanese had to hire out a million tons of cargo to British ships to carry on its war in China in 1938.¹⁶

Britain had a bigger stake in an independent China than anybody else.

It had fought to open China up in the 1840s and in 1900.

It couldn't afford to lose those markets now.

Every so often, diplomats tried to patch things up. The patching never worked. You could tell it wouldn't from the start. There were bad signs...

– like when the new British ambassador held a dinner and got up to offer a toast to friendship between the two countries...

and just at that moment, a typhoon blew all the embassy windows out, and ended the party

– or when the Japanese emissary came to England on a good will flight in a plain called “Divine Wind.”

(Doesn't sound bad? Let me translate it to the original Japanese:

Kamikaze)

¹⁶ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 638-40.

The longer the war in China went on, the more Japan blamed
England for it.

Whatever coin reserves propped up the Chinese government's
currency, British sectors in Tientsin and Shanghai
held in safe keeping.¹⁷

And the longer war went on, the more Japan could see that it NEEDED
the raw materials that southeast Asia – French and British
colonial Asia – had to offer.

The chance of war was rising, and rising fast.

Sun Set

By the late 1930s, British strategic planning was running scared east of Suez.

The one-power strategy was shown for the flimsy thing it was.

Again and again, an international crisis erupted....

Spain
Austria
Czechoslovakia
Albania
China

And every time, the British lion did no more than growl.

¹⁷ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 638-40.

Battle was unthinkable, because the moment Britain took on one power, it would be helpless to protect itself against the other.

Fight Japan over the Far East, and there would be no fleet to protect British interests in the Mediterranean.

Protect Singapore with all you had, and you would lose Suez.

Put all your muscle at Suez, and kiss your submarine bases at Hong Kong good-bye.

Appeasement rested on the very shakiness of the Dominions.

All the way into 1939, the Dominions made clear that in a major war, England might be on its own.

When Britain wanted sanctions against Italy, over its invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, the first to cut and run were the Canadians.¹⁸

Stand up over Poland? Word from South Africa made clear that a war over Poland wouldn't have South African support.

Canada wouldn't add its name to the Anglo-French guarantee of Poland, even though England wanted it to.

¹⁸ Brock Millman, "Canada, Sanctions and the Abyssinian Crisis of 1935," Historical Journal, 40 (March 1997): 143-68.

But the Prime Minister did promise to use occult powers to
read Hitler's mind

{hey, thanks a lot!}

It didn't work. He only summoned up Anne Boleyn,
Queen Victoria
Florence Nightingale in a seance

{and Ms. Nightingale asked about his health}

Canada didn't just hold back at getting into wars.

It didn't even what to KNOW what Britain was doing.

It didn't want to be consulted...

because if you consult with them, that takes away the
excuse of:

“Gracious, I had no idea!”

If a Dominion isn't consulted, then it can wash its hands of any
responsibility for whatever action the Empire took.¹⁹

In the League of Nations, it was against anything that could even edge
Canada towards using military force...

– admit Russia to the League? Mmm, no, that would make Germany
mad.

¹⁹ Brock Millman, “Canada, Sanctions and the Abyssinian Crisis of 1935,” **Historical Journal**, 40 (March 1997): 144-47.

It was so gutless that when Japan attacked China, Canada's response was to make a speech arguing that the League ought to take stern, firm action:

*They ought to expel CHINA!!!!*²⁰

As for Australia, it couldn't offer anything.

Japan was much closer, and a greater threat.

Commit to Britain, and you are giving away men you can't spare, against an enemy halfway around the world.

Better to spend money and men on defense.

Better, also, not to back up Britain's hand, even when it was tough...

Don't help it in sanctions against Japan.

²⁰ Brock Millman, "Canada, Sanctions and the Abyssinian Crisis of 1935," Historical Journal, 40 (March 1997): 148.

Don't do anything that would give Japan an excuse
for war.

And so, just about all the way up Pearl Harbor, Australia was
selling Japan

copra
and lead
and wheat²¹

The reason behind this was that – however much Germany looked like the threat
from Whitehall, it wasn't, to Sydney and Melbourne.

But Japan certainly was.

And there was every sign that England couldn't cope with Japanese
aggression. It would have its hands full at home.

Australia and New Zealand were rearming fast – not to put guns in
Britain's hands, but into their own.

Guarantee Poland? What they wanted was for Britain to guarantee
Singapore.

And when Britain failed to send its fleet east, just as a show of
force, it sent a message:

²¹ Kosmas Tsokhas, "Dedominionization: The Anglo-Australian Experience, 1939-1945," **Historical Journal**,
37 (December 1994): 873-75.

Help's not going to come, if the crisis gets really bad.

European needs will always come first.

By the spring of 1939, it was clear: there'd be no Anzacs in Europe this time.

They'd defend the Empire from their homes.

By the time the war began, it was clear.

The only help the Aussies would get would be American.

The Empire no longer could protect its own.

It would have to call on other world powers to do that.²²

Several things could have been done:

A) rapid rearmament, to build Britain up to a two-power, two-war level

²² Kosmas Tsokhas, "Dedominionization: The Anglo-Australian Experience, 1939-1945," **Historical Journal**, 37 (December 1994): 867-69.

able to take on Japan and Germany at the same time

- b) rearm the Dominions, and give them a bigger share of the task of defending themselves
- c) write up a mutual security pact with the United States, the one world power that had the financial and industrial resources, and was in a really secure place.
- d) git! Britain should cut its potential losses, abandon everything east of Suez and concentrate in European waters.

Tell Australia, New Zealand and India: you're on your own.

And oh, by the way ... take care of Malaya for us, won't you?

Trouble is, all these possibilities were out of the question.

- A) No British government before 1935 could have got any program like that through.
- B) The Dominions didn't want to do more, and were dragging their feet on doing what they were supposed to be handling now.

They weren't about to promise Singapore a lick of help.

- C) the United States wasn't about to make any mutual security pact. It could never have got through the Congress.

And militarily, the United States was a puny pipsqueak in the 1930s.

D) give up the Empire? That was in effect to give up England's status as a world power. Political suicide ... nothing less.

That left just one alternative: Appeasement.

At all costs, the empire must be kept safe.

England wasn't prepared to fight.
It needed years to rearm itself.

Till then, it should give way on things that weren't vital.

Appeasement, as Chamberlain saw it, wasn't just the best policy.

It was the ONLY policy.

The only alternative would have been collective security....
all working together, through the League of Nations, against the
aggressor.

But twenty years had shown how much of a failure that was.

Appeasement at its most reasonable wasn't buying friends.

It was buying time.

While it went on, Britain would be buckling on armor.

It would build up the home defense.

And the Royal Air Force would get the bulk of the money.

Some would go to Hurricane and Spitfire fights and to Radar.

Some would go to medium and long-range bombers, to knock out the enemy's industrial power.

Appeasement didn't mean giving up anything and everything.

If Germany attacked France, say, Britain would have gone to war.

If the colonies were invaded by Japan, Britain would have gone to war.

But the only war that Britain could risk was one where the stakes were too great for the rest of the Empire to stay out of.

- was Austria too great a stake?
- or the German pockets along the western end of Czechoslovakia whose people had always wanted to be in Germany from the very start?
- or the Germans' right to move their soldiers into their own back yard, the Rhineland?
- or the Germans' right to have what every other country had, an army and an air force all their own?

The problem came in deciding WHERE to draw the line.

That wasn't clear at first. And this, in its own way, was part of its danger.

Churchill's speech was right to the point, powerful and foreboding:

“For five years I have talked to this House on these matters – not with very great success. I have watched this famous island descending incontinently, fecklessly, the stairway which leads to a dark gulf. It is a fine broad stairway at the beginning, but after a bit the carpet ends. A little farther on there are only flagstones, and a little farther on still these break beneath your feet....”²³

Churchill – The Casualty of Empire

Through all the darkening events of the 1930s, one voice spoke clean and true about England's growing peril.

Winston Churchill seems today like a prophet crying in the wilderness.

What we may miss, though, is why he was in the wilderness.

It had everything to do with Empire – and everything to do with Churchill.

It fit everything odd about Churchill's character.

²³ Robert Rhodes James, **Churchill: A Study in Failure, 1900-1939** (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970), 354. The speech was delivered in the House of Commons, March 24, 1938.

For make no mistake, Churchill was the gaudiest kind of character.

Among the respectable bowlers and brollies, he was an old-fashioned aristocrat.

He despised the middle class – the very term he used as an insult.

He had a prodigious appetite for food and drink –
drink especially.

He wasn't an alcoholic, as one friend explained.

Alcoholics couldn't drink that much.²⁴

He had a fine taste for champagne, though tradesmen found he didn't have quite the same taste for paying his bills on time.

In a time of Depression, he lived gaudily and high on the hog, with flamboyant hats and bright dressing gowns, cigars and the best of everything.

He loved the lordly pursuits –

gambling
Polo
fox hunting

²⁴ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 606-07.

His closest friends were plungers and adventurers...

Lord Beaverbrook, the press lord

(“Lord Been-A-Crook” people called him)

“a kind of Dracula, Svengali, Iago and Mephistopheles rolled into one.”

Brendan Bracken, whose flaming red hair and financial schemes made him stand out as eminently not to be trusted.

One reporter told him:

“Everything about you is phony. Even your hair, which looks like a wig, isn’t.”²⁵

Lord Birkenhead, a “fluent and plausible bounder” and later “a crapulous and corpulent buffoon.”

Brilliant, yes – brave, yes. Eloquent, witty, dogged, versatile...

²⁵ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 606.

grant it all. But there was something terribly unstable in him, a kind of Romanticism we like in our heroes, but would be a little afraid of in people whose impulses can get up a war or close down an industry without thinking it all the way through.

His notions seemed so entirely right, once the war began.

But it was so easy not to believe him, because time and again, he had been so wrong – and always in the same language of doom and apocalypse.

– at Gallipoli, it had been he who convinced the Admirals that the Dardanelles could be taken easily...

and without an army to back them up.

– in Ireland, it had been he who built up the Black and Tans and the Auxis, and made a bad situation more horrific still²⁶

– at Chanak, he had been one the most fire-breathing for war with the Turks, and the very person that scared the Dominions the most.

Those were pretty hard mistakes to forget. They'd ended in nearly overturning one government, and in turning another out.

Twice, they'd ended in Churchill being thrown out of office,

²⁶ Robert Rhodes James, Churchill: A Study in Failure, 1900-1939 (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970), 141.

and, for a man of ordinary talents, any one of them
would have ended his career for good.

But the biggest imperial crisis of the last twenty years had been India,
and there Churchill had been bulldog stubborn and bullheadedly
wrong.

He fought his own party, to keep India from getting a single step
closer to self-government.

To him, Gandhi WAS another Hitler –
a lunatic bent on destroying civilization in blood and fire

a charlatan and a fake²⁷

To him, the government that negotiated with Gandhi was the worst
kind of appeaser – cowardly, truckling, weak.

He didn't think change was coming to India too fast.

He refused to consider change at all.

Self-government was out of the question.

The people in India weren't fit to rule themselves.
They never WOULD be.

“Elections, even in the most educated democracies, are regarded
as a misfortune and as a disturbance of social, moral

²⁷ Robert Rhodes James, Churchill: A Study in Failure, 1900-1939 (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970),
215-20.

and economic progress... Why at this moment should we force upon the untutored races of India that very system, the inconveniences of which are now felt even in the most highly developed nations, the United States, Germany, France, and in England itself?²⁸

It sounded very much as if, given the chance, Churchill would have spared England its elections, too.

How can you believe the Old Man who Cried Wolf?

It's a lot easier to think that It's Just Winston Again.

In each case, he had backed up his beliefs with facts.

And the facts had been wrong.

The arguments had been distortions.

The fact that he cared so, about Empire, by the 1930s, was just one more proof of how strange a throwback he seemed.

Just about everybody believed in Empire.

But in a very twentieth-century way.

Churchill sounded the lusty notes of the old India colonels..

²⁸ Robert Rhodes James, Churchill: A Study in Failure, 1900-1939 (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970), 236.

the beet-faced Colonel Blimps...
of cavalry charges and Kipling poetry
the empire of Heroes, not of Administrators.

It was terribly old-fashioned, and dangerous –

dangerous because it seemed so out of touch with everything
twentieth-century.

And that caprice, that just plain orneriness, came back, full-blast, just about every
time people had nearly forgotten what a queer customer Winston really was.

In 1930, Churchill seemed on the verge of a come-back.

When Conservatives returned to power – and it was sure to come in a
year or two – there was no way he could have been kept out
of the councils of the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, liked Churchill and knew his
talents.

But the India question turned them pretty close to enemies.

There would be no place for him in the Cabinet, as long as Baldwin
held high place.²⁹

²⁹ Robert Rhodes James, Churchill: A Study in Failure, 1900-1939 (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970), 231-32.

III. NEVILLE J'AIME-BERLIN'S PIECE POLICY

A.. Jo's Boy

Chamberlain was the wrong man for Prime Minister in rough international seas.

Old Joe Chamberlain's two sons had divided the old man's inheritance --

Austen was the one who cared about empire
 Neville, the one who cared about cleaning out Birmingham's drains...
 and, like his father, mayor

A bright, apt man with a mind of his own was the last thing Chamberlain
 wanted in his Cabinet...

No Churchill for him –

And, as soon as he could get rid of him, no Anthony Eden, either.

This wasn't a weak man. It was a strong one, and a strong Prime Minister
 with an autocratic strength.

That was exactly what made his ideas so dangerous. He couldn't be
 stopped, couldn't be slowed.

Neville Chamberlain wasn't a bad man – not even a stupid one.

But he knew little about the world outside.

America was “a nation of cads”

Russia was “semi-Asiatic”

The French “could not keep a secret for more than half an hour,
nor a government for more than nine months.”³⁰

He was certainly not a pacifist. Maybe his problem was that he was
an imperialist.

And to many of them, the REAL world was the Empire.

Europe was a sideshow – some place less important, less
significant, less exciting.

It was simply full of all those *foreigners*.

And like so many imperialists, he had a complete faith in his own
rightness, and his own abilities.

³⁰ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 610.

He didn't fear Hitler. He despised him – “the commonest
little dog” he'd ever seen

Men like that, the Master Race of Empire can tame, by simply
showing character.

They wouldn't dare break their word to YOU.

Because you are a person to be admired, one of
the inheritors of the globe –

the biggest empire in all history.

If a settlement took re-drawing the map of Europe – and Hitler insisted
that it must – what of that?

Who had more experience re-drawing maps of the world than
the imperialists?

Who did it all the time?³¹

³¹ For the imperial connection to appeasement, see Kathryn Tidrick, **Empire and the English Character** (London: I B . Tauris & Co., 1990), 273-75.

Settling Europe's difficulties would be just one more adjustment between Empires... and they'd been doing it all the time.

England could sit down for talks with Italy and Germany.

A fair bit of give and take would settle all differences.

C. The Search for a Lasting Settlement

By 1937, Churchill could speak for millions when he said:

“We seem to be moving, drifting, steadily, against our will – against the will of every race and every people and every class – towards some hideous catastrophe. Everybody wishes to stop it, but they do not know how.”³²

Neville Chamberlain's power came from the fact that he did know how – or thought he did.

He set out to stop that drift, but not in the Churchillian way.

England wasn't ready for war.

And war didn't have to happen – not if it could come to terms with Italy and Germany.

Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler were like any other politicians: they were reasonable men.

Reasonable men don't want war.

³² Robert Rhodes James, Churchill: A Study in Failure, 1900-1939 (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970), 355.

Reasonable men know that a deal or a treaty, once made,
has to be honored – or you can never expect
to work out differences in the future.

And Chamberlain, with a tidy Empire-fixed mind, knew the one treat that
he could give Hitler, that would make him give up his tricks...

the old German colonies lost in the war.

What an incentive to behave at home – lebensraum in the tropics!

Better still, how about giving Germany a major say in
everything between the Sahara and the
Zambezi?

(It was mostly French and Belgian, and neither one
had been consulted, but... these
foreigners can be so unreasonable).³³

(What Chamberlain hadn't figured out was that Hitler hadn't
the slightest interest in colonies.)

All along, Chamberlain had wanted to go slow on re-arming.

As Chancellor of the Exchequer, it seemed a waste of money
and a budget-buster, to him.

Now, he had even more reasons for going slow.

If he could work out a deal – and he knew he could – because

³³ Andrew Roberts, *"The Holy Fox"*, 77.

he was, after all, the supremely capable and utterly dependable head of the greatest empire in the world –

England wouldn't NEED more guns, tanks, planes, and ships.

But we also have to see the clear shocks he faced, when he became Prime Minister.

... word from Canada that when it came to re-arming the Empire, England would be on its own

... word from South Africa that if a war broke out in central Europe, no matter who was to blame, England could do all its fighting by itself

... word from Australia that what with the Far East being menaced by Japan, the Dominions Down Under couldn't do a thing for England in a European war

... a Neutrality Act from America that pretty much slammed the door on England buying guns and war supplies there, if a crisis came.

This, then, was the complicated source of Appeasement:

1. an England years from a war footing
2. an Empire putting distance between itself and the Mother Country
3. a Prime Minister who knew his own mind

D. The Halifax

At his side, soon enough was Edward Wood, Earl of Halifax.

Halifax was a tall, aloof, very moral man.

He had plenty of courage and plenty more Christianity.³⁴

He, even more than Chamberlain, had found his footing in handling the problems of empire.

For he was the same Lord Irwin who negotiated with Gandhi.

He found the Germans just one more quaint, pagan civilization – and Berchtesgaden really another Bombay.

When he got to Berchtesgaden, he almost mistook Hitler for a footman and very nearly handed him his hat and coat to put away.

After that, he was bullied and blustered in the true Fuhrerian style.

He was told that the one way to handle India was to shoot Gandhi first, and then supporters of the Congress — dozens if possible, hundreds if need be.

Hitler told him how much he like the movie, *Lives of the Bengal Lancers*, which showed British soldiers in India giving it good and hard to the savage Wogs on the frontier.

³⁴ The key biography, sympathetic to appeasement, is Andrew Roberts, *“The Holy Fox”: A Biography of Lord Halifax* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991). In fact, appeasement is about all it cares about – and the war years. India, and Halifax’s career there, everything in his first fifty years, is covered by page 43.

That's the way inferior races OUGHT to be treated.³⁵

It was, he noted, compulsory viewing for the SS.

But Halifax didn't get the point. If anything, he came away full of confidence.

He had handled a mad Mahatma – for someone like that, handling
a fervid Fuhrer ought to be a piece of cake.

In fact, Halifax thought, they really were the same.

... non-smoker
... charismatic
... non-drinker of alcohol
... vegetarian
... with no appreciation for blood sports –

a crank in his private life

a mystical sense of the universe....

Wasn't Hitler simply a German version of
Gandhi?

³⁵Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 615-16; Roberts, *"The Holy Fox"*, 70-3.

And look how easily Halifax managed him!³⁶

The real solution, after Austria, would have been to move fast...

– step up rearmament

– and make crystal-clear that Britain would go to war, if need be,
to protect Austria's neighbors from invasion.

But stand up to Hitler with what?

The Dominions had minced no words: they wanted Britain to cut a deal.

All their high commissioners in London pushed the PM to conciliate Hitler.

³⁶ Kathryn Tidrick, ***Empire and the English Character*** (London: I B . Tauris & Co., 1990), 275-77. This doesn't mean that Halifax liked Hitler. He found his views pretty repulsive. But taking tea with Joseph Goebbels, he later commented, "I couldn't rather help but like the little man." And Hermann Goering he saw as a moderate, with a personality "frankly attractive, like a great schoolboy ... a composite personality – film star, great landowner interested in his estate, Prime Minister, party manager, head gamekeeper at Chatsworth." Roberts, *"The Holy Fox"*, 73-74.

Chamberlain: “How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing.”³⁷

As for the notion that England shouldn't get involved where there were strange people that English people didn't understand....

What on earth was the whole Empire, but just that?

What did Tommy Atkins know about the Bantus?
 the Matabele?
 the Ashanti?
 the Sindh?
 the people in Tibet and Afghanistan?

Was Prague someplace more alien than, say, Palestine?

Chamberlain came home, lionized and glorified.

He waved the protocols he had signed with Hitler.

They were, he told crowds, “peace with honor,”
 “Peace for our time.”

The Church called a day of national thanksgiving.

Downing Street was buried under letters, flowers, umbrellas and fishing rods from the Prime Minister's admirers.³⁸

³⁷ Winston S. Churchill, **The Gathering Storm**, 282.

³⁸ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 625.

F. “Long Live the Shameful Peace”

Munich was a disaster, and there were those who knew it at the time.³⁹

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- ³⁹ Chamberlain’s defenders then and later would argue:
- Munich was right in itself.
 - People should have the right to decide what country they belong to.
 - Why should Czechs rule Germans, who wanted to be part of Germany?
 - What right had England to stand in the German-speakers’ way?
 - Munich was inescapable.
 - Public opinion in England wouldn’t stand for another war.
 - France and England weren’t ready to fight.
 - They didn’t have the guns, the men, the money.
 - Hitler could have taken the Sudetenland any time he wanted, by war
 - Munich bought time.
 - Hitler couldn’t be trusted.
 - But if there was going to be a war, England and France needed time and breathing space to build up their power.
 - They had to play catch-up.
 - Selling out the Czechs won them a year to do it in.

The arguments won’t hold up at all.

- England wasn’t working out a deal so that German-speaking Czechs could have self-determination.
 - Nobody held a plebiscite.
 - Nobody gave the German-speaking parts of Czechoslovakia a chance for a full, fair vote on whether they wanted to join Germany.
 - And maybe they didn’t.
 - The people in Alsace and Lorraine spoke German.
 - But they would die, to keep themselves part of France.
 - Language and culture aren’t everything. Freedom counts. If you speak German, but go to synagogue, would YOU want to join the Third Reich?
- France and England weren’t so completely overmatched as all that.
 - The Czech fortifications were solid and strong.
 - German generals weren’t absolutely sure they could break through.
 - The more troops the Reich sent into Czechoslovakia, the fewer there would be, on the borders with France.
 - France had about the same number of divisions as

Germany – but it would be fighting on one front, not two.

Germany's fortifications, the Siegfried Line, weren't finished yet, and couldn't be held without a lot of manpower.

What could France do, with 50 German divisions ranged on its border, the generals pleaded.

Not much. But there weren't fifty German divisions there. There were five.

Heck, the French customs service could have handled THEM.

German generals told Hitler that they could hold the Siegfried Line for a few days... tops.

– as for buying time, England and France would be weaker compared to Hitler one year hence than now.

They had lost 35 divisions of Czech troops.

They had lost the Skoda works, the third biggest arms -making concern in Europe.

In that one loss, Germany added as much to its arms manufacturing as all of the factories in Britain put together.

England and France made more planes, and that counted for a lot.

Re-making the old biplanes, and building Hurricanes and Spitfires ... in September 1938 that had only just started happening.

England had just five squadrons of the modern type.

Two years later, it had 47 squadrons.

It's very true that England did use the extra year to catch up with Germany in fighter planes...

but not bombers. It wouldn't catch up there till 1941.

Fighter planes were crucial to the Battle of Britain.

Without the RAF, Hitler would have had air supremacy, enough to mount an invasion.

But it wasn't the planes that let Hitler carry on the Blitz.

It was the bases.

It was only when his armies had control of the Low Countries and northern France that Britain was within striking range.

And in 1938, Hitler didn't have the power to do either one.

What about the Blitzkrieg? That depended on panzers – tanks.

In 1940, Hitler had no end of those.

In 1938, he had very few.

There would have been no German breakthrough.

By the end of 1939, Germany WOULD have a navy with some power to its punch.

It WOULD have the Siegfried Line completed.

And here's the other consideration.

If the war had started in 1938, Hitler would have gone in alone.

Italy had no Pact of Steel with the Reich.
It wasn't ready for war, and would have sat it out.
Japan was a long way from ready for war.
It, too, would have stayed out.
As for Russia, instead of being Hitler's ally, it would have
been ready to fight him, or at the very worst, stayed
neutral.

Winston Churchill told Chamberlain: you have been given a choice
between shame and war. You have chosen shame; but you will
have war, too.

Yet, the last echoes of the cheering crowds had barely died away before, through
England, you could sense a shift in mood.

Peace had been won, but as passions spent, people noticed the price-
tag: the wholesale looting of Czechoslovakian territory.

What had they been cheering?

They'd been cheering a peace that Chamberlain told them was
a much better deal for Czechoslovakia than what
Hitler had been insisting on.

But as the details started coming out, it became starkly
clear that the deal wasn't a bit better.

In some ways, it was worse.

As it was, within two weeks the Germans had all the German-speaking
bits of Czechoslovakia.

They also had some of the parts where most people were
Czechs.

Statesmanship looked more like cowardice.
When the Nazis unleashed their violence on Jewish neighborhoods
in Kristallnacht, who was surprised?

It was just more of the same – only a little more brutal.

But it drove home the point: when Neville Chamberlain brought “peace with honor,” he did it by widening the area of Nazi sadism to include the Czechs.

And in France they were calling him “*J’aime Berlin.*”

G. Cancelled Czechs, 1939

The real turning point came only in March 1939.

On March 9th, the Prime Minister told the press that the European situation looked very hopeful.

His Home Secretary announced the start of a “new golden age.”

If so, it lasted just five days.

That was when Germany abandoned its pledges and took over the rest of Czechoslovakia.

Until now, Hitler had seemed obsessed only with bringing Germans back into their homeland.

What did his empire need with Slavs? Or Czechs?

Now that argument was proved a lie.

What did England do? It had promised to protect Czechoslovakia.

Ah, His Majesty's Government explained, so it had.
But when Slovakia seceded, there wasn't really a Czechoslovakia
TO protect any more.

So all England's promises were null and void.

Now the scramble was on, to frame alliances to hem Hitler in.

The time had gone by.

The Reich was ready to go to war over Poland.
It would have done it, no matter what threats had been thrown
its way.

By that summer, it had concluded a deal with the Soviet Union.

The Non-Aggression Pact with a secret clause, splitting the
take.

Chamberlain kept dreaming.

"Hitler has concluded that we mean business," he wrote that summer,
"and that the time is not ripe for a major war."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Piers Brendon, **The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s** (New York: Knopf, 2000), 630.

