America, Britain, and Swaraj: Anglo-American Relations and Indian Independence, 1939–1945

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It must be made plain that the British nation has no intention of relinquishing its mission in India . . . or of parting with its supreme control of any of the essentials of peace, order, and good government. We have no intention of casting away that most truly bright and precious jewel of the crown of the King, which more than all our other Dominions and Dependencies constitutes the glory and strength of the British Empire. Winston S. Churchill, in his book India: Speeches and an Introduction, presented by Churchill to President Roosevelt at Hyde Park, NY, 1942.

There never has been, there isn’t now, and there never will be any race of people on earth fit to serve as masters over their fellow men. . . . We believe that any nationality, no matter how small, has the inherent right to its own nationhood. Franklin D. Roosevelt, at a White House press conference, 1941.

They [the United States and Great Britain] respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them. Third Article of the Atlantic Charter, signed on Aug. 14, 1941, by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill.

The Charter is quite a separate problem from the progressive evolution of self-governing institutions in the regions and peoples who owe allegiance to the British Crown. Winston S. Churchill, addressing the House of Commons, Sept. 9, 1941.¹

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Introduction

Despite growing agitation for independence in nearly every corner of the British, French, and Dutch colonial empires after the end of the First World War, U.S. foreign policy emphasized stability and predictability at a time of global political and economic upheaval. The fundamental assumption of Western cultural superiority was beginning to face challenge by educated subjects of the imperial powers, as well as by private Americans such as veteran socialist Norman Thomas and leaders of African-American opinion. Official American attitudes, however, could most charitably be characterized as studied disregard, leavened with a substantial dose of racism. Just as non-white Americans were seen as not ready to assume their full rights as citizens, so the peoples of the underdeveloped colonies were also seen as needing the tutelage of more advanced nations and races.

Not all Americans favored European colonialism, to be sure. President Wilson’s pronouncements committing America to national self-determination had made a significant positive impression on the founders of the Indian National Congress and, indeed, were cited by the Congress in a formal resolution in 1918. British rule in India was frequently cited in the U.S. Senate debate on ratification of the Treaty of Versailles, usually in negative terms. A more indicative example of U.S. official attitudes in the years following the First World War can be seen in a telegram sent by U.S. Consul General James Smith on February 25, 1920:

India is governed wisely, justly, humanely. As one who has lived in India for a number of years and has been brought into more or less close contact with a large number of British officials who comprise the Indian Civil Service, I have the most profound admiration for the Government of this country and for the unselfish spirit of sacrifice in the interests of India as a whole which dominates the official acts of the civil administrators who control its destinies.

The first signs of widespread change in these official attitudes became apparent in the late 1930s. America’s entry into the Second World War led, first haltingly and then increasingly forcefully, to an impulse toward official American intervention in the colonial affairs of its European allies. For three years after the start of the war, the United
States involved itself deeply in attempting to mediate the disputes between the British government and leaders of the Indian nationalist movements. This involvement had an enormous impact on the future course of British and Indian history and, to a certain extent, of much of the history of the rest of the world as well.

The administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt was torn by the need to reconcile ideological and moral sentiments with the practical exigencies of war. Roosevelt could not afford to alienate British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the leader of America’s most important ally. Yet, Roosevelt was also imbued with the American anti-colonialist tradition, and he had to strive to avoid embroiling the United States on the wrong side of a conflict that clearly was to outlive the war and would determine the shape of the postwar world as much as would the defeat of the Axis.

The decisions and actions of American policymakers in response to India’s struggle for independence from British rule established the foundations of key elements of America’s postwar foreign policy, including the bipartisan commitment to decolonization and the identification of newly independent nations as potential recruits (and clients) in the Cold War.

**The Roots of American Involvement**

From the signing of the Atlantic Charter forward, the question was not whether Britain would grant independence to her colonies, but when. This essay will not attempt to recapitulate the importance of India’s role as the centerpiece of the British Empire, nor of the rapid growth of Indian nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment in the early decades of the Twentieth Century. In assessing the key steps that led United States and British policy toward India to diverge in the 1940s, however, it is impossible to overlook the failed effort at compromise that came to a head with the 1935 Government of India Act. Approved over the objections of many Britons who saw it as too liberal, of most Indian nationalists who saw it as too limited, and of Indian traditional rulers who feared threats to their autonomy, the act imposed a federation with direct control from New Delhi on the subcontinent. The British claimed the act represented a great step forward in India’s constitutional progression, but nationalists derided it as mere window-dressing. This split was to have significant consequences as Britain, the United States, and India entered an era of global crisis.
The long-simmering conflict over independence for India came to a head in September 1939, with the Nazi invasion of Poland. Within hours of Britain’s entry into war, the personal representative of the King in India, Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, declared war on Germany. Linlithgow issued his declaration without consulting any of the leaders of India’s political parties, an action that enraged Indian nationalist opinion. In his memoirs, future Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru recalled his own anger:

War was declared in Europe, and immediately the Viceroy of India announced that India was also at war. One man, and he a foreigner and a representative of a hated system, could plunge 400 millions of human beings into war without the slightest reference to them. There was something rotten in a system under which the fate of these millions could be decided in this way.5

Nationalist leaders in India declared that they were unwilling to assist the war effort without concrete changes in the governance of India. The viceroy’s promise of full dominion status equivalent to that of Canada or Australia after the war, issued on August 7, 1940, did little to allay Indian suspicions of British intentions. Indian nationalist leaders as a group felt strongly that Britain was long overdue in fulfilling the promises it made to India in the 1930s, including self-government and ultimate Dominion status. Indian National Congress leaders announced that they would not support the war if the status quo remained as it was, and the remarkably diverse factions that made up the party agreed upon a joint statement, issued at Bardoli in December 1941:

The whole background in India is one of hostility and distrust of the British government and not even the most far-reaching promises can alter this background, nor can a subject India offer voluntary or willing help to an arrogant imperialism which is indistinguishable from fascist authoritarianism.6

This statement, which enraged the British government, set the stage for the events that were to follow. For while Indians refused to cooperate in the war effort as a dependent people, especially after seeing pre-war promises of Dominion status go unfulfilled, the British refused
to consider any move toward self-government while the war was being fought. A statement by Herbert Morrison, a Laborite and Home Secretary in the wartime National Government, made this all too clear:

It would be ignorant, dangerous nonsense to talk about grants of self-government to many of the dependent territories for some time to come. In those instances it would be like giving a child of ten a latch key, a bank account, and a shot-gun.7

The British government was particularly sensitive to foreign criticism of its policy in India, and the bulk of that criticism came from the United States. Although the Roosevelt administration avoided the issue of India in the years before the war, it was much discussed in academic and intellectual circles in America, and was a frequent topic of denunciatory editorials in such liberal publications as the New Republic. Sir Stafford Cripps, a rising star in the Labor Party and a future Lord Privy Seal in the National Government, said he recognized this in a speech to the House of Commons on October 26, 1939. Failure to act to resolve the Indian crisis, he said, could have severe repercussions:

I believe that among neutrals, and particularly the United States of America, where there is a very great interest in the Indian situation, it will reinforce isolationist and anti-British tendencies which have been very well demonstrated.8

Debates in the Commons in the years leading up to and during the war made frequent reference to the American interest in the Indian situation, and while many members, particularly those from the Conservative Party, opposed any U.S. involvement, others felt it was essential. A Labor M.P. from North Cumberland told the Commons in the autumn of 1941 that American participation was crucial:

The leaders of Indian opinion have not always derived their inspiration from this country. . . . They have looked to America and other countries and they still so look. . . . Perhaps the representatives of the other countries who stand to be just as seriously affected . . . by the developments of this conflict should be brought into this question.9
If many Britons were anxious for American involvement in the dispute, however, the United States was by no means prepared to play such a role at the outset of the war. Although there were American consulates in Calcutta and Bombay, they existed primarily for trade purposes, and all official American relations with India were conducted through the British Embassy in Washington and the India Office in London. When Americans did hold opinions about British rule in India, they tended to favor the continuance of the colonialist status quo. An early example of pro-British attitudes was expressed by President Theodore Roosevelt, a self-described proponent of Western imperialism in 1909:

> The successful administration of India . . . has been one of the most notable achievements of the white race during the past two centuries . . . If the English control were now withdrawn from India, the whole peninsula would become a chaos of bloodshed and violence.10

The U.S. Congress reflected American public opinion, and interest in India was evinced by members of Congress only when there was evidence of public interest. In the years up to 1939, there were never more than a few allusions to British rule in India in the course of periods of up to five years, and in the 1939 Congressional Record the only mention of India concerned a bill to ease the immigration restrictions for Indians.11 Similarly, there is not a single reference to India in the entire Congressional Record for 1940.12 China had a much higher public profile in the United States than India did.

Beginning in 1941, however, the American public began to become more aware of events in India, in part most probably because of the tremendous attention paid to Indian nationalist leader Mohandas Gandhi’s non-violent protests of that year in newsreels and the press. A speech by North Carolina Senator Robert Reynolds on February 24, 1941, signaled a change in American opinion. Charging Britain with “imperialist exploitation,” he referred to India as a “subject nation, probably against the will of a majority of its people, and certainly against the will of the followers of Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest single man in India.13 During the same debate, Senator Gerald Nye called the British Empire “the greatest aggressor in all modern history” and
denounced “the despotic, arbitrary, and sometimes tyrannical rule of almost half a billion people.”

Rapidly growing American opposition to British policy in India was noticed in Britain in the years just before America’s entrance into the war. British policymakers desperately wanted the United States to enter the war, and they feared any dispute that might prevent or delay American participation in the fight against the Axis. Member of Parliament J. S. Wedgewood said he was worried about American opinion concerning India. In a speech to the Commons, he told of his recent trip to the United States. Americans, he said, asked him:

“What about India? You have put them [the nationalist leaders] all in jail. You do not practice democracy there.” . . . Our enemies in America naturally use everything they can to arouse contempt of us and to make the thinking people in America believe that Imperial Britain is not really fighting a war for freedom.

The “Indian Question” played an important role in the shaping of wartime relationships between Britain and the United States. Anglo-American relations during the war were based on an extraordinary degree of personal cooperation and negotiation between Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt entered politics a strong supporter of the imperialist ideology of his distant cousin, Theodore Roosevelt. He strongly backed U.S. intervention in Haiti in the years before the First World War; much to the consternation of his superior, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, who favored a policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of Caribbean nations. In a much-quoted statement, Roosevelt bragged that he had written Haiti’s new constitution himself, “and if I do say it, I think it is a pretty good constitution.” In 1922, he stated his views on colonial self-determination, and his words could quite easily have been those of an India Office bureaucrat speaking about efforts to suppress agitation for self-government:

The vast majority of people in this country, I have always been certain, understand that complete independence for all those people is not to be thought of for many years to come.
Roosevelt’s views, however, changed gradually over the course of the 1920s, and this change coincided with a general shift toward moderate liberalism in his political philosophy. Jonathan Alter and other observers have cited Roosevelt’s coming down with polio as a life-changing event that influenced his view of the world. In any event, in a much-discussed 1928 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Roosevelt, while admitting he had played a role in encouraging previous American intervention in the Caribbean, proclaimed his change of heart toward colonial policy:

> The time has come when we must accept not only certain facts but many new principles of a higher law, a new and better standard in international relations. We are exceedingly jealous of our own sovereignty and it is only right that we should respect a similar feeling among other nations.18

In the early years of his presidency, Roosevelt pushed for legislation granting self-government to America’s most valuable possession, the Philippines, and in presenting to Congress the Philippine Independence Act of 1934, he declared, “Our nation covets no territory; it desires to hold no people against their will over whom it has gained sovereignty through war.”19 This statement marked a repudiation of America’s previous acquisition of territory by force, and it set the stage for Roosevelt’s later support for self-determination for all peoples under foreign domination and control.

Roosevelt’s revulsion at the expansionist policies of Japan played a greater role in bringing his opposition to imperial expansionism to the forefront of his foreign policy than did any other factor. Clearly, Roosevelt found the “master race” doctrines of the nations that would later constitute the Axis both dangerous and immoral, and while many current critics have observed that his objections did not apply nearly so strongly to race relations in the United States, his beliefs appear to have been genuine. In a 1941 press conference at the White House, he stated, “There never has been, there isn’t now, and there never will be any race of people on earth fit to serve as masters over their fellow men. . .We believe that any nationality, no matter how small, has the inherent right to its own nationhood.”20 As James MacGregor Burns noted, Roosevelt’s attitudes toward foreign colonialism bore a striking resemblance to his views on America’s domestic racial problems. Just
as Roosevelt loudly proclaimed his liberal intentions toward African Americans, but was stymied into inaction by the Southern wing of the Democratic Party, so in regard to British imperialism did he loudly and prominently denounce the policies of His Majesty’s Government with full knowledge that the realities of international relations prevented him from doing much of consequence to give his words concrete meaning.21

By mid-1941, Roosevelt appears to have been determined to bring the United States into the war on the side of the British. While Churchill justifiably viewed the war as a fight for national survival, Roosevelt saw it as an opportunity to assert the primacy of democratic, free societies over the evil forces of totalitarianism. Given the president’s declared opposition to colonialism, the logical consequence of this morality-oriented approach to U.S. involvement in the war effort—particularly in the months before Pearl Harbor, when isolationists could still argue that the Axis posed no threat to America—was a clash with Churchill over colonial policy. Churchill was very much a man of his generation, class, and background; during the later years of the war, he would frequently irritate Roosevelt by referring to the Chinese people as “pigtails,” “Chinks,” and “Chinamen,” and ridiculing America’s fascination with China as “sentimental.” 22 A remark he made to U.S. State Department advisor Isaiah Bowman in April 1944 clarified his view of India and Indians:

India is a troublesome country for us. . . . We cannot turn over the government of so vast an area and so many people to ignorant folk. The Indian is a small fellow. They are less well-equipped for self-government than the Chinese. They marry young, they are immature mentally, they breed far in excess of reason, seeming to think that to stretch their limbs out in the sun and let the light of Heaven shine on them is the chief aim of existence. How can you expect government from such people?23

Canadian Prime Minister William L. Mackenzie King cogently described Churchill’s view of Empire. He observed: “As he [Churchill] speaks of Communism . . . being a religion to some people, the British Empire and Commonwealth is a religion to him.”24

When Roosevelt and Churchill met in mid-Atlantic in August 1941 to hammer out the details of the Atlantic Charter, their personal liking
for each other could not prevent this difference in outlook and beliefs from becoming a matter of contention. There is much evidence that Roosevelt was profoundly suspicious of British goals and motives; later on in the war, he remarked to Churchill that “the British would take land anywhere in the world even if it were only a rock or a sand bar.”

Roosevelt’s sentiments were also revealed in a similar remark he made to Churchill at the Teheran Conference in November 1943:

Winston, this is something which you are just not able to understand. You have 400 years of acquisitive instinct in your blood and you just don’t understand how a country might not want to acquire land somewhere if they can get it. A new period has opened in the world’s history, and you will have to adjust yourself to it.

Many historians have attributed Roosevelt’s growing animosity toward British imperialism in the later years of the war to his reaction to the conditions he witnessed on a tour of British West Africa on his way to the Casablanca Conference in January 1943.

After a visit to Bathurst, then the capital of Gambia, he told his son Elliott that the poverty he saw there was “the most horrible thing I have ever seen in my life . . . it’s just plain exploitation of the people.”

Yet, it is clear that these attitudes were largely formed before America’s entrance into the war. Roosevelt had a very keen sense of history, and he made plain his belief that the age of European colonization was ending. He also understood politics, as indicated by a remark he made to Elliott at the Atlantic Charter conference. He noted that Churchill had,

one supreme mission in life, but only one. He’s a perfect wartime prime minister. His one big job is to see that Britain survives this war. . . . His mind is perfect for that of a war leader. But Winston Churchill lead England after the war? It’d never work.

The Atlantic Charter conference provided the first opportunity for Roosevelt and Churchill to speak at length about their views on the future course of the war and on the shape of the world that would follow an Allied victory. As Roosevelt never commented publicly on the precise content of his discussions with Churchill on the U.S.S. Augusta, it is impossible to ascertain exactly what was said. Elliott Roosevelt was present at the conference, however, and his account suggests that the
first meeting of the two men in 22 years was not entirely harmonious. For example, Elliott quotes his father thus:

Churchill told me he was not His Majesty’s Prime Minister for the purpose of presiding over the dissolution of the British Empire. I think I speak as America’s president when I say that America won’t help England in this war simply so that she will be able to continue to ride roughshod over colonial peoples. . . . I can’t believe that we can fight a war against fascist slavery and not work to free people all over the world from a backward colonial policy.29

According to this account, Elliott later told his father that, if he and Churchill were to get along harmoniously, the topic of India would have to be avoided. To this, Roosevelt replied: “I think we’ll even talk some more about India, before we’re through. And Burma. And Java. And all the African colonies. And Egypt and Palestine. We’ll talk about ’em all.”30

The two leaders did not reach agreement about colonial policy, but Churchill acquiesced in the language of the American draft of the Charter, in which the two nations agreed to “respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live.”31 Yet, it is clear that Roosevelt and Churchill interpreted this statement from vastly different perspectives. To Roosevelt it was meant to apply to the entire world. In Churchill’s view, the only relevant concern was the fate of the European nations being overrun by Hitler’s armies. Freeing the captive peoples of Europe, he told Parliament, was “quite a separate problem from the progressive evolution of self-governing institutions in the regions and peoples which owe allegiance to the British Crown.”32

Churchill’s reaction to Roosevelt’s initial mention of the Empire presaged a lengthy and often heated dispute that outlasted the war itself. To the British, American policymakers too often seemed naive, moralistic, and didactic; many Whitehall officials also harbored suspicions that America sought to usurp Britain’s traditional position in the underdeveloped countries to further its own economic goals. When Churchill made his much-celebrated remark that “We mean to hold our own. I have not become the King’s First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire,”33 he clearly saw himself as responsible for the destiny of a glorious, centuries-old empire.
For him, what could the provincial, unworldly Americans understand about such matters?

Churchill in particular resented Roosevelt’s intrusions into what he considered matters of concern only to members of the British Commonwealth of Nations. In his memoirs, he indicated he believed a modicum of hypocrisy was involved in the shaping of American policy. He wrote:

The United States had shown an increasing interest in Indian affairs as the Japanese advance spread westward. The concern of the Americans with the strategy of a world war was bringing them into touch with political issues on which they had strong opinions and little experience. Before Pearl Harbor, India had been regarded as a lamentable example of British imperialism, but as an exclusive British responsibility. Now that the Japanese were advancing toward its frontiers the United States government began to express views and offer counsel on Indian affairs. In countries where there is only one race, broad and lofty views are taken of the colour question. Similarly, states which have no overseas colonies or possessions are capable of rising to moods of great elevation and detachment about the affairs of those who have.34

After a meeting with Roosevelt in 1941 during which the American president brought up the subject of India, Churchill wrote that he [Churchill] reacted “so strongly and at such length that he [Roosevelt] never raised it again verbally.”35 While the president may have never again raised the topic of India verbally with Churchill, however, he did not stop discussing the Indian question in his frequent and voluminous correspondence with the prime minister. Roosevelt’s refusal to ignore the consequences of British policy in India was to have an important impact on the war and on the future course of American foreign policy.

**Among Friends**
The first concrete sign of increased American involvement in Indian affairs was the establishment of quasi-official contacts on a diplomatic level between the United States and India. Up to 1941, India’s only representation in the United States consisted of a half-dozen British diplomats in the India section of the British Embassy in Washington,
and America’s only representation in India consisted of the consulates in Calcutta and Bombay. Consuls in the two cities, nearly a thousand miles from New Delhi and the seat of the Indian government, could communicate with the capital only by mail and, consequently, were unable to exert much influence on behalf of the United States on topics unrelated to Indo-American trade, even had they been instructed to do so. This situation suited the British quite well, as they were anxious not to allow any suggestion of Indian sovereignty to be expressed.

Early in 1941, however, after several negotiating sessions in London, British and American representatives agreed to establish limited quasi-diplomatic relations between India and the United States. The status of the missions to Washington and New Delhi, which were established later that year, was never clearly explained, and this oversight, intentional or not, had serious repercussions in the years that followed. Thomas M. Wilson, a career Foreign Service officer and former consul in Calcutta, was chosen as the first American “resident commissioner” in New Delhi. In order to avoid offending Britain, Wilson arrived in India in October 1941 without formal credentials. Instead, he presented to Viceroy Linlithgow a letter of introduction from President Roosevelt. The British sent Sir Girja Bajpai, a fifty-year-old Indian member of the elite Indian Civil Service and a member of the viceroy’s executive council, to be the first Indian “agent general” in Washington. Officially, Bajpai was merely a member of the staff of the British Embassy, but from his arrival on, he assumed the duties of a diplomatic representative, even going so far as to sign the Declaration of the United Nations for India on New Year’s Day in 1942. (Bajpai later became Secretary General of independent India’s Foreign Service, making him the senior career diplomat in India; his son even later became Indian Ambassador to the United States in his own right.) Despite the limited scale of this change in representation, the presence of Wilson in New Delhi and Bajpai in Washington indicated that America would no longer continue to look at India as solely a British concern, and the appointment of Wilson served as a precedent that was to have large repercussions in the months that followed.

State Department officials began to express concern about the course of events in India. Tension was growing between the British government and leaders of the Indian independence movements, and British resources were being sorely strained by the need to defend India and defend Britain’s possessions and clients in the Middle East. Staff
members of the State Department’s Division of Near Eastern Affairs, long known for their anti-colonialist leanings and orientation, began to press Secretary of State Cordell Hull to take action to resolve the Indian dispute. On May 5, 1941, Assistant Secretary of State Adolph A. Berle sent a memorandum to Hull and to Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles proposing that America press for a “provisional settlement of the Indian problem” in order that India be integrated into “a common cooperative effort of free peoples” to win the growing war. Berle suggested that the United States should offer to send a special envoy to India to mediate the problem. He further said that while the United States should disclaim any “desire to intervene in the relations between His Majesty’s Government and the Indian Empire,” the United States should claim the right to “express concern over the tangible results, in light of a common effort which the British policy in India in fact produces.” Berle’s suggestions were ignored, however; an assistant division chief of the department noted on the original letter that “I understand nothing is to be done on this and that Mr. Welles feels it would be undesirable to do anything which might upset the Indian apple cart at this critical juncture.”

Berle and Wallace Murray, the chief the Near Eastern division of the department, were the foremost anti-imperialists in the Roosevelt administration. Their views were in constant conflict with the positions of Hull and Welles, who were very reluctant to offend British officials despite their stated abhorrence of colonialism. In early-August of 1941, Murray wrote to U.S. Ambassador John G. Winant in London, urging him to raise the issue of Indian autonomy with the British government. Both Hull and Welles reacted angrily to this initiative. Welles told Murray that “the United States is, not warranted in suggesting to the British government what the status of India should be.”

Despite this rebuff, Berle forwarded to Hull a memorandum from Murray a week later. The report noted that the situation in India was worsening and “some observers have ascribed this to the extreme conservative policy of old-fashioned imperialism maintained by Churchill, by [British Ambassador to the United States, Viscount] Halifax (the former Viceroy of India when he was Lord Irwin), and by Mr. Amery [Leopold Amery, Labour Secretary of State for India in the National Government].” Murray said disturbances in India “would be a pretty serious addition to our Far Eastern problems.” Hull’s reply was slightly more conciliatory. He wrote: “Postpone for a moment. But
Welles, however, was not nearly so polite in his response. He declared:

I cannot believe that any officials in our own government are sufficiently familiar with Indian affairs to make it possible for their judgment and recommendations to be put up against the judgment and recommendations of the British authorities themselves. . . . Any immediate change in the status of India would create internal dissension in India on a very wide scale and in all probability would give rise to a situation with which the meager number of British now in India could not cope.

Throughout the course of the war, Welles played a crucial role in stymieing the expansion of American involvement in Indian affairs. He had a direct personal channel to Roosevelt, who often went around Hull to deal with Welles directly. Although he himself frequently denounced British colonial policies, Welles greatly resented the constant urgings of American academics and intellectuals that Americas intervene more forcefully in India. In a statement at a 1941 press conference, he decried:

The intemperate insistence by pundits in the United States that the way to solve the Indian problem is for British authority to remove itself bag and baggage from India between dawn and night. . . . The future constitutional status of India is a tremendously complicated and delicate problem. . . . Wise men may differ as to the possibility of fighting the war and solving India’s historic problems at the same time. But to make active intervention in the Indian situation a test of liberalism, as some have done, presupposes a definition of liberalism which, I must confess, is beyond my comprehension.

American entry into the war changed the attitudes of American officials toward British policy in India. In his memoirs, Hull noted that after Pearl Harbor “some of the hesitancy we had in taking up with the British the subject of India vanished.” It was not the Japanese destruction of much of America’s Pacific fleet that primarily prompted American involvement in India, however. The fall of Singapore to Japanese forces on February 15, 1942, had a devastating emotional
impact both in Britain and the United States. If Britain’s Malayan divisions could not be counted on to defend Singapore, what were the logical conclusions to be made about India? It bears noting that many of the troops captured by the Japanese in Singapore were Indians serving in the (British) Indian Army. The Japanese later organized them into the pro-Axis Indian National Army led by Subhas Chandra Bose.

American and British officials were particularly alarmed by the pattern of Japanese advance. The Roosevelt administration was receiving alarming reports from Office of Strategic Services (OSS) agents in Asia, who warned of the strategic threat to India. In late January 1942, Dr. Conyers Read, British Empire section chief of the OSS, sent to Roosevelt a letter he had received from Krishnalal Shridharani, an aide to Gandhi and other Congress leaders. Shridharani appealed for American intervention in India:

> It is as likely as not that India will serve as the base of operations for a possible AEF [Allied Expeditionary Force] sent to recover points lost in East Asia. In that case, it would be dangerous to have a disgruntled India at the back. From this point alone, India can no longer be regarded by America as an internal problem of the British Empire. . . . Only free men can win this war, and not mercenaries or vassals.44

It is clear that the Congress Party had a very strong interest in American intervention, but, nonetheless, the points mentioned in the letter appeared to have a strong impact on the administration. Roosevelt’s desire to remain aloof from the Indian question was rendered impossible by several memoranda he received in early 1942 from William J. Donovan, head of the OSS. In early-February, he sent Roosevelt a report from an agent who had spoken to Agent General Bajpai in Washington:

> Sir Girja [Bajpai] . . . did not think it necessary to wait until the end of the war [to settle the Indian dispute]. Rather he thought it probable that the whole question of India’s international status would have to be dealt with before the war was concluded. He thought that some third party might be influential in helping to get some better status. . . . He was concerned about the attitude of our government toward India and wanted to know if the President
was interested in India, or the Secretary of State or certain other officials of lesser rank. 45

Donovan continued to inform the president of the dangers inherent in the Indian situation in the months that followed. He wrote Roosevelt on February 11, 1942:

Because of the danger to us of the Indian Ocean going [falling] we are interested in the fate of India—and in what the Indians will do. It is, therefore, no longer merely a British domestic question. We have a stake in their actions. 46

Pressure on Roosevelt to intervene in Indian affairs came from many sources. Among the most important was the U.S. Congress, which began to debate the Indian question in earnest in early 1942. Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long returned from a meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 25, 1942, and said he noted a “serious undercurrent of anti-British feeling re: India” from many of the committee’s most important members. “The committee all seemed to be of the same frame of mind,” he told Hull, warning of the danger of “prospective interference [by the Senate] in the internal affairs of the British Empire.” Long summarized the committee’s public statement on India, which asserted, “we should demand that India be given a status of autonomy” and called Gandhi and his followers “part of America’s military equipment.” The committee declared that the United States had to act “as would result in the realization to the Allied cause of the manpower of India, which could only be obtained by accepting the thesis of Gandhi’s political objectives.” Long observed:

The sentiment might flare up and be used by some members of the committee not as an attack against Great Britain, but as an attack against the administration for its alleged failure to take advantage of the position of power in which it finds itself. 47

Several private citizens also wrote to Roosevelt on the subject of India, and among the most insistent was Pearl Buck, the well-known author and Sinologist. In a letter capturing the skepticism of even
liberal-minded Americans about the readiness of Indians for independence, written only five years before independence became a reality, she wrote to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt on March 7, 1942, warning of her fears about the future of India:

They [Indians] are a group so filled with bitterness against the English that we must look for revengeful massacres against all white people on a scale much greater than have taken place in Malaya and Burma. . . . It is also true that the Indians as a whole, and particularly the Hindus, have the mind of a dependent people. This is inevitable in a country which has been a colonial possession for 150 years. . . . The Indians have too long been used to having their thinking done for them.48

African Americans took a particular interest in the plight of India, in large part most likely because of their sensitivity to racial prejudice and white domination. On May 22, 1942, Welles sent the president a letter he had received from Walter White, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. White had written to Welles to suggest that the president send a commission of prominent Americans to India to mediate the conflict there, and that the commission should include at least one African American among its members. Welles commented on this proposal thusly:

The Department believes this is not an appropriate moment for any individual effort of this character to be undertaken by the United States, and that the composition of the proposed mission as suggested by Mr. White would not be conducive to favorable results in India on account of well-recognized racial prejudices on the part of the Indian leaders themselves.49

Roosevelt was under extreme pressure at home from former Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, as well as from his own vice president, Henry Wallace. Willkie, on a 1942 national tour, demanded a strong stand against British imperialism. Americans, he claimed, were clamoring for the principles for which they were fighting to be applied equitably and equally. Roosevelt felt a need to clarify his views, a need intensified by Willkie’s claim soon after his tour that America was following Britain’s “white man’s burden” policy toward
the Far East. Roosevelt responded “I have already made it perfectly clear that we believe that the Atlantic Charter applies to all humanity. I think that is a matter of record.” It had been easy for the Japanese to conquer French Indo-China, Roosevelt said, because the people had been so abused and oppressed that they believed anything might be an improvement. American officials expressed fear that India might suffer the same fate if the Japanese invaded its borders; they were not heartened by Mahatma Gandhi’s statement on May 10, 1942, that “the presence of the British in India is an invitation to Japan to invade India. Their withdrawal would remove the bait.” American policymakers were torn between moral and strategic demands for action to convince the British to alter the status quo in India, and the practical need to retain harmonious relations with Britain at nearly any cost.

This lack of coherence is reflected in two passages from Hull’s autobiography. Hull declared, “at no time did we press Britain, France, or the Netherlands for an immediate grant of self-government to their colonies. Our thought was that it would come after an adequate period of years . . . during which their peoples would be trained to govern themselves.” Yet, Hull also defends his own record as an anti-colonialist:

While for the sake of good relations with Britain we could not tell the country what we were saying privately, we [Hull and Roosevelt] were saying everything that the most enthusiastic supporter of India’s freedom could have expected, and we were convinced the American people were with us.

The differences of opinion within the State Department concerning India were illuminated as a result of a Memorial Day address at Arlington Cemetery by Welles in 1942. Welles denounced the British record in India and declared:

If this is in fact a war for the liberation of peoples it must assure the sovereign equality of peoples throughout the world. . . . Our victory must bring in its train the liberation of all peoples . . . The age of imperialism is ended. . . . The right of a people to their freedom must be recognized. . . . The principles of the Atlantic Charter must be guaranteed to the world as a whole—in all oceans and in all continents.
Welles’s speech provoked a swift response from Hull, who revealed not only his personal dislike for Welles but also his belief that India had to earn its freedom by cooperating in the war effort:

There is no surer way for men and nations to show themselves unworthy of liberty than, by supine submission and refusal to fight, to render more difficult the task of those who are fighting for the preservation of human freedom. . . . It has been our purpose in the past and will remain our purpose in the future to use the full measure of our influence to support attainment of freedom by all peoples who, by their actions, show themselves worthy of it and ready for it.55

Against this background of public pressure to intervene, American attitudes divided, and fear of a Japanese invasion of India that Roosevelt and Churchill began a long period of correspondence on India. While for the most part the two leaders got along well and evinced real personal fondness for each other, when they discussed the Indian situation in their telegrams and letters a strong element of tension and suppressed annoyance was usually present. On March 4, 1942, Churchill wrote to Roosevelt to express his fears of the consequences of a hastily arrived-upon settlement in India:

If the British Government is stampeded into the trap laid for them [by the Congress] Moslem India would be sacrificed with the most disastrous consequences, especially in regard to the war effort. . . . Moslems are extremely apprehensive that His Majesty’s Government are gradually yielding to vociferous agitation and giving way contrary to pledges given to the princes, Moslems, and other minorities. . . . I only hope His Majesty’s Government will stand firmly by their duty to protect the best interests of the Indian people as a whole, irrespective of pressure from outside quarters which regard the British Commonwealth from a different angle.56

Churchill told Roosevelt he feared that the Muslim soldiers of the Indian Army would not fight if they feared the British were warming to the concept of a Hindu-dominated India:
Their professional allegiance is to the British Government, not to any Indian government. Any idea, however ill-founded, that their allegiance is to be transferred will inevitably upset their somewhat childish mentality.\textsuperscript{57}

This letter from Churchill coincided with several reports from OSS agents that the Indian Army might mutiny, if the conditions of its service were called into question. Roosevelt cabled Churchill to ask him if the British government might consider making a new proposal to Indians that would satisfy the demands of the various groups involved. Churchill replied:

We are earnestly considering whether a declaration of Dominion status after the war carrying with it the right to secede should be made at this critical juncture. We must not on any account break with the Moslems who represent 100 million people and the main army elements on which we must rely. . . . We do not want to throw India into chaos on the eve of invasion.\textsuperscript{58}

Roosevelt apparently was not satisfied with this reply, however, and in a now-famous letter to Churchill on March 10, he proposed a bold initiative. After apologizing for bringing up the matter of India, he proposed to look at Indian affairs from a historical viewpoint. The president somewhat naively suggested the American Articles of Confederation as a model for India’s transition to temporary Dominion government during the war:

Perhaps the analogy . . . to the travails and problems of the United States from 1783 to 1789 might give a new slant in India itself, and it might cause the people there to forget hard feelings, to become more loyal to the British Empire, and to stress the danger of Japanese domination with the advantage of peaceful evolution as against chaotic revolution. Such a move is strictly in line with the world changes of the past half century and with the democratic processes of all who are fighting Nazism. . . . For the love of Heaven don’t bring me into this, though I do want to help. It is, strictly speaking, none of my business, except insofar as it is part and parcel of the successful fight that you and I are making.\textsuperscript{59}
A day later, without waiting for a reply from Churchill, Roosevelt repeated his suggestion, and hinted at the role played by American public opinion in shaping American policy:

I still feel that if the component groups in India could be given the opportunity to set up a national government in essence similar to our own form of government under the Articles of Confederation . . . probably a solution could be found. If you were to make such an effort . . . at least you would on that issue have public opinion in the United States satisfied that the British Government had made a fait and real offer to the Indian people. 60

Churchill was apparently shocked that the president would consider applying an American model to India, and he was annoyed that Roosevelt had implied that American public opinion should have an effect on the formation of British policy. He wrote:

I was thankful that events had already made such an act of madness impossible. . . . The president’s mind was back in the American War of Independence. . . . We could not desert the Indian peoples by abandoning our responsibility and leaving them to anarchy or subjugation. 61

Yet, although Churchill considered Roosevelt’s proposal an example of American naïveté and failure to understand the key issues in the Indian crisis, it is interesting to note, as Welles remarks in his memoirs, that the proposals made by Roosevelt were “almost identical in principle” to those implemented by Attlee’s Labor government after the war. 62 This, of course, ignores the partition of India, which Roosevelt certainly did not foresee or welcome.

Louis Johnson, William Phillips, and the Cripps Mission
Many of the difficulties that arose between American and British officials were based less on specific issues than on the perceptions the leaders of the two nations held of each other. Harold Macmillan expressed views that reflected a common British perception of Roosevelt during the war:
The British Empire was a bugbear to him. Without any precise knowledge, he would lay down the law about Indian and colonial affairs; and the liquidation of the British Empire was, whether consciously or unconsciously, one of his aims. . . . The president was no friend of the British Empire.  

Churchill’s foreign minister, Anthony Eden, expressed similar views, but he also hinted at the involvement of American self-interest in Roosevelt’s attitudes:

The president shared a widespread American suspicion of the British Empire as it had once been. . . . He hoped that former colonial territories, once free of their masters, would become politically and economically dependent on the United States, and had no fear that other powers might fill that role.  

In what was clearly a reaction to American pressure, Churchill announced on March 11, 1942, that he was sending Cripps to India with specific proposals for an accord with nationalist leaders. Cripps, a rising star in the Labor Party and Leader of the Commons in the war cabinet, had much experience in Indian affairs and was well acquainted with both Gandhi and Nehru. Churchill admitted after the war that he had sent Cripps to India to ease American insistence on British flexibility and to “gain time”; the proposals Cripps carried with him to India, however, did represent a modest improvement over previous British offers. The essence of the proposals was a formal promise that Britain would grant India full independence at the end of the war if the Indians would support the war effort and accept a continuation of the status quo until an armistice were reached. The official text stated:

While during the critical period which now faces India and until a new constitution can be framed, His Majesty’s Government must bear the responsibility for and retain control and direction of the defense of India. . . .they desire and invite the immediate and effective participation of the leaders of the Indian people in the counsels of their country, of the Commonwealth, and of the United Nations.
The proposal promised:

the creation of a new Indian Dominion, associated with the United Kingdom and the other Dominions in common allegiance to the Crown, but equal to them in every respect, in no way subordinated in any aspect of its domestic or external affairs.66

While the Cripps proposal did not change the military arrangements for the defense of India, it did offer other constitutional arrangements that would have taken effect at once. While Congress was the dominant force on the Indian political scene, Jinnah’s Muslim League and the Indian princes retained considerable influence.

Cripps arrived in New Delhi on March 23, but his mission appeared to be doomed from the start. Gandhi told him, “Why did you come if this is what you have to offer? If this is your entire proposal to India I would advise you to take the next plane home.”67 Nehru later wrote of the mission that:

The real question was the transfer of power to the National Government. It was the old issue of Indian Nationalism versus British imperialism, and on that issue, war or no war, the British governing class in England and in India was determined to hold on to what it had. Behind them stood the imposing figure of Mr. Winston Churchill.68

American reaction was largely neutral at first. Berle wrote to Welles in late February that,

I do not have any confidence in the ability of the Indian Congress to do much except talk . . . but I believe the nature of their talk probably will determine whether there is a general acquiescence and cooperation in war organization in India, or whether there is more or less passive resistance, which would be exploited by the Japanese to the limit. We should have to put up with the methods for the time being of the British–our own role at this stage would have to be as observers.69

By early March Japanese troops were in Rangoon and Roosevelt began to lose patience with British strategy. American reaction turned
negative as the Cripps Mission met with no success. Partly as a result of talks held in London in January and February between presidential advisor Averell Harriman and Churchill, the president decided to send a personal envoy to break the deadlock in New Delhi. After sending a cable to Resident Commissioner Wilson informing him that he had been relieved of his position, Welles announced the appointment of Colonel Louis Johnson, a Southern lawyer and former assistant secretary of war, as the “personal representative of the president” in India. Johnson’s position was somewhat ambiguous, as he would not be an official diplomatic representative, but rather an envoy with the title “minister plenipotentiary” as part of an American trade delegation to India that had been planned several months before. This ambiguity was necessary to satisfy British demands that America recognize India’s colonial status, but it caused problems from the start.

Cripps met with little success, and after two weeks, he was prepared to return to Britain empty-handed. Johnson arrived on April 3, and he was immediately launched into a whirlwind round of discussions with all the major parties involved. Yet, the British continued to insist that Johnson’s official status be merely that of an observer, and their reaction to his arrival was cool. On April 7, Viceroy Linlithgow wrote to Leopold Amery, Secretary of State for India. He commented:

Johnson has, ever since his arrival, been dabbling in the constitutional affair and has, I think, succeeded in very considerably increasing the pressure on Congress in favor of accepting the offer. . . . But however helpful he may be, I do not altogether like the principle of anybody in his position concerning himself too closely with detailed negotiations between His Majesty’s Government and Indian politicians, and I shall be relieved if we get through this business without some misunderstanding or confusion arising on account of Johnson’s activities and perhaps on the part of the President himself.70

Churchill also cabled Cripps to advise him not to allow Johnson to interfere to too great an extent in the negotiations:

Col. Johnson is not President Roosevelt’s personal representative in any matter outside the specific mission dealing with Indian munitions. . . . I feel sure the President would be vexed if he . . .
were to seem to be drawn into the Indian constitutional issue. His message to me . . . was entirely opposed to anything like U.S. intervention or mediation. ⁷¹

Cripps’ efforts to achieve an accord with the Indian leaders ended in failure only three weeks after his arrival. On April 11, Johnson sent a cable to Hull which revealed his sympathies for the nationalist cause:

The Congress delivered its rejection of Cripps’s proposals. . . The rejection is a masterpiece and will appeal to free men everywhere. . . . Cripps is sincere, knows this matter should be solved. He and Nehru could solve it in five minutes if Cripps had any freedom or authority. . . . London wanted a Congress refusal. Why? Cripps’s original offer contained little more than the unkept promise of the First World War. Does England prefer to lose India to the enemy retaining claim to it at the peace table rather than lose it by giving freedom now? . . . Nehru has been magnificent in his cooperation with me. The president would like him and on most things they agree. ⁷²

Cripps’s mission was clearly aimed at American public opinion; this is demonstrated by the fact that the first official act Cripps carried out upon his return to Britain was to make a radio address to the United States explaining the failure of his mission,⁷³ and it is significant that Churchill welcomed Cripps back with the statement that “everyone admires the manner in which you have discharged your difficult mission and the effect of our proposals has been most beneficial in the United States and in large circles here.” ⁷⁴

Roosevelt’s letter of introduction to the Viceroy emphasized Johnson’s expertise in the field of military supply, and made no mention of a role in the negotiations. Roosevelt did, however, give Johnson a letter to deliver to Congress President Abdul Kalam Azad expressing hope that the Congress would accept the Cripps offer and join the war on the side of the Allies. ⁷⁵ Furthermore, the notes of Johnson’s briefing by Assistant Secretary Howland Shaw make clear that his work as the President’s Personal Representative would “take precedence over his work as Chairman of the Mission on Munitions.” ⁷⁶

The nationalists had nothing to lose and much to gain by snubbing Cripps; in addition to their reluctance to take responsibility
for an unpopular war, they knew they could profit by delaying as the Japanese neared the Indian border. Most importantly, however, as Johnson noted, the Cripps proposals contained nothing substantially new, and Gandhi and Nehru made clear their determination that Britain should leave India immediately and unconditionally. Shortly after Cripps departed, Gandhi proclaimed that if the British complained that there was no organized, cohesive force to which they could leave India, “let them leave India to God.”

From a British point of view, however, the Cripps mission accomplished its purpose, for it alienated large segments of American public opinion from the Congress cause. The American press and much of official Washington believed that the British had made a reasonable offer and Congress had refused to even consider it. American interest in India cooled noticeably, a fact communicated in Roosevelt’s telegram to Johnson on the eve of Johnson’s return from India to the United States. After thanking Johnson for his efforts, Roosevelt wrote:

> At the present moment the risks involved in an unsuccessful effort to solve the Indian problem outweigh the advantages that might be obtained if a satisfactory solution could be found.

The British, having achieved their primary goal with the Cripps Mission, were anxious that America not send another envoy to India in the near future. Churchill wrote to Roosevelt advisor Harry Hopkins on May 31 that:

> We do not relish the prospect of Johnson’s return to India. The Viceroy is also much perturbed at the prospect. We are fighting to defend this vast mass of helpless Indians from imminent invasion. I know you will remember my many difficulties.

While opposition to the Cripps proposals was unanimous among the Congress leadership, Nehru was aware of the risk of further alienating American public and Congressional opinion. He sent a telegram to Johnson on June 4 arguing that Gandhi did not want to:

> embarrass the present war effort . . . American public opinion should not misunderstand him; he has emphasized Indian
independence as this is the only way for India and progressive nations to utilize India’s great resources in cause of world freedom.\textsuperscript{80}

Nehru may have influenced a tonal shift in Gandhi’s public comments aimed at American audiences. In a personal letter to Roosevelt sent through journalist Louis Fischer, Gandhi wrote that as a “friend and well-wisher of the Allies” he wished to reiterate India’s willingness to cooperate with the war effort if it did not contradict India’s goal of freedom.\textsuperscript{81}

The message was mixed; however, as Gandhi ended his letter with the observation that Allied support for freedom and democracy seemed “hollow so long as American has the Negro problem in its own home.”\textsuperscript{82}

The decision of the Congress leadership to reject the Cripps proposal was followed by the July 14 decision of the Congress Working Committee to adopt a “Quit India” campaign of civil disobedience. The decision came against Nehru’s strong opposition.\textsuperscript{83} Nehru told U.S. Mission political officer Lampton Berry that the Congress would be willing to cooperate with the war effort if Britain declared India independent and established a provisional government. This was precisely the approach favored by Roosevelt—but it was clearly anathema to Churchill while the war entered one of its most critical phases.\textsuperscript{84} Some observers criticized the unrealistic approach of Congress to the war, noting that Japanese rule would have been worse for India than continued British rule. For Congress leaders, however, independence was the overriding goal.

Within the U.S. Mission and the State Department, ideas were floated of offering the Congress a U.S. guarantee of postwar independence and assistance with the establishment of an interim provisional government. The ideas never made it beyond the Department’s Near East division, as Roosevelt was convinced that Allied solidarity could not be endangered at such a difficult time.\textsuperscript{85}

Nehru’s opposition to the Quit India campaign was overcome by rising frustration within the Congress and Gandhi’s growing pessimism about British postwar intentions. On August 8, the All-India Congress Committee formally adopted the Quit India resolution, calling for Britain to withdraw from India or face massive civil disobedience and resistance regardless of the war. The resolution was
met by a rapid British crackdown and the arrest of the Congress leadership. The United States refrained from criticizing the British government’s actions, reflecting a widespread sentiment that Congress was endangering the war effort with self-centered impatience.86

Despite the change in American public opinion toward British policy in India, however, Roosevelt remained convinced that the failure of the Cripps mission was caused by British inflexibility. He told Churchill:

I am sorry to say that I cannot agree with the point of view . . .
that public opinion in the U.S. believes that the negotiations have failed on broad general issues. The general impression here is quite the contrary. The feeling . . . is almost universally held here that the deadlock has been caused by the unwillingness of the British government to concede to the Indians the right of self government. Why if the British government is willing to permit the component parts of India to secede from the British Empire after the war, is it not willing to permit them to enjoy what it tantamount to self-government during the war?

Roosevelt then reiterated his proposal for a settlement along the lines of America’s Articles of Confederation, adding that if the British were to propose such an idea:

you would at least on that issue have public opinion in the U.S. satisfied that a real offer and a fair offer had been made by the British government to the peoples of India and the responsibility for failure must—clearly be placed upon the Indian people and not upon the British government.87

Churchill’s reply to Roosevelt’s letter indicated his deep suspicion of continuing American involvement with the Indian issue:

You know the weight which I attach to everything you say to me, but I did not feel I could take responsibility for the defense of India if everything has again to be thrown into the melting pot at this critical juncture. . . . As your telegram was addressed to Former Naval Person [Churchill’s private nickname] I am keeping it purely private. . . . Anything like a serious difference between you and me
would break my heart, and surely deeply injure both our countries at the height of this terrible struggle. 88

This angry letter from Churchill was successful in getting administration officials, including the president himself, to cease their pressure on Britain over India, but only for a short time. During this hiatus, Roosevelt did not raise the issue with Churchill at all; both leaders were preoccupied with fighting a two-theater war against the Axis, and the Japanese advance toward India had slowed to a crawl by mid-1942. In August of that year, the imprisonment of Congress leaders by the British provoked renewed public interest in the Indian crisis in the United States. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes wrote to Roosevelt on August 10 that he was:

gravely concerned about India . . . Churchill simply can’t see this matter objectively and I doubt if he has any appreciation of public sentiment here. We are fighting for freedom and yet Great Britain denies India freedom. 89

Roosevelt replied:

You are right about India but it would be playing with fire if the British Empire were to tell me to mind my own business. 90

Indian public opinion shifted in the fall of 1942 as well. The Congress mobilized sympathetic voices in the United States to speak out, culminating in a full-page petition in The New York Times of September 28. Signed by a bipartisan list of luminaries including, Pearl Buck, Clare Booth Luce, Louis Bromfield, William Shirer, Upton Sinclair, Walter White, and Roger Baldwin, it urged the immediate renewal of negotiations and a more active American mediating role. 91

In the late summer and early fall of 1942, Roosevelt came under renewed pressure to oppose Britain’s Indian policy from Time, Inc., the media conglomerate founded by Henry Luce. In a Life magazine series “Why We Are Fighting,” the editors published an “Open Letter to the People of England.” The letter stated:

One thing we are not fighting for is to hold the British Empire together. We don’t like to put the matter so bluntly, but we don’t
want you to have any illusions. If your strategists are planning a war to hold the British Empire together, they will sooner or later find themselves strategizing all alone.  

Shortly after the series appeared, Roosevelt began to consider the idea of sending another envoy to India to report back firsthand on conditions there. The British were keenly aware of this possibility, as revealed in a letter from Eden to Amery on September 23:

There are many indications that pressure is being put on Roosevelt to intervene in some way. . . . It would almost certainly help Roosevelt to keep his own opinion steady if he were known to have at New Delhi an American who commanded general confidence.

Eden’s own clear desire to have a new American representative in India was not shared by many of his fellow officials in the British government, particularly those based in India. On Sept. 25, Viceroy Linlithgow wrote to Halifax:

Whatever we say or do, U.S. opinion is going to be difficult. My own temper is sorely tried by the ignorance amongst our friends, even in high quarters. And to this must be added even less informed criticism, some of which unconsciously derives I suspect from German promptings. . . . Nothing in my judgment could be better calculated to render our position here and that of His Majesty’s Government more difficult than the dispatch to this country of [an] American representative.

As the Roosevelt administration moved toward selecting a new envoy to India, however, British officials concentrated on influencing the choice. Ambassador Halifax, who was convinced that Linlithgow had no conception of American opinion on the Indian question, sent a message to Hull advising that,

it would be very desirable that such an appointment not carry with it any implications that the new commissioner . . . was to undertake any form of mediation between the British authorities and the Indian leaders.
By this point, Hull and Roosevelt had apparently decided to send a new envoy to New Delhi, but before naming the new commissioner Hull set forth general American policy toward India in a secret memorandum to the staff of his department’s Near Eastern division:

We cannot bring pressure which might reasonably be regarded as objectionable to bear upon the British. We can in a friendly spirit talk bluntly and earnestly . . . as long as they understand it is our purpose to treat them in a thoroughly friendly way. . . . Objectionable pressure . . . would probably result in no progress but only in exasperation and, in the case of the British, a possible disturbance of the unity of command both during and following the war.96

Shortly after issuing this statement, Hull announced the appointment of William Phillips to the post of “President Roosevelt’s personal representative to serve near the government of India, with the rank of ambassador.”97 Phillips’s appointment, which was confirmed in early December, was initially met with mixture of enthusiasm and concern in London. Phillips, a personal friend of the president and a member of a rich, socially prominent Boston family, served previously as Under Secretary of State and ambassador to both Canada and Italy. Although he had spent most of his career in Europe and the Americas, he was familiar with Commonwealth affairs and was known to be an Anglophile. Yet, he was also strongly in favor of a speedy transition to independence for India, a leaning he did not try to conceal. The British feared he might make the situation even more difficult for them than it already was. At the time of his appointment, Phillips was serving as OSS chief in London. Hull sent him the following declaratory message:

The president and I and the entire government earnestly favor freedom for all dependent peoples at the earliest date possible.98

Looking back in 1951, Phillips told an interviewer that he believed the British government had played a role in his appointment because he “had been sympathetic with the British and had many contacts in England . . . they felt because of this I would take the British side of the Indian problems.”99
Phillips spent the month of December talking with Churchill, Amery, Eden, Cripps, and other British officials about the situation in India. Before leaving London for India, he sent Roosevelt a letter that noted:

From this angle . . . the general opinion can be summed up as follows: a complete readiness to give effect to the principle of self-determination in India, a duty, however, which cannot be fulfilled merely by walking out and leaving the India that the British have created . . . to muddle through to a solution.

Phillips also remarked that Churchill,

is less liberal-minded toward India than the general feeling here in official and unofficial circles. Churchill made use of his familiar phrase that he was not prepared to sacrifice any part of the British Empire.\(^{100}\)

Phillips arrived in India on January 8, 1943, and immediately became the center of attention in the Indian press. He noted shortly after his arrival that “every Indian who comes to see me feels that through my influence the present deadlock with the British can be solved.”\(^{101}\) Linlithgow initially expressed happiness with Phillips’ appointment, writing Amery that Phillips was “really better than anything we could reasonably have hoped for.”\(^{102}\) Relations between Phillips and the viceroy soon deteriorated, however, after Phillips embarked on a whirlwind tour of India and pressed Linlithgow for permission to see the imprisoned Gandhi. Linlithgow refused, and tension mounted as Phillips expressed his anti-British views to public figures across India. Phillips also began sending weekly memoranda to Roosevelt. His first message, which set a fairly negative tone that would remain for the duration of his stay in India, declared that,

neither the Muslim League nor Congress has any faith in the British promise to free India. . . . The British whom I have met seem unaware of the changing attitude in India and cannot really envisage a free India fit to govern itself. . . . Naturally these views are reflected in the Indian leaders, and convinces them that British promises are worthless.\(^{103}\)
In a later letter, Phillips stressed to Roosevelt his desire to,

avoid any impression on the part of the Indians that . . . the presence of the U.S. Forces and my own presence here indicate that we Americans are strengthening the British hold over India.\textsuperscript{104}

As Phillips traveled throughout India and spoke to leaders of the various political and religious factions, he became convinced that no viable solution in India was possible so long as the British refused to alter their insistence on the maintenance of the status quo until the end of the war. This attitude was obvious to the Viceroy, who complained to Amery on February 19, 1943, that,

this is really becoming an intolerable situation. . . . It was a great mistake ever to have agreed to a representative of this nature or standing coming to this country. . . . Phillips, who is a charming person to meet, is really, I fear, something of a nincompoop and seems to have swallowed all the stuff he was told by Indian journalists and political deputations.\textsuperscript{105}

Phillips’s sympathies for the nationalist viewpoint were obvious in the letters he sent to Roosevelt and Hull, and his distaste for British rule in India increased as he traveled through the subcontinent. On February 23, he wrote:

I had hoped to avoid the impression here, signs of which have already appeared, that by the presence of our forces in India and by my own presence we were openly encouraging the British to maintain their hold over India. . . . Certainly Indians look to us for the help in their struggle. . . . After the war they believe that any such help will come too late. . . . That is their view, I think, and one cannot live here without having a great deal of sympathy for it.\textsuperscript{106}

British officials began to protest to Hull about the extent of Phillips’ activities in India. A letter from Amery to Linlithgow, dated April 5, 1943, expresses this unhappiness:

It is one thing for him to meet individuals and talk over things in private, but receiving formal deputations from political parties is
something no diplomat ever does in any country to which he is accredited.107

Phillips continued to press the viceroy for permission to see Gandhi, but his request was never granted. Finally, in late April, he received word that he was being recalled to Washington for consultation. Unknown to Phillips, Roosevelt had decided that the mission was no longer accomplishing much of substance, and the recall turned out to be permanent. Before leaving Delhi, Phillips sent a final letter to the president:

The peoples of Asia cynically regard this war as one between fascist and imperial powers. . . . It is not right for the British to say “this is none of your business” when we alone presumably will have the major part to play in the future struggle with Japan. If we do nothing and merely accept—he British point of view that conditions in India are none of our business, then we must be prepared for various serious consequences in the internal situation in India which may result.108

On his way back to the United States, Phillips stopped in London to see Churchill. The two men had an extraordinarily stormy two-hour meeting, after which Churchill referred to Phillips as “very ill-informed.” Churchill commented, only half-jokingly, “He does not think he will return to India. I hope he is right.”109 In his memoirs, Phillips recalled the rude realization he received when he returned to Washington and discovered that officials there were no longer interested in events in India. The Japanese threat to India had receded dramatically, and with it the American stake in seeing to a settlement between Indian nationalists and the British government. Phillips, like Johnson, believed that his superiors considered his mission a failure, even though he was satisfied that he had done his best.

Phillips’ final report to Roosevelt dated May 14, 1944, and later leaked to Drew Pearson’s syndicated column, was significantly more critical of the British than of the Congress. He charged the British with offering only “token” assistance in the fight against Japan, said the Indians felt they had no stake in the war, called the Indian Army “purely mercenary,” warned that the Indian population was bitter and demoralized, and concluded that all Indians of all backgrounds wanted
independence now. He urged Roosevelt to urge Churchill to act, and suggested the King set a specific date for independence after the end of the war, and permit an interim provisional government to be formed immediately.\textsuperscript{110}

Swaraj Nears

After failing to convince Great Britain to take a more flexible stance toward India in the years between Pearl Harbor and the end of the Phillips mission, the Roosevelt administration retreated to a “hands off” position in late 1943. A large factor in this change of policy was the disappearance of the Japanese threat to India, and with it the major reason for American involvement in Indian affairs.

Wallace Murray was one of the few State Department officials who foresaw the consequences of American inaction. In a series of letters to Hull and Welles in March 1943, Murray warned of a backlash against the United States as a result of its connivance in continuing colonial domination. His words are eerily prophetic when considered in the context of American foreign policy in the second half of the twentieth century:

The thing I most fear—and it is clear that Mr. Phillips also holds that view—is that we shall end up in this business of India with a reputation little less tarnished than that of the British, and that will do us little good in the Middle East and Far East where settlements have to be reached. . . . The Indians are now beginning to identify us with British colonial imperialism. We are now being tarred with the British colonial brush. . . . Now, by our silence on the whole colonial issue and the Indian one in particular, they [Indians] are beginning to feel that we are tacitly aligning ourselves with the British. They are beginning to think in terms of colored versus white, of Asia against the Anglo-Saxon. Which is very, very distressing. Especially when one casts a cool thought in the direction of China and the U.S.S.R. . . . To the Indians and to other non-white peoples the Indian situation provides a test of our sincerity and honesty of purpose with the certainty that if this country permits conditions to continue to exist in a manner giving rise to the belief that we are more interested in the creation of sonorous phrases than in the implementation of the principles enunciated by
those phrases, we can expect a harvest of hate and contempt the like of which our imperialistically minded ally has never known.\textsuperscript{111}

A similar test came in early 1944 with the spread of famine in Bengal. In the face of opposition from London, which did not want its inability to feed India highlighted by international intervention, Roosevelt resisted approving U.S. food relief shipments under the new mechanism of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). A young Congressman from Montana (and future Senate Majority Leader), Mike Mansfield, took the floor of the House to urge that aid be sent:

In considering India, we know that it is a difficult and complex area to understand. However, we must realize that some 350 million people live there. Those people are human beings—they eat, live, breathe and have the same emotions that we have . . . We have the history—the recent history—of the Burmese, Thailanders, and other Asiatic people turning against us, not because we did not understand them so much as because they understood us better . . . If we ignore India and her legitimate pleas, we are helping to sow a whirlwind which we will reap some day.\textsuperscript{112}

Conclusion

The outcome of America’s short-lived intervention into the colonial affairs of its major wartime ally fundamentally affected American policy toward decolonization in the immediate post-war period. Churchill’s National Government stuck to its refusal to consider constitutional change until after the war, and it was only after the advent of Attlee’s Labor government that British officials moved quickly to break the deadlock and begin the torturous and bloody process of withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent. Yet, American policy did play an important, albeit subtle, role in shaping the future relationship between the United Kingdom and India. For while America’s effect on British policy in concrete terms may have been extremely limited, the United States was in large part responsible for prompting a shift in the British attitude toward India and the rest of the Empire, a shift that made possible the realization of swaraj for India. By the end of the war, Britain was economically dependent on the United States, via the Lend-Lease program and other forms of indebtedness, which gave the
United States a great deal of leverage over British policy toward the colonies in the aftermath of VJ Day.

In 1939, British colonial officials were in no way prepared to acknowledge that India might be completely independent within the following decade; in 1945, the question for Attlee’s government was not whether it would grant independence to India, but how soon such a change could be accomplished and under what conditions it could be implemented. Without the realization that the United States was committed to a new world order in which traditional colonialism would have no place, British leaders might never have been able to accept India’s secession from the Empire, at least not without many more months—or even years—of bloody conflict.

Although American policy may have succeeded in prompting a change in British attitudes, however, the timidity and extreme caution of the Roosevelt administration in coming to the aid of Indian nationalism during the war had some effect on the Indian view of America. While Nehru’s participation in the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1950s may have been inevitable, given that the Cold War began roughly at the same time as Indian independence, one cannot discount the disenchantment that resulted when Indians realized that America was not prepared to back up its supportive words and sweeping promises with action, particularly if such action entailed any political or strategic risk to the United States. An even greater factor in this disillusionment was U.S. support for British, Dutch, and French efforts to hold on to other colonies after the war.

There is no evidence that Roosevelt’s declarations of sympathy for colonial peoples were anything but genuine, but in policy terms Roosevelt behaved in much the same manner abroad as he did at home. Roosevelt was not prepared to jeopardize Anglo-American amity and accord for the sake of Indian freedom; when he did support intervention in India, it was because he feared British policy might undermine the defense of India against Japanese aggression, or because he realized that America should not be on the wrong side of the colonial issue.

Roosevelt’s opposition to continued European colonial rule was essentially pragmatic: he saw a refusal to heed the growing cry for freedom as a sure way to alienate a large percentage of the world’s people at a time of worldwide upheaval, and he did not want America to be tied to a sinking ideology and a failed model for governance.
NOTES

In fond memory of Robin Winks, who taught me that facts matter.

1. Unpublished materials from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y., are cited as follows: Roosevelt Papers

   MRF: President’s Map Room File
   OF: President’s Official File
   PPF: President’s Personal File
   PSF: President’s Secretary’s File

   These abbreviations are in accordance with those used by U.S. Government archivists. Additional classifications from the Roosevelt Papers, including those for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) will be noted in the body of the citations. Materials from Roosevelt Library collections not mentioned previously, including the papers of leading members of the president’s administration, will be cited according to the collection title and file number assigned by the library. Citations from the published debates of the House of Commons will be given by volume and page number. All references to Parliamentary Debates pertain only to the House of Commons. The following abbreviations will be used for citations of materials from published document collections: FRUS: U.S. Department of State. Foreign Relations of the United States. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO), 1861–2011. Transfer: Nicholas Mansergh, and E. W. R. Lumby, eds., Constitutional Relations Between Britain and Indian The Transfer of Power, 1942–1947. Four vols. London: Her (or His) Majesty’s Stationery Office (HMSO), 1971.


11. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives and Senate, Congressional Record, 1939.

12. U. S. Congress, Congressional Record, 1940.


27. Elliott Roosevelt, As He Saw It (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946), p. 76. While contemporary reviewers were caustic in their criticism of Elliott Roosevelt’s recollections of his father, and while there is some doubt as to the precise accuracy of the quotations he attributes to his father, the general accuracy of his account has not been seriously challenged.
29. Roosevelt, As He Saw It, pp. 25, 37.
30. Roosevelt, As He Saw It, p. 38.
33. The Times, Nov. 11, 1942, as quoted in Louis, Imperialism at Bay, p. 200.
37. FRUS, pp. 176–77.
38. FRUS, pp. 180–81.
40. FRUS, pp. 180–81.
41. FRUS, pp. 184–86.
44. PSF, 164, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.
45. PSF, 164, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.
46. PSF, 164, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.
48. PSF, 55, F.D.R. Library.
49. OF, 93, Box 4, F.D.R. Library.
54. Louis, Imperialism at Bay, p. 155.
56. MRF, 2, F.D.R. Library.
57. MRF, 2, F.D.R. Library.
58. MRF, 2, F.D.R. Library.
59. MRF, 2, F.D.R. Library.
77. Kshirsagar, p. 122.
78. *PSF*, Safe File 4, F.D.R. Library.
87. *MRF*, 2, F.D.R. Library.
88. *MRF*, 2, F.D.R. Library.
89. *PPF*, 3650, F.D.R. Library.
90. *PPF*, 3650, F.D.R. Library.
97. OF, 2314, F.D.R. Library.
100. *PSF, 90*, F.D.R. Library.
103. *PSF*, 4, F.D.R. Library.
104. *PSF*, 4, F.D.R. Library.
106. *PSF*, 4, F.D.R. Library.
111. *PSF, Confidential File 93*, F.D.R. Library.