Journal of Contemporary History Copyright © 2002 SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, Vol 37(4), 599–616.
[0022–0094(200210)37:4;599–616;027919]

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The Foreign Office and the 1939 Royal Visit to America: Courting the USA in an Era of Isolationism

The visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth to the USA in June 1939, the first by a British monarch, seemed to symbolize, at a time of escalating danger, the solidarity of the English-speaking peoples. The occasion's significance was jocularly captured in a Gaumont newsreel: against images of the royal couple escorted along Pennsylvania Avenue, the narrator declares that the last time the British had gone there it had been 'to burn the White House'.[1] Extending a state visit to Canada, the US trip was the result of an invitation from President Roosevelt. Instead of a British minister, the minister-in-attendance was Canadian Prime Minister, Mackenzie King. The sovereigns visited Washington and New York, attending the World Fair, and relaxed at Roosevelt's Hyde Park home before returning to Britain via Canada. The outward harmony of the event, however, assiduously promoted on both sides of the Atlantic by the media, belied the tensions gathering force between the two nations during the 1930s, as each in its own way addressed the escalating threat to world peace from Germany, Italy and Japan.

It is an event which has received only passing comment in the many books about the era, including those dealing with propaganda and Anglo-American relations.[2] Existing accounts from a royal perspective offer useful but brief, one-sided summaries that do not establish the full context.[3] It has been the subject of just two articles. David Reynolds has meticulously examined the event from the American side, focusing upon the visit's place within the context of Roosevelt's foreign policy.[4] The British side has been examined by Benjamin D. Rhodes, in which he highlights the 'psychological approach' to

1 Gaumont British, 570, 6 June 1939, ITN Archive, London.

2 See Nicholas J. Cull, *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign against American 'Neutrality' in World War II* (Oxford 1995); B.J.C. McKercher, *Transition of Power: Britain's Loss of Global Pre-eminence to the United States, 1930–45* (Cambridge 1999); David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937–41: A Study in Competitive Cooperation* (London 1981); Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda, 1919–39* (Cambridge 1981).

3 See John Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI: His Life and Reign* (London 1958), 380–7; Robert Rhodes James, *A Spirit Undaunted: The Political Role of George VI* (London 1998), 154–68.

4 David Reynolds, 'FDR's Foreign Policy and the British Royal Visit to the USA, 1939', *Historian*, 45 (1983), 461–72.

the USA.[5] Rhodes' thesis is that, at a time when the domestic political controversiality of American foreign policy made direct diplomatic overtures hazardous, the visit enabled Britain to strengthen Anglo-American solidarity in the face of impending war. Written when the psychological dimension to diplomacy was only beginning to be recognized by historians, it was a perceptive argument, and it still stands. It does not, however, dig deep enough. By focusing on the visit's public relations success and praising the astuteness of the 'psychological approach', it exaggerates its achievement and understates the very real anxieties besetting the Foreign Office as it contemplated launching the visit on the unpredictable waters of isolationist America.

This article argues that fear of upsetting the isolationists was at least as important a consideration for the Foreign Office as any expectation that the visit might significantly improve the prospect of American support for Britain, and that the outcome should be seen within this ambivalent context. It is impossible to understand the Foreign Office's handling of the visit without comprehending that it represented a liability as much as an opportunity for war-threatened Britain. The Foreign Office, throughout ten months of preparation, treated the event as a singularly delicate diplomatic operation, upon the consequence of which Britain's future security could depend. For the visit presented something of a dilemma to the diplomats. How far could Britain go in courting the USA, whose support in a global war would be vital, without risking an isolationist backlash that would jeopardize the prospect of such assistance? Did the visit risk being interpreted within the USA as a conspiracy to ensnare her in an entangling alliance? It was important, however, not to snub Roosevelt; and if it succeeded in rallying American amity without arousing political suspicion, it might facilitate his battle to slant neutrality law favourably towards Britain. Thus, the episode offers an interesting case study in the fundamental problems which American isolationism presented to the beleaguered British, on the brink of war with Germany, Italy and Japan.

Roosevelt's invitation followed upon a lengthy period of frustration, even cynicism, in London concerning the USA's willingness to contain foreign aggression, much less back Britain in another war. Domestic isolationism, voiced through Congress, had been apparent since the USA's rejection of the League in 1919, while disagreements over debts, tariffs and disarmament also soured relations. In Europe and the Far East, American policy was as frustrating to Britain as it was ineffective in deterring aggression. The USA, declared British Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, in March 1932, 'could never be counted on for any active form of co-operation'.[6] So pronounced were British convictions about American unreliability that the Defence Requirements Committee in 1934 advised that the Cabinet 'thoroughly reconsider' relations with the USA.[7] Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under-Secretary at the

5 Benjamin D. Rhodes, 'The British Royal Visit of 1939 and the "Psychological Approach" to the United States', *Diplomatic History*, 2 (1978), 197–211.

6 CAB 17 (32) 9 March 1932, CAB 23/70.

7 CP 64 (34), 28 February 1934, CAB 24/247.

Foreign Office, encapsulated the dilemma of courting the isolationist USA thus: Britain should not make sacrifices merely to retain the USA's friendship, on which 'little reliance' could be placed; however, no government could allow Anglo-American relations to be treated with 'anything but considerable respect', because in another world conflict Britain would require once again 'the sinews of war' from across the Atlantic.[8] As war approached, the dilemma intensified. Through 1935–7 Congress passed neutrality legislation to prevent the USA being drawn, as in 1917, into war. Apart from words like Roosevelt's notorious 'quarantine speech' of 1937, the USA consistently refused any action capable of restraining international conflict or encouraging British resolve. As Chamberlain remarked, the isolationists were 'so strong and so vocal that she [the USA] cannot be depended on for help if we get into trouble'.[9]

The long preparations for the visit, beginning in September 1938, were made against a background of rising anxiety in London about escalating tension in Europe, the Mediterranean and East Asia. Roosevelt's invitation coincided with the Czech crisis, and the visit's planning overlapped crises in Prague, Memel and Poland, as well as Franco's victory in Spain. Meanwhile, Britain's other enemies exploited distractions caused by Germany, as Mussolini conquered Albania, allied with Hitler and supported anti-British terrorism in the Middle East; and as Japan, in the same month as the visit, humiliated the impotent British over Tientsin. The fearful prospect of a three-front war without strong allies dominated all foreign policy and defence debates, shaping the strategy of appeasement. Never had assurance of American support been more desirable, yet the escalating crises seemed only to reinforce Congress's determination to uphold neutrality, irrespective of the President.

Indeed, 1938–9 saw Anglo-American relations at a nadir, overshadowed by Munich. Chamberlain, often wrongly described as anti-American, was frustrated by the USA's track record and the President's manifest inability to convert Congress to his own interventionist instincts. Roosevelt's valiant efforts at least to remove the arms embargo stalled in a quagmire of recalcitrance within both Houses.[10] His parallel commitment to rearmament cut little ice with Chamberlain; this was Fortress America, upholding the Monroe Doctrine against foreign aggression, reinforcing rather than restraining isolationism; American backing in another war appeared remote. Similar qualms were shared by the Service Chiefs[11] and the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Alexander Cadogan.[12] Moreover, Roosevelt's predilection for ambiguity irritated the decisive Chamberlain. The quarantine speech he dismissed as 'so involved that it was very difficult to discover its meaning';[13]

8 Letter, Vansittart to Fisher, undated, c. 18 May 1934, A4114/1938/45, FO 371/17597.
9 Chamberlain, Diary, 19 February 1938, Chamberlain Papers, University of Birmingham.
10 See R. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1933–1945* (Oxford 1979), 179–92; Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, op. cit., 54–8.
11 Memorandum, 15 September 1938, CP199(38), CAB 24/278.
12 Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, op. cit., 45.
13 CAB 37 (37), 13 October 1937, CAB 23/89.

and he distanced himself from the 'preposterous proposals' of the so-called initiative of January 1938, regarding it as a typically vacuous Rooseveltian gesture, liable to offend aggressors without in any way making them fear the USA.[14] The best contribution the USA could make to world peace, Chamberlain told US Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau, would be to amend the neutrality laws.[15]

Many Americans, likewise, held negative views of Britain. Roosevelt regarded Chamberlain as a 'City man', anxious to promote business links with Germany rather than co-operate with the USA's free trade policy.[16] He thought him 'slippery', ready to relinquish responsibility and blame the USA.[17] Resignation of the pro-American Eden enhanced suspicions.[18] Chamberlain's strategy to limit Britain's liabilities by appeasing potential enemies — ironically reinforced by lack of confidence in the USA — went down badly. Czechoslovakia's betrayal was widely seen in the USA as testimony to the unworthiness of supporting the cowardly British, whom Roosevelt privately described as washing 'the blood from their Judas Iscariot hands'.[19] Indeed, the King was apprized of the bad impact of Munich before going to the USA, it being hoped that the sovereigns might restore confidence in Britain.[20]

Thus, the state of relations on the eve of the visit called out for some healing gesture of amity. On the other hand, the entrenched isolationism so signally on display in Washington raised the spectre of a backlash, should the American people read the royal visit as a covert bid for an alliance. There was a risk, but also an opportunity. The Foreign Office's objective was to finesse the handling of the event so that risk was minimized and the opportunity taken to enhance American goodwill, which Britain would surely require in large measure to survive another world war.

The Foreign Office's strategy in pursuit of these objectives was led by Britain's ambassador in Washington, Sir Ronald Lindsay, whose posting was specially extended so that this highly-experienced diplomat, popular amongst Americans, would remain in place to conduct the necessarily delicate manoeuvres. Lindsay, more sanguine than Vansittart's successor as Permanent Under-Secretary, Cadogan, about a favourable outcome, enjoyed the support of David Scott, Head of the American Department, and Angus Fletcher, of the British Library of Information. Lindsay's hopes, however, were constantly hedged by caution, for he cherished no illusions regarding isolationist strength and the danger that the visit be thought to harbour a hidden agenda.

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14 CAB 1 (38), 24 January 1938, CAB 23/92.

15 J.P. Blum (ed.), *From the Morgenthau Diaries* (New York 1959), 465.

16 Callum A. Macdonald, 'The United States, Appeasement and the Open Door' in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Lothar Kettenacker (eds), *The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement* (London 1983), 404.

17 Barbara R. Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis* (Princeton, NJ 1997), 97.

18 Mommsen and Kettenacker (eds), op. cit., 403.

19 Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, op. cit., 34.

20 James, op.cit., 162.

Since the first world war, the Foreign Office had carefully avoided activity that could be construed in the USA as spreading 'propaganda', widely regarded there as having compromised her neutrality.[21] If the sovereigns' visit were thus perceived, far from improving relations, it would prove counter-productive. But if handled skilfully, it could perhaps, as Lindsay hoped, pay hidden dividends. A more favourable attitude towards Britain, though it would not immediately reverse isolation or create an alliance, would at least be a helpful step, as Roosevelt struggled to wean Congress away from a blinkered neutrality. As Lindsay saw it, any political dividend must be indirect, and would require subtle diplomatic navigation around the rocks of isolationism. In November 1938, cautioning against expecting immediate political advantages, he told Cadogan that 'to an immense extent the political relationship of the United States to the Empire is governed by emotional and psychological considerations'. Political factors would 'lose half their strength for good if they are not reinforced by favourable emotional factors', which ultimately 'may prove to be the determining influence'.[22] In a sense, therefore, the Foreign Office did hope to influence American opinion for diplomatic purposes, but to realize this indirectly, without being suspected of spreading propaganda. If it could get away with this, it could prove the most effective propaganda of all.

Exploitation of royal visits as instruments of diplomacy was not without precedent. Edward VII, for example, had astonished the Foreign Office by embarking in 1903 on a tour that included Italy and France, with the aim of countering anti-British sentiment in an age of international crisis; and it was believed to have accelerated the conclusion the following year of the Anglo-French Agreement.[23] In July 1938, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth paid a state visit to France, which, although not invested with specific diplomatic purpose, did serve to mollify troubled relations and symbolize some sense of unity as storm clouds gathered over Czechoslovakia.[24] A more central purpose of royal visits, however, concerned the monarch's role as Commonwealth leader, consolidator of imperial loyalty; and the rallying of the Dominions was becoming a matter of increasing urgency by the late 1930s. The King, indeed, saw it as a priority to visit all his Dominions, especially Canada, whose foreign policy tended to align with the isolationist USA, and whose leader cherished an obsessive horror at the thought of another European war.[25] Together, the visits to Canada and the USA might conceivably help unlock the isolationism of the New World.

As a means of influencing American opinion, the visit held possible advantages over conventional diplomacy. Firstly, it was a response to Roosevelt's initiative, not a British overture. Secondly, they would arrive as sovereigns of Canada, the USA's good neighbour, the acceptable face of the British Empire.

21 See Cull, op.cit., 5–32.
22 Lindsay to Cadogan, 23 November 1938, A8823/7673/45, FO 371/21548.
23 James, op. cit., 29–31.
24 Ibid., 142.
25 Ibid., 141–2, 154, 161.

Thirdly, the supra-governmental nature of the occasion might deflect the suspicions attending a meeting between a British minister and the President. Fourthly, despite its republican roots, the American populace could be expected to revere the theatricality of the event, the quaintness of tradition, national pride flattered by the deference of English monarchs towards the President. Finally, the visit might prove a non-controversial way of wooing Anglophile sentiments amongst the USA's élite, whose favour had been crucial in 1914–18. The Foreign Office aimed to nurture these advantages, letting them work their own spell with minimal interference. Simultaneously, however, a vigilant watch was maintained on any aspect of the visit that might conceivably engender political controversy. To this end, the Foreign Office monitored every nuance of opinion regarding the event within the USA, cautiously vetting any proposal, however trivial, that could adversely affect its underlying goal. On one level, the occasion's handling can be seen as the skilful exploitation, when political co-operation remained elusive, of the visit's psychological and emotional potential, the grasping of an unexpected opportunity as war loomed. However, what stands out most forcefully from Foreign Office archives is its extreme wariness shared lest the visit precipitate a wave of isolationist suspicion, rendering even more remote rapprochement between Washington and London.

Roosevelt's invitation to the King on 17 September 1938,[26] and the latter's favourable response early in October,[27] immediately aroused Foreign Office anxiety about possible adverse repercussions. Lindsay, worried about 'murmurings' in American newspapers, voiced his concern to Roosevelt; it was being suggested that the visit 'might either imply the existence of some Anglo-American alliance or be interpreted as an effort to lure America into one'. The President, typically complacent, dismissed Lindsay's qualms with 'an emphatic and unqualified negative', but the ambassador's doubts remained.[28] On 11 November, he alerted the Foreign Office to hostile reactions in isolationist newspapers, especially within the Hearst empire, which scented 'a manoeuvre to beguile the United States into something more than sympathy for Great Britain'. A leading American journalist, Walter Lippmann, had expressed reservations about the visit's coinciding with controversial Congressional debates on rearmament, which might 'revive suspicion of foreign interference'; it might 'disunite and distract American public opinion' and 'mislead the innocent without impressing the mighty'. Some papers had praised the common objective of peace, although with the qualification that 'no Anglo-American alliance is wanted'.[29] Henceforward, the Foreign Office, through its News Department and the British Library of Information, and aided by intelligence from Anglophile sources, kept a watchful eye on press and public opinion within the USA, anxious lest it gravitate around the magnet of isolationist suspicion.

26 Letter, Roosevelt to King George, 17 September 1938, A7769/7673/45, FO 371/21548.
27 Letter, King George to Roosevelt, 8 October 1938, A7769/7673/45, FO 371/21548.
28 Lindsay to FO, 25 October 1938, A8061/7673/45, FO 371/21548.
29 Lindsay to FO, 11 November 1938, A8192/7673/45, FO 371/21548.

The Foreign Office was, of course, largely powerless to shift American opinion. Much would depend upon Roosevelt's battle with Congress. As Lippmann suggested, American perceptions of the visit could not be divorced from the wider context; the President's efforts to re-arm and amend the neutrality laws were liable to reinforce the isolationists.[30] Their vigour within Congress and their capacity to distort perceptions of the visit were drawn to the attention of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, in January 1939. Senator Reynolds of North Carolina, a new member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had vociferously expressed precisely those suspicions that the Foreign Office was anxious to avert. In a speech of undisguised Anglophobia, he had harped on the familiar theme of the Great War. The USA's contribution to victory, he complained, had remained unrecognized by the British, who 'refused to admit that they owed money to the United States', and she 'should not be called upon to shoulder the responsibility of once again saving democracy'. He made a spurious and suspicious connection with the recent visit to the USA by ex-Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. (He had been invited by the National Association of Manufacturers, although he also met public figures, including the President.) According to Reynolds, 'handsome, broad-shouldered, fine-voiced Anthony Eden' had been sent 'to blaze the way and to carpet the path that will be traversed by the King and Queen of England when they come to America to curry favour' and beg her people 'again to save them'.[31] An editorial in *The Baltimore Sun* noted that by challenging British royalty, Reynolds possessed 'campaign material of incalculable, noise-making potentiality', and there was no reason why such denunciations might not continue indefinitely.[32]

Sympathetic American warnings about the visit's coincidence with the volatile political situation in Washington were brought to the Foreign Secretary's attention on 16 February by Lady Reading, in the form of a letter from a Mrs Woods, niece of Anglophile banker, J.P. Morgan. The letter, in which Halifax declared himself 'most interested', offered some well-informed cautionary advice: although 'close co-operation with England is still a very unpopular idea here, especially so since Munich, many of us think the King's visit — if wisely handled — may be a Godsend in changing that point of view'; however, it might 'act as a boomerang' if it became politically controversial. The letter stressed Roosevelt's difficulties, with recent Democrat losses and the prospect of a president, as in 1918, not representing majority opinion; an 'important element to reckon with' was the cross-party belief that he was 'driving us into war'. In recent unsuccessful efforts to lead opinion towards Anglo-American co-operation, Roosevelt had 'stirred up a hornet's nest and aroused unnecessary opposition even among those who — in principle — believe equally strongly in this co-operation', and, for the moment, 'the cause has been set back'. This, nevertheless, invested 'even greater importance' in

30 Ibid.

31 Mallet to Halifax, 20 January 1939, A783/27/45, FO 371/22799.

32 Ibid.

exploring the visit's potential for cementing relations, provided that care was always taken to avoid any 'boomerang' effect. The sovereigns would be well-advised to visit the Mid-west, so as not to slight 'a large and important part of the country', where 'the isolationists and the anti-Europeans are strongly entrenched'.[33] The Foreign Office, in fact, had already considered and rejected extending the visit on grounds of practicality rather than politics, although the American Department had 'consistently advocated a visit to Chicago, at least'.[34] Cadogan, observing that the letter restated familiar arguments, thought it too late to alter plans;[35] and invitations from the Governor of California and the North Dakota State Government were also refused by the Foreign Office.[36]

The Foreign Office's acute sensitivity to charges of spreading propaganda was illustrated in its response to a private proposal that the News Department sponsor an advance publicity film about the monarchs, its purpose being to explain the symbolic importance of royalty and the empire in Britain. The commentary would express the hope that through the film, 'we may have forged yet another link in the chain which has for so many years bound in friendship and understanding the peoples of our great English-speaking nations'. It would conclude with an American citizen declaring: 'And so I came to realize what imperialism means to those democratic peoples bound up in the great British Empire to which we are so closely related by blood, ancestry and opinion. I now know why their national anthem is "God Save The King".' Such a film, however, was just what the Foreign Office wanted to avoid. Discountenancing the project, Roland Kennedy of the News Department cautioned against 'using the royal visit for obvious propaganda'.[37]

Fear of invoking unwelcome political associations within the USA also caused the Foreign Office to cold-shoulder a proposal from Deputy Secretary-General of the League of Nations, F.P. Walters, in March 1939, that the royals visit the League's platform at the World Fair. Walters acknowledged the government's probable reluctance to identify itself with so controversial an issue as the League, but he thought that public perception was changing and that the gesture would have 'an excellent effect on American opinion'.[38] The proposal was reaffirmed to Halifax in May by the League of Nations Union, which stressed the importance of indicating within the USA that British policy followed ideals of international co-operation.[39] The Foreign Office, however, wary of providing the isolationists with ammunition, could neither share

33 Letter, Reading to Halifax, 16 February 1939, A1408/27/45, FO 371/22799.
34 Minute by Beith, 22 February 1939, A1408/27/45, FO371/22799.
35 Cadogan to Hardinge, 17 February 1939, A1408/27/45, FO 371/22799.
36 Mallet to Cadogan, 19 December 1938, A227/27/45; Millar to Balfour, 17 February 1939, A1564/27/45, A227/27/45, FO 371/22799.
37 Minute by Kennedy, 8 February 1939, P539/539/10, FO 395/662.
38 Letter, Walters to Randall, 7 March 1939; minute by Perowne, 15 March 1939; letter, Randall to Walters, 17 March 1939, A1838/27/45, FO 371/22800.
39 Letter, LNU to Halifax, 25 May 1939, A3832/27/45, FO 371/22800.

Walters' questionable faith in changing public perceptions nor risk such a controversial gesture, and the proposal was deprecated by Lindsay as inappropriate.[40]

The Foreign Office's scrupulous efforts to insure against isolationist hostility were well-illustrated in its attitude towards ministerial representation. The question was focused in March when Mackenzie King wrote to Chamberlain urging that the role of minister-in-attendance most appropriately fell to himself, as Canada's Prime Minister. Roosevelt, he claimed, had proposed this to him in January.[41] Although Mackenzie King's presumption caused mutterings of displeasure within the Foreign Office, which thought his purpose 'domestic' and motivated by Canadian prestige, there was, nevertheless, considerable reluctance to send a British minister, as mooted by junior official, J.V. Perowne, which 'might, indeed, merely lead Americans to think that we were trying to angle for political favours'. Scott argued that for a minister to absent himself during critical times in order to accompany the sovereigns 'would almost certainly be misinterpreted in the States'; no one would believe that he was only there 'in attendance'. It would be concluded that he had gone 'with some political reason', which would be 'most undesirable'. Scott's judgment was backed by Cadogan, although not without some caustic remarks on Mackenzie King's 'tiresome' attitude and Roosevelt's infuriatingly casual methods. The President, he complained, had 'in a thoughtless moment' invited the Canadian leader, yet, conversing with Lindsay, he had 'resolutely refused' to be drawn into admitting that he wanted him.[42] As so often in Foreign Office dealings with the USA, frustration with the ambivalent Roosevelt had to be borne for the sake of wider political objectives. In fact, King George's first inclination had been to take ministers from both nations, but having been advised that it was 'important to avoid any suspicion' about 'political objectives', he now agreed with the Foreign Office.[43] It was agreed in April that the role would best be played by Mackenzie King.[44]

Foreign Office touchiness was also apparent regarding travel between Canada and the USA. In January, Roosevelt suggested that the couple might prefer to remain in Canadian coaches so as to avoid the inconvenience of changing trains; moreover, he considered the coaches 'more comfortable than any he could provide'. The Foreign Office was initially cagey about agreeing to what it regarded as a typically ill-considered gesture by the President. The American Department was disinclined to get involved, remarking, 'we should keep out of the trains business'. It was feared that in his 'laudable anxiety' to spare the sovereigns 'all fatigue and discomfort', Roosevelt might inadvertently be courting damaging publicity: 'If the American public were inclined to

40 Lindsay to FO, 29 May 1939, A4059/27/45, FO 371/22800.

41 Letter, Mackenzie King to Chamberlain, 14 March 1939, A2137/27/45, FO 371/22800.

42 Minutes by Perowne, 22 March 1939; Balfour, 23 March 1939; Scott, 23 March 1939; Cadogan, 24 March 1939, A2138/27/45, FO 371/22800.

43 Stephenson to Cadogan, 24 March 1939, A2292/27/45, FO 371/22800.

44 Lindsay to FO, 15 April 1939, A2784/27/45, FO 371/22800.

complain that the King and Queen obviously did not think American trains good enough for them, it would not be the President but the King and Queen who would get the blame.' However, informed of these reservations by Cadogan, the Palace decided that on the grounds of royal comfort and politeness towards their host the sovereigns should go along with Roosevelt.[45] The proposal was also favoured by Mackenzie King.[46]

Cautious respect for American public opinion also influenced the Foreign Office's decision to reject a plea that the sovereigns meet members of the British West Indian population in New York. The suggestion was brought to Foreign Office attention by the Colonial Office which had received an anonymous letter emphasizing the plight of the 'horribly poor and particularly miserable' community in New York, whose 'feeling of neglect' might be tempered by a show of royal interest. For various reasons, including security, protocol and practicality, the Foreign Office abhorred the idea, but deference to American opinion was also involved, in this case regarding white race superiority. As New York Consul-General, Godfrey Haggard, put it: 'The effect on public opinion would . . . be unhappy. The blacks are the element here held in the lowest estimation, for very good reasons; and it would look funny . . . if a visit were paid to them.'[47]

As the visit approached, Foreign Office anxiety about American opinion became more acute. Whatever Roosevelt's aspirations, there was no real sign of any shift against isolationism. A perceptive summary of opinion was forwarded to the Foreign Office from the Chief of Air Staff, Sir Cyril Newall, in a private letter to him from the air attaché in Washington. The latter argued that, although a 'real hatred' of the dictators had emerged over the last six months, everyone nevertheless still wished to keep out of a war. Fear that Britain's defeat would ultimately endanger American security meant that the provision of munitions aid might prove popular, but the isolationists still remained 'very powerful'. Although Roosevelt wanted 'to help in every possible way', he dared not go too fast 'for political reasons'; he had distanced himself from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee battle about neutrality law. In the Mid-west, especially, he warned the Foreign Office, isolationism ruled; there was resentment that war debts remained unpaid, and that Britain had once acted 'just as Hitler is doing now'; these tough people could not be influenced by propaganda, subtle or direct.[48]

During May, the Foreign Office worried about adverse press comments that indicated only too clearly the fine line between the visit's success and failure.

45 Mallet to FO, 14 January 1939; minutes by Scott, 16 January 1939; Cadogan, 16 January 1939; Balfour, 16 January 1939; letters, Cadogan to Hardinge, 21 January 1939; Hardinge to Cadogan, 24 January 1939, A338/27/45, FO 371/22799.

46 James, op.cit., 162.

47 Beckett to FO, 6 January 1939; Balfour to Lindsay, 10 January 1939, A147/27/45; Lindsay to Balfour, 11 January 1939, A316/27/45; Haggard to Perowne, 31 January 1939, A1228/27/45, FO 371/22799.

48 Newall to FO, 28 April 1939, A3291/27/45, FO 371/22800.

The American correspondent of *The Spectator*, Erwin D. Canham, cited an editorial in the nationally-circulated *New York Daily News*, which ended on 'an isolationist note'. The newspaper echoed familiar phobias about secret diplomacy, warning citizens: 'We should not forget, however, that the King and Queen are not coming over to see us simply because they love us. They are coming here to sell us a bill of goods; to convince us that our interests are identical with theirs.' This, according to Canham, was 'what will be said a thousand times in the coming months'. He himself praised the visit's careful arrangements, its brevity and avoidance of 'grand parades and tours'. Choosing his phrasing with significant irony, he stated that it 'almost encourages the suggestion that perhaps the King and Queen have nothing to sell after all'; and were 'simply paying a friendly visit from their neighbouring Dominion of Canada, recognising the place of the United States in the comity of English-speaking nations'. However, because such an unprecedented event coincided with 'grave world crisis, when sympathetic American interest and cooperation are of greatest value to the British Commonwealth', people could be forgiven for concluding that the visit had 'very real purposes'. The government should, therefore, offer 'realistic clarification'. 'Can it be stated candidly that the visit really has nothing to do with the present game of power politics?' It would be essential, when the next ambassador, Lord Lothian, arrived, to make it clear that he did not intend to act 'as a publicist or sales manager' for the British, who 'must watch their American relationships carefully these days'.[49]

The Foreign Office was anxious to restrain this kind of questioning. As anticipated, suspicions about propaganda and political conspiracy would never be far from American minds, however tactful the diplomacy. Officials were uncertain how or whether to respond. Perowne pondered embassy action to disavow such unfavourable impressions, perhaps reaffirming the visit's presidential origins.[50] There was, however, danger in protesting too loudly and drawing excessive attention. Scott hoped that the State Department itself would challenge such speculations; it was best not to react, for *'qui explique s'accuse'*.[51] The episode underlined once again the dilemma facing the Foreign Office: for Britain to reap maximum political benefit from the visit, the Foreign Office had, paradoxically, to minimize its political significance in the USA, lest it become actually counter-productive. In constantly affirming the non-political nature of the occasion, however, the Foreign Office was, to a degree, bluffing; for Lindsay, at least, did hope that ultimately the visit would bond the USA more closely to Britain.

Even discussions concerning transatlantic travel arrangements confronted American sensibilities, as well as underlining anxiety about the international situation. The King and Queen would sail to Canada aboard *HMS Repulse*, one of Britain's three modern battle-cruisers, but a question mark hung over

49 *The Spectator*, 19 May 1939; *New York Daily News*, 9 May 1939; minutes by Perowne, 19 May 1939; Scott, 22 May 1939, A3670/27/45, FO 371/22800.

50 Minute by Perowne, 19 May 1939, A3670/27/45, FO 371/22800.

51 Minute by Scott, 22 May 1939, A3670/27/45, FO 371/22800.

the mode of departure from the USA. The dangerous international context in which the visit was taking place was underscored by the government's reluctance to allow *Repulse* to wait for the King and Queen. 'In view of the uncertainties of the European situation', the Foreign Office noted, there were 'obvious disadvantages' in allowing the ship to remain 'so long out of European waters at what might well be a critical period'. The question was mooted whether this furnished an opportunity to woo American opinion by securing an 'invitation' to return aboard a US warship. This would 'constitute a gesture of friendship and association which would at once strike the imagination of the peoples of the United States and the Empire; and its effect upon the rest of the world, including the Dictator Countries, would not be lost'. Moreover, it would be 'in a direct line with the form of collaboration and sympathy for this country favoured by the United States Administration'.[52] Scott doubted whether it could be exploited by those 'who would like to make out that the royal visit has a political significance', since it would be a gesture in the American tradition: 'Let us send you home in *our* car'. He wondered, however, if there was a risk of 'advertising our lack of battle-cruisers'; but that, he laconically observed, was 'sufficiently well known already'.[53] Nevertheless, despite Scott's support and the chance of political capital, Cadogan and Halifax demurred, mainly for security reasons at a time of imminent war. Cadogan questioned the wisdom of entrusting royal security to any foreign power during 'critical times'; and Halifax, although pleased that the idea had been 'put up', aligned himself with Lord Chatfield, Chief of Naval Staff, who, he reported, 'did not like it at all'.[54]

The monarchs arrived in the USA on 7 June, and visited the White House and various sites of American national pride, including Capitol Hill, George Washington's house and Arlington Cemetery, where the King laid a wreath on the tomb of the unknown soldier, the only gesture evoking memories of Anglo-American co-operation during the first world war. The visit proved immensely popular; it was a theatrical event, with national pride flattered by the spectacle of British royalty honouring the American President. The royals, briefed by the Foreign Office, cultivated an image of ordinariness and accessibility, countering any American predisposition to expect aristocratic aloofness. As Fletcher remarked, it was easy to imagine sovereigns who might have left 'merely a negative impression of respect and mild interest, tinctured, perhaps, with the cynicism of a people whose republican principles have been carefully nourished for 150 years'; in the event, they had been able to 'reflect the British people at their best'.[55]

The mood overwhelming Americans was well reflected in newsreel coverage, especially by Gaumont, whose film was also shown to British audiences as testimony to the visit's superlative success. The newsreel indulged American

52 Ridsdale to Scott, 15 April 1939, A2892/27/45, FO 371/22800.
53 Minute by Scott, 17 April 1939, A2892/27/45, FO 371/22800.
54 Minutes by Cadogan, 17 April 1939; Halifax, 15 April 1939, A2892/27/45, FO 371/22800.
55 Letter, Fletcher to Leeper, 12 June 1939, P2549/35/150, FO 395/662.

naiveté and fascination with novel spectacle, and upheld national pride by stressing the British monarchs' deference, as Roosevelt's guests, to American tradition. They were shown travelling in the presidential cortège to the White House and attending the official garden party, mingling with 'Grade A delegations from the Social Register, *Who's Who* and the Congressional Directory'; it was 'all quite, quite American style'. There was an appeal to ordinary Americans: 'Royals or no royals, it [the party] looks very much like a long sociable and, as the folks back on main street say, a good time was had by all.' Political implications were eschewed and, significantly, the Canadian factor was highlighted, it being emphasized they were 'here not as the King and Queen of England but as the King and Queen of Canada'.[56]

At the White House banquet, the King himself stressed the Canadian aspect: he brought 'the warm greetings of a neighbour and a trusted friend'. The speech, tactfully composed by the embassy, carefully avoided any hint of pro-British propaganda. Presenting the draft to Scott, Lindsay explained that its intention was to inspire respect for the King as an ordinary human; he should employ 'the simplest language' and avoid 'all polysyllables' and 'all royal phrases'. This was 'the sort of thing that would make the best appeal to this country'. Consequently, his speech was suitably vague, yet redolent of goodwill, praying in conclusion that 'our nations may ever in the future walk together along the path of friendship in a world of peace'.[57] If the King was circumspect about what he said before Americans, Roosevelt, ever alert to isolationist opinion, excelled himself in bland ambivalence. Using phraseology so nebulous that it could offend nobody, he declared: 'I am persuaded that the greatest single contribution our two countries have been enabled to make to civilisation and to the welfare of peoples throughout the world is the example we have jointly set by our manner of conducting relations between our two nations.'[58] And speeches in parliament, before the sovereigns' departure, had also taken refuge in good-natured platitudes. Chamberlain observed that Anglo-American relations had 'long been of a special character on account of our common language, our common ideals and our common traditions'; he was certain that 'the visit of Their Majesties to that country will be warmly welcomed in that great Republic across the Atlantic'.[59]

Press coverage, assiduously monitored by the Foreign Office, mainly echoed public enthusiasm.[60] The visit's non-political image appeared to have succeeded, with only extreme isolationist papers critical; even they were muted so as to acquiesce in public euphoria. The *New York Times* praised Britain's wish to maintain free institutions and avoid war, and was pleased that she was looking to the USA for sympathy and such help as was 'consistent with our

56 Gaumont British, 570, 15 June 1939.
57 Lindsay to Scott, 9 May 1939, A3524/27/45, FO 371/22800.
58 Roosevelt Speech, 8 June 1939, A4437/27/45, FO 371/22800; Lindsay to FO, 16/6/39, A4437/27/45, FO 371/22800.
59 House of Commons Debates, 3 May 1939, cited in A3254/27/45, FO 371/22800.
60 Summary of press comments, Lindsay to FO, 20 June 1939, A4441/27/45, FO 371/22800.

own interests and our own traditions'. 'We like the British', it concluded, 'because we understand them better than most foreigners.'[61] The *New York Herald Tribune* hoped that, with the goodwill generated, 'a staunch structure of common aims may be built which could mean more for peace and justice than any formal alliance ever written'.[62] The *Baltimore Sun* reassured Americans that the King's objective was 'to combine not the fighting strength but the good faith and the good will of two strong nations'; the fact that he was 'a nice fellow' had 'no real bearing on our relations with the British Empire'.[63] The *Washington Post* hoped that the visit would strengthen the American people's growing determination 'to have the United States play a truly constructive role in this difficult era, to exert positive leadership and to fulfil all the responsibilities, which are an inescapable concomitant of power'; it further noted 'how much the British tradition means in a period when there is serious threat to the ideals which the two countries hold in common'. On the King and Queen's departure, it declared, carefully qualifying its celebration of Anglo-American friendship: 'There is no desire and there is no need for any alliance . . . . But there is both desire and need for people whose interests and ideals are largely identical to work and think and live co-operatively.'[64]

Contrasting emphasis was exhibited by the *Washington Times Herald*, a Hearst newspaper, which, while warmly welcoming the sovereigns, reminded readers that 'it is really Mr Chamberlain who is visiting us; and let's keep clearly in mind what he wants to sell us'. In a lukewarm endorsement of Anglo-American friendship, it qualified its position further, stating: 'Americans are cousins of the British — though not brothers. They are likewise friends of the British and want to remain so — though they don't want to be British allies.'[65] The *Philadelphia Enquirer and Public Ledger* remarked sarcastically that the royals were 'presumably not coming to the United States for their health, nor to study our quaint customs'; it represented the ultimate 'in a system of propaganda which is without equal anywhere'. It grudgingly admitted, however, that in present world conditions it was as well 'for the two great English-speaking democracies to be seen on cordial terms'.[66] Predictably, the *Chicago Tribune*, reporting from the isolationist heartland, declared that the purpose was 'to inveigle the United States out of isolation'. In words that penetrated the Foreign Office's secret hope of hidden political dividends, the paper complained that if the visit led Congress to relax the neutrality laws, and gave Roosevelt 'the authority he wants to pick sides and give aid', then 'Mr Chamberlain will think very well of his *coup d'état*'.[67] The Foreign Office, however, was relieved that, even in traditional isolationist regions, many

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.

papers were mildly supportive. The *St Louis Globe Democrat* commented: 'We need no Washington-London axis, nor is such contemplated. We have something better — a mutual understanding', to which the royals had made 'a substantial contribution'.[68] The *Indianapolis Star*, while asserting the USA's wish 'to remain aloof from foreign war', considered that Britain's 'programme for maintaining democracy wherever possible accords with American desires'.[69] On the West Coast, the Foreign Office noted, the newspapers were muted, although affirming the undesirability of foreign entanglements; Hearst appeared 'to have taken refuge from an obviously popular fact by avoiding comment on it altogether'.[70]

Superficially, American press reactions were positive; the nightmare prospect of an isolationist backlash with accusations of spreading 'propaganda' scarcely emerged. However, although papers generally yielded to the public mood, between the lines could be read a strongly conditional endorsement, on the premise that the visit did not imply Anglo-American political co-operation, or forebode reform of neutrality legislation. A less subtle approach would surely have triggered more censures in the mode of the *Chicago Tribune*. Thus, Lindsay was angered when United Press, following a conversation with a News Department official, suggested that the ambassador cherished a hidden agenda. Lindsay commented: 'It is particularly unfortunate that any mention should have been made of my hopes that the royal visit may in some way influence the attitude of Congress towards neutrality legislation.'[71] Even sympathetic newspapers, which applauded the visit and endorsed Anglo-American friendship, ensured that they distanced themselves from appearing to back anything resembling a political or military alliance. That they should have felt so compelled further underlines the constraints upon overt exploitation of the occasion for political ends, hidden or direct.

Fletcher's report to the News Department Head, Reginald Leeper, justifiably celebrated the 'stupendous' impact upon American opinion; much could have misfired, and he was undoubtedly voicing happy relief. The King and Queen symbolically represented the Empire, recognized by the USA as 'one of the few remaining bulwarks of individual liberty in the world today'. But he tempered jubilation with caution, urging 'a certain restraint' in judging their reception within the USA. He declared that in 'the present juncture in international affairs, when Great Britain so obviously stands in need of friends', the visit could easily have been criticized as 'a bid for American support'. He praised the sovereigns, as much as the Foreign Office, for obviating impressions of propaganda-making; thus the 'voices of doubt and suspicion' had proved 'inconspicuous and influentially negligible'. He warned against drawing 'false conclusions' from the success. 'It will be an evil day for Anglo-American

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Lindsay to FO, 14 June 1939; Balfour to Lindsay, 20 June 1939, A4201/27/45, FO 371/22801.

relations if upon the foundations which they [the sovereigns] have so well and truly laid we should see the jerry-building of mistaken propagandists.' When the *March of Time* suggested that the sovereigns had been 'sent over' for propaganda purposes, he had dismissed the idea as 'entirely mistaken', re-emphasizing Roosevelt's invitation and the Canadian dimension. Ultimately, the visit had succeeded because the royals were 'above politics and above policy'. The episode had shown that to influence American opinion it was important not 'to put the journalists on a diet', but rather 'to facilitate the task of those who work the machinery of the press, the radio and the moving pictures'.[72] Fletcher, effectively, was admitting the limitations of how far opinion could be actively moulded by Britain, even within the context of such a stunning publicity success. His careful reservations about reading too much into the visit's political significance merely underlined the confined parameters within which the Foreign Office had to operate in courting the isolationist USA.

Fletcher's sentiments were shared by Lindsay, who felt well pleased with this spectacular culmination to his career in Washington. No one had worked harder to pave the way for the visit's success, and to ensure that it was not condemned as propaganda. The ambassador, however, certainly hoped that the public relations success might pay off politically, facilitating Roosevelt's efforts to amend neutrality law in Britain's favour. Lindsay wished to have it both ways: to avoid impressions in the USA of manipulation, while simultaneously reaping political dividends. It was a finely-balanced objective; and, as his two highly-qualified reports to the Foreign Office demonstrate, it was unclear whether anything new and substantial had been achieved, apart from a general reinforcement of goodwill.

Lindsay's first report, on 12 June, the day after the King and Queen's return to Canada, coincided with the height of the euphoria generated by their reception in the USA. The visit had proved 'a complete success' with 'no incident of an unfortunate character and no discordant note'. Public enthusiasm had 'passed all expectations' and was 'unprecedented'. According to the White House press department, newspaper and radio coverage had been in the 'best possible tone' with only 'trifling exceptions'. The President and Mrs Roosevelt had been the 'embodiment of courtesy and friendliness'. He summarized the visit's impact thus: 'There can be no doubt that the visit has made a profound impression on the whole country and fixed already existing feelings of friendliness. Coming at a crucial moment it is of capital importance in the history of Anglo-American relations and its effects will not wear off.'[73]

Too much, however, should not be read into Lindsay's inevitably optimistic words; as much as anything, he was rejoicing, like Fletcher, that events had not misfired; and his reservations deserve equal emphasis. Despite his aspirations, he thought the effect on the immediate future of neutrality law 'more doubtful'; it was 'not yet possible to foresee the effects on the small group of strong isola-

72 Letter, Fletcher to Leeper, 12 June 1939, P2549/351/150, FO 395/662.
73 Lindsay to FO, 12 June 1939, A4139/27/45, FO 371/22800.

tionist senators who hitherto have been determined to block the amendments desired by the Administration'. The Senate regarded itself as 'the constitutional bulwark against waves of popular emotion', and the isolationist faction might 'feel moved to discharge what it regards as its duty with determination'. Tentatively, however, he believed that the visit had 'increased the pressure in the opposite direction' and made it legitimate to expect a 'popular surge of opinion' against 'the unfavourable enactment of the existing law', if war came. Summarizing, the ambassador chose his words carefully: 'In other words, while we cannot at present feel certain of receiving an immediate dividend we can be assured that our hidden reserves have been immensely strengthened.'[74]

On 20 June, Lindsay reaffirmed satisfaction with the outcome, praising the sovereigns' 'immense personal triumph'. Former Secretary of State, Henry Stimson, who was 'entirely devoted to the cause of Anglo-American friendship', had told him to take 'solid satisfaction in a great achievement of lasting good to both our countries'. Although the politics of Anglo-American relations had not been the primary purpose, Lindsay argued, the visit's significance had been recognized by the press, but with only the *Chicago Tribune* focusing upon propaganda. His relief at damage limitation was marked; had it not been tactfully handled as 'a perfectly natural event', it would have been 'regarded with suspicion by an America which is convinced of the imminence of world war, determined to remain neutral when it comes, and deeply resentful of any efforts to entangle it in the threatened disaster'. Such suspicions would have allowed 'an unpleasant element' to mar the occasion. Anglo-American relations, more than relations between any other nations, were influenced by psychological and emotional ties; the visit had stirred them to the roots. Provided, he concluded, the Administration had the courage to fight, it should make it more difficult for the isolationists to maintain resistance.[75]

The visit, however, had an immediate postscript, underlining only too clearly to the ambassador and the Foreign Office the danger of making any glib assumptions about changing American opinion. At Hyde Park, in typically expansive fashion, Roosevelt had assured the King of a most benevolent version of neutrality on the immediate outbreak of a war; he intended to alleviate Britain's naval responsibilities by instituting American naval patrols in the Atlantic, and even in the Pacific. In follow-up conversations with Lindsay, he reiterated his desire to 'establish a patrol over the waters of the Western Atlantic with a view to denying them to warlike operations of belligerents'. Scarcely had the ambassador secured glad acceptance from London, when the President backtracked, citing American public opinion; instead of being activated at the outset, his proposal would await an overt act of aggression by the Axis. The postponement, Lindsay confessed, was 'hardly a surprise': he and his staff 'had all been aghast at the light-hearted manner in which the President was proposing to defy all conceptions of neutrality at the very outset

74 Ibid.

75 Lindsay to FO, 20 June 1939, A4443/27/45, FO 371/22801.

of a war'.[76] On 18 July Roosevelt's mission to amend the neutrality laws stalled in the Senate. It would take actual hostilities for Congress to relent, and then only in moderation, approving arms purchases on a cash-and-carry basis. Not until after Pearl Harbor, and Hitler's gratuitous declaration of war, would a full-scale commitment be made to Britain by the USA.

Coming at a time of imminent war, and when there was precious little the government could do to bond the USA more closely to Britain, the royal visit certainly functioned as an effective psychological and public relations exercise,[77] and dovetailed favourably into Roosevelt's agenda.[78] It also helped to disperse the bad odour of Munich. It is important, however, not to exaggerate its immediate significance. There was no discernible impact on the attitude of the American people or their government towards neutrality, or on Roosevelt's freedom of action. Hindsight, as with the Anglo-American naval conversations of 1938,[79] retrospectively imbues the visit with greater moment than is warranted: cunning diplomacy facilitating Roosevelt's interventionist inclinations and the creation of an informal alliance. It must be remembered that it was the occasion's non-political character that guaranteed its favourable reception in Washington. Newspapers alone testify to the extremely guarded approval conferred by Americans, while the qualifications hedging Lindsay's and Fletcher's reports speak more eloquently than their understandable euphoria at the visit's success; it was as much the euphoria of relief that events had not miscarried as triumphal celebration at smart diplomacy. What the episode demonstrated, above all, was the severe limitations that isolationism imposed upon a truly constructive diplomacy and the near-bankruptcy of British policy. It exposed the Foreign Office's lack of confidence in any practical strengthening of Anglo-American co-operation; indeed, officials seemed more impressed by the visit's potential for catastrophe than for détente. On the eve of war, the risk of reinforcing rather than alleviating isolationism was a terrifying contingency, overshadowing Foreign Office ministrations, and if the visit had strengthened Britain's hidden reserves in the longer term it was not readily obvious in 1939.

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76 James, op. cit., 165–7.
77 Rhodes, op. cit.
78 Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, op. cit.
79 Laurence Pratt, 'The Anglo-American Naval Conversations on the Far East of January 1938', *International Affairs* (October 1971).