COMMUNICATION

DEAN ACHESON AND THE 'SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP': THE WEST POINT SPEECH OF DECEMBER 1962

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Great Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role.

Dean Acheson

Dean Acheson, an influential architect of U.S. foreign policy in the decades following the Second World War, was secretary of state under President Harry S. Truman (1949–53). Acheson was instrumental in the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the rebuilding and rearming of Germany. Perhaps more than any other American statesman, Acheson believed that the North Atlantic Community represented the culmination of human cultural, economic and political development.

Acheson left office at the end of the Truman administration to return to his private law practice in Washington, D.C. He continued speaking out on foreign policy issues and served as an unofficial adviser to the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations.

President John F. Kennedy (1961–3) often consulted Acheson on NATO matters or when international crises struck. It was on 5 December 1962, shortly after the U.S.–Soviet near-confrontation in October over the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, that Dean Acheson made his now infamous West Point speech which led the way in debunking the so-called special relationship between Great Britain and the United States.

By early December 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis was already deemed an American success. Although Acheson had advocated an air strike on the Cuban missile sites and strongly disagreed with Kennedy’s blockade decision, he had ‘gained respect for the President’ during those tension-filled days of October.1 He was looking forward to getting out of Washington in two months for his annual January hiatus to Antigua and the Southern Windward Islands. But first Acheson had to finish writing two articles and deliver a speech. ‘Three things of my own are about to burst on the world,’ Acheson wrote Lady Pamela Berry, wife of W. Michael Berry, editor-in-chief of the Daily Telegraph and a respected observer of British politics in her own right, on 3

1 DGA to John Cowles (owner and editor of the Minneapolis Star Tribune), 2 Nov. 1962. The Dean G. Acheson papers, Yale University Library (hereinafter referred to as DGA-Yale), Series 1, box 6, folder 83. Also David S. McLellan and David C. Acheson, Among friends: personal letters of Dean Acheson (New York 1980), p. 237. Acheson believed that the risk of delay involved in the blockade approach outweighed the risks of immediate air strikes against the missile sites. However, on President Kennedy’s instructions Acheson flew to Europe to brief President De Gaulle and Chancellor Adenauer on the decision to impose the blockade during the Cuban Missile Crisis.
December 1962, 'a leader in the December issue of *Foreign Affairs* ... a speech at West Point... and a piece about my childhood in the Connecticut valley in the 1890s.' Little did Acheson realize that this speech, delivered at the United States Military Academy at West Point, would prove to be the most controversial of his entire post-secretarial years.

Early in 1962 General William C. Westmoreland, the superintendent of West Point, had invited the former secretary of state to deliver the keynote address for the Fourteenth Student Conference on United States Affairs to be held at the Academy. Acheson was constantly receiving invitations to speak at colleges and universities and out of 'sheer laziness' he declined Westmoreland's offer; that is until General Maxwell Taylor intervened, urging Acheson to speak. 'Although I know you must receive many invitations of this kind, I hope that your busy schedule will permit you to accept this one', Taylor wrote Acheson in July. 'I think it is fair to say that this annual event has attained a considerable reputation, and, with the theme of "Atlantic Community", it would be a forum particularly appropriate for an address from Dean Acheson.'

Acheson could not bear to turn Taylor down; the general was one of the few men in Washington whom Acheson unhesitatingly admired. Acheson replied that although he had already rejected the West Point invitation, he would now accept, for 'when you ask me to do it, that is something different'. So it was that Acheson found himself at West Point delivering a speech on the prospects for a stronger European union entitled 'Our Atlantic alliance: the political and economic strands'.

The former secretary of state began his wide-ranging address by telling the cadets that in the wake of recent Soviet adventurism in Berlin, Cuba and the Third World, further steps were necessary to meet the Soviet threat, including a substantial increase in conventional forces in Western Europe and technological advances in military equipment. He proposed that the United States strengthen its economic, political and military ties with Europe and that NATO be used as a basis for broadening the Atlantic alliance. At the same time, Acheson added, the United States had to take the lead in developing plans for the economic advancement of the West. 'If wisely formulated and favorably received', he continued, 'the proposals would put us on the verge of another great advance in the development of the Atlantic Community and would require political agreements and political institutions of a most far-reaching nature.'

Acheson stressed that military policy was only one of three strands that had to be woven together 'to make a viable, strong and effective alliance'. He warned that unless mutual agreement on political policy was developed 'the best forces will remain unused to resist the kind of pressure that had been exerted on Berlin'. Acheson also emphasized that military policies that would deprive the Soviets of superiority in conventional forces on its Western European front would require increased productivity from all NATO countries. 'Such economic and military developments, should they occur,
would give reality to such political policies as the reunification of Germany and more independent national lives for the East European countries', he added. Speaking as one of NATO's founders and a distinguished diplomat whose entire career had been devoted to Atlantic solidarity, Acheson was calling for a new dynamism in the alliance's policy and for more conventional forces in Europe.8

For the most part, the speech was a vintage Achesonian call for strengthening and extending the Atlantic Community. Midway through his address Acheson told the audience that:

Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role. The attempt to play a separate power role – that is, a role apart from Europe, a role based on a ‘special relationship’ with the United States, a role based on being the head of a ‘commonwealth’ which has no political structure, or unity, or strength, and enjoys a fragile and precarious economic relationship by means of the Sterling area and preferences in the British market – this role is about played out. Great Britain, attempting to work alone and to be a broker between the United States and Russia, has seemed to conduct policy as weak as its military power.9

This portion of the speech was transmitted across the Atlantic to England the following day, where it was immediate front-page news. The British were outraged by Acheson's harsh judgement of their country, and a public outcry ensued disproportionate to the actual importance of the speech. 'I wonder who the unsung reportorial genius was who read through the whole speech and found that paragraph to cable to London,' an irritated Acheson wrote Arthur Schlesinger Jr, special assistant to President Kennedy, in the midst of the controversy, 'he ought to have a substantial raise.'10

The prominent treatment of the speech in British newspapers and the ‘anguish’ it caused at the foreign office and Admiralty House (temporary headquarters of Prime Minister Macmillan) forced the state department to point out on 6 December that Acheson, despite his role as presidential adviser, had spoken as a private citizen; therefore his right to speak needed no defence or explanation. In addition, Acheson's advocacy of British entry into the European Economic Community, increased economic co-operation by all Western nations, and of more conventional military power in Europe conformed to official state department policy. At the White House Pierre Salinger, the press secretary, said that President Kennedy had no prior knowledge of the tenor of Acheson's speech before it was delivered.11 Although Kennedy himself never publicly condemned the speech, he had McGeorge Bundy, presidential assistant for national security affairs, instruct the state department to issue a press release stating that 'U.S.–U.K. relations are not based only on a power calculus, but also on a deep community of purpose and long practice of close cooperation. Examples are legion... “Special relationship” may not be a perfect phrase, but sneers at Anglo-American reality would be equally foolish.'12

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8 Ibid. Also Leonard Ingalls 'More Nato units urged by Acheson', New York Times, 6 Dec. 1962, p. 6. Interestingly enough the Times mentioned nothing about Acheson's caustic remarks toward Britain when reporting the speech.
12 McGeorge Bundy to Robert J. Manning, 7 Dec. 1962, National Security Files 170A/34, the John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Mass. Also quoted in David Dimbleby and David Reynolds,
However, British pride had been too deeply wounded to be placated by state department disclaimers. ‘As you have doubtless seen from the press, my purpose in life now is to make enemies,’ Acheson wrote a young friend. ‘I shocked the British by accident, and really annoyed the allegedly phlegmatic people.’ The British press joined together in condemning Acheson in ad hominem terms. The *Daily Express* denounced what it called the American ‘stab in the back’ of her devoted British ally. Analysing what they considered Acheson’s tactless commentary, the *Sunday Times* charged that America’s success during the Cuban Missile Crisis must have ‘gone to his head’. The *Daily Telegraph* tried to calm its readers by pointing out that Acheson, who was always ‘more immaculate in dress than in judgement’, was ‘extremely unlikely ever again’ to hold high office. The *Spectator* noted that: ‘In this transitional period we have a right to ask that our friends should not make matters worse. It is the nature of nations diminished in power to feel humiliated when that fact is called to their attention.’ Only *The Economist* of 29 December 1962 did not blame Acheson for the controversy by pointing out that the West Point speech ‘sparked off what has always been the most disturbing feature of postwar Conservatism’s inferiority complex; namely, the feeling that when in travail, it is an appropriate reflex to turn anti-American’.

Many of Acheson’s closest British friends including Noel Annan, Lord Patrick Devlin, Desmond Donnelly, Anthony Eden and Lord Frank Stowe-Hill could not understand why Acheson had spoken so critically of their country and were concerned that it would exacerbate anti-U.S. feeling throughout the United Kingdom. ‘Since both the *Times* and the *Telegraph* have printed my speech in full, you have seen that I did not deliberately start out to cause pain to my friends’, Acheson defended himself in a letter to Sir Frederick W. Leith-Ross. ‘In fact it was with great surprise that I found that a quite subsidiary sentence had been taken from a speech to a student conference, causing even the unflappable Mac [McGeorge Bundy] to flap.’

The line which aroused such controversy in the U.K. was that ‘Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role’. British ambassador to the United States, Sir David Ormsby-Gore, was asked by the press what he thought of Acheson’s biting remarks. Ormsby-Gore replied that many of the points were ‘much in line’ with official British policy and he defended Acheson as being pro-British, with a record that spoke for itself.

Unfortunately for Acheson, who was hoping that the ruckus would quickly subside, British prime minister Harold Macmillan decided that Acheson’s comments had denigrated ‘the will and resolution of Britain and the British people’ so thoroughly that it demanded an official response.
Acheson's remarks had placed the British prime minister, President Kennedy personally telephoned Macmillan to persuade him to stay above the fray and to ignore the speech rather than be drawn into a public debate that could only serve to further damage Anglo-American relations.20

However, Macmillan, because of continuing British indignation, felt compelled to rebuke Acheson in a letter to the public, for committing 'an error which had been made by quite a lot of people in the course of the last four hundred years, including Philip of Spain, Louis XIV, Napoleon, the Kaiser, and Hitler'. He charged that Acheson's assertion that Britain's 'attempt to play a separate power role' was 'about to be played out' also applied to the United States and every other country in the West. 'The doctrine of interdependence', the prime minister declared, 'must be applied in the world today if peace and prosperity are to be assured.' Macmillan was further irritated that Acheson had described the Commonwealth as an organization with no political structure, unity or strength. 'Mr. Acheson', the prime minister said, 'seems wholly to misunderstand the role of the Commonwealth in world affairs.' He privately feared that Acheson's discounting of Britain's world status would add to his government's difficulties in convincing France and other members of the European Economic Community of Britain's value as a member.21

In retrospect, Acheson's speech received considerably more attention than it warranted because of Britain's sensitivity to any slighting reference to the validity of the so-called special relationship between the United States and Great Britain. 'In his speech Acheson said quite rightly that Britain had lost her old role and was seeking a new one,' recalled Acheson's friend and Australian ambassador to the United States during the Kennedy years, Sir Howard Beale, 'but in that inimitable way he sometimes uses in expressing words, he had given an impression quite unwittingly, which deeply hurt the feelings of the British people.'22

To strike a blow at the 'special relationship' was to expose the time-honoured conventions of the Anglo-American relationship as being illusory. Although many politically sophisticated Britons conceded that Acheson had said nothing that they themselves had not said privately, they were still angry that the former secretary of state said what he did publicly. 'Macmillan came pretty close to [saying] the same thing when he said recently, as quoted by the Washington Post, that "Britain could not expect to play a great power role in the new condition of the world,"' Acheson informed Francis Miller, special assistant to the bureau of educational and cultural affairs, department of state. 'But they are British and I, an alien. While they may justify

20 Nunnerley, President Kennedy and Britain, pp. 1–2.
21 Published letter to Lord Chandos, 7 Dec. 1962, in Harold Macmillan, At the end of the day, 1961–1963 (London, 1973), p. 339. Macmillan's statement was a reply to a letter he had received from Lord Chandos, president of the institute of directors and former Conservative cabinet member, Major Sir Edward Spears and Sir Robert Renwick, which requested that the prime minister seek a disavowal from Dean Acheson before he met President Kennedy at Nassau in the Bahamas on 19 December.
22 Oral history interview of Sir Howard Beale (transcript) 16 Apr. 1964, John F. Kennedy Library. Beale recalls that he was in England when the furore over Acheson's remarks hit the London papers: 'I spent the next few days in England defending him and when I came back, I took him to task and asked him why I should have to defend him! He told me it was one of those inadvertent things; he had thought the words he used were all right, some of his people had read the speech and saw nothing wrong – it occurred to nobody that it could be interpreted in any way wrong.'
my position, I doubt, alas, if they justify my stating it. Many of these same people attributed Acheson's remarks to post-Cuban Missile Crisis American cockiness. Others believed that Acheson was a mouthpiece for John F. Kennedy's own Irish-American disrespect for Britain, in part because of the role played by Kennedy's father in 1940. The *Daily Mirror*, with the largest circulation in Britain, emphasized the connexion in an editorial that labelled Acheson as a key presidential adviser. The editorial noted that Britain had been 'written off' by another American in 1940 – 'by a man who told [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt we didn’t have any hope in hell in Hitler's war'. ‘That man’, the editorial continued, 'was President Kennedy's father – the rich faint-hearted Mr. Joseph Kennedy, the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James in the days of Dunkirk."

Not only had Acheson's ill-chosen words upset the British but they had also raised doubts about President Kennedy's political motivations. The British government felt that if the administration had prodded Acheson into making the West Point speech, as some were claiming, then President Kennedy was guilty of a breach of inter-Allied diplomacy, ill-suited to the position of the United States as a leader of the 'free world'. Nothing could have been further from the truth; Kennedy preferred the Conservative Macmillan, who favoured British entry into the EEC, over the neutralist Labourites. He would not have asked Acheson to be his hatchetman in this case, for it would only have served to damage the Macmillan government. When asked years later if he had been prodded by the Kennedy administration into making the speech Acheson sharply retorted, 'Nobody prods me, I prod myself'.

Parliamentary reaction on both sides of the house of commons was even more severe. Moderates of the Conservative and Labour parties viewed the speech as aiding the growing number of M.P.s who were basically anti-American and who resented any public criticism by American leaders. This was particularly true of Labourites with regard to Acheson's reference to Britain's difficulties in participating in the European Common Market. The Labour Party, then led by Hugh Gaitskell, was slowly turning away from the notion of joining the Common Market, instead pursuing a neutralist course. Therefore, the party felt that any interference by any American was intervention in a domestic British political matter. It was not Acheson's charge that Britain had not yet found a role in the post-1945 order that irritated these Labourites. What angered them was the fact that Acheson uttered his statements at a time when Britain was going through a difficult transition period with Germany, France and other EEC members; his comments, they felt, had weakened the British bargaining position.

For Acheson, the 'special relationship' with Britain had always been greatly exaggerated, if it existed at all. He was a supporter of European integration and was impatient with making too much of Anglo-American ties because it would also be an obstacle to Britain joining the EEC. This point needs to be stressed, for many of Acheson's most severe critics, both revisionist historians and political contemporaries,

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mistakenly considered Acheson an anglophile because of his British demeanour. ‘Dean Acheson was one of the greatest Prime Ministers Britain ever had’, former under-secretary of state Chester Borels charged in a 1970 interview.27 ‘Time and again Acheson has been unjustly characterized as being ‘more British than the British’. Acheson may have been brought up like an English gentleman, may have looked like an English gentleman, may have even talked like an English gentleman, but in reality he was a hard-nosed American pragmatist concerned primarily with enhancing his country’s power and prestige abroad. Historian Gaddis Smith has described Acheson’s postwar historical beliefs: ‘Only the United States had the power to grab hold of history and make it conform’;28 Britain would have to learn to accept the role America assigned her – as a member of the Common Market.

In 1950, while secretary of state, Acheson discovered that British and American diplomats were writing a paper defining their countries’ ‘special relationship’. Disgusted, he immediately ordered all copies of the ‘wretched paper’ destroyed. Acheson realized that formalizing a privileged British position with the United States would perturb other allies, annoy the American public, and give the ‘McCarthys…proof that the State Department was a tool of a foreign power’. He did not call into question ‘the genuineness of the special relationship’, but ‘in the hands of troublemakers’, he argued, the memo ‘could stir up no end of a hullabaloo, both domestic and international’.29

From the time of the 1945 postwar loan to the 1962 West Point speech, Acheson was always among the first in Washington to recommend rebuffing any British requests for special concessions. Although Acheson believed that Britain was an important partner, he also believed that it was an unequal partner and that ‘unique did not mean affectionate’.30 Britain should not be treated any differently from any other NATO ally. ‘I’ve always thought that the special relationship was something which grew out of our past history and the fact that we spoke the same language, and that we had, to a very large extent, the same interests,’ Acheson confessed. ‘That there was nothing basically political about it and that perhaps it was a mistake to talk about it at all.’31 In fact, one could make the argument that if Acheson had favoured a ‘special relationship’ with another country it would have been West Germany, although he emphatically denied this. ‘Please don’t think I “prefer” the Germans’, Acheson protested to a friend in London. ‘No such suggestion can be found in the [West Point] speech; nor is it in my mind.’32

What was particularly noteworthy about Acheson’s remarks about Britain was that he had violated one of his own cardinal principles: never criticize a NATO ally. Ironically, it was Kennedy, whom Acheson had continually chided for his insensitivity to NATO members like Portugal and France, who in essence defended Acheson by refusing to denounce or dissociate himself from the elder statesman.

As if the United States’ lack of full consultation during the Cuban crisis and Acheson’s West Point speech were not clear enough indicators of Britain’s declining

30 Ibid.
influence in America, by late December 1962 London was also caught in a major
defence crisis triggered by the Kennedy administration’s cancellation of a sky-to-surface
missile called Skybolt, a weapon Britain regarded as essential for the Royal Air Force.\textsuperscript{33}
It now appeared that America was trying to deprive Britain of nuclear capability.

The U.S. military led by secretary of defense Robert McNamara, armed with
Acheson’s March 1961 NATO review, objected to Europeans acquiring independent
nuclear capabilities and wanted the United States to continue its nuclear monopoly.
Since 97 per cent of the nuclear weapons in NATO were under U.S. control, and the
U.S. was the only member with the know-how to manage them properly, Kennedy and
McNamara, as well as Acheson, believed that a separate British nuclear force would
only duplicate what was already available for the defence of Europe and squander
important resources. Therefore, shortly after the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis,
McNamara, with Kennedy’s support, unilaterally cancelled the Skybolt missile
program, which would have provided Britain with an independent intermediate-range
missile. The decision was logical and cost-effective from the American point of view;
for Britain it was another blow to its self-esteem.\textsuperscript{34}

Secretary of state Dean Rusk had warned McNamara that the cancellation of
Skybolt would cause Macmillan’s government problems, but McNamara insisted that
he would be able to iron them out with Britain’s defence minister, Peter Thorneycroft.
Unfortunately, on 7 December, only two days after Acheson’s West Point address, the
decision was leaked to the press before McNamara had a chance to talk with
Thorneycroft. By the time McNamara arrived in London to discuss Skybolt alternatives
with Thorneycroft on 11 December, he found the British public in a state of bitter
astonishment over America’s dual affront: Acheson’s critique and Kennedy’s
cancellation without consultation. McNamara left Britain without reaching any
agreement. Skybolt had been offered by Eisenhower in 1960 with no strings attached,
Thorneycroft argued, now the United States was trying to renege on their agreement.\textsuperscript{35}

Amid this new strain in Anglo-American relations, Acheson’s statement regarding
Britain’s declining status in the world took on more importance. ‘I suppose it was the
coincidence of some reporter’s coming across the sentence at just the time of the Skybolt
incident that touched off the commotion’, Acheson later reflected.\textsuperscript{36} It would be up to
Kennedy and Macmillan to try to patch up these autumn strains and revitalize Anglo-
American relations.

On 19 December 1962 Kennedy and Macmillan met at Nassau in the Bahamas to
discuss the status of negotiations for Britain’s membership in the EEC and the abortive
Skybolt programme. Upon arriving, Kennedy found the British prime minister
seething with anger at American insolence toward his country. Macmillan informed
Kennedy that he was unable to accept the cancellation of Skybolt, for this would surely
dismantle his parliamentary backing. Kennedy explained that the Skybolt programme
had been scrapped; it was not negotiable. The most he could do to help politically on
the eve of British elections was to offer the prime minister Polaris submarine missiles
(without nuclear warheads), provided that Britain pledged them to a NATO-wide
nuclear force and did not maintain an independent force of her own. Macmillan was

\textsuperscript{33} David N. Schwartz, \textit{NATO’s nuclear dilemmas} (Washington, D.C. 1983), pp. 96–103, offers an
excellent evaluation of the decision to cancel Skybolt, the McNamara–Thorneycroft meeting, and
Kennedy and Macmillan at Nassau. Also Andrew J. Pierre, \textit{Nuclear politics}, pp. 224–43 and

\textsuperscript{34} Schwartz, \textit{NATO’s nuclear dilemmas}, pp. 98–9.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid. p. 100. Also Oral History Interview of Lord Thorneycroft (transcript), June 18, 1969,
John F. Kennedy Library.

\textsuperscript{36} DGA to Sir Frederick W. Leith-Ross, 16 Jan. 1963. Series 1, box 19, folder 238, DGA-Yale.
unhappy with the restrictions but realized that for political reasons he could not go home empty-handed. He accepted Kennedy's watered-down offer in what became known as the Nassau Agreement, to save face and to camouflage yet another blow to British pride.37

But the Nassau Agreement only served to cripple President Kennedy's 'Grand Design' for Europe before it began to take shape. The agreement to replace Skybolt with Polaris had provided French President Charles De Gaulle with the perfect pretext for vetoing British entry into the Common Market on 29 January 1963. The Nassau Agreement, De Gaulle argued, was a clear indication that Britain was more concerned with maintaining its incestuous ties with the United States than becoming a qualified member of the EEC. Kennedy, as an afterthought, offered De Gaulle Polaris submarines on the same terms but the General defiantly turned them down.38

Anglo-American relations were now at a low ebb and many on both sides of the Atlantic were pointing at Acheson as a leading cause. This view was by no means unanimous: 'Your words of praise for the unfortunate West Point speech lost in the hurricane of British flap touched me and reassure me that, after all, it had a kernel of thought', a grateful Acheson wrote Henry Kissinger, then a Harvard professor.39 Never could Acheson have foreseen the negative repercussions a few sentences in a university speech would produce. 'It had not occurred to me that a speech to a student conference would go ricocheting around the world in this way, nor, furthermore, that the paragraph held the variety of meanings which seemed to be distilled from it', Acheson wrote Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. 'Doubtless I should have known better.'40 But Acheson meant what he said and refused to apologise publicly for his remarks. Many of Acheson's American friends began offering him their undiluted support. 'Congratulations on your address at West Point and the worldwide attention which it has aroused', wrote General Maxwell Taylor, the man who had recruited Acheson to deliver the speech. 'You gave the cadets and their colleagues strong meat for their intellectual molars.'41 Acheson's oldest and dearest friend, Felix Frankfurter, was seriously ill in a Washington hospital when he heard about the clamour Acheson's speech had created. '[Frankfurter] has been very much exercised at the British press attacks on me', Acheson informed Eugene V. Rostow, 'and worries a great deal about how to ensnare the Establishment so that we may subtly arrange for my reinstatement as a friend and not Public Enemy No. 1.'42

For Britain, the 'special relationship' with America had become a convenient means whereby London could maintain Great Power pretensions in a postwar order where Pax Americana dominated. Acheson's speech presented no novel revelations regarding the obvious decline of the British empire, apparent to everyone on both sides of the Atlantic. Nor was his argument on the need for the British to reorient away from America toward closer integration within the European Community a startling proposition; dozens of British statesmen had been saying the same thing for years. Acheson's speech had caused such consternation in Britain simply because he had said aloud the unsayable: that Britain's illusions of grandeur were just that – illusions. The

37 Schwartz, NATO's nuclear dilemmas, pp. 101–3.
41 General Maxwell Taylor to DGA, 7 Dec. 1962. Series 1, box 30, folder 385, DGA-Yale.
United States would no longer tolerate Britain's imperial pretensions, and London would have to realize that in American eyes Britain was simply another European nation. Acheson's West Point speech, followed by Kennedy's cancellation of Skybolt, had finally shocked the British into realizing that the 'special relationship' with America was greatly exaggerated at best. Acheson erred not in saying what he did, but in saying it so bluntly.43

'Britain has lost an empire and not found a role' became a catchphrase for nearly all of Britain's postwar woes. 'One of the great troubles of the remark,' Acheson told journalist William Hardcastle in a 1970 interview for The Listener, 'one which I struggled to overcome, is that you must not be epigrammatic. The first requirement of a statesman is that he be dull. That is not always easy to achieve. And that statement suffered from being too epigrammatic and quotable. If I'd taken twice the number of words to express it, it would have been inoffensive and recognized as true at once. Since then it has been adopted by almost every British politician, though they have never given me credit for it at all.'44

During the years before his death in 1971, Acheson was to criticise Britain openly again, this time for adhering to UN-imposed economic sanctions against the white-minority government of Rhodesia. 'I cannot understand why we follow the stupid policy of a bewildered country under a third-rate Prime Minister [Harold Wilson]', Acheson wrote a friend in 1968;45 speaking before the American Bar Association in Washington on 24 May 1968, Acheson would claim that Britain was involved in a conspiracy, 'blessed by the United Nations', to overthrow the Rhodesian government.46 In 1969 Acheson said that economic sanctions in Southern Africa were a substitute for 'the war Britain lacked heart and means to fight'. However, by this time the British were immune to Acheson's charges; they had become accustomed to the elder statesman's offhanded and epigrammatic critiques of their nation. Prime Minister Wilson, when asked in the house of commons about Acheson's Rhodesian remarks, said that the charges were ludicrous. 'Mr. Acheson', Wilson added, 'was a distinguished figure who has lost a State Department and not yet found himself a role.'47

43 Nunnerley, President Kennedy and Britain, pp. 3–13.
44 'Hard words from ... Dean Acheson...', in The Listener, 19 June 1970.
45 DGA to Lord Angus Graham, 23 July 1968. Series 1, box 13, folder 170, DGA-Yale.