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Safe for Decolonization: The Eisenhower Administration, Britain, and Singapore

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SAFE FOR DECOLONIZATION
The Eisenhower Administration, Britain, and Singapore
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The Eisenhower Administration, Britain, and Singapore

S. R. Joey Long

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On 12 August 1959, the Eisenhower administration’s Operations Coordinating Board (OCB), an interagency group coordinating the implementation of U.S. operational plans, urged that American policy toward Singapore be reviewed “on an urgent basis.” The British colony had been granted internal self-government following a general election on 30 May. What disturbed the American planners was that a leftist political organization—the People’s Action Party (PAP)—had carried the election. As the majority party in the unicameral parliament, the PAP formed the new government, with its leader, Lee Kuan Yew, becoming prime minister. Maintaining that the PAP was “communist infiltrated,” American policymakers characterized its electoral victory as significantly “adverse to US and free world interests” and stated that Singapore’s transition to self-government had occurred “under most unpromising auspices.”

Shortly thereafter, Washington acted against the Lee administration. In 1960 and 1961, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) directed efforts to recruit a local intelligence officer to subvert the new government. But the CIA operation failed, and a diplomatic row ensued. Although Washington apologized, the botched CIA business embittered Singaporean leaders. As Lee bitterly exclaimed in a “full-throated tirade” before a gathering of journalists in 1965 when recalling the debacle: “If it had been the Americans in charge [of Singapore], I think today I would not be here, and you would not be interviewing me. Because, they lack what one calls wisdom, i.e. a computer fed with data, judgement which comes out of long experience.” “If it were the Americans,” he continued, “they would say, Ah! Commie! Fellow-traveller! Lock him up.”

Ironically, Lee would become better known in later years as one of the most ardent Asian supporters of Washington’s involvement in Indochina. Proponents of the war regularly cite his sympathetic speeches to assert that the U.S. intervention in Vietnam was not a travesty. Since Lee first visited the White House in 1967, moreover, the range of common interests between Singapore and Washington has grown extensively. Both are in agreement on most issues in international politics. Both have also developed close military and economic ties. Lee’s earlier anti-American tirades thus seem a puzzling anomaly. Yet the backdrop to his 1965 outburst has received little scholarly attention.

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Reflecting popular concerns and the momentous impact of the Indochina wars on American society and politics, scholarly publications on the Eisenhower administration’s involvement in Southeast Asia have focused extensively on the upheavals in Indochina. Though comparatively fewer in number, there are also works published on U.S. relations with Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Burma, and Malaya/Malaysia. Historians have highlighted the efforts Washington undertook to promote and stabilize anticommunist regimes in these countries. The United States established an alliance (the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, or SEATO) in 1954 to deter the communist powers from invading the region; it propped up rightist and noncommunist governments with military and economic aid; and it undermined Jakarta’s leftist administration through covert action.5

Juxtaposed to those vast writings, the dearth of scholarship on the American involvement in Singapore is striking. The absence is also surprising. Ho Chi Minh, Norodom Sihanouk, Sukarno, and other colorful Southeast Asian politicians of that period have either passed on or retired from their countries’ political affairs, but the Singaporean politicians who engaged with the Americans during the 1950s remained influential through the 1990s and beyond. With the PAP entrenched in power since 1959, Lee Kuan Yew continues to serve the government as a senior cabinet member despite stepping down as prime minister in 1990.6 Though he respects American power and regards the United States as a stabilizing influence in the Asian strategic landscape, he remains wary of the American tendency to foist its liberal political values on countries such as Singapore. In 1993, Lee caustically remarked that this “baiting is done in a manner which ignores differences of culture, values and history.”7 The scars evidently run deep. Without historical background, then, it is difficult to reconcile the older Lee’s tendency to extol the virtues of Washington’s engagement with Asia with his simultaneous admonishment of the U.S. propensity to criticize Asian leaders for the way they have governed their countries.

This work puts U.S.-Singapore relations in historical perspective. It focuses on the Eisenhower government’s involvement in late-colonial Singapore. The Eisenhower years coincided with Britain’s decision to progressively devolve power to Singaporeans. Constitutional revisions from 1953 enabled Singapore to gain limited self-government in 1959. Although Britain retained control over the island’s external affairs throughout this time, U.S. officials never hesitated to bypass formal diplomatic channels to promote American interests with locals or independently counter leftist influences on the island. This book examines the nature and outcome of the American intervention.

In this volume, I have employed an overarching, multiarchival “international history” framework to study the subject. I have approached the topic from three perspectives. First, I have examined Washington’s security interests and the nature of its intervention in Singapore. Second, I have looked at the U.S. involvement from the British angle, querying the extent to which UK officials attempted to re-
strain or encourage the Americans. Third, I have investigated the locals’ responses to the Americans’ activities. I have endeavored to accentuate the roles that all concerned actors played in generating expectations and influencing the course of local events. Doing that has required research in many archives internationally, and I have found much to study in the documentary evidence left behind by the agencies and peoples who influenced developments on the island as well as those who observed, aided, or sought to circumscribe the Americans in their endeavors. Where there were gaps in one set of records, another set from a different repository has usually corroborated, elaborated on, or qualified the former source. Access to newly opened and previously neglected primary records from archives in the Netherlands, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States has accordingly helped to develop the narrative and strengthen interpretations.

Three key observations stand out from the narrative. The first is that there were many twists and turns, as well as much discord and harmony, in the relations among the principal actors who crossed paths on the island. Americans and Britons clashed principally over the tactics employed to make Singapore—in their view—safe for decolonization. They endeavored to steer the decolonization process—or to create conditions for the decolonization process to be steered—along trajectories that would thwart the ability of anti-Western forces to amass power and enable more benign groups to control the postcolonial state. The anticommunist powers would advance their interests in Singapore with the help of friendly—or at least nonhostile—local leaders who shared their concerns about the spread of communism. But the Anglo-American powers did not see eye to eye on every tactic utilized to further that aim. American observers initially feared that devolving more political authority to locals would threaten Western interests. But British policymakers, especially from the Colonial Office, insisted that greater political liberalization would gratify local aspirations and result in the development of friendlier relations between postcolonial Singapore and the Western powers. Unconvinced by the British assurances, U.S. agents would bypass their allies and intervene to advance American interests on the island. In doing so, they provoked the British, who were dismayed by the American intrusion into their sphere of influence. Britons also articulated disapproval of some of the Americans’ activities. In fact, when U.S. operations threatened to critically destabilize local political developments, the British would intervene. The high-handed CIA attempt to subvert the local government, for example, was foiled with British assistance. Yet even though tensions between the two countries would ebb and flow, their relationship—characterized as “special” in some circles—did not unravel or dissolve acrimoniously. Rather, it was held together by mutual sympathies and common interests, sustaining attempts by both parties to make Singapore safe for decolonization.

If there was conflict and convergence in Anglo-American relations, local attitudes toward the two powers were similarly complex. In Singapore, the Americans
encountered a cosmopolitan society that held in tension its admiration for and its misgivings about the United States. Within that polity were peoples who would marvel at American technological wizardry and affluence while at the same time criticizing U.S. policy for being overly aggressive or economically exploitative. Appreciating the local proclivities, U.S. officials worked to develop and strengthen the pro-American sentiments among Singaporeans by highlighting U.S. achievements and communist excesses. They would succeed in generating a sizable reservoir of local goodwill toward the United States, and that accomplishment would redound to the benefit of U.S. foreign policy. But the American exploits also perturbed the British, who found their attempts at solidifying their informal influence over the late-colonial empire frustrated by the Americans’ activities. London, of course, had no intention of retreating without retaining some informal sway over its former possessions. Historians have astutely noted this, and they have also argued that the postwar informal empire that emerged was largely Anglo-American in character, as Washington helped a declining power to decolonize its possessions. In Singapore, however, the informal influence would be less Anglo than American. By entering into and occupying the local sociopolitical spaces vacated by the retreating British, the Americans further destabilized the weakened collaboration network that had underpinned British colonial rule in Singapore for over a century.

A significant number of locals did not just stay on the sidelines as Anglo-American tensions brewed. They were also participants. The history of Singapore during the 1950s involved more than nationalists battling colonialists and communists: the nationalist historiography has obscured the role external actors played in local politics. This book shows that, apart from dealing with the specter of communism, locals also exploited the Anglo-American differences to further their own agendas. As U.S. officials bypassed the British and intervened unilaterally in Singapore, politicians from the Singapore Labour Front/Singapore People’s Alliance (SLF/SPA) attempted to cash in on the U.S. willingness to back their anticomunist operations. Unfortunately for the policymakers, public revelations of their association with the Americans would spell their political doom. Appearing to be a proxy for a foreign power rather than a party of national liberation, the SLF/SPA would be shunned by the anticolonial electorate and destroyed as a viable political force. And if local politicians were playing with fire in marshaling foreign support for their domestic politics, American officials were equally misguided in thinking their aid would advance the locals’ cause. Ultimately, it was political pluralism in Singapore that suffered as the SLF/SPA faded into insignificance, wrecked by the notion that it was in the service of foreign interests.

The second key observation that emerges from the pages ahead is that the instruments of statecraft employed by the Eisenhower administration to protect and promote U.S. interests in Singapore were multifaceted, with each generating
significant outcomes. They reflected President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s efforts to
develop a more robust U.S. Cold War strategy. Indeed, he was not the simple-
ton his critics made him out to be. That erroneous view had been proffered by
contemporary observers who rated Eisenhower an ineffective executive who gave
free rein to his dour secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, to run foreign affairs.
The administration was perceived to be rudderless, muddling through from one
foreign crisis to another. A British observer best summed up this disparaging per-
ception: “Anything would be better than was [sic] Dulles and ‘Ike’ never seemed
to me to be more than a charming fellow with a wonderful gift of getting people
to work together but neither a great soldier nor a statesman.”11 That perspective,
however, has been persuasively overturned. Armed with newly declassified docu-
ments, “revisionist” historians now contend that Eisenhower was a proactive and
shrewd statesman who oversaw the reformation and implementation of a sophis-
ticated strategy against communism.12

Eisenhower’s anticommunist strategy was implemented in Singapore. Antici-
pating counteractions and the possible ineffectiveness of some of its endeavors,
the Eisenhower government committed its resources and called on a variety of in-
struments—including diplomacy, covert operations, and psychological warfare—
to deal with what it thought was a communist attempt to subvert the island. These
activities engaged a broad cross section of Singaporeans, ranging from the elite
to the masses. And they generated unintended as well as intended consequences.
As far as outcomes were concerned, activities such as American covert opera-
tions produced harsh and counterproductive results. But the persuasive nature of
cultural diplomacy, which played up commonalities and was not as threatening,
generated not only less resistance but also more enduring positive local senti-
ments toward the United States. The Singapore case consequently bucks the trend
in both the admiring revisionist Eisenhower studies, which applaud the prudence
and wisdom of the president’s policies, and the “postrevisionist” Eisenhower
scholarship, which asserts that the Republican administration’s interventions in
the developing world consistently reaped disastrous results.13

The mixed outcomes produced in Singapore turn on the fact that the U.S. inter-
vention was mediated through an array of human, institutional, political, and so-
ciocultural intermediaries and contexts. A society infused with intensely anticolo-
nial sentiments could become hypersensitive to the slightest show of domination,
exploitation, and humiliation exerted by an external power. Yet to assess the overall
foreign policy record of the Eisenhower administration, one must also account for
how collaborative intermediaries and accommodating local contexts could blunt
the sharper edges of the American intervention and enhance the efficacy of some
of Washington’s operations. Indeed, the efficacy of U.S. operations depended not
merely on whether they were coercive or persuasive. Their effectiveness and impact
were also determined by the circumstances then prevailing locally—the third key observation that stands out from this story. The British acted as a buffer and kept Washington from implementing more extreme measures to get its way—measures that might have seriously destabilized domestic developments, caused grave sociopolitical upheavals, and intensely embittered locals toward the United States. In addition, whatever faulty assumptions U.S. officials made about the ideological inclinations of locals and whatever constructive or counterproductive activities they conducted in Singapore, it must be noted that the Americans operated in a relatively friendly sociocultural milieu that furthered some of their initiatives. The setting further reduced the likelihood that locals would hold long-term grudges against Washington for its foolhardy actions. In the end, as strategists themselves who keenly appreciated Singapore’s vulnerability to the vagaries of international politics, local leaders would look to Washington to sustain the regional power balance and preserve the island’s security. Their perception of the United States as a benign power certainly arose from their own strategic calculations. But U.S. public diplomacy also helped. In promoting a positive image of the United States among Singaporeans, the Eisenhower administration worked to lay the foundation for the establishment of friendly U.S.-Singapore relations. This book is an attempt to trace the course of this bilateral relationship in the era of decolonization.
Singapore's domestic affairs commanded little American attention before World War II. U.S. officials, based at the American consulate general on the island (established in 1836), focused on providing consular services to American merchants in the region. Singapore was British territory, and diplomatic and commercial activities were conducted in the context of Anglo-American relations. This arrangement reflected the prewar American attitude toward colonial territories in Southeast Asia. So long as U.S. regional economic interests were undisturbed, Washington did not attempt to upset the colonial order. The United States, however, did showcase its Philippines policy as a model for the colonial powers to emulate. In 1934, it had pledged to grant the Philippines autonomy after a transitional decade of political tutelage. The move signaled Washington's intentions to adhere to its anticolonial traditions; it also signified the U.S. disinclination to be overly activist in that subregion.

British officials confronted this noninterventionist mood when they sought U.S. military support in Southeast Asia during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Regarding Singapore as a peripheral interest, American strategists were reluctant to meet repeated British requests for naval assistance to defend the island. But American attitudes would change as World War II ended, U.S. security requirements expanded, and Cold War tensions intensified. The war experience and Cold War concerns engendered a fundamental shift in U.S. strategic thinking. American planners now worried that the communist subversion of Singapore and Southeast Asia would undermine U.S. containment policy in Asia and Europe. No longer was Washington indifferent to the island's affairs: American policy toward Singapore would come to be shaped by broad security considerations and marked by a readiness to intervene if communists threatened to capture the strategic outpost.
Before World War II, American policymakers had articulated little that suggested they would commit U.S. resources to defend the British Empire, so they would have been bemused to know that British planners had identified potential U.S. assistance as a key factor underpinning Britain’s defense strategy in the Far East. Throughout the 1930s, London had agonized over its continental commitments and imperial defense. If war broke out in Asia, Britain planned to dispatch naval forces to Singapore to deter aggressors. But matching intentions to capabilities was problematic. Treasury had cut the defense budget when Britain’s economy slumped during the 1930s. If British interests in Europe and Asia were threatened simultaneously, strategists in London appreciated that their relatively weak forces would not be able to mount defensive operations on two fronts competently. They had to prioritize, which they did when Italy invaded Abyssinia in 1935, Germany reoccupied the Rhineland in 1936, and Japan advanced into China in 1937. With Germany and Italy threatening Britain’s Mediterranean communication lines, its oil reserves in the Middle East, and Britain directly, it became increasingly clear that the defense of British positions west of Suez was paramount. With the main fleet unlikely to sail to Asia, London determined that the defense of Malaya and Singapore hinged on U.S. support for the status quo in that area. Such considerations concerned Winston Churchill, who, after becoming Britain’s prime minister, repeatedly pursued the matter with U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt.2

Roosevelt certainly recognized the empire’s economic contribution to Britain’s war effort. Yet he was also aware there was little public support for American involvement in Asia. Polls indicated that a significant majority of Americans opposed Washington intervening to deter Japan from attacking Singapore and the Dutch East Indies.3 Reflecting the dominant noninterventionist sentiment, many U.S. military officers—particularly in the army—were also reluctant to be embroiled in an Asian war. They believed the United States possessed few key interests in the Southwest Pacific, and they were loath to weaken U.S. defenses by diverting limited American military resources to inconsequential operational theaters. Facing little in the way of credible foreign threats and protected by the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic oceans, the United States customarily had modest defense budgets and a weak standing army. If any military resources were to be expended, it was thought, they should be expended to preserve U.S. concerns, not necessarily British ones.4

At the same time, American planners understood the threat that would be posed to U.S. security if Germany triumphed in Europe. Their thinking was fleshed out in the “Plan Dog” memorandum issued by the chief of naval operations, Admiral Harold Stark. In November 1940, Stark argued that Nazi Germany’s disruption of the European power balance might endanger U.S. security in the long run. He contended that Washington should consequently adopt a strategy predicated on a “strong of-
fensive in the Atlantic as an ally of the British, and a defensive in the Pacific.” Given this Europe-first emphasis, it was “out of the question to consider sending our entire Fleet to Singapore” as “Hawaii, Alaska and our coasts would be greatly exposed to raids.” Stark nevertheless proposed that American strategists consult their British and Dutch counterparts on strategic developments in Asia, with a view toward coordinating military plans. His ideas were eventually incorporated into a joint army-navy paper and submitted to the White House for endorsement. Reviewing the plan, Roosevelt approved American participation in Anglo-Dutch staff discussions and supported the defensive in the Pacific. He persisted, however, in keeping part of the fleet at Pearl Harbor. With violence erupting in Europe and Asia, FDR believed that “[the American] strategy of self-defense must be a global strategy.”

Roosevelt’s stance ensured that U.S. policymakers would pay attention to Asian affairs. But it also created opportunities for the British to attempt to influence U.S. policy. During staff talks in Washington in February 1941, British representatives bluntly requested that U.S. warships be deployed in Singapore’s waters. The Americans refused, stating they would instead increase the U.S. naval presence in the Atlantic, maintain some forces at Pearl Harbor, and dispatch B-17 bombers to the Philippines to threaten Japan’s communication lines and deter Tokyo from advancing across Southeast Asia. Expecting Britain to play the primary role in defending Singapore, the Americans contended that the U.S. deployments would enable Britain to dispatch part of its Atlantic fleet to the area to repel the Japanese.

Since British planners failed to persuade the Americans to deploy their forces to Singapore, London would in the end dispatch two capital ships to Southeast Asia. But the Anglo-American powers were unable to stop Japan. On 8 December 1941, Japan’s Twenty-fifth Army landed in Malaya and advanced toward Singapore. Japanese warplanes simultaneously attacked and destroyed the B-17s in the Philippines and crippled the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. Reinforcing the U.S. position in the Pacific, American planners shifted more forces to the Philippines. They sent no reinforcements to Singapore, however, as the island was regarded as Britain’s responsibility. The American maneuvers prompted Churchill to appeal directly to Washington, purportedly obtaining an agreement from Roosevelt to reroute Philippine-bound resources to Singapore. But the assistance never materialized. When unconfirmed reports of the arrangement broke, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, who opposed the deal, threatened to resign. To mollify his infuriated adviser, FDR convened a meeting and denied the rumors. Roosevelt appeased Stimson, but for the British, the consequence was that Singapore would be theirs alone to defend. It would be a futile stand. Without external help, Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942.

False hopes, then, had been raised on the British side that Washington would support London’s “Singapore strategy.” Indeed, among the “causes of [the Singapore] disaster” listed in a postwar British report was the “failure of the U.S.A. to
employ the Asiatic Fleet in the defence of Singapore when the Philippines were invested." The Americans had rejected the British invitations to deploy U.S. forces at Singapore because such a move would strain U.S. resources and expose other U.S. interests—even the United States itself—to attack. U.S. security concerns were also limited, and they were directed at that point to the balance of power in Europe and hemispheric defense. Singapore’s fall could be overlooked. If U.S. policymakers gave any immediate thought to Singapore after its military capitulation, it would be in the context of another matter.

Colonialism and Decolonization

Roosevelt’s war and operational aims tended to converge with Churchill’s, but the relationship between the two leaders was strained over colonialism. Contrary to the assertions Churchill made in his memoirs, his outburst in December 1941 did not stop the U.S. president from raising the issue of decolonization thereafter. In fact, Roosevelt persistently prodded Churchill on decolonization, either directly or via State Department officials. The cumulative effect of the U.S. criticisms would provoke change in Britain’s colonial policy.

Believing colonialism and closed imperial economic blocs caused interstate conflict and distorted international trade, Roosevelt opposed the postwar restoration of the European empires. The Atlantic Charter and international trusteeship reflected FDR’s efforts at advancing his decolonization agenda. The charter was the outcome of Anglo-American talks held in August 1941. Relishing the opportunity to stimulate international support for the war against fascism, Roosevelt had insisted that the meeting conclude with a newsworthy declaration. The result was an Anglo-American pledge to uphold the principle of self-determination. The pronouncement was inspirational, but it was also controversial. Although the colonial world’s political aspirations were stirred by the American assertion of the charter’s universal applicability, the Churchill government vehemently insisted it applied only to German-occupied territories. And if the charter put Churchill on the defensive in 1941, international trusteeship would further aggravate the prime minister and his government for the rest of the war.

The trusteeship concept, which FDR subsequently promoted in place of outright self-determination for the colonies, envisaged a body of great powers administering and preparing the colonial territories under their charge for eventual independence. Even though Roosevelt’s plan did not call for immediate self-rule for the colonies, British leaders, who adhered to the principle that the government was answerable only to Parliament on colonial matters, still found trusteeship offensive. In August 1942, when Secretary of State for India Leo Amery discovered that Roosevelt planned to consign Singapore to the control of foreign trustees at
war’s end, he erupted: “As for joint trusteeship, we might consider that when the United States are prepared to concede to us a joint trusteeship over the Panama Canal and the adjoining Central American States.”15

Despite putting on a strong front, British officials were affected by the U.S. anticolonial initiatives. Foreign Office planner Ashley Clarke caved in when he conceded that British colonialism had some “inherent faults” and then suggested in June 1942 that Britain backed the American position on trusteeship.16 Such “defeatism,” however, vexed Colonial Office policymakers. G. E. J. Gent thought the Foreign Office was capitulating too easily to American criticism and “seem[ed] to be fascinated by the belief that H.M.G. [His Majesty’s Government] must be subservient to the supposed American policy of preventing the restoration of British sovereignty in Malaya, Hong Kong, and possibly Burma too.” Such views had to be countered. To that end, a reformation of Britain’s colonial policy was necessary.17

By August 1942, a new policy toward Malaya had emerged. From the start, British planners recognized they could either emulate Washington’s Philippines model or revert to the status quo ante bellum. Given British economic interests in Malaya, they rejected the first option. Yet the second would alienate international opinion. To resolve the conundrum, they looked, ironically, to the Atlantic Charter. In their view, London should declare its support for self-determination for all “in accordance with the spirit of Article 3 of the Atlantic Charter.” Whether a colony was fit for self-government, however, could only be determined by the colonial power and after much political tutelage. The spirit of the charter also implied that the metropolitan powers were obliged to administer the colonies until they became economically sustainable and socially stable. For Malaya, political reform was evidently necessary, but a central body governing all British-controlled or British-administered territories in prewar Malaya was nonexistent. British officials therefore planned to first bring the nine Malay states, Borneo territories, and Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, and Singapore) under one centralized authority when hostilities ceased. Thereafter, though no timetables would be set, Britain would proclaim that it aimed to eventually turn this unitary polity over to the indigenous population to govern.18

By May 1943, as the so-called Malayan Union scheme took shape, British planners decided the Borneo territories and Singapore would be governed separately. Scholars maintain that Singapore was detached for a multitude of strategic and socioeconomic reasons.19 The pivotal factor, however, was race. If Singapore’s large Chinese population was added to the new polity, the Chinese would outnum-

ber the Malays by about one hundred thousand. They might threaten the Malay community’s sociopolitical privileges, which Britain was obligated by treaty and tradition to protect. British planners therefore decided Singapore should develop autonomously, with the caveat that it might eventually rejoin Malaya.20 Having determined its course of action, the Churchill government moved to score some
propaganda points by declaring in Parliament in July 1943 that Britain would prepare Singaporean and Malayan peoples for self-government after the war. Although details of the Malayan Union were not divulged, self-rule was articulated as Britain’s long-term plan.21

While Whitehall was enacting colonial reforms, the Roosevelt government’s anticolonial position progressively became more ambivalent. Debates persist today on whether Roosevelt affirmed his anticolonial beliefs to the end (he died in April 1945, leaving Vice President Harry Truman to assume the presidency) or whether he adopted a more conservative position from 1944 onward.22 The empirical record indicates the Roosevelt government gradually yielded to more pragmatic considerations as the war dragged on. As Secretary of State Cordell Hull stated: “We could not alienate them [the British] in the Orient and expect to work with them in Europe.”23 Advancements in airpower and modern weaponry also induced U.S. strategists to temper their views against colonialism. Embracing a broader, global view of U.S. national security and maintaining that threats should be countered far from American shores rather than dealt with when they touched U.S. soil, the Pentagon pushed for the acquisition of U.S. strategic bases in the Pacific and for such “strategic trust[s]” to be shielded against international administration and scrutiny. Trusteeship consequently was not to apply to all dependent territories.24 Accordingly, at the gathering of some fifty nations in San Francisco in 1945, Washington essentially stood with its European allies on colonial matters. Despite opposition from the Chinese and Soviet delegates, the Western powers succeeded in inserting the fuzzier term self-government rather than independence as the stated aim in the UN Charter’s Declaration Regarding Non-self-governing Territories. Although the Americans sponsored a trusteeship council to oversee the administration of some trust territories, they also supported a provision stipulating that any official inspection should be conducted at the discretion of “the administering authorities.” International organizations and foreign countries, in other words, possessed no right to interfere in the colonies’ and trust territories’ affairs. Thus, although a limited form of accountability had been thrust upon the colonial powers, the compromise fell short of Roosevelt’s initial plan for placing colonies under international trusteeship.25

All told, did the U.S. attack on colonialism make any impact then? The American promotion of trusteeship in the early part of the war undoubtedly played a role in compelling Whitehall to reassert its fidelity to the “stock definition” of colonial policy—“by means of education in its widest sense, to raise the standard of life of the Colonial people and to develop their resources so that in due course they may take an ever increasing share in the ordering of their own affairs.”26 It seems unlikely that Britain would have adhered to this stock definition prior to the 1940s. The words of a colonial official who entered the civil service in 1927 and retired in 1965 are instructive:
Looking back, I don’t think there was much thought in those days [1920s–1930s] about the development towards self-government. . . . No doubt, if the question was asked, it was assumed that in the course of time these territories, at differing paces, would move forward in the same way that the old colonies of British settlement had moved forward to self-government; but the question I think was not often asked in those days, and indeed I think the policy of the British Government was [merely] to provide an efficient, honest, good administration, for the territories.27

With Washington shifting the spotlight onto Britain’s colonial policy, however, London could not help but be pressed to offer more than efficient colonial government. Certainly, the British pronouncements were not accompanied by the issuance of precise dates for the colonies to attain self-government. The intent was also to deflect criticism and undercut the capacities of external powers such as the United States to attack British policy. Nonetheless, once entered into the political discourse, the pledges of self-government would play a significant role in colonial political life. Because such declarations focused attention on emerging rather than established political conditions, they created expectations. Expectations in turn encouraged the colonies’ budding political activists to prod their colonial governments into fulfilling their lofty declarations. Moreover, Britain’s proclamations about self-government put pressure on colonial administrators, who had to constantly stay one step ahead of their subjects to curb the activists’ ability to mobilize the disaffected masses for political action. Accusations about the colonial authorities’ sluggishness in implementing reforms could easily be used by political agitators for attack. Inspired by socialist, anticolonial, and even communist ideas, dynamic and radical nationalists who based their political strength on disaffected labor and student movements also introduced a confrontational style of politics into places such as Singapore, making life difficult for the colonialists. Yet official attempts at institutional experimentation only expanded the boundaries of competitive action between the colonial power and the colonized. Ushering in popularly elected majorities in colonial legislatures gave local politicians additional public space in which to question Britain’s sincerity in adhering to its stock definition of colonial policy.

As will be seen, political developments in Singapore throughout the 1950s would conform to such patterns. Ironically, then, policies that were meant to defend Britain’s empire actually helped to weaken it. The part played by Washington in this development should not be underestimated. Such was the impact, whether direct or indirect, of U.S. actions on the colonial question. They ensured that post-war politics in Singapore would not return to the prewar status quo.
As the British returned after the war to implement their Malayan Union scheme, Washington initially concentrated on concerns elsewhere. The United States, in fact, paid relatively little attention to Malaya from 1945 to 1948. This situation would change as U.S.-Soviet relations became frostier. The recovery of the ailing British and Japanese economies would bring into sharp focus Malaya's importance to the so-called free world and the latter's contest with the communist bloc for power and influence in the international system.

By 1949, the economies of Britain and Japan were reeling under severe inflationary pressures. If both nations failed to recover economically, their abilities to advance U.S. containment plans in Europe and Asia could be seriously thwarted. American policymakers believed Malaya and Southeast Asia as a whole could solve Britain's and Japan's economic problems. Malaya's rubber and tin exports contributed to Britain's dollar pool, and Japan could also strengthen its economy by trading its manufactures for the subregion's raw materials. Because of its economic value, Southeast Asia could not be permitted to fall under communist control.

In line with such thinking, Washington reversed its noninterventionist policy toward Malaya and Singapore. This shift was vividly reflected in the policy positions progressively adopted by the U.S. government between 1945 and 1949. Since June 1945, the State Department had embraced “a policy of noninterference in any British possession.” But by March 1949, U.S. strategists determined that Washington should “support British authority in Malaya” and thwart any communist attempt to subvert the territory. If any doubts remained over whether Washington should deepen its involvement in Southeast Asia, the end of the U.S. atomic monopoly in 1949, Mao Zedong's victory in China, and the increasingly vocal congressional indictments of Truman's Asian policy removed them. Even as the Sino-Soviet powers appeared to be progressing from strength to strength, the United States seemed to be losing ground to the communists in Asia. Such perceived developments generated concerns among U.S. policymakers due to the threat the communists posed to U.S. security. They also furnished Republicans with political ammunition to attack the Democratic administration for losing Asia to communism.

The Truman government accordingly reviewed its Asian policy in December 1949 and adopted NSC 48/2, which called for the “gradual reduction and eventual elimination of the preponderant power and influence of the USSR in Asia to such a degree that the Soviet Union will not be capable of threatening from that area the security of the United States or its friends and that the Soviet Union would encounter serious obstacles should it attempt to threaten the peace, national independence and stability of the Asiatic nations.” To those ends, the stabilization of economic and sociopolitical conditions in Asia was vital. Several U.S. fact-finding and technical assistance teams were dispatched to Southeast Asia to advance that
effort. They were sent to assess the political stability of a particular state or territory, evaluate the feasibility of implementing technical assistance programs to buttress anticommunist forces, and explore the possibility of increased trade ties between Southeast Asia, Europe, and Japan. Led by prominent individuals such as Ambassador-at-Large Philip Jessup and the Economic Cooperation Administration’s Robert Griffin, the excursions signaled the U.S. intent to safeguard Southeast Asia from communist domination.34

The Jessup mission toured Malaya and Singapore between 4 and 7 February 1950, and the Griffin delegation visited the territories between 16 and 23 March. Both parties held discussions with Britain’s commissioner general in Southeast Asia, Malcolm MacDonald. Jessup’s group found MacDonald receptive to proposals that Anglo-American dialogue on Southeast Asian issues be enhanced and that more effort be put into strengthening Japanese-Malayan trade relations. After touring Malaya, Griffin’s mission relayed to Washington a recommendation that US$4.5 million in aid be granted the British to help them fight an armed communist insurgency that had been raging in Malaya since June 1948.35

Policymakers in Washington found the British reaction to Jessup’s initiatives encouraging, yet they were hesitant about releasing funds to Britain. U.S. officials had received word that London, unlike its representatives in Singapore, was cautious about accepting American grants. The Truman administration was also reconsidereing aiding the British, since it believed the communist insurgency in Malaya was being pacified. To determine whether the aid should be released, a third delegation, led by Assistant Secretary of State John Melby and Major General Graves Erskine of the Marines, was dispatched to Southeast Asia.36

The Melby-Erskine mission arrived in Singapore in August 1950. Following extensive discussions with British officials, the team advised that Washington should release the assistance. Without American help, the delegation argued, Britain’s dollar shortage might worsen, especially if Britain had to expend its dollar earnings from commodity exports to fight an attrition war in Malaya. American aid would also persuade “wavering elements” in Malaya that the Anglo-American powers were intent on helping them prevail against communism.37 Overall, the Melby-Erskine delegation maintained that if the British position in Malaya collapsed because of insufficient U.S. assistance, communist expansion into the entire Malayan peninsula might result.38

Despite the best efforts of the Jessup, Griffin, and Melby-Erskine missions, almost all of their financial recommendations were disapproved. With the Malayan insurgency ostensibly under control, Washington concluded that the disbursement of large-scale assistance was unnecessary. Only “road construction equipment” valued at US$400,000 was allocated for Malaya. Still, the Truman government did make available to the British a reimbursable US$6 million loan. But this money also did not change hands. Congress, which had made the approval of U.S.
aid contingent upon the extent to which its allies conformed to American export control policy, intervened. Once members of Congress learned that Malayan rubber was being exported to the communist bloc, the loan proposal fell through.39

The U.S. missions nevertheless helped develop new avenues for cooperation among the Western powers. In February 1950 before a gathering of diplomats in Bangkok, Jessup announced that Anglo-American “joint discussions” would be convened to address regional security challenges.40 With France’s inclusion as a dialogue partner, a trilateral meeting was convened in London in May 1950 to coordinate an anticommunist strategy in Southeast Asia. Between 20 and 24 July 1950, U.S. and British officials also met separately in Washington for discussions on Asian security.41

The Korean conflict, however, proved pivotal in addressing the U.S. concern for its allies’ economic well-being. War-related U.S. purchases of Malaya’s commodities caused rubber prices to soar from M$0.50 to M$2.375 between 1950 and 1951, benefiting Malaya’s rubber industry, augmenting Britain’s dollar reserves, and enriching Singapore, which handled more than 70 percent of the trade. U.S. demand for tin also increased. By 1951, Malaya had registered a large and growing export surplus of US$1.1 billion, making it a significant contributor to Britain’s dollar reserves.42 The war incidentally also helped advance Japanese-Malayan economic relations. When China intervened in Korea in October 1950, Japan stopped trading with China and turned to Southeast Asia for raw materials and markets, and Japanese-Malayan trade rose sharply as a result. Japan also registered impressive trade surpluses with Singapore, rising from US$29 million in 1949 to US$105 million in 1952.43

If Singapore’s economic significance was underscored by its contribution to the economic recovery of Britain and Japan, its strategic importance would be underlined by U.S. analysts’ assessment of the island’s place in Washington’s overall anticommunist policy. In October 1950, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) determined that the island’s loss to communism might “close the Straits of Malacca” to allied shipping, which would hamper American naval deployments between the Western Pacific and the Near East. Since “Singapore [was] the only major naval operating base between Capetown and Sydney or Yokosuka . . . its loss would compel withdrawal of naval forces in the region of Southeast Asia to less desirable peripheral bases at Subic, Surabaya, and/or Trincomalee.” Additionally, if “the most important naval base in the Far East” fell to communism, this “would increase the operational capabilities of the Soviet Navy, particularly its submarine fleet,” and seriously impede the American ability to challenge Soviet forces in a global conflict.44

As the National Security Council (NSC) reviewed its Southeast Asian policy in June 1952, the U.S. commitment to preventing Malaya and Singapore from falling under communist control became notably more pronounced. NSC 124/2 maintained that if “Chinese Communist aggression” threatened the territories,
Washington should “assist in the defense of Malaya as appropriate, as part of a UN collective action or in conjunction with the United Kingdom and any other friendly governments.” Significantly, Australian, New Zealander, and American planners at the Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (ANZUS) Council meeting in November 1952 also proposed that if China initiated war, the three powers would repel the attack militarily, making “an all-out, last-ditch defense” of Malaya once Chinese forces crossed “the Hanoi Perimeter.” Yet for American strategists, the loss of the Malayan area (and Southeast Asia) to communism, though significant in itself, had greater ramifications. As NSC 124/2 maintained, that outcome “would seriously endanger in the short term, and critically endanger in the longer term, United States security interests.” An American failure to resist the communists might lead “fence sitters” in Asia and the Middle East to find it worthwhile to align themselves with communism. Cut off from those regions’ resources and strategic ports, Western Europe, Japan, and ultimately the United States would find their “stability and security” jeopardized. The communist advance into Southeast Asia thus had to be opposed.45

By 1952, then, the United States was intent on impeding communist expansion into Southeast Asia. Yet however plausible the scenarios that Washington posited were, it is interesting to note that the American assumption of a Soviet threat to Malaya was not placed under closer scrutiny. A concerted endeavor to infiltrate the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), perhaps using local proxies, might have revealed the organization’s dire financial condition and disabused U.S. policymakers of their ideas about its Soviet connections. As the MCP’s secretary-general, Chin Peng, wryly noted: “Despite all the negative attention the Establishment was heaping on us, including the propaganda line that we were being lavishly financed from Moscow, the truth was that the Central Committee was by now [in early 1948] in serious financial difficulties.” To finance the party’s activities, Chin had to rent out his house and extract financial contributions from acquaintances. Chin further stated that the MCP was “never aided financially by the USSR; neither did Moscow ever order us which path to take.”46 Nor did the Chinese exert undue formal influence at that time: “Medical aid for our TB [tuberculosis] patients was all we got from China until 1961,” when Beijing eventually provided funds. Even so, it would be presumptuous to suggest the presence of a monolithic communist movement operating in Asia.47

If U.S. officials had exaggerated Moscow’s and Beijing’s complicity in Malaya’s troubles, they were not alone in entertaining those overblown concerns. Initially, British officials were skeptical of a communist plot to take over Malaya. But under pressure to repair their credibility with European businesses and local politicians (the British had essentially been caught unawares by the outbreak of violence), they blamed the tumult on Moscow. British representatives in Malaya and Singapore also conveyed that message to U.S. officials in three separate meetings between June
and July 1948. The three U.S. delegations that visited Singapore in 1950 were given similar impressions. It is hardly surprising, then, that American officials would fixate on the Sino-Soviet threat to the territory. It follows that scholars indicting U.S. policymakers for their erroneous perceptions may have to apportion some of the blame to the British for contributing to that misperception.

It remained to be seen whether Truman’s successor would question those perceptions. Significantly, as the NSC approved NSC 124/2, Republican presidential candidate Dwight Eisenhower—in his missive to the Republican foreign policy spokesperson, John Foster Dulles—was echoing the essence of the policy directions charted by the Truman administration. To Eisenhower, the security of the United States and that of its allies were intertwined. It was also important that the strategic resources and foreign markets that underpinned the American economy should continue to be accessible to Americans. Above all, Eisenhower recognized his country needed to be engaged in world affairs: “Any thought of ‘retiring within our own borders’ will certainly lead to disaster for the U.S.A.” For Eisenhower, who went on to win the November 1952 presidential election, there would be no American retreat from the troubles of Southeast Asia and Singapore.