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PETER J. BECK

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THE LESSONS OF ABADAN AND SUEZ FOR BRITISH FOREIGN POLICYMAKERS IN THE 1960s*

PETER J. BECK
Kingston University

ABSTRACT. *Responding positively to the 1957 ‘funding experience’ initiative encouraging Whitehall departments to use history more systematically in their everyday work, the Foreign Office commissioned a pilot project centred upon the 1951 Anglo-Iranian Abadan crisis. The resulting study, completed by Rohan Butler in 1962, included a lengthy section drawing lessons from the historical narrative. During the early 1960s Butler’s Abadan history, attracting interest and comment from both ministers and officials, fed into ongoing reviews of British foreign policy and methods stimulated by the 1956 Suez debacle and Britain’s initial failure to join the Common Market (1963). Confronting policymakers with the contemporary realities affecting Britain’s role in the world, the history prompted serious thinking about the case for a radical change of direction in both foreign policy and methods. Generally speaking, the Foreign Office has made little use of history in the actual policymaking process. From this perspective, this episode, centred upon Butler’s Abadan history, offers a useful case study illuminating any appraisal of history’s potential as a policy input, most notably concerning the role of historical analogies in the formulation, conduct, and presentation of British foreign policy.*

At 12.32 hours on 3 October 1951 the cruiser *HMS Mauritius* cast off from Abadan for Basra.¹ The ship’s band was playing – reportedly, the ‘Colonel Bogey’ march was prominent in its repertoire – but the occasion was far from joyful. Sailing along the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, the warship passed the vast Abadan oil refinery, formerly the property of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), but nationalized in May 1951 by the Iranian government headed by Mohammad Mossadegh.² Subsequently, escalating tension, punctuated by abortive diplomatic

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Kingston University, Penrhyn Road, Kingston upon Thames, KT1 2EE
P.Beck@kingston.ac.uk*

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¹ *HMS Mauritius* log, 3 Oct. 1951, National Archives, Kew (NA), ADM53/130664; *Times*, 4 Oct. 1951; Norman Kemp, *Abadan: a first-hand account of the Persian oil crisis* (London, 1953), pp. 239–50; James Cable, *Intervention at Abadan: plan buccaneer* (Basingstoke, 1991), p. 100.

² The text uses ‘Iran’, as adopted in 1935, but retains ‘Persia’ when part of quotations.

initiatives, culminated in the refinery's closure and eventual British evacuation on 3 October, when *HMS Mauritius* was used to withdraw some 280 members of the AIOC's British staff still remaining in the country.

Terminating Britain's involvement in Iran's oil industry dating back to the 1901 D'Arcy concession, evacuation was represented by *The Times* as 'a humiliating defeat' for a country still regarding itself as a major world power: 'The British have been forced out of Persia because the Persian Government was resolved to force them out and because the British Government were not ... resolved to stay.'³ For *The Daily Telegraph*, 'From today, the word Abadan passes as a common noun into the vocabulary of national humiliation.'⁴ The impact of media representations of British withdrawal without a fight in the face of Iran's escalating nationalist demands was accentuated by the loss of what was presented as Britain's biggest single overseas investment owned by a company with a majority government shareholding. Unsurprisingly, the episode prompted press references to the edging-out process begun in India a few years earlier as well as expressions of concern about Britain's uncertain future. For Norman Kemp, who reported events from Abadan in 1951, 'to other small countries where dissentient opinion preached against the British, the shattering triumph of the weak Iranian nation was a textbook example'.⁵

Within Britain, the fact that withdrawal coincided with both the closing days of the Labour party conference at Scarborough and the opening skirmishes of the October 1951 General Election campaign imparted an added political edge to domestic debates. Launching the Conservative party's campaign at Liverpool on 2 October, Winston Churchill accused Clement Attlee, the prime minister (1945–51), of breaking his word about safeguarding the British presence in Abadan.⁶ On the next day, Herbert Morrison, the foreign secretary, used his Scarborough conference speech to mount a vigorous defence of the Labour government's policy in a manner reviving longstanding controversies about warmongering and appeasement, as epitomized during succeeding weeks by the *Daily Mirror*'s infamous 'Whose finger on the trigger?' front-page headline and the frequent mention of 'Munich' as a historical reference point.⁷

I

In an editorial, published on 5 October 1951, *The Times* used Britain's withdrawal from Abadan to draw attention to serious 'Faults in diplomacy' in an editorial given enhanced historical significance by the 1956 Suez crisis:

An opportunity of learning from mistakes rarely presents itself on this scale ... It is not a failure that Britain can afford to repeat ... The cumulative evidence of failure is so great

³ *Times*, 3 Oct. 1951.

⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Oct. 1951.

⁵ Kemp, *Abadan*, p. 238.

⁶ *Times*, 3 Oct. 1951.

⁷ *Times*, 4, 9, 20 Oct. 1951; *Daily Mirror*, 9, 24, 25 Oct. 1951; 'Middle East Munich', *Economist*, 6 Oct. 1951, pp. 779–80.

that an urgent case clearly arises for the relevant documents on the dispute to be given to the country in the fullest possible form ... It is not for the sake of finding scapegoats that these matters need to be made clear; the lessons of a muddle have to be learned so what happened in Persia will not be allowed to happen – as it could easily happen – elsewhere.⁸

However, as John Dickie, an experienced diplomatic correspondent, has acknowledged, generally speaking the Foreign Office has adopted an ‘ostrich posture’ towards learning lessons from past mistakes: ‘Diplomatic post-mortem examinations of policy are rare inside the Foreign Office ... It is unusual for the policy-making process to be reviewed after a major event.’⁹ Dickie’s assertion was confirmed by Zara Steiner, who concluded that the Foreign Office has made ‘only limited use’ of history in actually making policy.¹⁰ Preoccupied with today’s world and the immediate future, ministers and officials have always found it difficult to draw history into the policymaking process. Nor are things any different across the Atlantic. Drawing upon their experience of teaching a course at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government to policymakers ‘about how to *use* experience, whether remote or recent, in the process of deciding what to do today about the prospect for tomorrow’, Ernest May and Richard Neustadt identified the key problem: ‘They’re too busy. Can’t read what they get now. They’ll glance at papers in the limousine, thumb them while someone is talking, or just wing it. If you do get their attention, you can’t keep it. They will have to catch a plane or go to a press conference.’¹¹

In any case, policymakers rarely know exactly what they expect of history. Clearly, the last thing required in a crisis situation is a lengthy history however well researched and authoritative. Nor, given their penchant for drawing analogies between past and present, do policymakers want to be told that this practice is fundamentally unhistorical. What they really want is to be given an appropriate historical quote or example to employ for rhetorical effect in a forthcoming speech or to have complex matters concerning, say, background, context, or analogues, simply and clearly explained, but – to quote Steiner – ‘without the qualifications that are almost the hallmark of our profession’.¹² Analogies, enabling the current situation to be presented straightforwardly in shorthand form as like some previous occasion, have proved attractive for this very reason. But, like statistics, analogies can be, and are, used and abused. Just as what seems an appropriate precedent may be squeezed to fit the situation in order to put a familiar face on something strange, so ‘bothersome analogues’ might be conveniently dodged.¹³ Nor might account be taken of the fact that current circumstances may no longer be conducive to an analogue’s application.

⁸ *Times*, 5 Oct. 1951. ⁹ John Dickie, *Inside the Foreign Office* (London, 1992), pp. 236–7.

¹⁰ Zara Steiner, ‘The historian and the foreign office’, in C. Hill and P. Beshoff, eds., *Two worlds of international relations: academic practitioners and the trade in ideas* (London, 1994), p. 50.

¹¹ Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in time: the uses of history for decision makers* (New York, 1986), p. xxii, p. 4.

¹² Steiner, ‘The historian’, p. 46.

¹³ Neustadt and May, *Thinking in time*, p. 79.

Within this context, the historian's task is to encourage policymakers to use history better, and especially to foster the application of historical analogies in a manner designed to assist, not mislead, decision-makers. Detached from day-to-day official responsibilities, historians are also well equipped, it is argued, to challenge traditional mindsets by prompting thinking about alternative ways forward within and outside the box. In particular, they can teach policymakers to place actors and complex events in the continuum of time, since 'an understanding of the past helps with the placing of the present situation and casts light on probable outcomes'.¹⁴ For John Lewis Gaddis, policymakers can only benefit from the way in which history enables them to look backwards when going forwards into an uncertain future.

History can serve something of the function a rear-view mirror does in an automobile. One would not want to drive down the road with eyes glued to the mirror because sooner or later one would wind up in the ditch. But the mirror is useful in determining where one has been; it is even more helpful in revealing who, or what, is coming up from behind, a consideration of some importance in what is still a competitive international environment.¹⁵

In a fast-moving and often dangerous world, Gaddis's 'rear-view mirror' example epitomizes history's ability to expand the immediate experience of policymakers, particularly by making them aware of long-term patterns like the ever-changing power balance, the risks of over-commitment or the intimate correlation between power and economic performance. It recalls also an assertion attributed to Mark Twain to the effect that 'History doesn't repeat itself; at best it rhymes.'

II

Images of the Abadan crisis remain influential in present-day Iran, where 'Oil Nationalization Day' is still celebrated. By contrast, in Britain this earlier dispute has been pushed to the margins of people's memories and histories, if not completely obscured, by the 1956 Suez crisis. Then, the British resort to force, resulting in part from Anthony Eden's portrayal of President Nasser as another dangerous and unappeasable dictator in the Hitler mould, failed to reverse Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, let alone achieve the projected regime change. Certainly, the resulting crisis, presented frequently as a seminal moment in Britain's history, proved – to quote Kipling's phrase, as used by one of Eden's ministers for the title of his memoirs – 'no end of a lesson'.¹⁶ For John Young, events revealed 'Britain's lack of economic strength and reliance on the US': 'What Suez did show was Britain's inability to wield large-scale military

¹⁴ Steiner, 'The historian', p. 45; Zara Steiner, 'On writing international history: chaps, maps and much more', *International Affairs*, 73 (1997), pp. 531–46, at p. 538.

¹⁵ J. L. Gaddis, 'New conceptual approaches to the study of American foreign relations: interdisciplinary perspectives', *Diplomatic History*, 14 (1990), pp. 405–23, at p. 423.

¹⁶ Anthony Nutting, *No end of a lesson: the story of Suez* (London, 1967), pp. 7–16.

power, even in cooperation with its ally of 1914 and 1939, France.¹⁷ Perhaps Suez's actual impact has been over-stated, but its perceived lessons fuelled declinist narratives about Britain. Moreover, like 'appeasement' and 'Munich', 'Suez' became an enduring part of contemporary British political vocabulary, as evidenced by the way in which such terms helped frame the bitter controversies surrounding British policy towards the 2003 Iraq war. For example, Robin Cook, who resigned as leader of the House of Commons in March 2003 in protest at British policy, frequently urged Tony Blair, the prime minister, to worry about parallels with Suez.¹⁸ Indeed, following one exchange, he parted by warning, 'All I ask is that every morning you remember what happened to Anthony Eden.'

By contrast, 'Abadan' strikes no real political chord in Britain today. Even worse, the 1951 Abadan crisis, like the British relationship with Iran, is normally glossed over in histories and international relations texts, excepting several publications by William Roger Louis and a spate of recent studies prompted in part by the release of files previously subject to extended closure.¹⁹ Why should we study the Abadan crisis? In particular, why does it rate a stop en route from Munich to Suez? Following Goldsworthy, did the Abadan crisis pre-empt the Suez dispute in bringing together the mounting pressures upon British power, even serving as a kind of dress rehearsal for 1956?²⁰ As outlined above, the dispute came to a head in 1951, when Iran's nationalization of the oil industry culminated in British evacuation of Abadan and the eventual rupture of Anglo-Iranian diplomatic relations (October 1952). In August 1953 Mossadegh's fall from power, arising from a covert Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and MI6 operation

¹⁷ John Young, *Britain and the world in the twentieth century* (London, 1997), pp. 166–7.

¹⁸ Robin Cook, *The point of departure* (London, 2003), pp. 203, 224; Robert Fisk, 'New crisis, old lessons', *Independent*, 15 Jan. 2003; Robin Cook, 'The invasion of Iraq was Britain's worst foreign policy blunder since Suez', *Independent*, 19 Mar. 2004.

¹⁹ J. H. Bamberg, *The history of the British Petroleum Company*, II: *The Anglo-Iranian years, 1928–1954* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 383–511; Wm. Roger Louis, 'Mussaddiq and the dilemmas of British imperialism', in J. A. Bill and Wm. R. Louis, eds., *Mussaddiq, Iranian nationalism, and oil* (London, 1988), pp. 228–60; Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945–1951: Arab nationalism, the United States and postwar imperialism* (Oxford, 1984); Wm. Roger Louis, 'Britain and the overthrow of the Mosaddeq government', in Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 coup in Iran* (Syracuse, 2004), pp. 126–77; Steve Marsh, 'HMG, AIOC and the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis: in defence of Anglo-Iranian', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 12 (2001), pp. 143–74; Steve Marsh, *Anglo-American relations and Cold War oil: crisis in Iran* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 169–94; Sue Onslow, '"Battlelines for Suez": the Abadan crisis of 1951 and the formation of the Suez Group', *Contemporary British History*, 17 (2003), pp. 1–28; Ian Speller, '"A splutter of musketry?": the British military response to the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute, 1951', *Contemporary British History*, 17 (2003), pp. 39–66; Amy L. S. Staples, 'Seeing diplomacy through bankers' eyes: the World Bank, the Anglo-Iranian oil crisis, and the Aswan High Dam', *Diplomatic History*, 26 (2002), pp. 397–418; 'Document: a very British coup', *BBC Radio Four*, 22 Aug. 2005; Donald N. Wilber, *Clandestine service history: overthrow of premier Mossadegh of Iran, November 1952–August 1953* (Washington DC, Mar. 1954); <http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/041600iran-cia-index.html> accessed 24 Apr. 2004.

²⁰ D. Goldsworthy, 'Keeping change within bounds: aspects of colonial policy during the Churchill and Eden governments, 1951–1957', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 18 (1990), pp. 81–108, at p. 103.

ushering in the dictatorship of Mohammad Reza Shah, prepared the way for the resumption of diplomatic relations (December 1953) and the Anglo-Iranian settlement secured in August 1954. Iran's oil industry remained nationalized, but henceforth effective control was exercised by an international consortium, including five American companies, but leaving the AIOC (renamed the British Petroleum Company Ltd in 1954) as the largest single stakeholder.

For historians, the resulting crisis yields revealing insights into a wide range of issues: post-1945 British policy and power, including Britain's retreat from global commitments; the problematic Anglo-Iranian relationship; the evolving Anglo-American relationship; the clandestine activities of the CIA and MI6; the emerging challenge of nationalism; the strategic role of oil diplomacy; the growing frailties of the British economy; the interface between big business and government; the World Bank's attempt to act as 'a global corporatist manager of international economic relations' offering an alternative approach to international diplomacy; the contrasting foreign policy priorities of British political parties and government departments; the BBC's role in British government propaganda; and the outcome of the October 1951 general election, as Clement Attlee's Labour administration gave way in the midst of the Abadan crisis to Winston Churchill's Conservative government.²¹ More importantly for this article, the dispute proved the subject of an experimental Foreign Office history designed less to record what happened but rather to investigate and test the value of history as an input to the policymaking process. As such, the resulting study offers useful insights informing any appraisal of the case for and against the systematic use of history in the everyday work of British government.

III

The resulting Abadan history was not so much a Foreign Office initiative as a response to a broader Whitehall proposal designed to improve departmental memories and the efficiency of the governmental machine. As the Second World War Civil Series official histories project drew to a close in 1957, Sir Norman Brook, the cabinet secretary and head of the Home Civil Service, sounded out departments whether this 'very successful experiment' held 'any practical lessons for the future'.²² Fearing that the series would 'founder on the rocks of political controversy', Brook ruled out publishing peacetime official histories, but hoped to retain the fundamental principle underlying the official histories, that is to 'fund experience for government use' as 'an aid to current administration'. For Brook, histories offering a 'consecutive narrative' over time for 'particular episodes of policy or administration which have been of particular significance in a department's work' promised to provide a departmental memory as well as a welcome

²¹ Staples, 'Seeing diplomacy through bankers' eyes', p. 397.

²² Brook to heads of departments, 5 Dec. 1957, NA, CAB103/562.

sense of historical perspective for current issues. They would also fill an existing gap:

It is a feature of our administrative system that we make many forecasts but few retrospects. More post-mortems would be salutary – not, of course, for the purpose of attributing praise or blame but of analysing how forecasts and judgments originally made have stood the test of time.

Brook acknowledged departmental concerns about costs and staffing, but anticipated that in the long term the resulting simplification and speeding up of policymaking through using history would save time and money!

Nor were Brook's proposals for the functional use of history mere theoretical speculation. As joint permanent secretary to the Treasury, he had followed closely its pilot 'funding experience' projects conducted by Margaret Gowing, whose editorial responsibilities for the wartime official histories had largely disappeared.²³ Encouraged by its 'satisfactory' results, Brook suggested the project's formalization and extension through Whitehall.²⁴ In the event, his proposal evoked a somewhat mixed, frequently unenthusiastic, response. Unsurprisingly, the most supportive reply came from Brook's own department, the Treasury, where Gowing's initial work provided the foundation for the eventual creation of the Treasury Historical Section.²⁵

Otherwise, one of the more positive initial reactions emanated from the Foreign Office, where Brook's initiative was taken up by its Steering Committee in April 1958.²⁶ Chaired by Sir Frederick Hoyer Millar, the Permanent Under Secretary of State (PUS), the committee noted that, quite apart from an active historical publications programme centred upon the *Documents on British Foreign Policy (DBFP)*, the department undertook already a limited amount of historical work codifying standard administrative procedures appertaining to, say, the presentation of an ambassador's letters of credence, the rupture of diplomatic relations, or the evacuation of British nationals. Even so, members favoured doing more on policy-related topics along the lines suggested by Robin Hooper's background paper, especially as diplomatic staff were mobile and official memories short: 'Looking back can be a salutary exercise. If we could spare the time or the staff we should probably derive great benefit from examining in retrospect the accuracy of the information on which policy was based and the correctness of the conclusions drawn from it.'²⁷ As Hooper pointed out, 'there may be issues ... when past experience can be a useful guide to recurrent problems. For example, the Persian oil crisis was a major trouble which may one

²³ Gowing to Sir I. Bancroft, 7 June 1978, correspondence files, Bancroft 2, papers of Margaret Gowing, Museum of History of Science, Oxford.

²⁴ Brook to Professor W. K. Hancock, 19 Feb. 1958, NA, CAB103/562.

²⁵ On the Treasury's use of history, see my forthcoming monograph *Using history, making British policy: the Treasury and the Foreign Office, 1950–1976* (Basingstoke, 2006).

²⁶ Minutes, 8th meeting, Steering Committee (SC), 1 Apr. 1958, NA, FO371/135611/ZP2/12G.

²⁷ R. Hooper, head of PUS's dept, n.d., SC(58) 20, NA, FO371/135611/ZP2/15G.

day be followed by others sufficiently similar to make its history relevant to their handling'. The committee's support of the case for following up Brook's proposal led Hoyer Millar to commission Rohan Butler, the *DBFP*'s senior editor, to undertake a historical 'pilot project'.

Following a review, led by Cecil Parrott, the Director of Research and Librarian, of subjects upon which 'historical accounts might be useful in the future', a shortlist – the seven topics included the 1950–3 Korean war, the 1951 Abadan crisis, and the 1954 Geneva conference on Indochina – was placed before the Steering Committee in February 1959.²⁸ Looking back, the 1956 Suez affair seems a notable omission, but this was hardly surprising, given its continued high sensitivity in both political and official circles.²⁹ In the event, the Abadan crisis, described as involving 'a complex concentration and critical balance of factors, political, economic, juridical and military', was selected by the committee as promising to yield 'a particularly instructive case history'.³⁰ Significantly, this topic, highlighted in Hooper's background paper in 1958, was favoured also by Butler himself because it promised to be 'important, revealing and not too dispersed from point of view of treatment'.³¹ The fact that the Steering Committee devoted a large proportion of its time during 1958 to redefining British policy towards the Middle East reinforced the case for selecting Abadan, especially as Selwyn Lloyd, the foreign secretary, devoted close attention to the policy statement's coverage of Iran.³²

IV

In March 1962 Butler completed what had proved a challenging, often difficult, research study entitled 'British policy in the relinquishment of Abadan in 1951'.³³ The time taken to complete the project, though partly explained by its size, reflected also the fact that Butler, a fellow of All Souls (1938–84) and sub-warden between 1961 and 1963, worked only part time for the Foreign Office. The history, totalling 324 pages, was rather long, but Butler argued that a more concise approach would have reduced its utility by oversimplifying and distorting complex issues relating to, say, the evaluation of alternative policy options and decision-making.³⁴ Nevertheless, an awareness of the pressures upon busy policymakers led Butler to signpost key points through headers as well as to codify the lessons in a sixteen-page concluding section cross-referenced to the text.

Rejecting the use of interviews with participants in events because of time pressures, Butler's research relied heavily upon Foreign Office records

²⁸ SC (59) 7, 12 Feb. 1959, NA, FO371/143694/ZP15/2.

²⁹ Butler, 15 Feb. 1963, p. 2, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

³⁰ R. W. Mason, 23 Nov. 1962, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3; Butler, Sept. 1962, p. 2, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

³¹ SC (59) 7, 12 Feb. 1959, NA, FO371/143694/ZP15/2.

³² Selwyn Lloyd to Hoyer Millar, 3 Nov. 1958, NA, FO371/135615/ZP2/40G.

³³ Butler, Sept. 1962, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

supplemented by limited Cabinet Office files and *Hansard*.³⁵ Even so, and contrary to his initial expectations, some relevant departmental documentation was withheld, prompting him ‘as a matter of historical principle, to disclaim in advance all responsibility for all errors or omissions of fact or inference due to this cause’.³⁶ The fact that his history glossed over intelligence issues, most notably excluding any meaningful mention of the 1953 coup, indicates that intelligence files came into this category. Nor was he allowed access to the records of other departments, most notably the Treasury and the Ministry of Fuel and Power, prominent in the Abadan crisis. Naturally, the archives of the AIOC, like those belonging to the American, Iranian, and other governments, were also closed to him.

Despite claiming to approach the topic like any other academic historian, Butler acknowledged his functional role in giving practical effect to Brook’s ‘expressed intentions’.³⁷ Recalling the assertion made by Sir Llewellyn Woodward, the former senior editor of the *DBFP*, that ‘while history does not repeat itself, historical situations do recur’, Butler urged caution when using his history, since hindsight rendered it easy to appear wise after the event.³⁸ Account had also to be taken of an ever-changing international context:

To attempt to reduce this to too rigid an exercise would, I fear, be unduly mechanistic and unrealistic in view of the complexity of ever-shifting diplomatic problems, of their particularly high political content by comparison with the work of most other Government departments, and of the tiresome fact that diplomacy deals with foreigners not subject to the authority of the Secretary of State.³⁹

Butler’s lessons were numerous and often overlapped, but his principal ‘political’ and ‘administrative’ conclusions can be categorized under six principal headers. First, the Abadan crisis revealed Britain’s relative weakness in power, most notably its declining capacity for independent action and growing dependence upon the USA.

One is left with the impression that if a mark of the greatest among great Powers be the capacity to influence the government of smaller Powers by its extreme displeasure then, in relation to Persia, that greatest Power, over against Russia, was now the United States and no longer Great Britain as in the days of her recently relinquished Indian Empire.⁴⁰

Iranian intransigence meant that ‘probably, as came to be recognised in the Foreign Office, only British military force could at the last, have prevented the abandonment of Abadan’.⁴¹ But the military option was repeatedly rejected.⁴² Throughout a fundamental lack of power in the region was paramount, but for

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3. Butler exhibited a somewhat conservative attitude towards sources, but during the early 1960s oral testimony represented an emerging form of historical evidence still being rediscovered by historians: Butler, 18 Oct. 1966, FO370/2906/LS13; Paul Thompson, *The voice of the past: oral history* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1988), pp. 72–81.

³⁶ Butler, Sept. 1962, p. 3, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

⁴² See Speller, ‘“Splutter of musketry?”’, pp. 60–2; Cable, *Intervention at Abadan*, pp. 95–123.

Attlee perceived American opposition to the use of force reinforced the case for restraint. Certainly, the 'effective lack of American support for British policy ... underlay the whole development of the crisis in 1951 and facilitated the Persian game of playing Great Britain off against the United States'.⁴³ The Korean war, reinforcing Washington's tendency to view Iran primarily as a potential Cold War ally, ensured that the British government was 'more immediately influenced by pressure from the American government' to appease, not oppose, Iran.⁴⁴

Secondly, the failure to use force, compounded by the evacuation of Abadan, undermined images of British power and prestige in general and in the Middle East in particular. Quoting from Eden's recently published memoirs to the effect that 'the troubles fomented on the Shatt al Arab, festered on the Nile', Butler concluded that 'The gravest and most prompt repercussion of the British eviction from Abadan occurred in Egypt with special significance for the British position on the Suez Canal.'⁴⁵ Within days of leaving Abadan, the British government was confronted by Egypt's denunciation of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty as well as serious unrest in the canal zone.⁴⁶ Thirdly, despite rejecting force, policymakers failed nonetheless either to adjust to Britain's 'changed circumstances' or to exploit its vital role in the Cold War:

It may be that in 1950–51 the background of British power and prestige (e.g. Second World War, Indian Empire) was too close to permit a full adjustment to changed circumstances wherein Great Britain might need to reinforce her position of strength in relation to lesser Powers such as Persia by exploiting the techniques of bargaining from weakness with greater Powers such as the United States. Hence, perhaps, the impression sometimes that British policy regarding Persia was at once too rigid and too weak.⁴⁷

From this perspective, Washington's Cold War preoccupations should have been used as leverage to ensure that American pressure was exerted upon Iran, not Britain, to do the appeasing.

Fourthly, these problems reflected the shortcomings of policymakers, most notably in failing to decide upon a feasible and effective strategy. Far from adopting a strong proactive course, British policymakers allowed the Iranian government to set the agenda so that 'British policy often seemed to be waiting upon, or catching up with, Persian propulsion of events.'⁴⁸ The 'precarious' situation confronting the Attlee government in September 1951, when only the 'extreme alternatives' of withdrawal from Abadan or the eviction of Mossadegh remained, highlighted the 'bankruptcy' of British policy, even if Butler accepted that normally it was preferable to make no agreement than to make a bad one.⁴⁹ For Butler, drift proved a function of the Labour government's

⁴³ Butler, Sept. 1962, p. 318, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 309. ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 291, 307; Anthony Eden, *The memoirs of Sir Anthony Eden: full circle* (London, 1960), p. 195; Michael T. Thornhill, 'Britain and the Egyptian question, 1950–1952' (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1995), pp. 39–41, p. 136.

⁴⁶ *Times*, 9 Oct. 1951.

⁴⁷ Butler, Sept. 1962, p. 309, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

small parliamentary majority; the lengthy illness of Ernest Bevin, the foreign secretary (1945–51); the inadequacies of his successor, Herbert Morrison; the contrasting perspectives adopted by the Treasury, Ministry of Fuel and Power, and the Foreign Office; and the lack of support from Washington. Even worse, the British government showed itself incapable of responding effectively to the nationalist challenge emerging in Iran, let alone dealing with political leaders like Mossadegh, ‘a demagogic xenophobe and fanatical eccentric’ skilled at both mobilizing popular support and playing upon the USA’s Cold War fears.⁵⁰

Fifthly, the British failure to consider *in advance* a range of alternative strategies in the event of the AIOC’s nationalization exposed a range of methodological shortcomings, most notably a fundamental lack of intelligence, research, forward thinking, and contingency planning. For Butler, the Teheran embassy’s lack of reliable local contacts, fragmentary grasp of the Iranian nationalist movement, and difficult relationship with its American counterpart meant that policymakers were handicapped by an inadequate information base upon which to make decisions. This failing was compounded during the actual crisis when ‘action under pressure’ and ‘the endless rustle of the in-tray’ allowed officials ‘little or no time for philosophic brooding upon the heavy issues’ or to look ‘back to historical precedents and warnings or forward to the remoter but in the long run possibly more important implications and consequences of immediate action’.⁵¹ Hence the micawberite tendency to muddle through, not control, the crisis. Finally, the fast-moving nature of events revealed the merits of procedural improvements, like placing the department on ‘crisis alert’ in order to prioritize important and urgent communications. Reportedly, one dispatch, sent by the British ambassador in Teheran on 31 December 1950 and received in the Foreign Office on 4 January 1951, was not seen by the head of the Eastern department until 24 January!

V

Notwithstanding the fact that only one hundred copies were printed for ‘confidential official use’ within the Foreign Office and by selected overseas missions, Butler’s secret history exerted a far from insubstantial impact upon policymakers. Revisiting the 1950s prompted several readers to go beyond the Anglo-Iranian past to reappraise Britain’s current international position alongside future courses of action adjudged capable of enabling Britain – to quote Butler – ‘to regain a larger measure of initiative in her foreign policy’.⁵² Commentaries, drawing frequently upon personal memories of the actual crisis, reflected also a growing appreciation of the ‘great shift of power’ in the Middle East during the past decade. Recalling his posting at Teheran during the late 1950s, Frederick Mason, head of the Economic Relations department, minuted that ‘the whole story is full

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 319–21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 308.

of the lesson that *Her Majesty's Government can no longer act on their own in major matters of this kind*' (author's emphasis):

If anyone ever doubted the paralysing effect which United States actions had on the negotiations, this history is there to dispel such doubts. Again and again our actions were frustrated by American warnings, threats and above all by their day to day interference and attempts to mediate or influence one side or the other.⁵³

Impressed by the memorandum's value in illuminating contemporary realities and offering meaningful discussion points for policymakers, Harold Caccia, Hoyer Millar's successor as PUS, asked Lord Strang, who had served as PUS (1949–53) during the Abadan dispute, to review Butler's history and 'draw what lessons he can both as to the conduct of affairs in the circumstances of the time, and as to the possible bearing of these lessons upon the conduct of affairs in the circumstances of today'.⁵⁴ Significantly, Caccia forwarded Butler's concluding section to Lord Home, the foreign secretary (1960–3), who found the lessons a 'very interesting' read. Undoubtedly, his attentiveness – Home, trusting that 'we are better geared to an emergency now', indicated his willingness to discuss any issues raised therein – reflected also his recent involvement in the Cuban missile crisis, and particularly his active role in publicly articulating the lessons thereof.⁵⁵ Following Home's comments, Caccia asked Strang to investigate also the case for any special administrative preparations.⁵⁶

In February 1963 Strang submitted an informed and thoughtful commentary, supplemented by numerous marginal notes, on what he described as Butler's 'instructive case history'.⁵⁷ Indeed, his handwritten commentary amounted to sixty-four pages, or forty-four pages when typed up! Despite his preparedness to identify lessons viewed 'in the circumstances of the time', Strang confessed diffidence about articulating their present-day relevance because of changes in both international relations and Foreign Office practice since his retirement. Strang admitted also he had a personal case to answer in the sense that the Abadan crisis was only one of a number of questions requiring his attention as PUS; thus, from May 1951 he conceded that his prime focus was the defection of Burgess and Maclean to the Soviet Union as well as the Korean war, not the Abadan crisis.⁵⁸

On the whole, Strang found Butler's conclusions somewhat lengthy and written a 'shade pedantically', but basically sound, excepting an occasional

⁵³ F. C. Mason, 24 Apr. 1962, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

⁵⁴ Strang, n.d. (4 Feb. 1963), NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3. This comment is also in STRN2/10. Lord Strang's papers (STRN), located at the Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge (CAC), are quoted by kind permission of the Churchill Archives Centre.

⁵⁵ Home, 4 Jan. 1963, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3; D. R. Thorpe, *Alec Douglas-Home* (London, 1996), pp. 245–9. ⁵⁶ Caccia, 17 Dec. 1962, 7 Jan. 1963; Home, n.d. (Jan. 1963), NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

⁵⁷ Strang, n.d. (4 Feb. 1963), NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3. 'Personal' comments in paragraphs 14–23, formerly extracted from FO370/2694, have now been re-inserted separately. They are also in CAC, STRN2/10. Significantly, his commentary glossed over Britain's role in the 1953 coup: Louis, 'Britain and the overthrow of Mosaddeq', p. 176.

⁵⁸ Strang, n.d. (4 Feb. 1963), paras. 20–2, CAC, STRN2/10.

problem of interpretation: 'Butler is hard to satisfy. If Persian proposals are accepted, this is a retreat. If they are rejected, this is a failure to negotiate. If we consult the Americans, we are waffling; if we do not, we are reckless.'⁵⁹ Looking back, he recalled that Britain's failure to pursue 'an adroit and purposeful diplomacy' towards Iran largely reflected 'the lack of strong ministerial direction at the highest level', since the problems consequent upon Bevin's ill-health were compounded by Morrison's inexperience of foreign affairs and relative lack of ministerial authority. As a result, as Strang recorded, the prime minister settled policy: 'In Mr. Attlee's mind, that course meant retreat rather than resort to force.' Strang, who conceded that his thinking was not unaffected by the recent Cuban missiles crisis, minuted that the key lesson centred upon the fact that 'US not UK the Great Power', so that 'The whole Abadan crisis bedevilled by US theory about Russia.'⁶⁰ Like Butler, he complained that in 1951 the British government failed to 'face America with grave consequences of breach between us' caused by Washington's cultivation of Iran as a potential Cold War ally.⁶¹

Reviewing the past encouraged Strang also to look forward in order to advocate the serious re-think of both policy and methods adjudged necessary to enable Britain to play 'the active game of diplomacy' more effectively.⁶² Building upon Butler's critique of the 'temper' in which diplomacy had been conducted in 1951, Strang developed arguments outlined already in both his recent book entitled *Britain in world affairs* (1961) – here, he compared the 'quiet tradition' of Castlereagh, Salisbury, and Grey with the 'rumbustious tradition' associated with Canning and Palmerston – and oral evidence given in January 1963 to the Plowden Committee on representative services overseas.⁶³ The perceived failure of a 'quiet' diplomatic strategy in the Abadan crisis, viewed alongside indicators of declining power, imperial retreat, and the fact that 'you can never be sure of complete US support', led Strang to speculate whether 'we cannot bring about a revolution in our international outlook and procedures' to 'give our diplomacy a new look'.⁶⁴ Pointing to de Gaulle's selfish independent course, he presented France as a possible role model. The alternative – Strang feared 'international impotence' – was unwelcome, even unacceptable.

Having already been shown Butler's conclusions, Lord Home found Strang's commentary a stimulating read:

I am particularly interested in paragraph 73 to the end. Are we a bit too altruistic in our foreign policy? We could reach a point when we are so careful to appease this or that interest that we have no recognisable line of our own and have no identity. That would mean that we would lose influence and authority and command no function in our own

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 64, p. 41. ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 51. ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, para. 69. ⁶² *Ibid.*, para. 75.

⁶³ Lord Strang, *Britain in world affairs: a survey of fluctuations in British power and influence, Henry VIII to Elizabeth II* (London, 1961), pp. 38, 108–10, 304; Strang, 28 Jan. 1963, CAC, STRN2/11, pp. 5–8.

⁶⁴ Strang, n.d. (4 Feb. 1963), para. 75, p. 33, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

right. I would like you to give some thought to this danger of 'international impotence', paragraph 75.⁶⁵

The foreign secretary's positive response, alongside the government's perceived need to consider alternative policy options in the wake of Britain's recent failure to join the Common Market (January 1963), led Caccia to reproduce the paragraph attracting Home's attention in his recently introduced monthly letter to heads of mission: 'While we are re-considering our methods rather than our long-term objectives, I would ask you to consider a thought which has been recently put to me by Lord Strang.'⁶⁶ Strang's paragraph 75 followed:

Would it be possible to give our diplomacy a new look? The example is here before our eyes. The French have traditionally employed a highly efficient diplomacy for self-regarding national ends. Unlike ourselves, they have not as a rule thought it to their long-term advantage to cast their bread upon the waters by taking account of the general interest side by side with the national interest. Can we any longer afford, indeed do we now need, to be to this extent altruistic? President de Gaulle has shown how a European Power, alliance or no alliance, can follow an independent, nationally-based policy, paying scant regard to the interests of others. France has shown how to exploit the advantages of the weaker party. As M. Massigli is reliably reported once to have said: 'France, though no longer so powerful as of old, has always a stopping card to play in the game of diplomacy.' She can, and does, make the most of her nuisance value. Having no effective parliamentary check, and little public sentiment in favour of the United Nations, and a deep scepticism about the reliability of the United States and the effectiveness of NATO, she can follow courses on a number of international issues which one would say are not open to any British Government in the face of prevailing Parliamentary and public opinion. And yet, unless we break free from these shackles, may we not be condemned to relative international impotence? Is it not time, as Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick once asked, for us to force someone to appease *us* for a change? If we cannot bring about a revolution in our international outlook and procedures, can we not at least make a modest start? We have a Foreign Secretary today who, more than any of his recent predecessors, has the necessary qualities. And might we not, in our training, try to instil into our new recruits some insight into the active game of diplomacy, as the French have shown that it can still be played?

No indication was given of what actually prompted Strang's speculations; indeed, most respondents thought mistakenly that he was reacting to the abortive Common Market talks. As a result, Caccia used his next monthly letter to disclose the actual source in a manner merely acknowledging the existence, not the contents, of Butler's Abadan history. More importantly, Caccia took the opportunity to place upon record what he saw as the contemporary relevance of the lessons of the Abadan dispute.

Then [i.e. 1951], in the main, we employed an accommodating diplomacy in an ugly and most difficult situation, with results that were far from wholly satisfactory, even though we ultimately salvaged a large amount economically by the consortium agreement of 1954.

⁶⁵ Qu. Caccia to Strang, 7 Feb. 1963, CAC, STRN2/10.

⁶⁶ Caccia, 1 Feb. 1963, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

The defence of our stake in Persian oil in 1951 was severely handicapped by the fact, among others, that for the Americans it was rather too readily subordinated to their fear of provoking Russian intervention and to their calculation that in order to obviate that danger it was desirable to appease, not us, but the weaker Persians. The latter surpassed themselves in techniques of bargaining from relative weakness, techniques which only the very strong can afford to neglect all the time. Such instances are worth recalling, even while they clearly need to be balanced against those more familiar ones e.g. from the Suez Crisis the dangers inherent in any attempt to go it nearly alone: a situation, indeed, which all diplomacy so far as possible must surely try to prevent.⁶⁷

Prompted by Strang's praise for Gaullist vigour in promoting French interests, Caccia speculated whether Britain was 'too apt ... to do the giving and leave the taking to others'?

VI

Strang's thoughts struck a chord, as evidenced by the thirty-plus responses received from overseas missions. Naturally, his views did not always win support, but, like Butler, most respondents took the opportunity to express concern about both British policy and methods. Revealingly, many experienced difficulty in finding an appropriate agreed descriptor for Britain's current status. Was Britain, though no longer a major power 'in the sense that we once were and the Americans and Russians now are' (Patrick Dean, UN), still 'a world-wide power' (Dean), a 'leading European nation' (Lord Robert Hankey, OECD, Paris) or merely 'a declining power' of 'one and a half rate importance' (Paul Gore-Booth, New Delhi)?⁶⁸ Within this context, Sir Geoffrey Wallinger (Rio de Janeiro) offered perhaps the most vivid description of Britain's fundamental dilemma: 'Our difficulties seem to have turned us into the rather muscle-bound policeman of the Western world ... primarily engaged in the somewhat negative task of trying to stop the fast-moving traffic all about us from getting out of hand'.⁶⁹ Prompted by Caccia's reference to the Abadan crisis, Gore-Booth offered a 'footnote' to Butler's history. For Gore-Booth, the Abadan crisis established that Britain was 'a declining power' preoccupied with packing up an empire: 'our problem is to learn how to behave like a smaller power than we were, while retaining those of the qualities of an ex-great power which are relevant and discarding those which are not'.⁷⁰

Several respondents advocated updating British diplomacy through sharper thinking and plainer speaking; indeed, there was widespread support for the adoption of a 'greater ruthlessness in discarding inherited axioms and sentiments' (John Maud, Cape Town) by way of moving on from the usual nostalgia about

⁶⁷ Caccia, 1 Mar. 1963, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

⁶⁸ Hankey to Caccia, 8 Feb. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/2/i; Gore-Booth to Caccia, 30 Apr. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/4n; Dean to Caccia, 16 Mar. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/4j.

⁶⁹ Wallinger to Caccia, 22 Mar. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/4k.

⁷⁰ Gore-Booth to Caccia, 30 Apr. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/4n.

'the old spacious days' (Sir Roderick Parkes, Amman).⁷¹ Even so, most expressed reservations about emulating the French model because of marked differences between the two countries arising from France's greater economic self-sufficiency and continental location. In any case, as Dean observed, de Gaulle, who was subject to 'no effective parliamentary check', had 'no conscience about the United Nations'.⁷²

Generally speaking, respondents displayed a keen, indeed revealing, appreciation of perceived constraints hindering Britain's conduct of diplomacy in a more positive, dexterous, and flexible manner than had happened during and after the Abadan crisis. Britain's economic shortcomings proved a perennial theme. None felt able to minimize the economic drags on policy; indeed, as Wallinger observed, 'diplomacy by itself ... cannot make a great power out of an economic question mark'.⁷³ Failure at Suez was often cited as casting a long shadow over policymakers, most notably by prompting an awareness of the limitations upon British power and discouraging strong independent action. For Hankey, the Suez precedent undermined Strang's case for 'going it alone': 'we saw in 1956 that we could not do this effectively even in association with France, and even against the Egyptians'.⁷⁴ At the same time, the Suez failure led countervailing evidence to be ignored; indeed, only one respondent mentioned Britain's armed intervention at Kuwait in 1961.⁷⁵ Several responses betrayed continuing official sensitivities about Suez; in fact, Maud questioned whether this episode, when 'diplomacy was short circuited' by Eden, warranted description as a diplomatic failure.⁷⁶

VII

In this manner, the commentaries and exchanges prompted by the Abadan history – these occurred soon after Dean Acheson's infamous remark in December 1962 about Britain's loss of empire and failure to find a new role – fed into and complemented ongoing reviews (e.g. Cabinet Future Planning working group, 1962–4; the Plowden Committee's study of representative services overseas) conducted by ministers and officials about the future course and methods of British foreign policy.⁷⁷ In particular, Butler's history encouraged

⁷¹ Maud to Caccia, 8 Feb. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/2h; Parkes to Caccia, 22 Feb. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/3k. ⁷² Dean to Caccia, 16 Mar. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/4j.

⁷³ Wallinger to Caccia, 22 Mar. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/4k.

⁷⁴ Hankey to Caccia, 8 Feb. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/2i.

⁷⁵ George Vaughan, Panama, to Caccia, 14 Feb. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/3d. Subsequently, lingering anti-British sentiment qualified initial impressions of success: Nigel Ashton, 'Britain and the Kuwaiti crisis, 1961', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 9 (1998), pp. 163–81; Wm. Roger Louis, 'The British withdrawal from the Gulf, 1967–1971', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 31 (2003), pp. 83–102, at p. 91; Simon Smith, *Britain's revival and fall in the Gulf: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial States, 1950–1971* (London, 2004), pp. 119–28.

⁷⁶ Maud to Caccia, 8 Feb. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/2h.

⁷⁷ Saki Dockrill, *Britain's retreat from east of Suez: the choice between Europe and the world?* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 24–42; Peter Mangold, *Success and failure in British foreign policy: evaluating the record, 1900–2000*

a greater official preparedness to consider new directions based upon a more realistic assessment of recent trends. Encouraged by the ‘stimulating, if critical’ range of views, Caccia instructed Butler to codify responses by way of guiding the Steering Committee’s future discussions about giving British diplomacy a ‘new and more enterprising look’.⁷⁸

Once again, a substantial part of the resulting memorandum, entitled ‘A new perspective for British diplomacy’, was circulated both within the department and to overseas missions as part of the ongoing exchanges about alternative ways forward – to quote the concluding header – ‘Towards a revived diplomacy for Britain’ enabling the foreign secretary to lead ‘a modern Britain in a modern world’.⁷⁹ The text was sent also to Edward Heath, the lord privy seal, who was currently commissioning David Thomson to produce a history of Gaullism.⁸⁰ The ‘new perspective’ memorandum in which Butler described Britain as ‘a somewhat impotent middleweight’ power proved the basis for discussion at two meetings of the Steering Committee, held on 30 July and 23 August 1963, with Butler being invited to attend upon the second occasion to guide members.⁸¹ In the event, the committee, eschewing a point-by-point focus upon Butler’s conclusions, gravitated towards more practical issues, like overseas representation and planning, being actioned already through the Plowden Committee (1962–4) and the Foreign Office’s planning staff.⁸²

Sir John Nicholls, a deputy under-secretary of state, minuted that over time broader policy issues raised by Butler’s papers would be taken into account by the Foreign Office, most notably through the work of the Steering Committee and planning staff.⁸³ Indeed, within weeks of taking over in January 1964 as head of the restructured planning staff, Michael Palliser acknowledged that Butler’s Abadan history and subsequent memoranda, alongside ‘the ideas generated as a result of the numerous letters sent last year by Heads of Mission have been to some extent responsible for the “new look” that we are now trying to give to our planning arrangements’: ‘I think it is fair to say that the present experiment is designed to give Planning greater punch and precision and I hope we shall therefore meet many of the criticisms made in Butler’s paper.’⁸⁴

(Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 13, 121–4. Pointing to its ‘folly’ and ‘persistent stupidity’, Acheson, the US secretary of state (1949–53), proved highly critical of British policy over Abadan: Dean Acheson, *Present at the creation: my years in the State department* (London, 1970), pp. 501, 506.

⁷⁸ Caccia, 1 Mar. 1963, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

⁷⁹ Butler, 24 May 1963, para. 52, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

⁸⁰ Caccia, 29 May 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/1; Woodfield, 13 May 1964, NA, PREM11/4808. See David Thomson, ‘Gaullism’s point of reappraisal’, *Times*, 22 Aug. 1963.

⁸¹ Minutes, 39th, 41st meetings of Steering Committee, 30 July 1963, 23 Aug. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/8.

⁸² Butler, 24 May 1963, paras. 51–2, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3; Ernest Barnes, 4 Oct. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/8; Office Circular, no. 27: reorganisation of planning work in the Foreign Office, 30 Dec. 1963, NA, FO371/178812/PLA1/1.

⁸³ B. Burrows, 10 Oct. 1963, Nicholls, 14 Oct. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/8.

⁸⁴ Palliser to John Peck, Dakar, 6 Feb. 1964, NA, FO371/178812/PLA1/4.

In any case, radically changing direction, as opposed to gradually readjusting course, was a complex and time-consuming operation requiring a fundamental transformation in the mindsets of officials and ministers. After all, the latter were still beginning to address seriously the case for a major shift in both foreign policy and methods. What these exchanges had done was to carry forward, at least at the official level, the process of diagnosis and prognosis about Britain's role in a rapidly changing world, particularly regarding Europe, the Middle East, the empire, the USA, and the Soviet Union. In this sense, they were part of what Saki Dockrill described as the 'incremental' series of twists and turns culminating during the late 1960s in the landmark decision to withdraw from east of Suez.⁸⁵ The genuine interest shown by Home and Heath in Butler's lessons indicated that the Abadan history exerted significant impacts also at the political level; indeed, in October 1963 Heath specifically asked to be kept apprized of any follow-up to Butler's 'new perspective' paper, but within days was moved to the Board of Trade in Sir Alec Douglas-Home's new government.⁸⁶

VIII

Butler's history also reached the desk of Michael Stewart, when foreign secretary (1965–6) in the 1964–70 Wilson government. Impressed by this 'interesting' study, Stewart suggested that Butler should undertake a confidential history of the 1956 Suez crisis for which 'The Abadan report would be the pattern and precedent': 'I think that just as we have learned some useful lessons from Abadan, so something worthwhile could emerge from a study of Suez.'⁸⁷ Quite apart from appreciating the value of learning from the past, Stewart was giving effect also to the perennial demands of Labour MPs, as pressed through repeated parliamentary questions, for an official history of what was seen as the Conservative party's Achilles heel.

Stewart's proposal alarmed officials, who feared that any Suez history would open up a veritable Pandora's box by highlighting the failure of politicians to consider, let alone follow, official advice.⁸⁸ For Gore-Booth, Caccia's successor as PUS:

The lesson to be learned from Suez was a simple one. It was this: if Ministers consulted their officials and then rejected their advice this was perfectly proper and might on many occasions give the right answer. If, however, a government undertook operations by a process of deliberately refraining from taking official advice, or keeping officials informed, then the result would in due course be disastrous.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Dockrill, *Britain's retreat*, pp. 209–26; Louis, 'British withdrawal', pp. 83–102; Smith, *Britain's revival*, pp. 1–6, 151–6.

⁸⁶ Heath, 15 Oct. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/8.

⁸⁷ Stewart to Gore-Booth, 5 July 1965, NA, FO370/2807/LS13/4.

⁸⁸ N. Henderson, n.d. (July 1965), NA, FO370/2807/LS13/4.

⁸⁹ Gore-Booth, 13 July 1965, NA, FO370/2807/LS13/4; Paul Gore-Booth, *With great truth and respect* (London, 1974), p. 230.

Pointing to the topic's political sensitivity and the fact that a departmental review indicated that the records 'thin out' after nationalization – reportedly, there existed 'no confidential evidence in the Foreign Office official archives at all' documenting the crucial events leading up to hostilities – Gore-Booth sought to dissuade Stewart from pressing the matter.⁹⁰ In this instance, official advice prevailed. Stewart backed down, at least 'for the present'.

In fact, unknown to Stewart, there existed already a 1957 Foreign Office study of the lessons of Suez prepared at Eden's request by his private secretary, Guy Millard.⁹¹ Significantly, Eden, though accepting the need to strengthen Britain's economic base and to scale down existing military commitments, still opined that post-Suez Britain was capable of playing 'an independent part in the world'. Unsurprisingly, Millard's account, albeit confined to Britain's relations with France, the USA, and the United Nations, identified many of the themes developed a few years later by Butler's history, most notably 'the limitations of our strength' and the way in which the capacity to act independently was circumscribed by economic weakness.⁹² Of particular interest were the links drawn by Millard between the Abadan and Suez disputes, including the way in which 'strong memories of Abadan' were presented as influencing both British and Egyptian policymakers in 1956. Thus, he saw Iran's example as reinforcing Egypt's 'intense nationalism' by demonstrating that 'the "imperialist" Powers could successfully be defied'. Conversely, concern about the resulting damage to British interests and prestige in the Middle East was presented as a 'strong' influence determining the nature of the British response: 'Successive retreats in Asia and the Middle East had made further retreats increasingly repugnant ... An earlier crisis had left strong memories of Abadan. Their lesson seemed to be that in the defence of important British interests it is sometimes necessary to take risks.'⁹³

IX

Following the arrest of eight British servicemen on the Shatt-al-Arab waterway for allegedly entering Iran's territorial waters in June 2004, Jack Straw, the British foreign secretary, drew upon history to explain to BBC radio listeners the problematic course of Anglo-Iranian relations.⁹⁴

Part of the problem that we have in terms of our relations with Iran go back to our domination of that region. We had been instrumental in putting the Shah's father on the throne and many aspects of the Shah's regime were brutal, repressive, sought to strike out

⁹⁰ This claim should be viewed alongside reports that relevant material, including the British copy of the Treaty of Sèvres, was destroyed: Avi Shlaim, 'The protocol of Sèvres, 1956: anatomy of a war plot', *International Affairs*, 73 (1997), pp. 509–30, at p. 509.

⁹¹ Qu. F. Bishop to Laskey, 28 Dec. 1956, NA, PREM11/1138.

⁹² Millard, Aug. 1957, pp.1–2, 29, NA, FO800/728.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

⁹⁴ 'World at one', *BBC Radio Four*, 4 July 2004.

Iran's past and also its Islamic heritage and its Islamic beliefs. So those things are associated in many Iranians' minds with the United Kingdom.

Straw's references to the Iranian past, demonstrating the preparedness of policymakers to use history's present-day rhetorical value in presenting foreign policy, possessed added meaning given Britain's recent role in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Within this context, Butler's Abadan history offered an illuminating case study piloting Brook's 1957 'funding experience' initiative. Writing from Prague, Parrott, who had helped Butler set up the project, urged the institutionalization of what he saw as a 'fascinating' and worthwhile activity.⁹⁵ Likewise, George Vaughan (Panama) welcomed Butler's history as emphasizing the 'lessons for us, as diplomats, in what has happened ... First, which ought not to need repeating, is how important is a knowledge of history, if blunders and pitfalls are to be avoided.'⁹⁶ In this vein, Butler's obituary in *The Times*, albeit influenced by his subsequent appointment in May 1963 as special historical adviser to the foreign secretary (1963–82), claimed that 'Among the special studies that he made, his analysis of the lessons to be learnt from the Abadan crisis of 1951 permanently influenced Foreign Office thinking.'⁹⁷ Perhaps, this rather over-stated the impact of his Abadan history, but what had been supported by the Foreign Office as a 'pilot project' seemed worthy of emulation, even if such histories would not always prove as timely nor possess a similar wide-ranging utility. Inevitably, the principal influence was exerted upon officials, but the interest shown by Home, Heath, and Stewart established that the history impacted directly upon ministerial thinking across party without having to be filtered upwards through officials.

Despite presenting himself as an academic 'outsider looking inwards at the problems confronting British diplomacy today', Butler found it difficult to avoid acknowledging that in reality he was acting as an official historian enjoying privileged access to departmental records.⁹⁸ Conceding the functional nature of his brief – his principal task was not so much to record what happened, when, and why, but to use the historical narrative for drawing out lessons about policies and methods for policymakers – Butler hoped that his history would make 'a small but constructive contribution towards strengthening British foreign policy for the great tasks and great opportunities which now lie ahead'.⁹⁹ Looking back from 1962, it seemed natural for Butler to view the Abadan and Suez crises as 'contrasting yet largely complementary' elements in Britain's withdrawal – for some, this meant 'scuttle' – from the Middle East.¹⁰⁰ This retreat gathered pace

⁹⁵ Parrott to Caccia, 22 Feb. 1963, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

⁹⁶ Vaughan to Caccia, 14 Feb. 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/3d.

⁹⁷ *Times*, 14 Nov. 1996; Caccia, 1 May 1963, NA, LCO27/21.

⁹⁸ Butler, 24 May 1963, para. 3, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

⁹⁹ Butler to R. Mason, 9 March 1962, Butler, 15 Feb. 1963, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

¹⁰⁰ Butler, Sept. 1962, p. 308, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

in 1956, when Nasser's action led parallels to be drawn with not only Hitler and Mussolini but also Mossadegh. Abadan was easily viewed as a dress rehearsal for 1956, even if the Suez crisis' cataclysmic and divisive nature soon caused officials and politicians, among others, to gloss over, even forget, what had happened in Iran a few years earlier.

Certainly, the Suez debacle, in which Nasser posed a more demanding challenge than Mossadegh, demonstrated vividly that Eden – he looked back to the 1930s rather than 1951 – had learned little from Abadan. Of course, in 1956 the lessons of the Abadan dispute had yet to be codified formally in the way undertaken by Butler, but in August 1951, that is at the height of the crisis and a few months before Eden returned to the Foreign Office in Churchill's 1951–5 government, Sir Roger Makins, a deputy under-secretary, drafted what Strang, then the PUS, described as a 'brilliant and sound' appraisal of the fundamental principles underpinning British foreign policy.¹⁰¹ In particular, Makins recognized the growing pressures upon British power consequent upon economic underperformance, the emerging nationalist challenge, and the fact that the USA was 'an awkward ally'. Nor was the ongoing Abadan dispute helping Britain's standing in the Middle East: 'The dispute with Persia has dealt a heavy blow to our prestige ... We cannot afford another mistake of this magnitude.' From this perspective, the key lesson of the Abadan question was clear, that is, 'we now need American support to keep our end up in this area', and particularly 'to maintain our position as a great Power'.

For Donald Cameron Watt, the chief lesson of Suez 'was largely to discredit the conduct of foreign policy by the light of historical analogy in Britain'.¹⁰² Nevertheless, politicians, officials, and journalists have continued to use analogues to frame present-day debates. Nor did Suez deter either Brook from launching his 'funding experience' initiative one year later or the Foreign Office from commissioning during 1958–9 the Abadan study to investigate history's policy potential. As discussed above, it proves difficult to treat Butler's pilot study as having a clear-cut outcome; indeed, neither Steiner nor Neustadt and May anticipated more than marginal improvements in policymakers' behaviour to result from incorporating history more formally into the policy process.¹⁰³ Rather the Abadan history, including related documentation, fed into, guided, and influenced ongoing discussions and reviews within Whitehall by juxtaposing the lessons of history, contemporary realities, and possible new directions for both foreign policy and methods.

However, this episode, though casting light upon history's utility as a policy input, demonstrated also the need for caution. Admittedly the lessons resulted

¹⁰¹ R. Makins, 11 Aug. 1951, Strang, 11 Aug. 1951, NA, FO371/124968/ZP24/2.

¹⁰² D. C. Watt, 'Introduction', in J. T. Emmerson, *The Rhineland crisis 7 March 1936: a study in multilateral diplomacy* (London, 1977), p. 13.

¹⁰³ Steiner, 'The historian', p. 45; Steiner, 'On writing', p. 546; Neustadt and May, *Thinking in time*, pp. 233–72.

from in-depth research referenced back to the actual events, but they were – to quote Butler – ‘historical conclusions’ applicable to the political, economic, military, and administrative context of the early 1950s.¹⁰⁴ As Strang noted, the domestic and international context was changed, even transformed, during the next decade, and hence the contemporary relevance and application of Butler’s lessons was rarely obvious and largely a matter for conjecture upon the part of policymakers.

A few years earlier, when reviewing Eden’s Suez memoirs stressing the lessons of the 1930s, Strang had pointed already to the central problem of learning from history: ‘The question that will be long debated is whether the analogy with the 1930s was a true one, and how far it is wise in any event to shape a course of action upon an analogy from history.’¹⁰⁵ In this vein, the Abadan history raised several questions, albeit without necessarily providing the answers, about history’s policy potential. How useful for policy purposes is a 324-page history which takes years, not days, to complete? Is even a sixteen-page summary of key lessons too lengthy for policymakers to use easily during a fast-moving crisis? To what extent is the utility of lessons a function of the quality of a history’s research base? Is the history of a topic, involving several Whitehall departments but based principally upon Foreign Office documentation, a useful policy resource? Or does this give a more realistic indication of the situation facing Foreign Office policymakers, who unlike historians are unable to consult the files of other departments and governments? How far should such internal histories make use of oral testimony? Should the identification of a history’s lessons be undertaken by historians or officials? Is there a serious problem in writing a history, as in this case, a decade or so after the event, when the improved sense of historical perspective is qualified by the dangers of hindsight and filtering lessons through subsequent events?

Finally, the episode raises questions about the ability of history to challenge, even to transform over time, the ‘unspoken assumptions’ moulding the world view of a foreign policymaking elite imprisoned by traditional structural, ideological, and other factors.¹⁰⁶ As Strang pointed out in paragraph 75 of his commentary on Butler’s history, the rapid pace of events repeatedly challenged conventional ways of thinking about Britain’s role in the world, particularly

¹⁰⁴ Butler, Sept. 1962, p. 3, NA, FO370/2694/LS18/3.

¹⁰⁵ Strang, BBC Overseas Service, ‘This day and age’, 2 Mar. 1960, CAC, STRN3/8; John Young, ‘Conclusion’, in S. Kelly and A. Gorst, eds., *Whitehall and the Suez crisis* (London, 2000), p. 228. See Peter Nailor, *Learning from precedent in Whitehall* (London, 1991), pp. 25–9, 33–9; Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at war: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam decisions of 1965* (Princeton, 1992), pp. 3–18, 174–205; Jeffrey Record, *Making war, thinking history: Munich, Vietnam and presidential uses of force from Korea to Kosovo* (Annapolis, 2002), pp. 11–18, 146–55.

¹⁰⁶ James Joll, *1914: the unspoken assumptions* (London, 1968), pp. 8–9, 23–4. The mindsets of post-1945 British diplomats is a topic in need of further research building upon studies covering the interwar years: Donald Lammers, ‘From Whitehall after Munich: the Foreign Office and the future course of British policy’, *Historical Journal*, 16 (1973), pp. 831–56; Michael J. Hughes, ‘The peripatetic career structure of the British diplomatic establishment, 1919–1939’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 14 (2003), pp. 29–48; Kelly and Gorst, eds., *Whitehall and the Suez crisis*.

regarding continental Europe, the USA, and smaller powers, like Egypt and Iran. From this perspective, Abadan-type histories, using the historical narrative to yield lessons based upon past experience, appeared potentially capable of informing policymaking, *but only* if read, digested, and fed into the process. If nothing else, Butler's history encouraged busy policymakers snowed under with urgent paperwork to find time to comprehend better present-day realities and future scenarios, and *even to think outside the box*. As Sir Andrew Noble (The Hague) complained to Butler, 'We are writing too much and thinking rather too little.'¹⁰⁷ Perhaps Millard, formerly Eden's private secretary and currently a departmental head in 1963, highlighted the central lesson for British policymakers. Pointing to the failure of successive governments to accommodate foreign policy to post-1945 realities, and particularly to recognize that 'our reduced circumstances' meant that Britain could influence events but no longer command them, Millard opined that 'There is a lot of truth in the suggestion, made by Mr. Acheson in his celebrated speech, that we have failed to find our true role in the world.'¹⁰⁸

The creation of new pieces of machinery is not a substitute for policy. If there is a lesson to be learned from General de Gaulle's methods it is ... that the influence which any state can exert is vastly increased if it has clearly defined national objectives. One of our troubles is that we lack what one might call a philosophy of foreign policy. To a large extent we go on answering telegrams without having any very clear idea of where exactly we want to get to ... we do not know what our national ends are supposed to be. This lack of philosophy is more marked now than before in contrast with the Russians, the French.

As happened in the Abadan crisis, policy proved increasingly a function of 'what was negotiable within Whitehall ... the highest common factor of agreement between entrenched bureaucrats' rather than a function of an informed evaluation of Britain's current and future interests and power.

¹⁰⁷ Noble to Butler, 18 June 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/5.

¹⁰⁸ Guy Millard, 17 June 1963, NA, FO371/173334/WP30/1.