

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Philip Stevens: Britain Alone

Peter Moore: Hello, I'm Peter Moore and welcome to *Travels Through Time*, the podcast made in partnership with ColorGraph

[Music]

Peter Moore: Hello, I'm Peter Moore. Today we're off to the 1960s and the politics of post-imperial Britain.

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In a well-known photograph taken in February 1945, Winston Churchill, Franklin D Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin sit cheerfully together at the conference in Yalta. The war is very nearly won and the so-called "Big Three" have gathered to discuss what the peace-time world will look like.

For all his good humour, this would become a haunting photograph for Churchill. He knew that no longer could Britain sit alongside the two superpowers. With her finances ruined by the war and her empire disintegrating, post-war Britain was going to be a very different kind of country to that of Churchill's youth.

But what kind of country? As the historian Philip Stevens point out in his new book, *Britain Alone*, the answer to this simple question has proved stubbornly elusive. From Suez to Brexit, Anthony Eden to David Cameron, generations of British politicians have tried to define the nation's place in the world – few of them with any lasting success. In this episode Stevens takes me back to one of the telling month in this long, turbulent story.

Britain Alone has been described as "an instant classic" by the historian Peter Hennessy. We have a couple of copies to giveaway so keep listening to the end to find out how you can be in with a chance of winning one. Otherwise, enjoy!

[Interview begins]

Peter Moore: Welcome, Philip Stevens, to *Travels Through Time* to talk about your book, *Britain Alone*, which is nothing if not timely. I was looking at the news yesterday and it says 'the UK's chief Brexit negotiator has criticised the EU for its actions since the trade deal agreed by the two sides came into force six weeks ago.' David Frost said 'the relationship has been more than bumpy over the past few weeks.' [Laughter]. I can hear a little bit of a mirthful laugh.

Philip Stevens: Yes.

Peter Moore: Because really, you've chartered this relationship much further back than the last few weeks, really back to Suez and the Second World War. I think it would be really nice if you just began by telling us a little bit about *Britain Alone* in your words and what drove you to the writing of it.

Philip Stevens: I suppose I'd say that the book's the story of Britain's struggle to find its place in the world after the end of the Second World War and the dissolution of empire. It's a story essentially, I suppose, about exalted ambition. How do we hold on to our greatness? We can't keep the empire but surely, we can remain a great power but that colliding with economic and political circumstance; the US and the Soviet Union taking over as the superpowers and others

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catching up with our economy and us struggling to finance these overseas commitments that made us a global power. It's sort of ambition colliding with straitened economic circumstance and in that, there's a sort of collision as well between self-identity and global ambition. It was summarised very well by an American statesman, Dean Acheson, who famously accused us of losing an empire and failing to find a role. The reason I wrote it? Well, I've been writing about these issues in one way or another for the last 40 years, I'm afraid to say; a short period of that time for Reuters in Brussels and since, for Reuters in London and travelling around the world. It's always struck me that we try to make these false choices. Are we Atlanticist? Are we pro-American or are we pro-European? Are we global or are we European? I'm not a pessimist about Britain. I think we're a great country but we've struggled to find somewhere to sort of fit in. I came across, a few years ago, the quotation that I start the book with. The chief scientist for the Ministry of Defence in 1949 was a chap called Henry Tizard, a very interesting man. He said, in 1949 - and this was a sort of plea to his colleagues and to the politicians. He said, 'Look, we're a great nation but we're no longer a great power and if we continue to try to behave like a great power, the risk is we'll cease to be a great nation.' That struggle between great power and great nation has fascinated me. I suppose Brexit, in its way, was the trigger to write it because it struck me as a sort of bookend for this search. One was Suez which, in the end, tipped us into Europe and Brexit takes us out. In a funny way, we're back to where we started in this world of power blocs of the United States, China and economically, at least, the European Union. Where does this sizeable nation on the edge of Europe, with lots of talents and skills, fit in?

Peter Moore: It's such a fascinating question and one of the recurring themes, especially throughout the early part of the book but you might the case right up to today, is this coming to terms, I suppose, that Britain is going through collectively, of its loss of empire. I remember being at school in the 1980s and they still had these globes which must have been produced in the 1930s and so goodness knows why they had survived quite so long. These were the globes where a quarter of the landmass was coloured in pink.

Philip Stevens: Pink, yes.

Peter Moore: In particular, it maybe interesting in itself why those objects remained in the classroom so long and why they were not updated. You can maybe think about that. Early in the book, you make frequent reference to the Big Three which is a fallacy but it comes from that famous old photograph at Yalta with Churchill, Stalin and...

Philip Stevens: Roosevelt at Yalta and there's one at Potsdam as well where it's Truman, Stalin and Churchill.

Peter Moore: Exactly but it's a comforting photograph for Churchill but it's not an authentic projection of the reality of power as soon as the war has ended. Is that correct?

Philip Stevens: Yes, that is correct. We won the war, as it were. Of course, the Soviet Union and the United States did play their parts but in our self-consciousness, we won the war. Not only did we win the war but we'd stood alone and when everyone else had given up, we decided to battle on. So that sense that we were victors crashed into the reality that, firstly, the war had bankrupted us. Before the war, we had been huge net creditors with, if you like, investments and cash stashed around the world. All of a sudden, we were a debtor. We needed cash. Secondly, the empire was crumbling. India would go within two years of the war and that would be the beginning. So as victors, we felt, of course, that we should be sitting there at the top table but the reality was that our power - and in the end, all geopolitical power is based on economic strength - was seeping away but Atlee and his foreign secretary, Bevin, thought, 'Look, we'll rebound

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from the economic shock of the war. Our technological skills, our engineers and our scientists will bring us back.' That's why the book, I suppose, starts with Suez. It wasn't really until the shock of Suez and the defeat at the hands, not so much of the Egyptians but the Americans who forced us to stop fighting. That was the big shock that, if you like, led us to say, 'Okay,' but only quietly, like, 'Perhaps we're not a great power. Perhaps we'd better think about something else. Is there another construct through which we can retain our influence?'

Peter Moore: There's a really nice and intriguing early conception of Britain's post-war identity as a Greece to America's Rome. Could you tell me a little bit about that, please?

Philip Stevens: Yeah, it's a great phrase and it was actually coined by Harold Macmillan, not in his days as a politician but when he was serving in North Africa in the war. Already, it was clear that America was taking over the war and the question was how does Britain make sure that its view of how the conflict was being fought would prevail. So Macmillan came up with this idea of saying, 'Look, we'll be Greece to America's Rome. In this metaphor, we'll be the smart Greeks, the clever people, who come up with the ideas which are then taken on board by the not so clever Romans/Americans. We'll be the advisors whispering in their ear.' This became, post-war, if you like, a strategy. 'Okay, if we can't hold on to our power by sitting as an equal at the top table, we'll hold on to our power by being the big influencer in the US. We'll get the Americans to do what we want and we'll pursue our national interests through being the most important voice in Washington.' After Suez, Macmillan became the prime minister and he developed this into this concept which he dressed up into something called interdependence; that in this new world, everyone would have to work together. In a way, he posed that we were equals. Of course, the Americans took a rather more hardheaded view of this and they were happy to have a solid, loyal, British ally but they always saw the relationship as asymmetric and more than once, demonstrated that by operating in their interests rather than ours. This was the 'special relationship'. Churchill had talked about the 'special relationship', actually, as far back as the 30s and he'd resurrected it after the war but it became part of the theology, as it were, after Suez when we decided that our future lay with being best friends with the Americans.

Peter Moore: What we're going to do now is really focus on a particular part of the story in a particular year. Actually, you've gone further than that, which is very admirable. You're going to give us three scenes in one particular month, which kind of bring out some of the themes that you write about in *Britain Alone*. Can you tell us, please, what year you would like to go and have a look at?

Philip Stevens: I'd look at 1962.

Peter Moore: I think probably just broadly, shall we talk about 1962 in a general sense before we get specific? This is a time of coming change, if that's not too much of a cliché. A lot of the old things from the old world are still there but they're feeling quite outmoded.

Philip Stevens: In 1962, across the country, there's an energy about Britain that has followed through from the end of the '50s into the '60s. There's a mini economic boom engineered by Macmillan in order to win himself reelection in 1959, which it did. We remember him talking about 'we've never had it so good'. In one sense, it was that world. There had been a huge housing boom through the '50s. Here's an example that governments can actually do things when they put their minds to it. They built hundreds of thousands of new houses: houses with inside toilets and bathrooms; houses which were equipped to take all the new consumables, like TV, washing machines; and actually, even a new system of finance called HP or hire purchase which allowed people to buy things. It was the beginning of the consumer age but it was also the

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growth of rock and roll, of what was to become pop music; a generation of people no longer going into national service and wanted to grow their hair. There was a vibrancy of art schools, of fashion and a certain optimism which, indeed, Harold Wilson would harness a couple of years later by promoting Labour as the party of the future and the 'white heat of technology'. It's the Space Age and the missile age. It's a mixture, I would say. For the country, it was a mixture of quite exciting ambition but with some problems already showing themselves economically and politically.

Peter Moore: That's a tremendous overview. Let's go to the first of the three scenes you've chosen. Where would you like to go first, please?

Philip Stevens: We're going to cross the Atlantic for this one. We're going to go to the West Point Military Academy in the United States for this. The reason I've chosen these three scenes is that I think that when we put them together, they crystallise the tensions and the challenges in this quest for a post-imperial role. The first scene is with this chap, Dean Acheson, who'd been the secretary of state to Harry Truman in the war and one of the far-sighted American politicians responsible for encouraging the integration of Europe, a supporter of the Marshall Plan and a supporter of the fledgeling Common Market. He didn't work for Kennedy. By then, the young chap, Kennedy, is in the White House and Acheson was the sort of person who spoke to the president when he wanted to speak to the president, as it were. He was a man still of influence and someone who was listened to. He gave a speech on 5th December to the passing out parade at West Point, which I suppose the equivalent to our Sandhurst. The speech was actually about the whole transatlantic relationship: the relationship with Europe; with the fledgeling NATO; the standoff with the Soviet Union. This had been the year of the Cuban crisis where the West and America had been really tested but in it, he chose to direct a few well-chosen sentences towards his British friends and he was an Anglophile. He was not an enemy of Britain and they were said in a blunt but friendly warning, as it were. He used this famous sentence that 'Britain has lost an empire but is yet to find a role.' That came after he'd looked at the various roles that he thought we were trying to play. He talked about us trying to play the role of best friend to the US, the 'special relationship'; us trying to play the role as head of the Commonwealth with our own global network and global powerbase; and, indeed, us trying to play the role of mediator between the two superpowers, Moscow and Washington. He said, 'All these roles are about played out.' What he was really saying underneath this was that Britain was part of Europe and it better get on and join this Common Market thing and be a part. The Americans were very keen on dealing with a united Europe. This caused an absolute furore in London and particularly, the Tory press went completely mad. The *Daily Express* had a front-page headline 'Stab In The Back'. There was uproar and Macmillan felt he had to rebut this and so he actually sent a letter to Lord Chandos so he could put out a statement saying, 'This is a mistake that all sorts of people, including Napoleon, have made through the ages but don't underestimate the Brits.' It hurt. It struck home because Macmillan and others knew that it had more than a grain of truth. Actually, that night, Macmillan wrote in his diary and says of Acheson, 'Of course, he was always a conceited arse,' but then he reflects, 'but on the other hand, we ought to be strong enough ourselves to laugh off this sort of thing.' Macmillan had actually already decided that we had to be part of the Common Market, so he knew that Acheson was right but, of course, he couldn't accept those phrases. Was the relationship with the Americans exclusive or was it going to be part of a broader architecture?

Peter Moore: It's that clarifying view of the outsider, in a way, and you might say that the Americans weren't dispassionate outsiders but here in Britain, it's maybe more difficult to make sense of your place at close hand than it is for them. It's quite amusing to read this section in the

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book and just how much of a thorn it was or - it was more than that. It really, really aggravated the newspaper editors, for sure, but they were obviously tapping into the national sentiment.

Philip Stevens: Partly, we'd made so much of being best friends with the Americans [*laughter*] but, yeah, you're right. In fact, there was such uproar that Kennedy actually called Macmillan to assure him that he hadn't talked to Acheson beforehand and that Acheson hadn't been put up to this.

Peter Moore: That was going to be my question because occasionally, and I'm sure you know the inner workings of politicians, someone will be sent out to say something for maybe the purposes of negotiation, or to make a point, or to exert some pressure. Do you think applies in this case or was he really just expressing a point of view?

Philip Stevens: The Americans were beginning to treat us as part of Europe. A couple of months earlier, Robert McNamara, the then defence secretary, had given a speech about nuclear weapons. Of course, we were the only European country then with our own deterrent. He was saying, 'There shouldn't be separate countries and Europe shouldn't have nuclear deterrents. They should be one pan-European deterrent as part of NATO.' That had been taken as an affront because part of our identity crisis was this sense of something Churchill had said which was that we're with Europe but we're not of it. We wanted to be seen as, of course, European but slightly above or one rung up, as it were. The idea that the Americans were treating us on the same level as the French and, indeed, beginning with Germans stung. It wasn't part of a concerted plan but it was certainly a reflection of the feelings of the American political establishment, including within the Kennedy White House.

Peter Moore: There's a further irony here that you bring out in the book to this moment, in particular, because as Macmillan well knew as he sat down to write that diary entry, all that was being said was really only a verification of everything he'd been told by the civil servants, who'd worked on this future policy study for him over the past few years, who'd come up with much of the same arguments [*laughter*]. Is that correct?

Philip Stevens: Yeah, that's it. That's why it stung because, in the end, Macmillan, in his heart at least, had to admit that Acheson was articulating, albeit in rather brutal terms, the sort of arguments that 1) Norman Brook, the cabinet secretary and the civil servants had made to him and 2) that he, in this curious way, was trying to make to the country, in his effort to persuade the country, that we should join the Common Market and that although we were close to the Americans, we couldn't afford to be left behind by the French and the Germans.

Peter Moore: So this is the first week of December in 1962. Where are we going to go from there to your second scene, please?

Philip Stevens: We're going to the second week of December. This was a busy month and for Macmillan, this was a busy pre-Christmas three weeks.

Peter Moore: I know. I was thinking we could almost title this episode 'Macmillan's Busy Month' which is pretty much what it is.

Philip Stevens: Yeah, so a week later, Macmillan is off for a two-day summit with General Charles de Gaulle to persuade de Gaulle that Britain should, indeed, be accepted as a member of the Common Market. He'd applied a year and a half earlier. There had been negotiations going on at technical level really but led on the British side by, in fact, Edward Heath, who would

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eventually take us into the Common Market. They'd been going on. The French had been pretty much very difficult. The British had the sense that Adenauer, the German chancellor and then Belgians, the Dutch, the Luxembourgers and the Italians were all pretty happy, given the right terms that we should join but the French were being difficult and obstructive. Now Macmillan, who'd known de Gaulle during the war, thought he could charm and persuade him. In fact, a couple of months earlier in October, he'd invited him to his house in Sussex, Birch Grove, for a couple of days of softening up but sadly, that hadn't worked. So now, on 14th December, he had gone to Rambouillet for a last big effort to get de Gaulle to think about the big politics of this and drop his objections in the hope that the technical negotiations would all be unblocked and in the first half of '63, we could be accepted for membership.

Peter Moore: I'm just thinking here about de Gaulle and his vital contribution to this point of the story because his attitudes towards Britain had been shaped over a very long time, predominantly during the years of war. You write, at one point, how he often cited an exchange that he had with Churchill on the eve of the Normandy landings that 'if Britain ever had to choose between Europe and the open sea, Churchill had admitted she must always choose the open sea.' That's a nice little vignette that clarifies his suspicion of Britain in Europe, isn't it?

Philip Stevens: It is and it does absolutely capture the French view. De Gaulle was a complicated fellow: a man with, one might say, a certain pride, if not arrogance; a leader who'd appreciated the help he'd received during the war from the British but equally, deeply resented the way he'd been treated, so he thought, in the war by the British and not allowed to be part of the big decisions. He was locked out of the Yalta meetings and the Potsdam meeting, so a sort of second-class citizen. He was the man who had rescued France in 1958. You have this person who is extremely powerful and as proud of France as anyone is as proud of Britain. It's this age-old relationship between France and Britain and it's often said 'we've been through the centuries the best of enemies' and so there's that tension set up. There is also a geopolitical point here, if you like. Suez was an Anglo-French enterprise and the French had the same reasons as us to go into Suez to prove they remained a global power and we both got a bloody nose but our response was to rush back to the Americans and say, 'Look, we won't do this again.' The French reaction to Suez was to say, essentially, 'Unless we want to be dominated by the Americans, we have to build Europe, not against the Americans but as a competitor and as an equal to America.' Here was de Gaulle's great suspicion that Britain was the Trojan horse for the Americans.

Peter Moore: That's right.

Philip Stevens: If you let Britain into the Common Market, basically, you'd be opening the door for the Americans to dominate.

Peter Moore: I think then that having set it up, you should tell us how this meeting concluded.

Philip Stevens: The meeting went badly. Afterwards, Macmillan would say one of the things that he found particularly galling was how, as difficult as they were and as obstructive as they were, the French were absolutely polite and respectful in the way that they treated him. Basically, de Gaulle, in fairly brutal terms, made it clear that he was not going to accept British membership of the Common Market. The reason, that he would subsequently give a month later when he publically exercised his veto, was that Britain was not ready to tear itself away from its dependency on the US. Now there were other things as well, like de Gaulle was worried about Commonwealth food competition for French farmers but the central political point was he didn't believe that Britain was ready to break with the Americans and he was right in that. Basically, he sent Macmillan away with a big no, although, not yet admitted. At that stage, de

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Gaulle still wasn't quite sure about being seen as obstructing the whole thing but, as Macmillan said afterwards 'with extreme courtesy and good manners', he basically showed him the door. Macmillan fumed. He thought there was reason in part of this but, again, he thought it was about France being, as he said, 'jealous of Britain'. France had never really forgiven and this was a theme that would come up again and again. France had never forgiven Britain for winning the war.

Peter Moore: It sounds like there's so much rage in Macmillan's diaries during these weeks [*laughter*] because he's getting quite a lot thrown at him.

Philip Stevens: There's rage and despair, basically [*laughter*].

Peter Moore: Rage and despair.

Philip Stevens: They're a wonderful read.

Peter Moore: Oh really?

Philip Stevens: I recommend Macmillan's diaries all the way through. There are two volumes which have been well edited and I absolutely recommend them.

Peter Moore: We should put a link up to those on our website. I think it's a fascinating way of getting inside the political mind. I did also want to ask you some supplementary questions about this point because obviously, we're talking about the process of joining the European community at this very early moment in its history when you said it was comprised of six member states, I think.

Philip Stevens: Yes.

Peter Moore: After the referendum and the rancour of the last five years, we're so used to these decisions being made almost by the whole of the nation in a very angry way that it seems strange that you have this process of application to joining just going on between these two individuals, Macmillan and de Gaulle. Was the process for joining at that point just a matter of being approved by each of the current member states, as it stood, and we weren't because there was a veto that was exercised by de Gaulle? Is that what happened, essentially?

Philip Stevens: That was the process and we had to negotiate terms with the six governments, like customs' duties and all the things that we remember from the Brexit debate and subsidies. That's not to say that, in Britain, the subject was not talked about because it was.

Peter Moore: Was there a public appetite for joining?

Philip Stevens: Not particularly but there wasn't a great public attitude on it either way. This is why you get, through this period, a running sense of *deja vu*. There was a sense of fierce opposition on the right of the Tory Party and on the left of the Labour Party...

Peter Moore: This all sounds very familiar [*laughter*].

Philip Stevens: ...so think Boris Johnson or whoever you like in the Tory Party [*laughter*] and Jeremy Corbyn's section of the Labour Party.

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Peter Moore: This is Enoch Powell type opposition.

Philip Stevens: Enoch Powell. These are the backbenchers, like Bill Cash of the late '50s and early '60s. They called themselves the Suez Group and said that our place was in the world with the Commonwealth. They said we weren't part of Europe and we were a global power. In the Labour Party, you had people on the left, like Peter Shore and others. Tony Benn, initially, was pro. When he was Anthony Wedgewood Benn, he was pro and then when he was Tony Benn, which he later became, he was anti. On the left of the Labour Party, amongst some of the trade unions, this sense that the Common Market was basically a capitalist club and that if we brought down all our trade barriers, these would be used to force down wages and allow the capitalists to make more money. So you had quite noisy groups on the right and the left. There was a debate but I think it also goes back to this sense of modernity and there was this sense that this was the way that the world was going. Weren't the French doing well? Weren't the Germans doing very well recovering? Weren't, indeed, the Italians doing well? Again, in our relationship with Europe, there's always been this sense of, on the one hand, superiority and that we're better but also, hang on, we can't let them run away from us. We've got to be part of that club. Macmillan had gone softly softly and he'd won over the Tory Party over a period of about 18 months and so had de Gaulle not vetoed, we would have gone in and it would have been quite straightforward but it wouldn't have been without any noise whatsoever.

[Break]

Peter Moore: Hello, it's Peter. If you're enjoying this conversation about political life in the early 1960s then you might like to have a look at one of ColorGraph's latest productions. The image is made from a black and white photograph of Jack Kennedy that was taken in November 1963. It shows him surrounded by the top brass of the US Navy, watching the launch of the polaris rocket. It's a powerful piece of work. The president looks so vividly young and alive in his teal blue suit. It's all the more compelling because we know what happened so shortly afterwards.

This image of JFK is one of a series that ColorGraph have been making for us: portraits of the Beatles and Oscar Wilde, pictures of the NASA research facilities, images of the snow lanes in the cold winter of 1963. These and hundreds more are now available to buy as museum-grade prints at colorgraph.co. Made in Britain to the highest production standards – it's history at its most provoking and striking. They make amazing and unusual presents for anyone interested in the past and *Travels Through Time* listeners can get money off too. Just use the discount code TTT at the checkout.

[Break Ends]

Peter Moore: That's a really fascinating overview. What do they say? History doesn't repeat itself but it does rhyme.

Philip Stevens: It does rhyme. It certain rhymes [*laughter*].

Peter Moore: It's rhyming very well in this particular scene. Brilliant. Okay, let's go to the third because there's a contrast here and it's equally interesting and equally enmeshed in this idea of geopolitics.

Philip Stevens: The third scenario is in Macmillan's busy month and having got back from Rambouillet, Macmillan has two or three days in London and by 19th December, he's heading to

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Nassau in the Bahamas where he is to meet the young Jack Kennedy for a two/three-day summit. There are lots of things on the agenda but there's one, as far as Macmillan and Britain are concerned. There's one really important thing: will the Americans supply Britain with its next generation of nuclear-carrying missiles and what became the Polaris missile?

Peter Moore: There's a whole chapter on this in the book and it seems to be an absolute obsession with many British politicians, this desire to have a nuclear capability.

Philip Stevens: It actually starts with Atlee's government after the war and it was Ernest Bevin, the foreign secretary, who swung the argument. There were some fairly brutal arguments because the Treasury thought it was too expensive. He was a rather outspoken, former trade union leader and Bevin said, 'We've got to have this thing over here whatever it costs. We've got to have a bloody Union Jack on it.' This was the sense that the only way that we could assert real independence and status was if we followed the Americans into the nuclear club. Of course, we knew that the Soviet Union were developing their nuclear weapons and so we had to be part of the club. The deterrent, or nuclear weapons, as an emblem of our national status and our position in the world has been an absolutely unbreakable thread through our post-war politics.

Peter Moore: Right through to David Cameron and Trident in 2016. It will recur again whenever there's a need, won't it?

Philip Stevens: In fact, the new Trident is due to stay in operation until 2060, I think. I would argue that the decision taken in 1962 by Macmillan and Kennedy locked us into that position. Other things being equal, and we don't know what might happen before 2060, if we keep it until 2060, that will be on the basis of a decision taken by Macmillan and Kennedy in the Bahamas in December of 1962. There aren't that many decisions as consequential as that.

Peter Moore: In which case, I think we should do it full justice by explaining just what happened at this meeting between Kennedy and Macmillan. I think I should start off by asking you an interesting personal question because they had good chemistry, even though they were quite an unlikely couple.

Philip Stevens: They did get on well. It had helped that Jack Kennedy had been in London in the late '30s where his father had been the ambassador. Jack had mixed in the same circles, as it were, as the Macmillans and Tory high society in the late '30s. During the Cuban crisis, where Kennedy was facing some quite difficult confrontations with his own generals and his own political advisors, Macmillan had played it very well. He hadn't tried to lecture Kennedy. Kennedy had called a number of occasions but Macmillan had positioned himself as someone that Kennedy could bounce ideas off and ask for advice. There was a certain amount of real trust in the relationship. The really crucial thing in this was that we'd built our bomb and we'd then built our H-bomb and so we were part of the nuclear race, as it were. We had our Vulcan bombers to take these things, if they ever needed to be taken, to be dropped on Moscow and other Russian cities but by the early '60s, the whole world had changed. Sputnik and space had revolutionised defence strategic policy and it had become clear that, in future, nuclear weapons would be carried, essentially, on rockets rather than in bomb bays. Planes were there to be shot down. Rockets were far more dangerous and difficult to stop. This was very expensive and here, again, it was one of those occasions where our overseas' ambitions or our great power ambitions collided with our straitened economic circumstance because we didn't have the money. There were constant battles with the Treasury. The initial arrangement was, and this was fortuitous for Britain, that the Americans had developed the Polaris submarine-based nuclear system and they needed a base in Europe. A deal was done by Macmillan whereby the Americans were allowed to

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establish a base in Holy Loch in Scotland where they could service and refuel Polaris. In return, the Americans would sell us some rockets that they were developing, which were rockets that were fired from the air by planes, that we would use to deliver our deterrent. But in 1962, the whole thing began to unravel because the American rocket wasn't working or it seemed unlikely that it was going to work. We were committed to buying something which the Pentagon was already beginning to think that they might cancel and we had nothing. This left us with nothing. So when Macmillan went to Nassau, he went there with this supreme ambition which was to persuade Kennedy to sell us Polaris and Kennedy went with a White House and State Department trying to persuade him not to sell the UK Polaris. He was surrounded by a raft of advisors who said that if he sold Polaris to us, it would encourage proliferation and much better, if we lost our nuclear deterrent, then the Americans could then engineer a European-wide deterrent which could be shared with the French, the Germans and everyone else.

Peter Moore: Could I just interject here because I think there's an interesting point you bring out in the book which is the way we tend to think about these political summits nowadays is as a kind of showpiece. Often, much of the discussion has been done, the agreements have been made and you get everyone together to have a nice meal and a photograph. It seems to me, in your description of what happened here at this time, that this was a very uncertain outcome as they entered the negotiations.

Philip Stevens: It was absolutely uncertain. Summits then, as you rightly say, were not, particularly summits when it was two leaders but often, when there were three or four, they were two-day or three-day working affairs. The press were there but they were kept at some distance and the debate over Polaris, in the meeting itself and in different sessions, took several hours. Macmillan's point was basically this: that if he didn't get Polaris or something (although there wasn't an obvious alternative), he'd probably have to resign because Britain would effectively lose a working nuclear deterrent. At one point, he says to Kennedy, 'Do you want Labour in power? Do you want this anti-nuclear party in power because that's what might happen?' Meanwhile, as I say, Kennedy's people are saying, 'Look, we can't have the Brits having the bomb.' They knew the French were developing their own. The big fear was if France got it, then how long before Germany, which had already recovered a lot of its economic power, says, 'We're going to go nuclear.' That was a real and significant fear in Washington. In the end, Macmillan got Polaris but he got it with strings attached, as it were. Kennedy overruled his own staff and said Britain could buy the Polaris weapons system. So we bought the missile systems onto which we put our own warheads but - and here was the American construct to pay a little bit more than lip service to the idea of a single European deterrent - Macmillan agreed that Britain's Polaris system would come under the command of NATO. It would be part of the Western Alliance defence system. After a lot of toing and froing and arguments over words and phrases, the agreement was that this was an alliance which would be deployed under the command of NATO, except in circumstances of extreme national emergency, in which case, Britain could take it back under its own command. So independent or not independent?

Peter Moore: You can spin it both ways which is what politicians do. As you've been describing this, you have to say that Macmillan went in with a pretty poor hand but came out with as good a result as he could have managed. Is that right? Is that a good summary, would you say?

Philip Stevens: I think that's right. I think if you measure it just in terms of a sort the exercise of statesmanship and winning the argument, you would say that Macmillan won. Various of Kennedy's aides, who'd been on the other side, subsequently accepted that Macmillan had outplayed them. On the other hand, you could say why is it that when any British politician talks about the British nuclear deterrent, they always preface it with the word 'independent'. The

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French, when they talk about the Force de frappe, don't say the French independent deterrent. The fact that politicians, ever since, have had to underline this sense that it's independent tells you that there's at least an ambiguity there. What he'd done, and this is why I think this is such a consequential meeting, was he'd constructed a psychological prison for every one of his successors. Having made so much about the need for us to have this deterrent, when he left office, who was going to be the prime minister who would now give all this up? In my view, and some people would think this a good thing, Macmillan was basically committing us to nuclear weapons for at least another 50-60 years and if the present Trident system were to go until 2060, it would be for nearly 100 years.

Peter Moore: It goes right to the centre of this thing that you're grappling with in the book which is Britain's sense of itself. What can it give away? What can it gain? What things does it need to be able to stand tall? To be honest [*laughter*], it seems to need these nuclear warheads to be able to do that and it's fascinating.

Philip Stevens: They are and these missiles now haven't been targeted since 1994. Put aside this sort of suggestion that they're prowling the seas and ready to fire at a few minutes' notice if Boris Johnson gives the order. They're not targeted. It would take days, if not weeks to actually target them. It would then require the Americans to help us do it. It would require us to persuade the Americans that this was a sufficient national emergency that we should take control from NATO. In the book, I quote Peter Westmacott, who was the ambassador in Washington when David Cameron negotiated the latest modernisation programme for Trident and our purchase of the latest Trident. While remaining loyal, what Peter Westmacott says is that it's a rum thing that the purpose of having an independent deterrent is really as an insurance policy against the Americans not coming to defend us in a time of need but we've taken out an insurance policy against the Americans not helping us but we're going to use it if the Americans agree that we can use it. It's a very odd construct now. I put these new aircraft carriers in the same bracket. I can't name him, unfortunately, but a very senior military official in this country once said to me that we set up our armed forces as if we're a pocket superpower. Instead of spending on useful things that might be used in small conflicts here or there, we have to pretend that we have what the military types call 'full spectrum capability'. That's what a superpower has. A superpower has a capacity to do anything anywhere and that's what we're pretending that we can still do. In truth, we can only fight any serious war with the Americans. The politician who stands up and says, 'We should give up our nuclear weapons,' I fear would still be howled down even now as someone who would be giving up our defences. Yet, if you talk to the people who run our defence strategy, they will openly say, 'Well, if we didn't have it, we certainly wouldn't buy it or try and reinvent it.' This is where the Rambouillet and Nassau come together, as it were, because what Nassau does and our purchase of Polaris does is, of course, it confirms de Gaulle in his judgment that, basically, we are the Trojan horse for the Americans and we are prisoners of the Americans. In fact, Kennedy offers the same deal to de Gaulle in the hope that he can contain France's programme to develop its own really independent nuclear deterrent. But de Gaulle says no and what Nassau does is to give him the excuse to say, 'Look, it is blindingly obvious that while the rest of us, we six, are in Europe to build Europe, Britain is still in thrall to Washington and will never show the same enthusiasm and energy in developing Europe.' Of course, you could say, given the events of 2016, maybe de Gaulle was right.

Peter Moore: Now I was thinking, reading through, that when you explain de Gaulle's vision of Europe, it seems like we are returning to that kind of vision now, in a way, and it's almost that Europe is becoming this purer version of itself without the oddness of Britain tacked on to the edge, which is a thought which we can leave suspended. This has been a fascinating conversation. I've learnt a lot and the book is so well-researched, nimbly written and more than

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anything, absolutely timely for anyone and I suppose, in our own little ways, we're all trying to make sense of these conundrums and they will continue but the book is a wonderful contribution. Listen, I've got one question I want to ask you before we finish and we ask it of everyone who comes on and it's a fun one, I hope. I hope you're not going to pick a nuclear warhead or something like this but we'll see where we get to. If you could bring one tangible memento back from 1962 to have with you today, what would you like?

Philip Stevens: I've thought hard and this is going to sound rather boring but what I'd like is the original of Acheson's speech because I think in that speech or in those half a dozen sentences, the whole agony, struggle and conflict which has surrounded our attempt to settle our place in the world is summarised. I would like that and I would frame it and put it on my wall.

Peter Moore: Brilliant. A really good choice. Philip Stevens, it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you. Thank you very much for coming on *Travels Through Time*.

Philip Stevens: Thank you. It's been absolutely fascinating for me and enjoyable. Thank you, Peter.

[Interview ends]

Peter Moore: That was me, Peter Moore, talking to Philip Stephens about *Britain Alone*, a brilliantly analysed look at Britain's complex post war history. It's full of fascinating new research, but today's episode with an old-Eton prime minister, a new US president and an exasperated European Union will have also reminded you of the phrase, *plus ça change*.

To win one of two copies that we have to giveaway of *Britain Alone*, just head to our website and make sure that you're signed up to our newsletter. We'll make the draw on Sunday night, which is 28 February.

Also make sure you visit our website to see the fascinating colourised image of John F Kennedy, taken just a week before his assassination from Dallas. It's compelling to look at him gazing out on a bright blue Florida day.

I hope you enjoyed this episode. Please do let us know with a review if you did. After three weeks in the 1960s we're off to the Renaissance next week as Violet Moller sits down with the author Mary Hollingsworth. Until then, thank you for listening. Goodbye!

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