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‘A Joint Controlling System’: Commonwealth Bases and the Special Relationship, 1945-1947

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‘A Joint Controlling System’: Commonwealth Bases and the Special Relationship, 1945-1947

Britain's position in 1945 was precarious but London was not prepared to relinquish global power status. Most famously, Winston Churchill in March 1946 argued this goal could be achieved by nurturing an Anglo-American 'special relationship'. Yet Britain also sought to utilise the British Commonwealth of Nations to prop-up its position and facilitate closer bonds with the United States. Significantly, Churchill had also claimed that the joint use of military bases could provide the mechanism to bind this 'English-speaking' alliance. This vision was, crucially, shared by the Labour foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, who described the US-Commonwealth military partnership as 'a joint controlling system'. Nevertheless, between 1945 and 1947 the Truman administration's attempts to gain base rights in the Southwest Pacific, India and on Ascension Island proved one of the most controversial issues between Washington and the Commonwealth capitals during the immediate post-war period. This article demonstrates that the Commonwealth members remained unwilling to sacrifice their partnership in favour of closer ties with the United States. At the same time, Washington sought to negotiate separate agreements with each of its wartime allies and refused to enter into binding reciprocal regional defence arrangements with the Commonwealth.

Keywords: Commonwealth, Britain, United States, special relationship, bases

1. Introduction

Despite being a victorious power Britain's international position at the end of the Second World War was more precarious than it had been since the Napoleonic Wars. The nation was bankrupt; London's grip on its Empire had been severely weakened; and it had been eclipsed by the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet policy-makers in the incoming Labour government assumed Britain would remain a global power. Most prominent in their thoughts was the nurturing of the bonds forged with Washington during the war. As such, enormous historical attention has been lavished on what the former prime minister of Britain, Winston Churchill, famously labelled in his 5 March 1946 speech in Fulton, Missouri, the 'special relationship'. Yet the British Commonwealth of Nations was seen as the other central prop to Britain's attempts to resurrect its post-war international standing. Moreover, the Commonwealth was a vital feature of Britain's relationship with the United States.

In fact, Churchill himself had described the 'special relationship' as not exclusively Anglo-American but one between 'the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States' and as a 'fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples'. He also explained the mechanism underlying this alliance. While laying great emphasis on political, economic and cultural bonds, Churchill spelled out his key proposal to combat the growing Soviet threat: 'The continuance of the intimate relationship between our military advisers...It should carry with it the continuance of the present facilities for mutual security by the joint use of all Naval and Air Force bases in the possession of either country all over the world...Already we use together a large number of islands; more may well be entrusted to our joint care in the near future.' To achieve this goal, Churchill argued that the US-Canadian Permanent Joint Board of Defence 'should be extended to all British Commonwealths with full reciprocity'. By combining the material and moral power of the United States and the Commonwealth,

therefore, Churchill claimed ‘there will be no quivering, precarious balance of power to offer its temptation to ambition or adventure’.¹

Crucially, this vision was soon shared by the Labour foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, who D. K. Fieldhouse describes as ‘at least as Churchillian as Churchill’.² Indeed, just ten months after Churchill pronounced the ‘special relationship’ Bevin privately described the United States and the Commonwealth as ‘a joint controlling system’. Indeed, Bevin argued that any decline in the military position and prestige of the Commonwealth, particularly in the Pacific, would damage ‘our common cause’ with Washington.³ In many ways, therefore, this label was more appropriate than the emotive language used by Churchill since it focused on the close military ties that formed the bedrock of the relationship. Nevertheless, while between 1945 and 1947 the administration of the president of the United States, Harry Truman, sought exclusive or joint rights to numerous bases in British colonial and Commonwealth-controlled territories, its efforts proved a major point of controversy between Washington and the Commonwealth capitals. It should also be noted that these negotiations were separate from the well-known deliberations concerning the United States’ growing desire for base facilities in the British Isles. As such, this issue is excluded from this article.

Still, the Commonwealth bases issue has been largely overlooked by ‘special relationship’ historians. John Baylis, John Charmley, Alan Dobson, John Dumbrell, Ritchie Owendale, Bradford Perkins, Robin Renwick, and David Reynolds all agree that during the first eighteen months after the war, before the Cold War had become a reality, Anglo-American relations were characterised by tension. But these historians do not mention the bases issue, instead focussing on clashes over the US loan of \$3.75 billion to bankrupt Britain, nuclear cooperation, the Palestine Mandate, divided Germany, and the British withdrawal from Greece.⁴ Moreover, while Alex Danchev and Steve Marsh and John Baylis mention the US desire for Commonwealth bases, they include no detail regarding the bitter

negotiations undertaken.⁵ Randall Bennett Woods goes one step further, briefly discussing the US War and State departments' 'strongest bid' for the transfer of these bases. But Woods' focus is how this issue impacted the US loan to Britain.⁶ Moreover, Alan Bullock's magisterial biography of Bevin dedicates just three pages to his wrangling on the bases issue with the US secretary of state, James Byrnes.⁷ Likewise, Byrnes' memoirs are silent on these discussions.⁸

Additionally, Commonwealth historians have said little about the bases issue. H. Duncan Hall, Ivor Jennings, and Francine McKenzie focus on the constitutional and economic challenges faced by the Commonwealth after the Second World War.⁹ Nicholas Mansergh, W. David McIntyre, Krishna Srinivasan, and Patrick Gordon Walker do pay greater attention to Commonwealth regional defence planning but only briefly note base negotiations with the United States.¹⁰ Similarly, the leading historian of British decolonization, John Darwin, mentions Commonwealth defence but says nothing specific about the bases.¹¹

In contrast, Richard Best outlines the extensive planning undertaken by the US military during and after the Second World War regarding the acquisition of air and naval base rights to construct a global defensive chain. Yet Best is much more interested in bases in the North Atlantic, where the Soviet threat was more imminent, than in the Southwest Pacific, South Atlantic and India where the Commonwealth was more directly concerned.¹² Consequently, Best fails to fully address the strains created between Washington and the Commonwealth capitals over the bases. P. G. A. Orders is more effective in this respect since he argues that the Truman administration sought to pressure Britain, Australia and New Zealand to gain base rights in the Southwest Pacific but these three countries successfully collaborated to ensure that the Commonwealth continued to function as an independent

military force. But Orders goes into little depth regarding the negotiations and is only interested in this one region.¹³

Using American, British, Australian and New Zealand sources, therefore, this article demonstrates for the first time that in the initial post-war period the Commonwealth members were still largely unwilling to bow to American pressure, and strengthen their individual ties to Washington, if this meant sacrificing the close Commonwealth military connection. It will also show that the Truman administration refused to make any concessions to allay the fears of its wartime military partners, especially if this involved entering into an 'entangling alliance' with the Commonwealth. Instead, the prevailing view in Washington was that arrangements should be concluded with each Commonwealth country on an individual basis. In doing so, the majority of this article will focus on the talks regarding Commonwealth bases in the Southwest Pacific since these were the most fraught and dominated proceedings. However, the American military had global designs and Byrnes raised in conjunction with this issue the US desire for joint use of British airfields on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic and in India. As such, these difficult talks must also be examined. Lastly, the reciprocal use of US and Commonwealth naval ports, the only tangible agreement to come out of the negotiations, will be analysed.

2. Southwest Pacific Islands

Following the turnaround in fortunes in the war in 1943 the US military began considering its post-war global base requirements to prevent the country being exposed to aggression in the future. Yet the State Department did not want to discuss this matter with Britain until after the Axis Powers had been defeated.¹⁴ Consequently, the issue was first raised by Byrnes with Bevin on 28 September 1945 after the London Council of Foreign Ministers conference.

Byrnes revealed that the US joint chiefs of staff wanted long-term rights at military facilities that the United States had utilised or constructed at considerable expense during the war, including bases on Iceland and the Portuguese Azores and Cape Verde Islands. But the vast majority of the desired bases were located in territories governed by Commonwealth members in the Southwest Pacific. Washington wanted these countries to cover the costs of maintaining the bases in peacetime but their control be transferred to the US military in wartime. Moreover, Byrnes hinted that such a 'gesture' might convince Truman to reverse his recent decision to terminate Lend-Lease aid to cash-strapped Britain.¹⁵

The British initial response, however, was mixed. Clearly the Labour government, despite its anti-colonial credentials and desire to focus on welfare reform, continued to hold strategic and economic interests in the Southwest Pacific. Indeed, the first sea lord, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, argued on 11 January 1946 that Britain must 'show the flag' to maintain its prestige and prevent American domination of the region.¹⁶ Bevin, though, initially refused to discuss the matter 'until we could see the whole picture of what America really wanted' and doubted that any action could now dissuade Truman from terminating Lend-Lease. Evidently, as Bullock claims, Bevin distrusted Byrnes and believed that the proposal was part of a concerted effort to take advantage of Britain's weakened position.¹⁷ On the other hand, the British ambassador at Washington, Lord Halifax, was much more eager to meet US wishes, arguing that an agreement on bases would 'have [a] very useful effect on public opinion and Congress' regarding the many issues – especially the loan agreement – being negotiated between the two countries.¹⁸

As a result, Bevin adopted a step-by-step approach, requesting on 12 October 1945 a list of all the Commonwealth territories in which the United States desired base rights.¹⁹ On 6 November 1945 Byrnes obliged producing an aide-memoire containing two lists relating to the Southwest Pacific. The first list was composed of eighteen British governed islands –

including the condominium of Canton and Enderbury jointly governed with the United States – and nine islands governed by New Zealand whose sovereignty had been disputed by Washington for many years. The aide-memoire claimed the time was right for these islands to be recognised as American possessions, especially Canton, Funafuti and Christmas Island on which the US military had constructed facilities during the war. The second list consisted of ten islands – eight British-governed, including Tarawa, as well as Manus in the Australian League of Nations’ mandate of New Guinea and Upolu in the New Zealand mandate of Western Samoa – on which US bases had been constructed. The aide-memoire stated that the United States desired exclusive or joint control of these bases on the cryptic basis that ‘the strategic importance of these islands to the United States defences in the Pacific...requires no comment’.²⁰ In fact, the United States had spent over \$230 million constructing these bases and this evidently underlay the Services’ determination to retain the right to use them.²¹ What is more, on 7 November 1945 the joint chiefs of staff concluded that exclusive rights at Canton and joint rights at Manus were ‘essential’ while exclusive rights at Funafuti and joint rights at Tarawa were ‘desirable’.²²

Significantly, Bevin discussed Byrnes’ aide-memoire first not with his Labour colleagues but with Churchill. On 13 November 1945 the leader of the opposition responded in words prophetic of his Fulton speech, writing: ‘The future of the world depends upon the fraternal association of Great Britain and the Commonwealth with the United States...[since] the British Commonwealth and the United States were for strategic reasons one organism.’ Churchill added: ‘The long-term advantage to Britain and the Commonwealth is to have our affairs so interwoven with those of the United States in external and strategic matters.’ Churchill thus argued that joint association of the Commonwealth and the United States in the Southwest Pacific bases would make the former indispensable to the latter.²³ A week later the British chiefs of staff similarly argued that the joint use of bases in the Southwest Pacific

would be of value in ‘helping to tie the United States to us more firmly in defence matters...all around the globe’. Yet the military chiefs were more cautious than Churchill. They opposed any US-Commonwealth defence agreement in advance of the United Nations (UN) Security Council establishing its own security arrangements, fearing this would undermine the new world organisation and antagonise Moscow. The chiefs of staff also strongly opposed transferring sovereignty of the disputed islands until US intentions for them were clearer. In addition, they wanted reciprocal rights at US bases in the Central Pacific.²⁴

Bevin was thus caught in a quandary. He shared Churchill’s vision of using bases ‘to tie up the United States to the maximum extent in the defence of the British Commonwealth’. But Bevin also shared the military’s concerns and feared that ‘bad blood’ would be created between Britain and its Commonwealth allies if they were not immediately brought into ‘fullest consultation’.²⁵ On 22 November 1945, therefore, the British secretary of state for commonwealth relations, Lord Addison, informed the Australian and New Zealand governments of Byrnes’ proposals, and called for a joint approach.²⁶ This desire to work in harmony with the Pacific Dominions also fitted with Britain’s evolving post-war strategy for Commonwealth defence – based on Britain’s own limited resources – with each member assuming responsibility for its ‘zone’ with Australia and, to a lesser extent, New Zealand acting as the Commonwealth’s representatives in the Southwest Pacific.²⁷

This strategy also chimed with Australia’s own aspirations to take a leading role in the region. Even before the end of the Second World War, the Australian Labour government, especially the minister for external affairs, Dr H. V. Evatt, had given considerable thought to the post-war defence of the Southwest Pacific.²⁸ In fact, on 21 January 1944, concerned with growing American domination of the region and annoyed at being excluded from the 1943 Cairo Conference, Australia and New Zealand had signed the Canberra Pact. This agreement demanded that the two countries be consulted in all Pacific defence arrangements as well as

insisting that military bases constructed in the territory of another power could not be used for territorial claims. While Evatt had been the driving force behind the Canberra Pact, the Labour prime minister of New Zealand, Peter Fraser, wholeheartedly supported the agreement but was careful to insist that there was nothing in it calculated to disserve the close wartime relationship with the United States and insisted Pacific security depended upon mutual cooperation with Washington.²⁹

Then on 19 June 1945 the Australian Defence Committee concluded that British forces could no longer protect imperial possessions in the Pacific and Australia needed to take greater responsibility for its own local defences. Moreover, Australia required 'adequately protected bases in and to the north of Australia' to deter interruption of sea communications, sporadic raids, and invasion.³⁰ Clearly Australia and New Zealand remained haunted by events during 1942-3 when they had been left unprotected by Britain and relied on US forces to repel the Japanese offensive. At war's end, fearing a revanchist Japan, the Pacific Dominions, therefore, wanted to retain a US protective umbrella in the Southwest Pacific but on the condition that the Commonwealth character of the region was not diminished. In addition, the two countries believed that the islands claimed by the United States were crucial to their defence and could not be transferred in case Washington remained neutral in a future war as it had for much of the previous war.³¹ The prime minister of Australia, Ben Chifley, in particular, believed that Washington wanted exclusive control of the facilities on Australian-controlled Manus since this had cost approximately \$132 million and was the largest US naval repair base west of Pearl Harbor.³²

Nonetheless, on 10 December 1945 Byrnes welcomed bringing Australia and New Zealand into the base negotiations expecting them to support continued US military involvement in the Southwest Pacific. He also attempted to dispel Commonwealth concerns claiming that the disputed Pacific islands 'had little or no value' and the United States had no

military plans for them.³³ Australia and New Zealand, however, were far from the compliant vassals Byrnes expected. Fraser swiftly told Chifley that the islands under Commonwealth sovereignty 'should not be given up lightly' and no arrangements could be entered into before the establishment of the UN's security system. In response, Chifley stated he was in favour of 'strong joint British Commonwealth-United States bases in the Pacific' but only as part of 'an overall plan' for regional security.³⁴ Evatt, however, was most critical of Byrnes' proposals. The Australian had previously incurred Washington's ire over the 1944 Canberra Pact and by opposing the veto power of UN permanent members at the 1945 San Francisco Conference.³⁵ US antipathy towards Evatt, though, reached new heights over the bases issue. Evatt claimed on 12 January 1946 that the 'present [US] move is a try on', insisting that no Commonwealth territory be surrendered and use of military facilities in the Pacific must be reciprocal.³⁶

Consequently, Bevin wanted to reassure Byrnes that the Commonwealth was taking the US proposals seriously and invited the secretary of state to meet with the Commonwealth leaders gathered in London before the first UN General Assembly.³⁷ Byrnes agreed to a meeting on 22 January 1946 and clearly expected to convince the Commonwealth countries to accept his proposals since he emphasised that the United States had paid for the construction of the bases and implied that they might be needed against a revanchist Japan. Byrnes also stressed that it was in Britain's interest to settle the disputed islands issue while the loan deal was being passed in Congress since 'a settlement would have good effect upon his public and at the same time upon his admirals'. Byrnes was thus taken aback when the usually moderate Fraser responded that there was 'nothing doing' over the disputed islands. Fraser also offered to reimburse the United States for the base on Upolu to bring it under Commonwealth control. Not wanting the meeting to end on this sour note, however, Bevin proposed that a joint commission, composed of military and civilian officials from the four countries, meet to discuss all the practical issues concerned regarding the bases and disputed

islands in the Southwest Pacific. While Byrnes was clearly annoyed no solution had been found, he grudgingly agreed to hold exploratory talks in Washington.³⁸

The Australian government, however, adopted a harder line immediately after this meeting. To begin with, on 24 January 1946 Evatt informed the US Embassy in no uncertain terms that the Southwest Pacific bases should only be made available to the United States on the principle of reciprocity.³⁹ In addition, four days later Chifley informed Addison that he wanted the joint commission's terms to be broadened so that the future defence arrangements for the entire Pacific could be discussed. Alternatively, Chifley proposed holding a conference of all interested countries to discuss this issue in Australia given its proximity to the area of interest. Evatt believed that these proposals were necessary since 'there is a tendency on the part of United States to isolate such questions from one another when really they are part and parcel of the same broad question as to the future Pacific set up'.⁴⁰ Consequently, Canberra submitted a note to the US State Department insisting that Australia and New Zealand be represented at all stages of discussions regarding military base rights in the Pacific.⁴¹

With US-Commonwealth tensions mounting the prime minister of Britain, Clement Attlee, suggested on 4 February 1946 holding a Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting to principally discuss Pacific defence. Chifley promptly welcomed this proposal hoping to unite the Commonwealth behind Australia's position.⁴² Fraser and Addison, however, argued that they had committed to holding preliminary talks in Washington and it would create 'misunderstanding' if they withdrew now. Moreover, they believed that these exploratory discussions could only help reveal what the United States truly had in mind. Addison, therefore, assured the Australian High Commission in London that the British government simply sought to use the talks in Washington to persuade the Americans that 'we are not going to run them out' and nothing would prejudice any future Pacific security scheme.⁴³

Still, the Australian position solidified. To start with, Chifley produced a directive on 14 February 1946 stating that the future of the US bases constructed on Commonwealth territory should be considered simultaneously with Pacific defence under Article 52 of the UN Charter that permitted the establishment of regional security arrangements. This directive also insisted that any plan for Pacific bases include the principle of reciprocity.⁴⁴ Evatt then went even further stating that the United States' 'stale and not genuine' claims regarding the sovereignty of the Pacific islands 'should be made openly before the permanent court [of international justice] and resisted'.⁴⁵ Yet Bevin argued that Britain and New Zealand at least must honour their commitment to hold talks in Washington and make it clear that the Commonwealth wanted 'to associate the Americans as closely as possible with us in common defence problems in the Pacific as elsewhere'.⁴⁶

Like the Commonwealth, the Truman administration was also becoming divided on the Pacific bases. At a cross-departmental meeting on 9 February 1946 the US Army argued that Manus and Upolu were of their 'lowest requirement'. The State Department also urged the United States to pursue control of these bases only if they were absolutely necessary given these islands were part of mandates that would soon be transferred to the UN Trusteeship Council. The US Navy and Air Force, nevertheless, were desperate to maintain their Manus and Upolu bases so that in wartime these could be activated to protect the United States' southern flank. These two Services thus wanted the two islands declared 'strategic areas' under Article 82 of the UN Charter and for the United States to be made either the sole or a joint trustee when they became UN Trusteeships.⁴⁷ Byrnes was clearly annoyed by this attitude and informed Halifax that the Services were 'opening their mouths wider in this question of bases than Congress would be for long ready to pay for' and were 'in danger of fighting the last war again'.⁴⁸

Even so, Byrnes sought now to drive a wedge between the Commonwealth countries by dealing with them individually. He focused his attentions first on New Zealand. He met with Fraser in Washington on 26 February 1946 and stated that the United States preferred bilateral agreements rather than dealing with the Commonwealth as a whole. More specifically, the Truman administration did not want exclusive control of the Upolu base but only the right to 'avail themselves of these facilities whenever the necessity arose'. Byrnes thus produced a draft agreement proposing that when Western Samoa was transferred to the UN Trusteeship Council Upolu be designated a 'strategic area' allowing the United States continued use of the military bases on the island.⁴⁹ In response, Fraser promised full consideration of this proposal but made it plain that he would have to discuss it with Australia and Britain. He also questioned concluding any agreement that might derogate from the prestige of the UN Trusteeship Council. Still, Byrnes believed that his proposal had been well-received and claimed Fraser and he 'were now about 99.9% in agreement'.⁵⁰ While clearly an exaggeration, Fraser was now reluctant to participate in the Washington talks. Yet Bevin understood what Byrnes was seeking to achieve and was concerned that 'if New Zealand were now also to run out, we should indeed be exposing ourselves to allowing each member of the Commonwealth to be taken in detail by the Americans with clear disadvantage to each of us, instead of presenting as united a front as possible'. On this basis Wellington reluctantly agreed to participate in the talks.⁵¹

As a result, on 13 March 1946 the first Anglo-American-New Zealand meeting took place.⁵² Some initial progress was made with the US delegation accepting that if it was granted long-term joint rights to the Manus and Upolu bases Australia and New Zealand could still extend similar rights to other Commonwealth countries. It was also agreed that Australia and New Zealand should cover the costs of maintaining these bases in peacetime. Nonetheless, the meeting was soon side-tracked when the US delegation raised its desire for

exclusive control of the bases on the disputed Canton, Funafuti and Christmas islands. Moreover, to the British delegation's annoyance, the US delegation again linked the bases issue to the loan negotiations.⁵³ Still, Halifax reported his view that the United States only really desired exclusive rights to the bases on the disputed islands and would renounce its other claims. But Bevin was annoyed by Halifax's interference and instructed the British ambassador to focus on finding out as much as possible about Byrnes' specific proposals so these could be explored at the forthcoming Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting.⁵⁴

At the second meeting in Washington on 19 March 1946, nevertheless, the atmosphere deteriorated with the British delegation calling for reciprocal Commonwealth rights at US bases in the Central and North Pacific. The US delegation quickly sought to quash this 'embarrassing' question by stating that Washington was asking for rights to bases it had constructed on Commonwealth territory while the Commonwealth countries had paid nothing for facilities on American territory. The US delegation also warned the British not to raise this matter so soon after Churchill's Fulton speech that had proven so controversial in the United States. Still, the Americans did reassure the Commonwealth delegations that use of US bases would never be denied in wartime.⁵⁵ Consequently, after two further meetings at which no progress was made, Bevin decided on 3 April 1946 that an agreement was a distant possibility and believed the time was now ripe to discuss the Australian proposal for a Pacific defence arrangement with the Commonwealth leaders.⁵⁶ He was evidently influenced by a chiefs of staff report presented to the Cabinet the previous day outlining the Commonwealth's strategic position. This report placed great emphasis on the importance of the Southwest Pacific as one of Britain's 'main support areas' in a future – potentially atomic – war and prompted the Attlee government to find a means to defend the area without having to commit more resources.⁵⁷ Yet, as Halifax concluded, the exploratory talks only confirmed that London and Washington had fundamentally different approaches. Britain desired close

US-Commonwealth association in the defence of the Southwest Pacific. In contrast, the Truman administration only wanted to secure rights to the US-constructed bases in the Southwest Pacific and attain the disputed islands.⁵⁸

Before the Commonwealth leaders met in London, however, Byrnes tried again to divide them. To begin with, on 14 March 1946, just a day after the Washington talks had commenced, the State Department handed a memorandum to the Australian Legation stating that the United States desired joint rights at the Manus base and for the island to be designated a 'strategic area' when Australia transferred its New Guinea mandate to the UN Trusteeship Council.⁵⁹ Evatt, however, was in no mood to compromise. The previous day he had told the House of Representatives that his government would not agree to any arrangements for the re-allocation of territory or the disposition of military bases in the Pacific or to the lessening of Australian control over its territories. Evatt insisted that any plans for the joint use of bases in Australia's dependent territories must 'be preceded by an over-all defence arrangement for the region of the Western Pacific...[and] Australia should be entitled to reciprocal use of foreign bases in the region'.⁶⁰ Evatt, therefore, informed Byrnes that he desired a regional arrangement and was opposed to 'piecemeal proposals' on individual bases. He thus informed the US Embassy that he could not discuss anything concrete until after the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting.⁶¹ Byrnes did, though, have more success with the sympathetic British ambassador. He bluntly told Halifax that he wanted a general agreement on the Pacific bases to be signed in the next two or three weeks to assist the passage of the loan through Congress. In consequence, Halifax renewed his calls that his government accept Byrnes' proposals to strengthen bilateral relations.⁶²

Yet the British ambassador's words fell on deaf ears at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting held in late April-early May 1946. Chifley and Evatt took the lead outlining Australia's plans for a Southwest Pacific defence scheme modelled on the US-

Canadian Permanent Board of Joint Defence. Moreover, the spiky Australian added that he was pleased Britain now supported regional defence arrangements after appearing to previously relegate the Southwest Pacific to a secondary position in its global strategic plans. In addition, the deputy prime minister of New Zealand, Walter Nash, present in Fraser's absence, fully agreed with the Australian position. The Commonwealth leaders, therefore, agreed to invite the United States to join them in a formal conference to discuss a Pacific defence plan. Chifley was thus extremely pleased that Australia's view had now been accepted by the other Commonwealth countries.⁶³

While the Commonwealth leaders were meeting, however, the Truman administration adopted a diametrically opposite policy. On 27 April 1946 the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC) concluded that a regional arrangement for the Southwest Pacific would be 'artificial...premature and inadvisable' given the lack of an imminent threat in the region and might set a dangerous precedent for the Soviet Union to establish rival regional arrangements. Accordingly, the SWNCC advocated continued piecemeal discussions based on individual bases.⁶⁴ Unsurprisingly, therefore, when Bevin revealed to Byrnes at a private meeting on 2 May 1946 during the Paris Council of Foreign Ministers that the Commonwealth desired a conference to discuss Pacific defence the secretary of state insisted that the United States 'had no-one against whom they need prepare to defend themselves'. As such, Byrnes stated that all the United States desired in the Southwest Pacific were naval repair facilities; the islands for which it had claims; and for Britain to cede Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands to the United States. To justify this final request Byrnes argued that the American public attached great sentimental value to Tarawa, where one of the US Marines' most important battles had taken place during the war. He added that the island's transfer would greatly aid passage of the loan in Congress.⁶⁵

At this point Bevin greatly complicated matters by completely ignoring the views expressed at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting. Acting on his own initiative and evidently wanting to present his Commonwealth colleagues with a *fait accompli*, Bevin indicated to Byrnes that his government might be willing to cede Canton, Christmas Island and Tarawa; grant the US joint base rights on Funafuti; and even throw the other disputed islands 'into the bag'.⁶⁶ Bevin was clearly conscious of the United States' hardening Cold War position at this time, triggered by George Kennan's famous 'Long Telegram' sent from Moscow on 22 February 1946, and wished to present Britain as Washington's most useful and loyal ally. In fact, Bevin's principal objective from this time onwards was to entice the Truman administration to commit to protect Western Europe from the Soviet Union and was prepared to put this ahead of Commonwealth unity. But on hearing of Bevin's proposals to Byrnes the following day both the British Cabinet and Commonwealth leaders present in London rejected them, arguing it was a British principle not to cede territory without ascertaining the views of the local population. Serious doubts were also expressed that a sudden announcement to cede Tarawa would favourably influence the loan debate. Bevin was thus instructed to withdraw his proposals but reiterate the Commonwealth's willingness to discuss these issues alongside broader on Pacific defence.⁶⁷

Yet Bevin, used to getting his way on foreign policy, sought to convince Attlee to at least cede Tarawa on the grounds that transferring 'this single atoll...[that] meant little to us but much to the Americans' would have a considerable positive 'psychological effect' on the Truman administration. In addition, Bevin warned that he would have to give some 'excuse' to Byrnes for rejecting this proposal since if he gave the real reasons 'it will make things worse'.⁶⁸ Halifax also supported these arguments claiming that Truman had expressed his pleasure with the progress made by Byrnes and Bevin and arguing that ceding Tarawa would strengthen Byrnes' hands during the loan debate.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the British Cabinet

remained adamant.⁷⁰ Still, on 6 May 1946 the prime minister of South Africa, Jan Smuts, rhetorically asked his Commonwealth colleagues: 'Should we not throw out a bait to catch the fish?' Smuts argued that if the United States was granted base rights 'today' they would accept greater obligations across the globe 'tomorrow'. But Evatt questioned why Washington wanted bases in the Southwest Pacific if it had no security interests in the region as Byrnes claimed. He also insisted that the Commonwealth continue to act in unison and not grant base rights unless the United States accepted reciprocal obligations. Attlee did, however, convince Evatt and Nash to follow up on the bases issue directly with Byrnes in Washington on their journeys home.⁷¹

On 10 May 1946, therefore, Bevin reluctantly informed Byrnes of the Commonwealth's decision and two days later the British Cabinet concluded that 'the question should be allowed to rest for the present'.⁷² Moreover, while the US ambassador in London, Averell Harriman, suggested that he continue to press the Attlee government to issue a 'general statement' on bases to influence the loan debate in Congress, Byrnes felt nothing more could be done and it was up to Britain to make the next move.⁷³ On 5 June 1946 the joint chiefs of staff also reduced its aspirations for bases in the Southwest Pacific to 'required if reasonably attainable, but not absolutely essential to the base system'. Even so, Washington did still desire sovereignty over Canton, Funafuti and Christmas Island.⁷⁴

In stark contrast, Evatt was unwilling to accept the defeat of his regional defence plan and was determined to personally outline his proposals for the Truman administration.⁷⁵ Consequently, between late May and late July 1946 Evatt held a number of meetings in Washington with top American officials informing Chifley that 'the door to negotiations has not been closed and that despite all difficulties, satisfactory arrangements may result'. He also maintained that 'Byrnes' attitude was sympathetic, but non-committal' despite insisting it would be difficult to justify any new defence obligation to Congress.⁷⁶ Moreover, Truman

told Evatt a defence treaty would be difficult since it would extend American obligations ‘to an area far outside their present hemispherical sphere of influence’. Evatt, ever the opportunist, however, immediately suggested that an informal statement clarifying that the United States would defend Australia and New Zealand in a future war would suffice.⁷⁷

While Truman gave no indication that he supported such a statement, Evatt doggedly pursued this plan with the US chief of staff for the Navy, Admiral Chester Nimitz. Evatt suggested that if the United States was granted joint use of Manus, Australia should be compensated with access to the US base at Guam. Evatt argued that this alternative plan ‘could properly be regarded as a practical regional arrangement’ that could lead to greater defence obligations at a later date. He thus informed Chifley that Nimitz ‘seemed receptive to, and even attracted by, this alternative approach’ and agreed such an arrangement was ‘business-like and at the same time justifiable’ since it implied ‘effective continuation of wartime cooperation’. As a result, Evatt felt that Nimitz would recommend the reciprocal use of base facilities if in the initial stages the bases involved not too numerous. He was, accordingly, ‘hopeful, though not overconfident’ of achieving his objective.⁷⁸ At the same time, Chifley was greatly encouraged by Evatt’s reports, hoping an informal arrangement would deflect public concerns that the United States might withdraw from the Southwest Pacific altogether. What is more, the Australian Cabinet supported Evatt’s informal statement proposal although its ultimate goal remained a regional defence arrangement.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, once Evatt left Washington negotiations came to an abrupt halt. Evidently, Evatt’s reports had been exaggerated and the Truman administration had only sought to mollify him.

Wellington’s position also hardened at this time. On 11 July 1946 Nash informed the US undersecretary of state, Dean Acheson, that his government opposed the transfer of any of the disputed Commonwealth islands to the United States. Nash also insisted that the US desire for base rights in its Western Samoa mandate could only be worked out through a

regional defence arrangement.⁸⁰ Additionally, the New Zealand government stated it was ‘unnecessary and most undesirable’ to declare Western Samoa a ‘strategic area’ in the Trusteeship Agreement it would submit to the UN or to grant base rights to the United States before this agreement had been concluded.⁸¹

In consequence, by the late summer of 1946 the bases issue appeared to be deadlocked. On 8 November 1946, however, the tenacious Evatt told the Australian House of Representatives that he ‘had every reason to suppose that a satisfactory arrangement would be come to’.⁸² Evatt then informed the US ambassador at Canberra, Robert Butler, that he desired arrangements for the joint use of the Manus base but ‘to satisfy his Parliament, Australia must have arrangements for at least token right for mutual use of facilities in at least one American base’ on Guam, Canton or American Samoa.⁸³ Evatt also reiterated to Butler that Australia ‘should be in on the ground floor’ with the United States on all Pacific matters.⁸⁴ This last-ditched effort to establish some sort of reciprocal arrangement, though, was soon rejected. On 12 December 1946 Butler revealed that an agreement had to be reached over Manus before Washington would even consider Australian use of its bases.⁸⁵

By the end of 1946 an agreement on the Southwest Pacific bases thus appeared more distant than ever. But Byrnes’ resignation on 10 January 1947 led to renewed hope that a solution could be found. Bevin anticipated the appointment of Second World War hero General George Marshall as secretary of state would lead to ‘very wide repercussions’ regarding US defence policy, especially in the Pacific.⁸⁶ The new British ambassador at Washington, Lord Inverchapel, was in agreement and urged the Foreign Office to make concessions on the disputed islands to convince Marshall to agree to a favourable solution to the bases issue.⁸⁷ Still, Evatt was first to act, returning to his proposal for the reciprocal use of bases on Manus and Guam. Rather than encouraging this proposal, though, the new US ambassador at Canberra, Arthur Richards, on 27 January 1947 informed Evatt that the US

Navy was now planning to completely withdraw from Manus and that an agreement was needed to ensure the upkeep of the base.⁸⁸ Yet, in spite of this clear message, the Australian government continued to press for the reciprocal use of bases and Evatt proposed that he visit the United States, as well as Nimitz be invited to Canberra, to try to make progress.⁸⁹

As a result, on 21 March 1947 Evatt's proposals were again raised with the State Department. Yet on 2 April 1946 the Australian Embassy was informed that the US withdrawal from Manus could not be halted since Congress had significantly cut military appropriations following a major review of peacetime spending.⁹⁰ Furthermore, in early June 1947 the commander-in-chief of the US Navy in the Pacific, Admiral Louis Denfeld, visited Australia. Denfeld only briefly discussed military matters during his stay but left a note stating unequivocally that 'the Japanese military menace which caused the construction of the facilities of Manus has now been removed'. The note added that the US military thought it preferable to withdraw completely from Manus and 'for no agreement according post-war military rights to the United States at Manus to be concluded'. The note went on to state Manus was only 'of slight strategic interest' to the United States in view of the base facilities now available in the former Japanese mandated islands captured during the war.⁹¹ Evatt was greatly disappointed by Washington's decision and expressed his view to Addison that, while Australia had 'steadfastly declined yielding to the United States on Manus except as part of a plan of regional defence or in return for reciprocal rights', Washington was 'even now endeavouring to play off our interests one against another'.⁹²

In the meantime, British hopes of rekindling negotiations after Marshall's appointment initially appeared well founded. The SWNCC continued to seek the transfer of sovereignty of Canton, Funafuti and Christmas Island although it was willing to accept long-term joint base rights on these islands.⁹³ In early April 1947 the State Department thus produced a new more limited plan proposing Britain surrender its share of the condominium

of Canton and Enderbury and cede Christmas Island. In return, the United States would drop all its other requests for base rights in British territories in the Pacific since the War and Navy departments' demands had fallen alongside their budget cuts.⁹⁴

Significantly, while continuing to oppose any transfer of territory, the Attlee government wanted to utilise this proposal as an opening. By June 1947 London had thus produced a counterproposal offering the United States a ninety-nine year lease for the base on Christmas Island; prolonging the existing fifty year condominium of Canton and Enderbury to ninety-nine years; and providing the US Marines with two acres of land on Tarawa to establish a memorial and cemetery. In return, the British proposed that Commonwealth countries retain the right to use bases on these islands, including in wartime even if the United States remained neutral, and be accorded the right to use facilities in American Samoa and air staging facilities in the Philippines. In addition, Washington would have to abandon its claim to Funafuti and publicly state that the security of the Southwest Pacific was a matter of concern. The Attlee government, accordingly, hoped such arrangements would 'open the way to discussions at a convenient moment on regional defence'.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, London desired Commonwealth support for its counterproposal before transmitting it to the United States. On 7 August 1947 Fraser promptly revealed that he supported the British approach as a means to reopening negotiations despite doubting the Truman administration's willingness to compromise.⁹⁶ The Chifley government, however, remained non-committal and Evatt, clearly upset by the failure of his own initiative, repeatedly postponed holding Commonwealth discussions on the matter. Only on 19 November 1947, after five months of delay, did Canberra finally agree to support London's proposals on the grounds that it was in Australia's interest to retain some US role in the region, particularly if the right to use facilities in American Samoa could be secured.⁹⁷

Yet the window of opportunity, if one had ever existed, had already been closed. On 9 September 1947 the joint chiefs of staff had concluded that base rights on the Commonwealth islands in the Southwest Pacific were no longer desirable.⁹⁸ The State Department thus paid short shrift to the British counterproposal, insisting that the Attlee government recognise US sovereignty over the Canton and Enderbury condominium and Christmas Island and in return the United States would drop its claims to the other 'immaterial' disputed islands. The Australian government, however, insisted that all of Washington's claims were 'frivolous' and adamantly opposed surrendering control over any Pacific islands 'as bargaining points'.⁹⁹

In December 1947, therefore, the controversial negotiations regarding base rights in the Southwest Pacific concluded without the creation of Bevin's 'joint controlling system' for that area. This episode demonstrated that while the Commonwealth countries saw their security in the Southwest Pacific intimately tied to each other and to the United States, Washington shared neither the same strategic interest in the region nor the desire for close military relations with the Commonwealth. The Truman administration also clearly did not understand how intimate Commonwealth bonds remained after the Second World War. As Orders argues, it is easy to see the Commonwealth perspective on the Southwest Pacific bases 'as an imperial hangover' and as a 'failure to adapt to new economic, political and military realities'.¹⁰⁰ Yet these negotiations also revealed the very real frustrations felt by the Commonwealth governments at being treated by Washington as junior partners in a region formerly seen as their own.

3. Ascension Island and India

Nevertheless, the Southwest Pacific was not the only region where the United States desired exclusive or joint rights to bases on Commonwealth territory. When Byrnes presented his list

of desirable bases to Bevin on 6 November 1945 he also included the airbase at Wideawake Field on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic and a number of airfields in India. These bases were seen as an integral part of the United States' post-war global security network and were discussed alongside the Southwest Pacific bases. Yet the negotiations over these airfields involved their own specific problems and generated additional tensions. Also, despite both Ascension and India being British colonies, rather than Commonwealth territories, London viewed Washington's request for rights at these bases in the context of the broader issue of Commonwealth defence.

Wideawake Field had been constructed by the United States during the Second World War at a cost of approximately \$7.25 million and the joint right to use this base was categorised by the joint chiefs of staff as 'essential'.¹⁰¹ The Truman administration, however, did not return to this question until 19 March 1946 during the Anglo-American-New Zealand exploratory talks in Washington. During these negotiations the State Department produced a memorandum outlining its desires for Wideawake Field, stressing that the US military viewed this base as a key staging point for air travel across the South Atlantic. The Foreign Office, though, had clearly given little thought to this issue since November 1945 and was thrown when it was raised in conjunction with what it considered the more pressing issue of the Southwest Pacific bases. The British delegation was thus instructed to state it had no authorisation to discuss Ascension. Yet the US delegation insisted and their British counterparts grudgingly accepted incorporating this question into the discussions.¹⁰²

All the same, the Attlee government viewed Ascension not as an exclusively Anglo-American issue but as one relating to the defence of southern Africa. Just as Australia and New Zealand were seen as having special responsibility for Commonwealth security in the Southwest Pacific, South Africa was deemed to have principle interest in the southern African 'zone' which was also viewed as one of Britain's 'main support areas'.¹⁰³ Moreover,

much like Canberra in the Southwest Pacific, Pretoria had long sought greater influence in what it considered South Africa's backyard. While Britain distrusted South Africa's expansionist aspirations, it did not want to discourage Pretoria when it suited Commonwealth defence interests.¹⁰⁴ In consequence, the British delegation in Washington coordinated closely with the South African Legation during the discussions on Ascension. On 20 March 1946 Bevin also raised the matter with Smuts – in London for the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting – who largely shared the views of Churchill, his close friend, as well as the foreign secretary, regarding US-Commonwealth relations. The South African premier, therefore, told Bevin that the Commonwealth should be prepared to concede to the United States 'much of a free hand by way of strategic bases' to convince Washington to 'loyally support us in our vital African interests'.¹⁰⁵

Nonetheless, with tensions mounting over the Southwest Pacific bases in the summer of 1946, the Ascension question again drifted into the background. In fact, in June 1946 the joint chiefs of staff downgraded Ascension to the category of 'required if reasonably attainable by negotiations, but not absolutely essential to the base system'.¹⁰⁶ Then on 14 November 1946 the US War Department revealed that it now wanted to withdraw American military personnel from the island but to maintain the strategically important facilities for use in wartime. The War Department thus proposed that it subsidise Pan-American Airways to maintain Wideawake Field for civil aviation purposes so that the base could be quickly reverted to military use in a future conflict.¹⁰⁷ Still, Bevin dragged his feet on Ascension over the winter of 1946-7 since he did not want to set any dangerous precedents for the more important discussions on the Southwest Pacific. Bevin, conscious of issues regarding sovereignty, also wanted the airfield to remain under British military control rather than being placed in the hands of an American civilian airline. But since Britain did not have the

resources to maintain Wideawake Field, on 11 February 1947 Bevin reluctantly accepted the US proposal on the condition Pretoria concurred.¹⁰⁸

On 13 March 1947, though, the War Department informed the British Embassy that its budget had been severely cut by Congress and it could no longer subsidise Pan-American Airways. The State Department proposed instead that the British firm Cable and Wireless maintain the telecommunications facilities on Ascension ‘in case of emergency’.¹⁰⁹ Bevin was evidently confused by these mixed signals and warned Marshall that Wideawake Field might become ‘unusable’.¹¹⁰ Even so, the cash-strapped US military promptly withdrew its personnel from Ascension and the facilities fell into disrepair despite the joint chiefs of staff’s continued desire for joint rights at Wideawake Field.¹¹¹ As such, no agreement was reached over Ascension. But the same level of tension had not arisen as with the Southwest Pacific bases. Clearly, Wideawake Field, while militarily important, was deemed strategically vital by neither the United States nor the Commonwealth and the issue was not linked to any binding regional defence arrangements.

Nevertheless, while it had been partially receptive to Washington’s initiative regarding Ascension, the Attlee government was unwilling to entertain Byrnes’ proposals for joint rights at the Indian airfields at Dudhkundi and Barrackpore, near Kolkata, and Karachi. These airfields had been enlarged by the United States during the Second World War at a cost of over \$1 million and used mainly to transport supplies to the Southeast Asian and Chinese theatres. Yet, with the extremely difficult negotiations for Indian independence in full swing, Bevin informed Byrnes on 15 November 1945 that his proposals placed Britain in a ‘very difficult situation’ since India was now ‘virtually a sovereign state’.¹¹² In addition, the secretary of state for India, Lord Pethick-Lawrence, and the viceroy to India, Lord Wavell, agreed that negotiations regarding the right to use these bases would have to wait until after Indian independence.¹¹³

Washington appeared to appreciate these arguments and did not return to the matter until 11 February 1946 when the joint chiefs of staff included the airbases at Kolkata and Karachi, as well as at Agra and Yangon, on a list of global bases at which air transit rights were deemed desirable.¹¹⁴ On 28 February 1946, therefore, Byrnes emphatically informed Halifax by way of a map that Indian airfields, in comparison to the Southwest Pacific bases, were ‘within closer reach of where danger might develop’ and ‘plumped the palm of his hand down on Siberia’. Byrnes obviously did not want to name the Soviet Union as a potential enemy with the Cold War in its infancy. But there was little doubt in Halifax’s mind that the Truman administration now attached great importance to securing facilities in India as ‘an advanced outpost on the periphery of the Soviet orbit’.¹¹⁵ In April 1946 the India Office, however, warned again that no agreement could be reached on this issue until after Indian independence. Furthermore, the British Cabinet Mission conducting negotiations in India opposed raising the American proposal believing that it would further complicate their difficult job. The Cabinet Mission simply recommended that Washington seek to negotiate directly with the soon-to-be-established Indian interim government.¹¹⁶

Even so, Byrnes did not initially appear to grasp that British rule of India was ending and continued to press his proposal with Bevin at Paris, stressing that the United States ‘could provide the greatest aid in case of trouble in the Indian Ocean by having the necessary facilities’. On 6 May 1946, though, Byrnes informed Bevin that the US military was no longer interested in the Indian airfields.¹¹⁷ Evidently, Byrnes had understood from Britain’s own bitter experience that base rights in India would not be granted at present. Indeed, India continued to be considered vital to the Commonwealth’s defence strategy given its proximity to the Soviet Union and location at the crossroads between Britain, its Asian colonies, and the Pacific Dominions. As such, during the independence negotiations the Attlee government sought to convince the Indian nationalist leaders, including the future prime ministers of India

and Pakistan, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammad Ali Jinnah respectively, to sign a formal defence treaty permitting continued use of military facilities on the subcontinent. Yet both Nehru and Jinnah were unwilling to enter into defence relations with Britain believing this would derogate independence even before it had been won. With India rapidly descending into sectarian violence, therefore, the Attlee government accelerated its withdrawal plans, postponing attempts to negotiate a defence treaty.¹¹⁸ Accordingly, the Indian airfields issue was dropped in early 1946 before it generated serious Anglo-American tensions. Even so, on 9 September 1947, less than a month after Partition, the joint chiefs of staff renewed their desires for transit rights at the airbases in independent India and Pakistan.¹¹⁹

4. Reciprocal Use of Naval Ports

Despite the many problems encountered between the Commonwealth countries and the United States over base rights, one notable success was achieved. On 23 August 1946, with the negotiations at a nadir, Byrnes proposed to Bevin the reciprocal use of all US and Commonwealth naval ports and air facilities for refuelling, loading supplies, minor repairs and recreational purposes. He argued that this was necessary with the reversion to peacetime arrangements imminent since this would entail needing to attain through diplomatic channels permission to use each other's facilities on every occasion. While Byrnes made this proposal 'in a seemingly casual way', Bevin immediately understood that this was a serious attempt to break the deadlock and informed Attlee that such arrangements were 'of great advantage'. Bevin also connected this proposal to Washington's growing acceptance of 'the possibility of another war in the present generation'. In addition, Attlee and the chiefs of staff agreed that the proposal had 'every advantage and no substantial disadvantage' as long as all Commonwealth members were included and it was applied globally.¹²⁰

Yet the negotiations got off to a rocky start in September 1946. To Bevin's disappointment, the State Department limited its 'embryo plan' to reciprocal use of naval ports at Gibraltar, Malta, Guam and Pearl Harbor. Bevin thus informed Byrnes that to be effective the agreement needed to be global and include air facilities given the ever-increasing strategic importance of air power. But Byrnes explained that emphasis was placed on the Mediterranean and the North Pacific due to the difficulties presented by Australia's plans for a Southwest Pacific security arrangement.¹²¹ Realising Byrnes would not go any further, Bevin dropped his demands and proposed that Britain and the United States undertake an informal understanding allowing each country's navy to use the other's ports as a guest rather than through a written agreement 'liable to misinterpretation' by Moscow.¹²²

Bevin's proposal was promptly accepted by the State Department and on 24 October 1946 an Anglo-American naval understanding was established. Washington, however, continued to resist British calls to extend the reciprocal arrangements to air facilities, arguing that this would 'arouse international interest' and *ad hoc* practices already existed between the United States and Commonwealth countries. Still, the Foreign Office was pleased progress had been made believing it 'desirable to get what we can by stages rather than to hold out for too much all at once'.¹²³ The chiefs of staff, though, continued to press for an understanding regarding the use of air facilities for staging purposes, stating that this would not involve the stationing of military personnel on foreign territory or create controversy. The Truman administration, nevertheless, refused to budge and in early December 1946 London dropped the matter for fear of risking what had already been agreed.¹²⁴

Significantly, the British government had not, as was normally the case, kept the Commonwealth capitals fully informed of these discussions since Washington had explicitly wished to pursue separate negotiations with each country. The Dominions Office, therefore, only informed the Commonwealth countries of Britain's position in December 1946 once

Attlee decided it would be unfortunate if the Dominions got the impression something had been settled without them.¹²⁵ The British government was thus relieved to find out very similar understandings were being reached in concurrent discussions between the US and Canadian, Australian and New Zealand navies.¹²⁶ The United States did not, however, seek an understanding with South Africa given the limited contact between the two countries' navies. Instead, Britain agreed that the US Navy could utilise its naval base at Simonstown outside Cape Town with Pretoria being kept informed.¹²⁷ Evidently, the Commonwealth countries, while acting alone in this instance, were united in recognising the practical benefits of the reciprocal use of naval ports with the United States. Moreover, while the agreements reached were limited, they represented the potential basis for future defence arrangements.

5. Conclusion

Between 1945 and 1947 rights to use military bases appeared to offer an opportunity to strengthen the US-Commonwealth 'special relationship' forged during the Second World War. Washington wanted long-term global base rights while Commonwealth countries had such facilities in their territories. Yet this article has demonstrated that base rights proved one of the most contentious issues experienced between Washington and the Commonwealth capitals in the immediate post-war period. The Truman administration expected its junior partners to willingly grant base rights without having to make concessions of their own. In particular, Washington resisted every effort by the Commonwealth to involve it in reciprocal defence arrangements. At the same time, the US government showed little understanding of the importance the Commonwealth continued to hold for its members, seeking repeatedly to drive wedges between them to achieve its ends. In stark contrast, despite the vastly changed post-war international environment, the Commonwealth members sought an equal alliance

with the United States while also retaining traditionally exclusive ties with each other. What is more, Washington's strategic priorities did not duplicate those of the Commonwealth.

While the Southwest Pacific, South Asia and southern Africa were seen as important to US military planners, the Commonwealth deemed these areas vital to their security.

Consequently, American desires for bases in these regions were curtailed when negotiations stalled and Congress imposed military budget cuts.

This article has added, therefore, significant new insights into the embryonic stages of the US-Commonwealth 'special relationship'. With memories of the Second World War fresh and the emergence of the Cold War, the Commonwealth capitals were determined to utilize their strengths – namely bases in the Southwest Pacific, India and on Ascension Island – as a bargaining chip to establish binding military ties, or what Bevin termed a 'joint controlling system', with the United States. Furthermore, Commonwealth cohesion proved surprisingly resilient under pressure from the Truman administration, with each government refusing to deviate from their shared goal. For its part, though, the United States' unwillingness to compromise further confirms that its relationship with the Commonwealth was only 'special' as long as it was on Washington's terms. Agreements could thus only be reached when American and Commonwealth interests aligned over limited mutually beneficial issues such as the reciprocal use of naval facilities.

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