



The Churchill Complex: The Curse of Being Special, From Winston and FDR to Trump and Brexit by Ian Buruma.

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Ian Buruma, a prominent public intellectual and former editor of *The New York Review of Books*, has added another book to his prolific output. *The Churchill Complex* is a history of the so-called “special relationship” between Great Britain and the United States, a diplomatic-political alliance that reaches back some two hundred years, to the Congress of Vienna, and runs up to recent US misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. By “special relationship,” Buruma means what such varied advocates as Theodore Roosevelt, Rudyard Kipling, Cecil Rhodes, and Woodrow Wilson enunciated at the opening of the twentieth century: a global Pax Anglo-Americana steeped in “common values, the shared English language, and the Anglo-American love of freedom” (10). Liberalism and faith in the progressive force of “civilization” were the hallmarks of this relationship, a Nordic Darwinism its backbone. Senator Albert J. Beveridge dramatically summed it up in the debate over the acquisition of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War: “God,” he proclaimed, “has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-admiration. No! He has made us the master-organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns” (13).

Politically, this manifest destiny would justify Britain’s far-flung empire as well as America’s subsequent economic expansion around the globe. But the doctrine was not usually given such explicit Beveridgian form, according to Buruma, because its tone was too ruthless, the implications too arrogant for worldwide consumption. That is, until Winston Churchill adroitly softened it, first to coax America into the Second World War when British defeat loomed and, second, to gird the fragmenting British empire after the war ended. Here begins the modern history of “the complex.”

In Churchill’s refurbished post-1945 formulation, Anglo-Americanism was cast as the heroic redoubt in a new battle against aggressive Soviet totalitarianism and, simultaneously, the cradle of a noble, time-tested experiment in democratic self-government destined to rescue the war-ravaged West. But two costly world wars had fatally sapped British energy and resources and made America into the senior partner in this vast undertaking. Churchillian rhetoric—and imperial self interest—at work.

Such is the framework for Buruma’s *Churchill Complex*, a concise and astute excursion into the course of joint American-British foreign policy over the last seventy-five years. The narrative scheme is simple. The book examines British Prime Ministers and American Presidents chronologically and measures them in terms of their trans-Atlantic unity or divergence. To what extent do the Presidents ignore or override British interests? To what extent do the Prime Ministers throw in their lot with their European counterparts and distance themselves from the Americans? Arguably, the split between the two allies—while of course always paying lip service to the “special relationship”—was widest during the Suez Crisis of 1956 (viz., Eisenhower-Eden), but virtually nonexistent during the Gulf Wars (the two Bushes-Thatcher/Blair). However, in every case, reor-

dering the world and nation-building proved illusory goals for every one of the Presidents and Prime Ministers.

Buruma is certainly no fan of either a moralistic foreign policy (read Thatcher, Blair, Carter, and George W. Bush), or of isolationism, Donald Trump and Boris Johnson foremost here. Nor does he think the Munich-Chamberlain model of capitulation is applicable to the post Cold War world. He regrets Brexit, dislikes economic protectionism, derides the British “obsess[ion] with the notion of influence” (232) upon the United States, but also condescending toward the unsophisticated Americans, whom he considers too often “muscle-bound” and simple-minded in conducting foreign policy. Yet, despite such criticisms, Buruma asserts, “the political freedom and openness of Britain and the United States gave many people hope. That the ideals were often betrayed is no reason not to celebrate them” (282).

The Churchill Complex is a nifty, elegant essay in British-American relations. Its lean prose belies its nearly three hundred pages. Capsule portraits of British and American politicians and diplomats and plenty of telling anecdotes are deft and incisive. On Anthony Eden, for instance:

Although imbued with all the loftiness of an English gentleman born at the summit of British imperial power, Eden felt comfortable with foreigners in a way that few British politicians did, or indeed do ... [but] he suffered from the same blind spot as most other men of his class and age. He could not conceive of Britain as a European nation on par with other countries. (69)

On George H.W. Bush and John Major:

[Bush] was not an articulate man, nor did he share Ronald Reagan’s fervor or talent for political salesmanship. His traditional brand of American patriotism was usually expressed in uninspiring boilerplate phrases.... Even though Bush was not above letting others get rough on his behalf, he exuded civility and the discretion of a competent operator—a club man, a team player. He was in fact much like his British counterpart, John Major ... not as outspoken, colorful, or contentious as his main rivals for the job. A thoroughly decent sort, easily caricatured ... as a gray man spouting banalities. (179)

Such disciplined economy in presentation and swift strokes in portrayal highlight Ian Buruma’s knack for catching the subtle nuances and fleeting circumstances of complex situations and major personalities. *The Churchill Complex* will add to his substantial reputation as a keen observer and analyst of current events.