

THE CHANGING TIMES AND GREAT BRITAIN*

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This paper attempts to summarize much material available on Great Britain in the hope of organizing some concepts into a useful structure. Great Britain's former great stature among nations, still thought to exist by some people although that nation is now of secondary importance, needs wide publicity. A knowledge of this situation is of critical importance to the United States. The people of this country in attempting to understand the intricacies of relationships among nations must always be cognizant of rising and descending nation-powers of significance in the international scene.

Whether or not Great Britain is a great power is a subject of much argument. This writer believes she is not for these reasons: 1) she cannot make decisions of an international nature without considerable concern over the reactions of other nations; 2) she does not have under her immediate control many of the sources of raw materials needed by a modern industrial power; 3) she lacks the economic potential to carry on an all-out thermonuclear war—for an all-out war Great Britain lacks the capital and natural resources to prepare for it, and once such a war begins there will be no time to build up production and 4) Great Britain lacks the space for even a remote chance of significant survival should a thermonuclear war be directed at her—perhaps no nation has space for this. Now let us see how, through the course of events, Great Britain reached her, at best, second-rate status among nations.

Great Britain began on the road to industrial preeminence early and reached her peak of industrial glory in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Her beginnings were based on raw materials at home—to name a few and the most important—iron, wool, coal, and clay. Woolen goods, for example, accounted for over half of her exports in 1700. With the supremacy of the steamship, but before diesel engines, coal became a significant item of export. The iron and coal resource base and its importance to British industry is, of course, well known to all. In general, her basic raw materials were cheaply available and could be easily fashioned into the relatively simple products of the time.

Great Britain obtained capital for development from a prosperous agriculture (grain was an export commodity until about 1750), from her commerce, and from foreign sources, apparently Dutch and German. Labor was plentiful on the island, and skilled labor not available was often imported. For example, foreign technicians were employed to smelt copper at Keswick. As industry expanded, the market at home was somewhat self-generating.

The Empire probably did not become important until after Great Britain was well on the road to industrialization, and in all probability the Empire and the later Commonwealth cost more than they were worth. Both Disraeli and Adam Smith thought that the Empire was not a paying pro-

* The writer wishes to acknowledge that the use of the term Great Britain, is inaccurate for part of this paper. In the span of the changing times from the 1600's to the present, however, it is more appropriate than the term United Kingdom.

position. But certainly the world is better off for the civilizing effects of the British even though they did increase the population by spreading certain concomitants of the industrial revolution (among others, a little cleanliness, some medical care, and increased food supplies).

As products became more complex and increased in variety, additional raw materials were obtained from the colonies. Britain, over the years, possibly could have obtained these at less cost on the open market. Proponents of this argument forget, however, that Great Britain provided orderly government and a safe *milieu* for capital investment that might otherwise have been lacking. It is possible that preferential trade with colonies and the Commonwealth did Great Britain a dual disservice—high costs of raw materials just mentioned plus a built-in market that made for British industrial obsolescence because competition was not truly operative. In recent years the age-old British industries of mining, quarrying, textiles, clothing and china have suffered less than average increased development, accounting for the average industrial production index being lower than might be expected.

The creation of the Empire trade fashioned lifelines and political units that needed control and protection and these cost more, probably, than the profit from trade. At the same time, to protect the empire, the navy was built which was the symbol of British international power for more than 100 years before World War I. The post-world War I rise of air power supplanted British symbols of control.

As industrialization increased in the world, Great Britain had competition—in textiles from India, Japan, and the U. S., and in heavy industry from the U. S. and Germany, to name a few examples. In both World War I and World War II, but particularly the latter, Great Britain was unable to supply her overseas markets, and competitive industries sprang up in other countries; she fostered new industries in some Commonwealth lands during World War II. More than this, modern industry uses many raw materials, many of which are not found in significant quantities within Great Britain (petroleum and several alloy metals are illustrative of this situation), and her own basic mineral raw materials have been in use for a long time; hence, the high-quality, easily-obtained ores are largely depleted. Also, because of increasing product complexity requiring more use of foreign raw materials Great Britain's ability to compete with other nations has been reduced.

At the close of World War II Great Britain was handicapped by: 1) the job of rebuilding at home; 2) continuing defense costs; 3) competition from Commonwealth and other countries in the world's markets; 4) a Germany that being denied defense expenditures, could devote all capital outlay to building a modern industrial system; 5) a blossoming industrial Japan.

What is Great Britain's future, remembering that she must import many raw materials; that she must increasingly meet additional competition; that she must make enough profit from fabrication and international services to provide about 50% of the food she consumes; that many financial services formerly provided by Great Britain are now supplied by international organizations and the U. S., that many commonwealth countries

are increasingly interested in their own regional economic alliances, and that Great Britain can compete effectively in some industries, such as, chemicals, vehicles, engineering, electrical goods, paper and printing?

It is postulated that Great Britain should encourage and join a broadened European Common Market that would include most if not all of Europe. This would give Great Britain access to a large free-trade area. She should lessen her dependence upon preferential Commonwealth trade and work unceasingly at more efficient production and the abolition of obsolete plant facilities and techniques. Great Britain cannot afford the use of labor that can be replaced by more efficient machines which can give lower per unit cost production. She is today significant for her past contributions to Western civilizations and she will remain a bulwark for democracy and industrialism but she can best operate in concert with other countries, especially those of Europe. Great Britain should continue to pursue her world markets and to take an active role in collective defense.