Britain, Empire and the Second World War
Summary of Consequences

- **ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE ON USA** - Lend Lease Act 1941 turned Britain from a major creditor nation into one of the world’s biggest debtors. Crucially the loss of financial independence had reduced the government’s freedom of choice when it came to making decisions on the Empire’s future.

- **US OPPOSITION TO EMPIRES** - The Atlantic Charter of 1941 set the tone for America’s defence of the British Empire. For many this document indicated that America was not fighting to restore the Old Order but to introduce democracy and self rule to Britain’s colonial subjects.

- **LOSS OF ASIA = PRESTIGE AND STRATEGIC HARM** - Britain could not defend its Empire from the Japanese threat. Years of under-resourcing, mismanagement and racism left the Asia colonies defenceless. Pinned all hopes on the USA to handle the Japanese in the Pacific. Only in Burma and India did the British mount any credible defence of its possessions. Britain’s wartime aims were to protect the motherland, defend the shipping lanes, safeguard the Suez Canal and protect India. The Dominions and Australia in particular felt betrayed and moved closer towards the US sphere of influence.

- **CHANGED ATTITUDES IN BRITAIN** - The Labour Party committed itself to expensive social welfare projects like the National Health Service. Public mood also turned against the failure of the “Old Order”.

- **COLONIAL DEVELOPMENT** – The USA's $3.75 billion loan of 1945 was linked to a promise to allow make Sterling freely convertible with the Dollar. This threatened Britain's protected Imperial markets and could have seen a huge devaluation of the Pound. The Labour government's response was to stimulate exports in the colonies (E.A. Groundnuts!) to earn dollars.

- **NATIONALISM IN THE COLONIES (1)** - In the colonies there was also a loss of confidence in the old rulers. Their arrogance and insulated style of leadership sapped the commitment of many to the Empire e.g. The Indian National Army and Chandra Subhas Bose. This also the case in Burma and Malaya. The British government invested heavily in propaganda, which stressed that WWII was being fought against racist ideologies.

- **NATIONALISM IN THE COLONIES (2)** – Economic exploitation of the colonies required tighter political control and also replaced staple crops with cash crops and caused discontent.
**The Immediate Post War World – 1945-1950**

*Attitudes of the political elite*- the new Labour Government were in a difficult position. They were fundamentally committed to social welfare at home but were also anxious not to appear to be left wing in terms of imperial and foreign policy. Attlee was keen to demonstrate Labour’s imperial credentials. With the exception of India, the government were not in favour of retreat from Empire. The political elite of the day seemed to be suffering from delusions of grandeur. **They were unwilling to accept Britain’s increasingly second-rate nature.** Only as the impact of escalating costs and the new Cold War dynamic materialise is there a change in attitudes.

*Social Change in Britain*- The British public in the post war period seemed indifferent to Empire. **The desire for social regeneration and equality at home were far more important.** Increasingly, the British public became alienated from India as the violence increased, and hostile towards Palestine as Jewish terrorism spread.

*Colonies and Dominions*- **The war emphasised the different interests between Britain and the dominions.** Australia, Canada and New Zealand all slipped into the US sphere of influence. In addition, in Asia, British prestige was shattered. This was due to British capitulation to the Japanese and Britain’s impoverished condition.

The post war period saw the development of the Commonwealth as a political and economic vehicle. Britain regarded it in a multifaceted way. For example, for Britain it was a way of maintaining military and economic links with former colonies. It was also regarded as a way of nurturing democracy in the colonies, which were winning their independence. The Commonwealth nations could act as a counter to the march of communism in Asia and Africa. While finally, many in the British political elite saw it as a third force in world politics. A force headed by Britain in a world increasingly dominated by the USA and Russia.

*Economy*- The post war world represented a period of economic decline for Britain. **The war cost the nation 25% of its national wealth.** It was transformed into a huge debtor nation. It became economically dependent on the benevolence of the USA. In return for Marshall Aid and the cancellation of Lend Lease debt Britain had to end its system of imperial preference. That said, Britain still depended heavily on imperial investments e.g. Iranian and Iraqi oil.

*Military*- Military costs escalated quickly during the period. This in turn had a dramatic result on Empire and foreign policy. The McMahon Act of 1946 resulted in Britain developing its own **costly atomic arsenal by 1952.** Peacetime conscription was maintained at great cost until 1954 as a result of the Cold War. While Britain had conceded that it could never again act alone militarily when it joined NATO in 1949.

*Technology*- The arms race became too costly and quick for Britain. As ICBMs were developed in the 60’s Britain had to acknowledge defeat in the race. It’s own ICBM “Blue Streak” was abandoned in 1960.
Other Powers - The Second World War mobilised the only two global superpowers. The next half a century would become dominated by the US and USSR. Britain was in danger of becoming a US satellite (see economy, military and nationalism).

Nationalism - this problem was most acute in India and Palestine. Indian independence in August 1947 was the culmination of the process started by the Government of India Act in 1919. Demands for the overthrow of the Raj, mutinies in the Indian army, communal violence, economic cost, growth of Congress and the Muslim League, commitment of the Labour Party, lack of popular will in Britain, Realpolitik, and the desire for a bulwark against communism in Asia all played a part in independence.

Withdrawal from Palestine was less traumatic as British imperial history and commitment there was far less significant. However, a range of reasons caused the British pullout in May 1948. For example, vast Jewish immigration from Europe, US pressure to favour Jewish settlers, lack of compromise between Palestinians and Jews, UN decision in ‘47 to partition Palestine and establish an independent Israel, increased terrorist attacks by the Zionists, cost of enforcing partition, hostility of British public opinion, increased role of the US in the region.
The End of Empire in the Middle East – 1950-1960

**Attitudes of the political elite** - During the period Britain was governed by successive Conservative governments. British PM’s Churchill and Eden wished to keep British influence over remaining possessions. However, faced with rising nationalism, economic contraction and the Cold War they had to come to terms with the situation. There seemed to be a hostility towards Britain’s growing dependence on the USA. The Suez Crisis of ’56 was a reaction against this dependence. Many only came to terms with this inferior status following the failure of Suez and the election of Macmillan as Prime Minister e.g. “Winds of change in Africa”.

**Social Change in Britain** - The British media suggested that that period was uncomfortable for Britain. There was a public impression that Britain was powerless and on the run. Britain was suffering from the delayed shock of imperial disengagement and relative impotence in world affairs.

**Colonies and Dominions** - British influence in informal Empire collapsing quickly. This most evident in the Middle East e.g. Iran, Iraq and Egypt. In addition, the Commonwealth proved to be far less malleable than Britain had hoped. It demonstrated an independence of mind during Suez.

**Economy** - Britain still had huge economic interests in the Middle East. The Anglo Iranian Oil Company was a huge money-spinner for Britain. Its nationalisation in 1951 following the election of Mussadiq was a big loss. Failure by the US to sanction an armed invasion to retake it was a slap in the face for Britain. In addition, Britain was losing out to the USA throughout the region. US dollar loans/handouts to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates pushed British influence to the periphery.

The biggest economic problem of the period came during the Suez Crisis of ’56. The sterling crisis confirmed that Britain could not afford a war to recapture the newly nationalised canal. The devaluation of sterling and the blocking of IMF loans by the US were hugely embarrassing.

**Military** - Britain’s military presence and importance in the Middle East diminished greatly during the period. At the start of 1950, Britain’s military presence in Egypt offered NATO and the US essential bases for an attack on southern Russia. They were also important in guarding against any possible attack on the West’s oils supply. However, after Turkey joined NATO in 1951, Britain’s role was not so important and thus its bases in the Canal Zone become a strategically redundant or insignificant. The USA had no need to maintain or prop up Britain’s fading position in the region. In fact Britain’s colonial past embarrassed the US as it attempted to win influence within the region.

**Technology** - Britain retained its world power status with the introduction of its Atomic bomb in 1952. But at what cost? And could it have acted independently?

**Other Powers** - Britain had to come to terms with the new conditions imposed by the Cold War. British independent action could not be sanctioned or funded without US help. US usurped Britain’s position in the Middle East. Demonstrated to the world that Britain was now the lap dog of the US. France certainly believed this. France and rest of Europe suspicious of British intentions and sympathies. Saw it as lacking any European commitment. France’s alienation by Britain over Suez contributed to its hostility towards British membership of the European Community.

**Nationalism** - India clearly acted as a spur to Arab nationalism. The military coup of 1957 in Egypt and the emergence of Nasser confirmed this. When the Anglo British Treaty of 1936 expired in ’56 Nasser nationalised the canal. Nasser represented Pan Arabism, Socialism and Islam. For PM Eden, he was the Asiatic Mussolini who could not be appeased. Britain’s
attempts to retake the area condemned the nation to international isolation. Britain was morally and politically castigated. It represented the actions of a dieing belligerent imperial power trying to reassert its authority in an area where its presence was no longer wanted. None of the British objectives were achieved. It encouraged Arab nationalism, confirms Britain’s economic weakness and acts as a stimulus for African decolonisation under Macmillan.

**Attitude of the political elite**- Macmillan replaced Eden as PM in 1957. He knew better than most that Empire was a luxury Britain could no longer afford. He had been minister in charge of the economy during Suez. Had initially supported the action but then argued for its immediate end. When PM he became an advocate of rapid decolonisation in Africa. In his famous Cape Town speech of 1960 he argued that there were “winds of change blowing through the continent.” For a variety of reasons Britain had to listen and act. Appoints Iain Macleod as Foreign Secretary in 1959. Macleod also a pro decoloniser and became responsible for the retreat from empire in Africa.

**Social Change in Britain**- The British public by the 1960’s were indifferent at best to Empire. They were unlikely following Suez to support new military or economic burdens. In addition, Britain was starting to experience cultural change brought on by the “flower power” generation e.g. growth in CND, Anti Apartheid Movement, Anti War groups etc.

**Colonies and Dominions**- The Commonwealth welcomed the spirit of decolonisation. There was a hope that the new democratic governments in Africa would become new Commonwealth members. They would also act as a check on communist influence in Africa. Pressure was placed on Britain not to emulate the violent French and Belgian experience in Africa and potentially give communists a cause to rally people to their cause.

**Economy**- 1957 cost benefit analysis showed that there was no strategic or economic reason for spending vast sums of money and risking the loss of lives trying to maintain British rule. The newly independent nations would be encouraged to continue their economic links with the Britain through the Commonwealth. Huge British investments in African companies would be protected with a peaceful transfer of power. Seizure or nationalisation of British mineral, gold, agricultural concerns would be avoided through peaceful and quick decolonisation.

**Military**- Despite initial discussions about an African Army to replace the Indian Army, Africa had no military or strategic value, especially since the Suez canal was no longer such a vital asset. Also the cost of continuing a military presence in countries, which were agitating for independence, would be too high.

**Technology**- See Above.

**Other Powers**- African decolonisation would be used as part of the Cold War game. Handing power over to pro west leaders would allow them to become proxy states in the battle against global communism.

**Nationalism**- The transference of power to nationalist governments was comparatively easy. In west Africa, where there were few whites, the hand over was peaceful e.g. Gold Coast ’57, Nigeria ’60 and Sierra Leone ’61. In East Africa, with the exception of Kenya, where the white population was small but influential, independence was also peaceful e.g. Tanganyika ’61, Uganda ’62 and Kenya ’63.

However, Central Africa was more difficult to handle. There was a big white population in Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia and in Southern Rhodesia. In the main, Macleod successfully averted disaster with the independence of Nyasaland as Malawi in ’64 and Northern Rhodesia as Zambia in ’64. However, the South was not prepared to take any orders from London. The white supremacist group the Rhodesian Front under Ian Smith declared independence in 1964. Between 1964 and 1980 the “Rhodesian ulcer” tormented Britain. Not until 1980 did the black population attain independence from their white masters. This was eventually achieved due to international sanctions and the actions of ZANU under the leadership of Robert Mugabe.