On 6 December 1964, Harold Wilson, along with an unusually large entourage, travelled to the United States to see President Johnson for discussions about a number of issues of mutual concern. These included Britain’s military role East of Suez, the preservation of which the White House urged in support of the United States’s own role in keeping the peace in Asia. For reasons of prestige and to strengthen the Anglo-American relationship, Wilson affirmed Britain’s intention to retain its traditional position as a world power. The second main topic of the Wilson–Johnson summit concerned the war in South Vietnam, with Johnson requesting a British troop presence, to support the anti-communist effort of the United States. As there was no constituency in Britain for committing troops, and because he wanted to reserve the option for the UK of trying to initiate peace negotiations, Wilson rejected Johnson’s request. Britain’s participation or otherwise in the Multilateral Force (MLF) was the final key topic of the summit. The British maintained opposition to the scheme by putting forward the diluted version of the project known as the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF). Johnson, in order to avoid any impression of an Anglo-American ‘fix’ to kill the scheme, used the summit as the starting point of a new, more passive and low-key approach towards the American initiative. Washington would now leave the matter to be addressed primarily by the Europeans. The Washington summit was useful to Johnson mainly because it allowed him to impress upon the British the need for them to retain their traditional ‘great power’ role and also to allow him to bring the MLF to a conclusion. For Wilson, however, the gathering had a broader, longer-term purpose beyond pushing the MLF off the agenda: he saw it as an initial means of creating the closest of ties with the White House.

The summit begins

To exert the maximum impact on the Americans, Wilson is said to have considered travelling to Washington by warship as Winston Churchill had during the war, but he realised that such a journey would be too time-consuming, not to say anachronistic, so he flew instead. Upon arrival, Wilson told press reporters that ‘this will be the beginning of our fruitful cooperation, the beginning of a
series of discussions which, we hope will lead to the strengthening of the Alliance.² But American observers had less faith in the importance of the visit. News of Wilson’s arrival ranked only second on a major TV news broadcast, with a report of the impending visit of Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko taking first place. Similarly, some of the American journalists in attendance at the White House on 7 December appeared less interested in the Prime Minister’s arrival than in the possibility that Johnson might make a speech to commemorate Pearl Harbor Day.³ Though the direct discussions between Wilson and Johnson would occupy centre stage, Wilson had felt it expedient to bring a large troop (at least thirty-five) of supporting ministers, officials and others – mainly for effect. David Bruce, US Ambassador to Britain, wrote in his diary that the British delegation ‘consists of almost everyone except hod carriers’.⁴ Wilson had brought this large retinue despite the reservations of Lord Harlech, UK Ambassador to Washington, who had seen the ‘rather formidable list of those intending to descend on Washington’ and was ‘not quite sure what they will all do’.¹ Duly, Wilson and the President entered the Oval Room for their first discussions. Meantime, Dean Rusk (Secretary of State), Robert McNamara (Secretary of Defence) and other leading members of the Administration entered the Cabinet Room with Patrick Gordon Walker (Foreign Secretary), Denis Healey (Defence Secretary) and other members of the British delegation, to begin ‘opening up the various subjects they would want to discuss during the week’.⁶

In contrast to the general fanfare of the summit there was something almost conspiratorial about some of the Wilson–Johnson meetings. Bruce noted in his diary that the principals were ‘closeted alone for an hour or more’ in Johnson’s private office ‘before they joined the rest of us in the Cabinet room. What they had said to each other was not disclosed.’⁷ The verbatim content of some of Wilson and Johnson’s conversations went unnoted, though there are accounts which capture the substance of their talks. Many of the private discussions concerned the British political system. Johnson was ‘intensely interested’, as Bruce had told Wilson, ‘in the problems of political management’.⁸ Johnson and Wilson also discussed more substantial matters. In a telephone conversation with Bundy at 1.30 p.m. on 7 December, just after he had left the Cabinet Room talks with Wilson, Johnson presented a frank, blow-by-blow account. In essence, he had launched a bullying tirade upon the Prime Minister, to make it clear who was in charge, arguing that ‘there were a lot of problems which did not show in the US [electoral] returns, especially with respect to international affairs’. The United States was ‘damned tired of being told that it was their business to solve all the world’s problems and to do so mainly alone’. So far as the MLF or any other major foreign policy initiatives were concerned, the President was ‘very wary of taking any tall dives’.⁹

He also mentioned Britain’s economic problems, rebuking Wilson for Labour’s apparent profligacy: ‘the impression which had been created by the British budget [on 11 November], with its heavy emphasis on social security, and the pressures
created against the pound had combined to make the President's own budgeting process very difficult'. The repercussions for the dollar generated by the British budget were such that although he had 'originally planned on a budget of $107 or $108 billion' of public spending 'now he was forced to think in terms of $101–102 billion, which would make it very difficult to carry out the programmes he wanted'. Labour's budgetary commitments to the welfare state 'had shaken us up some'. The President then complained about Wilson's broken pledge that he would not raise the Bank rate: the British 'had made trouble for themselves and others by sounding as if they did not believe in the instrument of the bank rate and then using it very heavily and suddenly' to try to ease the pressure on sterling. Finally, Johnson 'talked to the Prime Minister about the difficulties created by his speech on Atlantic nuclear defence in the House of Commons' on 23 November, when Wilson had described the MLF as a 'divisive force in Europe'. Johnson told Bundy that by now the Prime Minister 'was almost on the ropes'. Considering that he was himself backing away from the MLF scheme, Johnson's attacks on Wilson over the Commons speech were surprisingly heavy. He also reminded him 'of the difficulties Sir Alec Douglas-Home had given him on commenting on Cuban buses from the White House steps' in February 1964. Drawing a parallel with this and Wilson's Commons speech, Johnson said that this time Wilson 'had given him trouble ten days before the visit'. He complained that 'all his best advisers' had 'the temperaments of Rhodes Scholars, dangerously sympathetic to the UK'.

Britain's global role

After lunch, and in more measured terms, Wilson and Johnson discussed Britain's global defence role, especially the position East of Suez. During the recent crisis of sterling Chancellor James Callaghan had argued that 'There would not have been a sterling crisis if we did not have to bear so much of the burden of defence abroad. We would have restored our balance of payments if we had not had to bear this heavy load.' Britain's defence expenditure was increasing, from £1,596 million in 1960–61 to an estimated £2,141 million in 1965–66 and an estimated £2,400 million by 1969–70. Wilson had told Bruce that 'The defence talks at Chequers [19–22 November] had highlighted the fact that Britain was at the moment trying to fulfil three roles – the independent nuclear deterrent, the conventional role in Europe, and a world role East of Suez'. Britain spent about the same on defence as did France or Germany, but their military commitments were confined mainly to Europe. The United Kingdom carried 'world-wide commitments on the basis of expenditure which is only one-tenth of that of the only other country (i.e. the USA) which plays a world role'. This also exacerbated Britain's chronic balance of payments problem (£800 million when Labour assumed power), with some £300 million spent overseas each year on 'defence and related activities'.

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However, given the American commitment to an international ‘policing’ role, Johnson and his colleagues were concerned that Britain should continue to maintain the world power stance. On the afternoon of 7 December, Rusk informed Wilson that the UK had an important role in the world, complementary to that of the United States. Britain, ‘by virtue of both historical and geographical connections fulfilled a strategic function in many parts of the world which the United States could not attempt, and because they could do so, even with relatively small forces, the value of their contribution extended beyond the immediate local impact’. In particular, ‘it had a kind of multiplier effect by enabling the greater power of the United States to be deployed in areas which might otherwise be largely inaccessible to it’. Johnson underlined the comments. The importance of Britain’s world role, he said:

had been dramatically illustrated by the manner in which the United Kingdom’s offer of facilities at Ascension Island had enabled the United States and Belgian Governments to mount an operation to rescue the hostages in the Congo, an operation which they would otherwise have found it difficult, if not impossible, to arrange. Wilson accepted the American view that Britain should preserve its current position in defence, telling the Cabinet on 11 December that ‘the most encouraging fact about the conference was America’s emphasis on Britain’s worldwide role’. But Johnson’s exhortations that Britain should remain in force East of Suez did not suggest any understanding that Britain’s ailing economy could not sustain large global commitments; he criticised the social spending of the Labour government but seemed oblivious to the greater strains imposed on the British economy by UK spending abroad on defence.

Vietnam

Johnson not only wanted Wilson to maintain Britain’s defence commitments, but to extend them into South Vietnam. But on 5 December Bundy had told Johnson that Wilson had little freedom of manoeuvre on the Vietnam War: ‘the British will find it very, very difficult indeed to increase their commitment in Vietnam’. Although this had not precluded the President ‘hit[ting] them hard while Wilson is here,’ it did mean that ‘we cannot expect a definite and affirmative answer’. There was ‘no political base whatever in England, in any party, for an increased British commitment’. For a decade, Bundy explained, Washington had accepted ‘a situation in which the British give political support, but avoided any major commitment on the grounds of their other interests and their position of co-Chairman of the Geneva Agreements of 1954’. All Wilson ‘could possibly do at this stage would be a slight enlargement of the Thompson advisory mission and of their police training effort, with perhaps a green light to a few bold British officers to get themselves in the line of fire as our men do’. Wilson would have to do this ‘quietly’, as there was ‘no workable basis for a
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public change in British policy at a time when there is no public change in ours’. The President ‘might press him to go from the current level of seven Britshers to about a hundred, but we would be lucky to get fifty in this first phase’. ‘When and if the United States opened a second phase and need to land a mixed force of US and other troops, we might conceivably get a small British contingent along with larger ones from Australia and New Zealand’. The United States’s ‘own commitment would have gone up and there would be a better case for asking the British to join in’. But there was, conversely, the problem that ‘if the British Co-Chairman sends troops in, that might be the trigger, or at least the excuse, for the Soviet Co-Chairman to help Hanoi’. Finally, Bundy underlined to Johnson ‘how hard it will be for Wilson to do as much for us in South Vietnam as we need him to do’.19

On the question of British defence commitments in Asia, Bundy had also noted previously and correctly that Wilson’s ‘government (or at least its Ministry of Defence) is eager for joint ventures east of Suez, but they have visions of ships steaming around the Indian Ocean, not of men getting killed in Vietnamese jungles’. Yet a ‘British sacrifice of men is just what we need most’.20 Bundy was right to argue that the Vietnam War was a matter of growing controversy in Britain and within the Labour Party. Shortly before Wilson had left Britain, a group of Labour backbenchers had written to him, worried about alleged British complicity in the American policy of ‘creeping escalation’ in Vietnam, and proposing that Britain and Russia should re-convene the Geneva Conference. On his return from Washington the Prime Minister was obliged to ‘nail the lie’ that he was proposing to send British combat troops to Vietnam, and to draw attention to the summit communiqué of 9 December, which declared, *inter alia*, that ‘the President and the Prime Minister recognised the particular importance of the military effort which both their countries are making in support of legitimate governments in South-East Asia, particularly in Malaysia and South Vietnam, which seek to maintain their independence and resist subversion’.21

The State Department noted that President Johnson had a ‘deep personal concern’ to obtain ‘increased third country contributions’ towards the American effort in Vietnam from US allies.22 Yet advisers such as Bundy ensured that he was not insensitive to political realities in Britain. Consequently, on the afternoon of 7 December he made his request to Wilson for a British troop commitment in Vietnam with relative forbearance: ‘a United Kingdom military presence, on however limited a scale, might have a significant effect. A few soldiers in British uniforms in South Vietnam, for example, would have a great psychological and political difference.’23 The President’s restraint was inconsistent with his earlier tirade that the United States was ‘damned tired’ of trying to solve the world’s problems alone, but he was after all seeking a favour from the British. But Wilson was unable to make a commitment, responding that:

we fully recognised the United States interest, particularly since we faced exactly the same problem ourselves in Malaysia. We were already providing some reinforcements
to the United States effort in Vietnam by maintaining the Thompson advisory mission, by training Vietnamese troops in jungle warfare in Malaysian schools and by providing police in Saigon. We might be able to increase our effort in these directions to some extent; but the United States Government must remember that our position as co-chairman of the 1954 Conference implied that we might find ourselves in a very embarrassing international position if United States action in Vietnam compelled us to activate our co-chairman role.24

Wilson noted that Johnson seemed unaware of the extent of the British commitment to the former colony of Malaysia, which Britain was defending against the territorial predations of Indonesia (‘Confrontation’) – there were some 54,000 British troops there.25 But Confrontation was low in intensity and loss of life compared to the situation in Vietnam.26 Although in general terms Wilson supported the American efforts in the former Indochina, he was never inclined to commit, or ‘sacrifice’, British troops even for a possible collaborative quid pro quo with the United States East of Suez, because British forces were already overextended and therefore it was not fitting to undertake new commitments, however nominal in scale; because there was no support for doing so in the UK; and due to the UK’s position as co-Chairman of the 1954 Geneva Conference. Yet the Americans were persistent in their entreaties: they tried again the next day to obtain a British commitment. Rusk indicated that ‘the US was appealing to a number of countries for assistance, both for its practical effect as well as for its political impact, to demonstrate to Hanoi and Saigon the degree of free world solidarity’. But again, the appeal yielded nothing.27 As Wilson later put it to his Cabinet, ‘We … continued to resist [American] pressure for a United Kingdom military presence in Vietnam and had merely undertaken to increase slightly the various types of support facility which we already provided in the form of training facilities for South Vietnamese troops, etc.’28

Moreover, invoking Britain’s position as co-Chairman would allow Wilson greater latitude to try to act as an intermediary to help bring peace to Vietnam. The response also fitted in with the Foreign Office line. A document from the Foreign Office noted that as well as ‘technical assistance and a small amount of capital aid’, the British contribution to the American effort was confined to training Vietnamese policemen ‘in counter-insurgency techniques in Malaysia and to keep the British Advisory Mission in Saigon’. President Johnson ‘would obviously like … a token British military force … but we cannot provide this without violating the 1954 Geneva Agreement ban on the introduction of fresh troops, military personnel, arms and munitions’. The best compromise might be to ‘train more Vietnamese in Malaysia; to provide more police officers in Saigon; [and] to announce publicly that we are doing this as a token of our support for South Vietnam’.29

On the evening of 7 December, there was a State dinner at the White House, with, as Bruce noted, ‘a couple of hundred people, of several colours, and many occupations … the reception was elegant, the dinner even more so’.30 Wilson commented later that Johnson:
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made the most eloquent, elegant speech about our common Anglo-American links through many of our citizens' kinship … through the common origin of our legal system right back to Saxon times, through Norman law, Magna Carta and the great battles for the sovereignty of Parliament over the monarchy in Stuart times; our comradeship in two world wars, and in our efforts to create conditions of lasting peace following those wars.

But Wilson, as he noted later, had ‘prepared no speech, and had to speak, as they say, right on’. In his impromptu address he used the expression ‘close relationship’ instead of the established formulation ‘special relationship’. The new phrase, probably thought of well in advance of the dinner, suggested that although committed to close bonds with the United States the Labour government did not carry the Churchillian baggage of the Conservatives. This example of verbal dexterity also represented an effort to avoid antagonising the Labour left and yet it favoured the ‘close’ Anglo-American relations to which Wilson was personally dedicated. But the speech did not generate any excitement among Johnson and his colleagues, who had no real emotional commitment to the ‘close’ Anglo-American relations of which Wilson had spoken.

The MLF

The morning of 8 December was left open to allow the British party to exchange notes, but Wilson also used the interlude to lay wreaths at the National War Memorial and the grave of John F. Kennedy at Arlington National Cemetery. Bruce noted that in the meantime on the American side there were:

meetings in the President’s office of a small American contingent, joined by Hubert Humphrey [Vice-President], who has told the President there would presently be no chance of getting the MLF approved by the Senate. Mac Bundy, McNamara, George Ball, Dick Neustadt and I went to the White House War Room to revise a paper replying to the British paper [on the ANF] delivered to us yesterday. We ate hamburgers, drank coffee, added and deleted phrases. After approval by the President, it was turned over to the British. Wilson's approach that afternoon was to try to cause doubt and delay by criticising the American counter-proposals to the formal British outline of the ANF submitted the previous day. These American proposals covered, for example, a range of technical and political questions, such as nuclear dissemination, voting arrangements and periodic meetings of the defence ministers of the contributing nations. Demonstrating a precise grasp of the issues – a precision verging on downright pedanticism – Wilson assailed the American counter-response to the ANF: he ‘had nineteen points to raise in connection with the American paper’. He asked, for example, about paragraph ten which referred to the United States ‘surrendering its veto on the use of the force’s nuclear weapons in the event of a politically unified Europe’. He ‘regarded with horror any possibility of the
emergence of a completely separate European force’, because of its implications for nuclear non-proliferation. He also contended that:

the mixed manned surface fleet issue could bring the Labour Government down. Even though the Tory Government had given equivocal support to this concept, the Tories were now ready to bring down the Labour Government on this issue. Therefore the US position was most important and the British attitude toward the force would be governed by the permanence of the American veto.

Johnson listened quietly, and after the discussion he said that he would instruct his delegation at NATO to enter into full discussions with the British and other colleagues to prepare a study of what was involved. Johnson had wanted to let the MLF ‘sink out of sight’, to use Bundy’s words, though without antagonising the United States’s other European allies by giving the impression of an Anglo-American ‘fix’. The summit communiqué – presented for the approval of Wilson and Johnson at the end of the final meeting at 4.00 p.m. – was especially bland and non-committal with regard to the MLF. It signified a new low-key approach on the part of the Americans: the matter had been discussed ‘as a preliminary to further discussions among interested members of the Alliance’. At 6.00 p.m. that evening Wilson gave a reception in ‘honour of the President … and Mrs. Johnson’ at the British Embassy. Two hours later Dean Rusk held a dinner for the British. Bruce presented in his diary an image of sheer opulence: ‘Good food, good oratory. We had consommé with sherry, filet of sole with lump crab meat, roast capon with wild rice, cheese, pistachio ice cream and brandied peaches, consorting with Pinot Chardonnay, Chateau Lynch Bage, Piper Heidsieck 1959, and liqueurs.’

Soon the MLF was no longer a major issue in the Anglo-American relationship, though its demise was not immediate. The Economist wrote in January 1965 that ‘President Johnson, Mr Wilson and Herr Erhard [of West Germany] cannot afford just to stand by and blame one another for collective failure [on the MLF] … the responsibility lies first with President Johnson’. Johnson told a press conference at his ranch in Texas on 17 January 1965 of his continued interest in the MLF, and on 9 February he told the German Ambassador that had not agreed with Wilson’s assertion that any ‘favourable views … expressed in Europe’ about the MLF ‘had been coloured by US insistence’. In a telephone conversation of 11 February, Johnson badgered Wilson, saying that he was ‘still waiting for the Prime Minister to carry out his agreement’ in December ‘to go and talk with the Germans’ about the MLF/ANF. Johnson said he had been ‘very careful not to be domineering, and he had wanted to give the British Prime Minister time to talk with the Germans on this matter, although he had not changed his own strong views’ in favour of the MLF. This was an odd stance to take considering that in December Johnson had expressed his disillusionment with the MLF, but it was in keeping with his desire not to make any obvious concessions to the British because of the effect that this might have on other European allies. On 26 February Rusk reminded Johnson of his ‘suggestion in
December to Prime Minister Wilson that the best next step on the MLF ‘should be discussions among the interested European countries to determine how wide a consensus could be reached’. Rusk recommended to the President that he send a letter to Wilson pressing for action and trying to give the impression that the United States had not abandoned its own project. But Johnson declined to send any such message. Finally, on 11 March Wilson wrote to Johnson about his recent talks in Bonn. It had become clear, said Wilson, that ‘Erhard was not going to have anything to do with nuclear matters this side of the German elections … I would judge that there is no progress to be made on this.’ Without fuss Johnson said that he shared Wilson’s view that ‘the Germans do not want to do anything serious between now and their election’. He indicated that there should be ‘a very careful review of the whole problem, so that we can be ready to move ahead in whatever way seems most likely to be effective after September’.

Throughout 1965 the MLF gradually became moribund, due to a mixture of practical and political objections from the European allies, including worries about nuclear non-proliferation, plus hostility from Moscow. In particular, British reservations, advanced by Wilson and quietly adopted by Johnson during the British visit to Washington in December 1964, had been the critical blow. Johnson told a journalist on 29 April that ‘I didn’t shove [Wilson] on the MLF. All of my advisers said I ought to demand that he move right then and there but he only had a three man majority, and I tried to treat him like I’d like to be treated if I were in the same situation … I told him to … talk to the Germans, get their views and we could work it out’. Moreover, Wilson had avoided the invidious situation outlined by the Foreign Office in August 1964, whereby ‘If eventually we decide not to join, and the Force nevertheless comes into being, our influence with the Americans will surely decline’.

After the summit: Washington

Johnson expressed satisfaction to Andrei Gromyko on 9 December that ‘we now had the UK discussing the [nuclear weapons] problem with the Germans rather than Uncle Sam having to indicate any particular conduct’. Yet the President needed Bundy to try to persuade him that the Wilson visit had been worthwhile. On 10 December, Bundy wrote that ‘A couple of times over the last few days you have strongly expressed to me your doubts about the value of having Harold Wilson here. Since I think that this was without doubt the most productive and useful two days that we have had in foreign affairs since President Kennedy went to Berlin, I would like to urge the opposite view.’ Bundy stated the ‘negative fact that there is just no way in the world that a President of the United States can avoid reasonably regular visits from the Prime Minister of Great Britain’. If Johnson had ‘said to Wilson that you were unwilling to see him in December, the reaction everywhere would have been critical’. Meetings with the British can bring ‘real inconvenience … because there is no way of predicting
what issues will come up’. The Nassau conference of 1962, Bundy reminded the
President, ‘was not set up to deal with Skybolt, which broke over its head’,
because of the timing of the budget of the US Department of Defence. ‘There
was no such difficulty’ with Wilson, Bundy told the President, ‘because we knew
that the Atlantic nuclear problem would be at centre stage, but the handling of
the matter was certainly difficult’. Prior to the visit Johnson had ‘received a
very strong recommendation to force Wilson to a decision [on the MLF], and
you carefully walked around that and took a different and better course’ of
allowing the matter to be worked out between the British and the Germans. This
was a ‘major achievement’. Firstly, argued Bundy, ‘We have had a very straight
and honest talk with the British … on the hard elements of the problem, and
they have gone off to talk on their own with the Germans.’ This presented the
President ‘as the firm but patient leader of the alliance’.

Secondly, Bundy suggested, Johnson had laid the ‘basis for political educa-
tion and political leadership with Congress as the progress of the enterprise
justifies it’. The Administration had ‘a major problem of communication with
the Leadership and the relevant committees, but we have won time in which to
go about it’. Thirdly, the meetings had ‘forced discussions between you and
your advisers which has for the first time given both you and them a clear
understanding of the problem and the way you want it treated’. Fourthly, ‘From
now on … the progress of this Atlantic negotiation will need your own contin-
ued personal command’. Bundy would ‘make sure that the state of play is before
you at every stage and that every significant decision is signalled as far ahead of
time as possible’. Finally, Bundy concluded that ‘the Wilson meeting has not only
been a modest success in its own right, but a turning point in the process by which
you take the effective command of a major issue of foreign policy’. This was ‘a lot
for two days’, and there was also the ‘fringe benefit that at least a hundred of your
warmest political supporters were given a thank-you dinner of the most fashion-
able sort, because glamour is one thing the British still bring with them’.49

Other observers in Washington had a favourable verdict of the talks. Robert
Schaetzel of the State Department said on 11 December that ‘the general im-
pression was that the visit was highly useful and certainly achieved its principal
purpose’ of helping bring the MLF to a conclusion.50 Ball told a journalist that
Wilson had made a good impression on Johnson: ‘They spent a lot of time just
the two of them together. No-one was involved in that. I think Wilson made an
impression of a highly capable politician and a shrewd man.’ Ball also held the
view that the President was ‘impressive’ in the talks – he showed great percep-
tion of the key issues and exuded ‘a strength that had a big impact on Wilson’.51
(Later, though, he said that while Johnson ‘had been impressed by [Harold]
Macmillan’, Wilson ‘lacked Macmillan’s consummate ability to deal on a friendly
but slightly condescending basis. He wore no patrician armour, was too ordi-
nary, too much like other politicians with whom LBJ had to deal, and Johnson
took almost an instant dislike to him’.)52
Although they had spent much time together talking ‘man-to-man’, Wilson had not won over the President. The Prime Minister had undertaken that he would ‘say nothing outside the White House’ that he had told Johnson inside, but the President still feared, in Bundy’s words, that Wilson ‘might be tempted to put words in the President’s mouth for press purposes or to advocate his standpoint from the White House steps’; in other words, ‘to sell buses from the front steps of the White House’ as had Douglas-Home earlier that year. Consequently, Johnson asked Bundy to ‘make his position very clear’ to Lord Harlech in order ‘that there be no misunderstanding of the forbearance and restraint with which he conducted his discussions of the Atlantic nuclear problem with Mr Wilson’. Bundy in turn asked David Bruce ‘to say these things to the Prime Minister, although not on the basis of a direct Presidential instruction’. Johnson ‘wants to be very sure that the Prime Minister does not misunderstand his position on the nuclear force problem’. He was a political man who knew what ‘a close election was like’. It had seemed to Johnson that it would have been ‘unfair to force an immediate decision … on a man who has been in power for less than two months, with a four-seat majority and a very grave economic and financial crisis on his hands’. The President therefore ‘decided not to force the pace with the Prime Minister, but rather to allow his advisers to explain American thinking as clearly as they could within a framework which the President deliberately set as one of discussion and not of decision’.

Johnson also ‘recognised and understood the importance of giving the British a free hand in finding out for themselves the real position of the government in Bonn’ on the MLF. The ‘Labourites have been telling us for a very long time that we do not properly understand the Germans’, but ‘there is every reason for the Prime Minister to satisfy himself directly on this point, and if we have been wrong in our estimate of the Germans, no-one is more interested than we in finding out’. Meanwhile, ‘the President is gravely concerned by the risk that the Prime Minister may give others the impression that the US has in any way backed off in its basic assessment’ of the need for the MLF. Just because ‘the President himself did not pursue the argument was merely an indication of his desire not to force the judgement on the Prime Minister now’. Johnson asked Bundy ‘to emphasise particularly to the Ambassador [Bruce] the very great damage which could be done if the Prime Minister’ overstepped the mark. The President knew ‘the temptations of debate, and he has already had one painful experience with a speech of the Prime Minister in the House of Commons’. If ‘the impression should be created in the United States that the Prime Minister was trying to strengthen his position by seeming to have “won a victory” in Washington’, the President ‘would find it necessary to take a very different attitude toward this whole series of discussions’. Bundy surmised in the message to Bruce that ‘a man in the Prime Minister’s position would be extremely ill-advised to run any risks of this sort with a sensitive and determined man like President Johnson’, since the President ‘has plenty of cards to play if this becomes
a public contest’. Bundy said he would ‘tell Lord Harlech that the President has shown great restraint in these last days because of his concern to avoid any appearance of running a power play against a weak opponent’. But if ‘his generosity is misunderstood, I doubt if it is likely to last’. But Wilson did not try to ‘sell buses from the White House steps’ or from anywhere else. Solicitously, he told Bruce on 8 December that he had ‘thought he had handled his press conference this morning in a manner to cause no concern’ in the White House.

After the summit: London

After Wilson’s visit to Washington, most observers, including the President, anticipated that he would face a serious challenge in explaining what he had agreed to in Washington to the House of Commons in the foreign affairs debate scheduled for 16–17 December. The Conservatives were ready to attack him for any undertaking to commit British nuclear weapons irrevocably to NATO whereas the unilateral nuclear disarmers in the Labour Party would oppose any indication of British readiness to allow the Germans further access to nuclear weapons even as part of a multilateral group and subject to an American veto. Wilson had told the President on 8 December that he ‘expected to have a problem … next week when there would be a parliamentary debate on foreign and defence policy’. David Bruce was worried about ‘how he will deal with questions posed him … in the House of Commons Foreign Policy Debate … He will of course be pressed hard, and crockery may be broken... The opposition … will query him in hope of extracting replies embarrassing to him and us.’ But Wilson’s ‘comprehensive’ report to the Commons on his visit to Washington was ‘his best performance in this session’, noted the US Embassy with satisfaction. The Prime Minister ‘achieved a statesmanlike level’ of debate and analysis ‘by avoiding controversy and packing a long speech with closely reasoned analysis’. The warnings of the administration had been noted – Wilson did not try to portray himself as the victor in his dealings with Johnson, nor did he say anything that might upset the United States’s other European allies. In fact, on 8 December, Wilson had arranged to have the broad outline of what he would say in the Commons cleared by the Americans.

While in Washington Wilson had faced no unbending urge that Britain should join the MLF. He had not been obliged to make any concessions nor had he antagonised the President by the force of British opposition to the project. ‘Clearly we had won the day’, said Wilson in his memoirs. He noted with pleasure that:

One 1964 election myth had been disposed of: Sir Alec Douglas-Home’s frequent gibe that Britain under a Labour Government with our distinctive nuclear policy would never be invited to sit at the ‘top table’. This was because of his obsession with what he regarded as the ‘independent nuclear deterrent’. In fact our approach, less obsession and more realistic, had led to a much warmer welcome at the top table.
The Washington summit

Both sides could feel we had laid down the basis of a satisfactory working relationship for the years ahead. (Wilson’s approach to the MLF had in reality not differed much from that of the Conservative government of Douglas-Home.) Wilson told the respective Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand Menzies and Holyoake on 14 December with similar satisfaction that the talks were ‘conducted in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, and I feel that the visit was a really successful one’. The ‘Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary [also] had very useful talks with their opposite numbers’. The Administration’s talk of the ‘multiplier effect’ of British policy East of Suez evidently gratified Wilson, since he affirmed the same idea to Menzies and Holyoake. To his Cabinet he presented the summit communiqué as a token of success, saying that its wording ‘implied that the United States Government recognised … our right to participate in all major international negotiations’. Wilson claimed at the Labour Party Annual Conference on 12–13 December that his meeting with the President was ‘one of the most important international discussions since the war’. He assured delegates that Britain was a fully-fledged partner of the Americans, still wanted at the ‘top table’, and that ‘we shall be wanted so long as we have anything to contribute’. At the conference, however, he was obliged to denounce ‘as a lie a press report that he had entered into a secret agreement’ in Washington ‘concerning British readiness to participate in the MLF’.

Wilson’s philosophy of Anglo-American relations

Despite his private doubts about the value of the talks, on 9 December Johnson sent a glowing letter to the Prime Minister, saying what ‘a pleasure it was for me to meet with you these past two days’. The meeting ‘was in the long tradition of the constructive working relationship which has long existed between our two countries’. Wilson was delighted by these comments, which suggested that he had succeeded in forging close personal relations with Johnson. He replied the same day he received Johnson’s letter, expressing gratitude for ‘the warmth of your welcome’, and then outlining his credo for the Anglo-American alliance: he had ‘long admired the way in which successive United States administrations since the war have shouldered the military, political and economic burden of the defence of liberty all over the world’. Britain had ‘an equally essential role to play, complementary to yours, if smaller in scale, exploiting our particular advantage as the centre of the Commonwealth and as a member of all three regional alliances and the fact of the British presence from Gibraltar to Singapore’. Wilson indicated that this presence was ‘no longer for imperial purposes but simply to help keep the peace, to promote a stable and just order and to be ready to respond to United Nations calls’. He told Johnson that he felt ‘much satisfaction to find in Washington that we saw eye-to-eye on such matters’, and was ‘also gratified to find that both of us viewed the Atlantic...
Alliance as the essential element in our national safety’.

On 3 January 1965, Housing Minister Richard Crossman wrote in his diary that Wilson valued his relations with the Americans far too highly:

in 1964 Harold Wilson was responsible for an overcommitment in overseas expenditure almost as burdensome – if not more burdensome – than that to which Ernest Bevin committed us in 1945, and for the same reason: because of our attachment to the Anglo-American special relationship and because of our belief that it is only through the existence of this relationship that we can survive outside Europe.

But Wilson’s future influence on President Johnson would remain to be seen, not least because, as the Washington Embassy warned around the same time, Britain would ‘be increasingly treated on [its] merits and shall be regarded not so much for who we are as for how we perform’, and ‘our ability to solve our own economic problems and to bring an end to what seems to the Americans to be a position of chronic insolvency’. Britain’s ‘unique capability of influencing American policy’ would be a ‘wasting asset unless we handle our own affairs with considerable skill and attention to the correct priorities’. The Washington summit was ‘a useful start’, but ‘only a beginning’.

Notes
3 Shrimsley, Hundred Days, pp. 91–2.
4 LBJL, Statements of LBJ, Box 134, ‘Members of Prime Minister’s party’, 7 December 1964; VHS, Diary of David Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, entry for 7 December 1964.
5 PRO, PREM 13/103, Lord Harlech (David Ormsby-Gore) to Wilson, 16 November 1964.
7 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303: 50, entry for 7 December 1964.
8 PRO, PREM 13/103, ‘Note for the Record’, 27 November 1964.
14 PRO, PREM 13/103, ‘Note for the Record’, 27 November 1964.
16 PRO, CAB 133/266, ‘Meeting held at the British Embassy ... and later at the White House,
The Washington summit on 7 December at 3.30 p.m.'

Ibid.

PRO, CAB 128/39, Cabinet minutes, 11 December 1964.

LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Box 2, Bundy, vol. 7 10/1–12/31/64 (2 of 3), ‘The British and Vietnam’, 5 December 1964.


PRO, CAB 133/266, ‘Meeting held at the British Embassy ... and later at the White House, on 7 December at 3.30 p.m.’

Ibid.


Denis Healey’s biographers noted that ‘Confrontation was an almost unknown war to the British people, although officially 119 British servicemen were killed and 182 wounded before it came to an end in August 1966.’ Geoffrey Williams and Bruce Reed, Denis Healey and the Policies of Power (London: Sidgwick and Johnson, 1971), p. 205.

NARA, Records of George Ball 1961–66 (74 D 272), MLF 4, ‘Memorandum of Conversation, 8 December 1964’.

PRO, CAB 128/39, Cabinet minutes, 11 December 1964.


VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, entry for 7 December 1964.


Ibid.

VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, entry for 7 December 1964.


PRO, CAB 133/266, ‘Meeting held at the White House on Tuesday 8 December 1964 at 3.45 p.m.’

Ibid.


LBJL, NSF: Memos to the President, Bundy vol. 8 (1/2) 1/1–2/28/65, transcript of Wilson–Johnson telephone conversation, 11 February 1965.


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46 LBJL, tape WH6504.06, citation 7378, Johnson–Robert Spivack telephone conversation, 12.43 p.m., 29 April 1965.
51 LBJL, George Ball Papers, Box 1, Britain III (11/24/64–12/31/65), Telecon, White to Ball, 12/9/64 and Telecon, McGrory to Ball, 12/9/64.
55 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, entry for 7 December 1964; LBJL, NSF: Country File, Box 214, UK Wilson Visit I 12/7–8/64, ‘Memorandum to Ambassador Bruce’, 9 December 1964.
57 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, entry for 8 December 1964.
58 NARA, Records of George Ball 1961–66 (74 D 272), MLF 4, ‘Memorandum of Conversation, 8 December 1964’.
59 VHS, Diary of David K. E. Bruce, MSS 5:1B8303:50, entry for 9 December 1964.
60 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 2.1 UK, Joint Weekas UK 12.1.64, Joint Weeka No. 49 (A–1521), 17 December 1964.
61 PRO, CAB 133/266, ‘Meeting held at the White House on Tuesday 8 December 1964 at 3.45 p.m.; NARA, Records of George Ball 1961–66 (74 D 272), MLF 4, ‘Memorandum of Conversation, 8 December 1964’.
64 PRO, CAB 128/39, Cabinet minutes, 11 December 1964.
65 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 2.1 UK, Joint Weekas UK 12.1.64, Joint Weeka No. 49, 17 December 1964.
66 NARA, Subject-Numeric 1964–66, POL 7 UK, Visits and Meetings 12.1.64, Johnson to Wilson, 9 December 1964.