

The Sir William Luce Memorial Lecture

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Sir William Luce in the Middle East

by

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Luce's "Class" of 1930 in the Sudan Political Service was not one of those famous for its scholars or athletes. Of the fifteen recruited that year, only one had a first-class degree, four had thirds, and one had a fourth. Of those who reached retirement age in the Sudan, one became Director of Economics and Trade, and five retired after achieving the rank of Governor. Incidentally the member with the fourth-class degree had played football and squash for Oxford and retired as the Senior Judge in the Sudan.

There was nothing unusual about Luce's early career in the Sudan. After the normal short training course in Khartoum he was posted to al-Damer in Berber Province, downriver from Khartoum, in September 1930 as an Assistant District Commissioner; then, from July 1932, to Berber town; and finally in April 1933 to Shendi. Berber Province was picture-postcard Northern Sudan, with old, historic towns, irrigated agriculture along the Nile, and famous nomadic tribes in the hinterland.

In 1934, after leave, Luce was transferred to the westernmost part of the country, Darfur, as Assistant DC at Nyala, the principal town of the huge and sparsely-populated southern district.

Although there is no reason to doubt that Luce gained valuable practical experience there – not least in the nuts and bolts of tribal administration – there was nothing remarkable about his tenure. His official correspondence shows neither exceptional achievement nor, frankly, much interest in the place; we find no tribal histories over his name, no study of onomastics or interest in archaeology: private letters home confirm an impression of restlessness and boredom. Wilfred Thesiger was among his colleagues in Darfur, but their paths diverged.

The first of several turning points in Luce's career came with his transfer, in December 1936, to Hasaheisa in the Blue Nile Province. This followed closely upon Luce's marriage; I think he might have left the Sudan altogether if he had expected a longer stay in Darfur. In any case, at Hasaheisa he was able to combine routine administrative work with a much livelier social life in the Sudan's most important province. Even during this period of retrenchment there were fourteen DCs and ADCs there. The nearby town of Wad Medani had a heterogeneous and vibrant community of expatriates.

Whatever future Luce may have foreseen, in Blue Nile a much wider world came more clearly into view. In the normal course of business he now found himself in regular contact with the senior echelons of the Sudan Government and the many official and private visitors who passed through. He and his wife established their first real Sudanese home there; and through that imponderable and subjective mixture of experience, talent, and personality by which the up-and-coming are identified, he began to make a mark.

Luce shared with many members of the Political Service extreme discomfort during the Second World War, for reasons both obvious and private. The crisis of August-September 1939 found him on leave in England, and he made the urgent return journey aboard the “Montcalm”, an old Canadian-Pacific liner, with 350 other employees of the Sudan Government. The period of the “Twilight War” was one during which, in the Sudan as well, boredom alternated with suspense. But the British there found themselves facing 200,000 soldiers of Fascist Italy in neighboring Libya, Eritrea and Ethiopia. The pessimism of the Governor-General, Stewart Symes, was reflected in inaction indistinguishable from defeatism, and jokes were made about the country’s meager defenses.

Luce and his colleagues faced a quandary. In Europe their brothers were in arms, while in the Sudan they only stood and waited. Nothing happened. A decision had been made that no one over the age of 32 would be released to the war, but Luce was 32 plus two months. In his diary he wrote:

It is absolutely maddening for people like myself who are only just over the age; as far as I am concerned, everything now depends on whether my transfer to ... [the Civil Secretary’s department in] Khartoum goes through at the beginning of the year;... if it is postponed ... or cancelled, and they give me nothing equally good, then I can see nothing for it but to resign. In an airmail letter I had from M[argaret] [his wife] yesterday – the first [such letter] – she clearly feels the same. Quite apart from one’s natural instinct to go and fight, I do feel very strongly that the great mission and opportunity of my generation will come at the end of this war, when a new basis for the future life of the world has to

be built; I hate the idea of being excluded from that work.... In the meantime ... I feel I am completely wasting my time.

There we catch a glimpse of Luce otherwise found only in private correspondence. Here is another, from a week later. When his Governor told him that “the individual must eliminate his private inclinations and do exactly what he is told by ‘authority’ ... [because] only the ‘authority’ can know how best the individual can be employed in winning the war”, Luce reacted strongly:

...there is far too much talk about the need for totalitarian organization [he wrote in his diary]. ... what is this fount of infallible wisdom which knows exactly the capabilities of each individual ... ? In England it consists of a body of men, many, if not all, of whom, at one time or another ... have proved their judgment, and sometimes their moral values, to be false and unreliable....

Some of Luce’s colleagues resigned. Workloads increased for those who remained, and separation from family in Britain was prolonged; he and his wife were apart for over five years. By the time the Italian threat was removed – in a spectacular and largely forgotten campaign – the British in the Sudan had settled into a prolonged supporting role.

A second turning point occurred in 1941 when, at the age of 34, Luce was appointed Private Secretary to the new Governor-General, Hubert Huddleston. It is worth mentioning how this appointment came about: Luce asked for it. In the autumn of 1940 he told the head of the Service

that he could not face a *sixth* year in Hasaheisa, and when asked where he'd like to go, Luce said "into Khartoum". When nothing happened he brought it up again, and was appointed Private Secretary. That position was misnamed; several holders of the post had risen to high office in and after the Sudan. Luce ran the Governor-General's office, accompanied him everywhere, drafted his confidential papers, participated in most of his important meetings and, during the war, met all the distinguished visitors who passed through the Sudan while the Mediterranean was closed. It was not an executive position but, for the right sort of man, it was excellent *training* for executive office.

The departure of Huddleston as Governor-General heralded a change for Luce, too. In January 1947 he was seconded for a course at the Imperial Defence College. During that unusual extended period in England he was active behind the scenes. The Foreign Office was trying to negotiate a new treaty with Egypt to preserve British control in both the Canal Zone and the Sudan. Luce kept secret documents to bring back with him, and when Harold MacMichael was due to speak to the class, Luce spent an hour with him privately, beforehand, telling him what to say. Returning to the Sudan, Luce began arguing boldly that preparing the Sudanese for self-government should not obscure what he called the "even more important mandate – the establishing of British influence in the future Sudan when we are no longer in control". This was to be a theme of Luce's entire subsequent career.

Luce's appointment as Deputy Governor of Equatoria Province in June 1950 was I am sure intended to give him experience of the Southern Sudan before higher office in Khartoum.

Likewise his appointment in August 1951 as Governor of Blue Nile facilitated his return to the central government with appropriate rank.

In 1952 the Egyptian revolution brought to power a regime unencumbered by its predecessors' insistence on the King of Egypt's sovereign rights in the Sudan. The new revolutionary regime agreed to recognize a Sudanese right to self-determination. This brought the Independence party there, the Umma, under the patronage of Sayyid Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi, to the bargaining table, and in a turnabout they reached agreement with the Egyptians. With the pro-Egyptian party in Khartoum in congenital opposition this meant that there was suddenly no "government party" in the Sudan. Ensuing negotiations ended in the landmark 1953 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement for self-government and self-determination.

With their days numbered, the British had one overriding objective: that the Sudan should achieve actual independence rather than union with Egypt. That this meant empowering the tiny Northern Sudanese political class could not be helped. Long-term aims would best be served by cooperating to achieve early dissolution of the regime rather than holding on by force for a few more years.

Both in his newly-created and unique position as Adviser to the Governor-General for Constitutional and External Affairs, and, I would argue, in his subsequent posts in Aden and the Gulf, this was the constant line that Luce would advocate. Abandoning the language of diplomacy we might put it like this: Better to make an early, graceful exit than to *resist* leaving and be kicked out.

Although he would reach the normal retirement age in 1955 anyway, Luce, in October 1954, wrote straightforwardly to Selwyn Lloyd:

It is essential for me for personal reasons to get another job when I leave the Sudan and of course, at my age, every year I wait reduces my eligibility. It would therefore be a great help to me in coming to a final decision about staying on to know whether the Foreign Office, or any other British Government Department, is likely to be interested in my future employment, either next year or a year or two later. If it is not, then of course I must look for employment elsewhere at the time most favourable to me personally.

Selwyn appreciated directness, and he wanted Luce in Khartoum until the end. He took the matter to Eden, who wrote, unusually: “I am anxious that Luce should remain in Foreign Office employment after he leaves the Sudan and I think we can certainly give him an assurance that when the time comes we shall offer him a job.”

As Adviser for Constitutional and External Affairs Luce was very active, privately, secretly, and almost never publicly. There is no question that he personally orchestrated the covert British attempt to help the anti-Egyptian Umma Party win the first Sudanese parliamentary elections; a remarkable formal agreement, *in writing*, was entered into (and was kept in the office safe of the so-called British Trade Commissioner so Luce had deniability). He was also, unconstitutionally, a conduit between the Governor-General and the Foreign Office. But the anomalous nature of the position left him exposed to criticism. No less a figure than the former Civil Secretary, James

Robertson, hinted darkly in his own trouble-making correspondence that the British in the Sudan now had no leader at all, and, referring to Luce, argued in July 1954 that a “plenipotentiary” should be sent out from London. To die-hards like him, even a hint of understanding for the Foreign Office point of view amounted to treachery.

But Luce had in fact never been part of the backwoods wing of the Political Service, with their inspired articles in the newspapers and planted parliamentary questions. I have yet to detect in his occasional ire any of the hurt feelings so common among departing British officials. He remained, above all, a realist.

Here is the contemporary opinion of Derek Riches, later Head of the Eastern Department, Foreign Office:

I am impressed by the objective, unemotional, and political approach of Mr. Luce to local political questions.... I also get the impression that he will do a great deal to re-establish confidence between the administration and Sudanese politicians by suppressing the tendency of British grievances and emotions to get involved in their mutual relations.

On 18 March 1955 Alexander Knox Helm became the last Governor-General. He left in mid-December. Luce remained until literally the end, *personally* shutting down the office in Kitchener’s Palace at noon on 31 December 1955 and handing over the keys a few hours before the Sudan achieved independence.

The job that Selwyn and Eden had promised turned out to be the governorship of Aden: suitable, interesting, and thankless – but, in Luce’s case, perhaps these words were synonymous, for he might after the Sudan have been seen as a liquidation specialist, someone brought in to keep an old family firm going, to protect assets, and avoid bankruptcy, while putting things in order for a graceful sale.

Yet after Suez, liquidation was not what most people had in mind. Immediately upon assuming office in January 1957 Harold MacMillan ordered a vast, comprehensive review of the present and future constitutional status of every British colony: to continue the mercantile metaphor, a “profit and loss” statement. The Colonial Office’s response on Aden, both the Colony and the Protectorate, was clear and unambiguous. HMG was already on record in favor of a “considerable degree of self-government” but no foreseeable diminution of British “responsibilities” there. The review concluded:

Taking all considerations into account, particularly strategy, economic interests, and prestige and influence in the Middle East, Her Majesty's Government have a strong interest in the maintenance of control of Aden Colony for an indefinite future period.

Regarding the Protectorate, however, the review recognized both "a clear obligation ... to maintain and uphold ... treaties with the Protected States", and a possibility of [evolving] a different kind of relationship". But British interest in the Protectorate was limited to its status as "a buffer between that Colony, the Yemen and Saudi Arabia". In other words, the Aden Colony’s role was as a base for protecting British interests in the Gulf and beyond; the Protectorate’s role was in defence of the Colony.

In Luce, London sent to Aden one who had already dealt for years with Egyptian subversion and the rising tide of pan-Arabism. He shared with the Foreign Office and the War Office the view that the *short-term* interests of Nasser's Egypt in Arabia were wholly compatible with those of the Soviet Union. The issue, as Luce saw it, was not how to *defeat* that combination - which, he argued, was unbeatable in light of Britain's present governing status and resources - but how best to salvage the essential elements of British national interest. Again, the key was realism.

In the Aden Colony the transition from British rule to self-government - let alone to self-determination, another matter entirely - had barely begun, and it was already too late for the step-by-step approach that had accelerated out of control in the Sudan. In the Colony's hinterland and the Protectorate was a tribal house of cards with, if anything, an abundance of kings and countless knaves. What to do?

In an important series of letters to the Colonial Office in March 1958 Luce offered a diagnosis and prescriptions. His method was characteristic: a detailed analysis in one letter; a lucid, almost detached appraisal of options in a second; and, in a third, his recommendations.

Luce's unsparing analysis was typical, like an experienced doctor's after all the tests had come in. He summarized the current palliative policy in the Aden Colony - gradual constitutional advance and ultimate control - then identified its weakness: "It would be idle", he wrote, "to assume that the Colony Arabs will be content to stop anywhere short of full self-government and thereafter self-determination. It would be equally idle to assume that having reached that point they would choose to be fully self-governing within the Commonwealth. Nothing seems less likely than that outcome. The pull of pan-Arabism will be far too strong."

A temporizing policy might work for a decade or so, but would “involve a head-on collision with Aden Arabs, their physical repression and probably a constitutional breakdown”. Even worse was the situation of the Protectorate, where a jumble of weak autocracies depended on British protection against the Zaidi Imam and his local allies, lately emboldened by the introduction of Russian arms and the Yemen’s nominal accession to the UAR. Aden was in the grip of four powerful currents, Luce wrote: the empire’s evolution from dependencies to independence; Arab nationalism; Russian expansionism; and the decline of British power. “All these currents” led to the same point, “the termination of British control in Aden”. It would be impossible to defeat all four, since dealing effectively with one would only worsen the threat of another. Recent events in Palestine, Jordan, the Sudan, and Egypt had “set in motion a process of abandoning British power in the Middle East and any attempt to arrest it in its last stage” would “merely bring us the worst of both worlds”.

Luce listed three options: 1. To dig in, a policy requiring ever-increasing military commitment and ending in defeat or voluntary abdication; 2. To withdraw right away, a policy he dismissed as “unthinkable”, not least because it would destroy British prestige elsewhere in Arabia and the Gulf; and 3. Gradual disengagement, undertaken while strengthening Britain’s friends in the Colony and Protectorate and replacing the current relationship with a new one based on what we would today call “soft power”. Luce of course advocated that third option, with an aim, however, of completing it within ten years and with great flexibility.

The means for carrying out that policy may be summarized as rapid political, economic and educational development; and viable federation of the Protectorate Arabs, with British financial assistance. He recognized the difficulties.

But London temporized, then adopted a *policy* of temporizing. “No final decision as to our future policy for Aden should be taken pending the review of our policy in the Middle East as a whole” was how Macmillan himself put it in December 1958. Tellingly, I think, the Minister of Defence advocated separating Perim, possibly the Kuria Muria islands, even Socotra and, last but not least, establishing a “strategic enclave” in the Colony itself, namely the air base and harbor! I have not yet found Luce’s reaction to that last suggestion.

When London opted for the worst alternative he had imagined, “digging in”, Luce told the government that failure to achieve self-determination would confront the Colony Arabs with a choice between Nasserism and British imperialism; attempts to hold the Colony by force would end in failure.

At the Colonial Office they took the gloves off. “There is a major difference of conception between the Governor and myself,” Julian Amery, then the parliamentary under-secretary of state, wrote in April 1959:

Seen against the general background of British Colonial development and against the particular background of his own experience in the Sudan [Luce’s policy was] perfectly respectable.... It involve[d], however, a radical departure from ... traditional policy towards Aden ... [by which] Aden Colony [was] important ... primarily as a fortress; and the Protectorate ... as a glacis to that fortress.... It will always be to our advantage, as a world power, to control the key position which Aden holds.

Luce was “in danger of forgetting how often in British history the mood of weariness that so often follows a great war has been overtaken by a reversion to more retentive and even more acquisitive policies”. Now the sentimental imperialist called the realist a defeatist: Amery swept

aside Luce's recommendations and instead advocated "by every means ... [to] delay", and to adopt the tactics of opportunism: to give way when necessary, then recover lost ground when possible.

Luce lost this battle. Lennox-Boyd, the Colonial Secretary, visited Aden in February 1959 and, after much more palaver, tried to split the difference. He accepted Luce's – and, I should note – local British military advice in rejecting the idea of "Fortress Aden". But he concluded that "the wisest course" would be "to play for time and to avoid defining our policy too clearly".

Seven weeks before his departure in October 1960, Luce wrote a final, lengthy exposition of his views. The Colony's Legislative Council's term would end in two years. Then what? The normal pattern of constitutional development would require steps toward full local control of internal affairs. In unvarnished prose Luce said it was too late for that: radicals would win any election, and the Colony would be ungovernable. Instead, he suggested

conversion of the Colony into a Protectorate ... before the end of the life of the present Legislative Council, say in the autumn of 1962, with the further aim of bringing about a merger between the Protectorate and the Federation.... The conversion would entail the relinquishment of British sovereignty over the Colony territory, and thereafter H.M.G.'s relations with the new Protectorate would be governed by the same kind of treaty terms ... as those which now exist[ed] between H.M.G. and the Federation.

Luce recognized that this proposal might seem "drastic and revolutionary", but reminded the Colonial Office that as far as he was concerned there was "nothing new about it".

Luce had stuck to his guns. So did the Colonial Office, where stalling and "awaiting developments" *was* the policy: other departments' views were needed, they said; the new

governor would need “time to settle in”; ministerial visits were planned; and so forth. Even a junior clerk felt sure enough to minute that Luce’s proposals were “outrageous”. As the file moved up through the CO, comments on what was called Luce’s “swansong” grew harsher. Sir Hilton Poynton, the permanent under-secretary, admitting that he knew nothing about Aden, caviled at the legal implications of “Protectorate” which, *obiter dicta*, might have been influenced by what he called Luce’s Sudan “background”. Finally the Earl of Perth airily concluded only that constitutional advance of some kind was needed, and that it would be necessary to “cook ... the elections”.

In the Sudan Luce’s role in the transition to self-government and self-determination had been entirely advisory and conducted largely in the shadows. In Aden his position was representational and executive, and much more constricted by the normal channels of metropolitan control. Now, in 1961, he would assume a hybrid role as Political Resident in the Gulf, where he had the status of an ambassador and the vague duties of unofficial adviser. In Luce’s case even the admitted anomaly was un-straightforward, for the role of Political Resident had changed substantially since before the war.

Britain’s position in the Gulf has been compared to that of the United States in South America: British interests had been defended by protecting the independence of the various Rulers against external aggression. Informality had suited London’s purposes. But by the time Luce took over, in May 1961, the region’s political development had been far outpaced by its economic significance. The Gulf States’ enormous oil reserves, the threat posed to them by Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia and by political upheaval independent of, or in conjunction with, external interference, had brought the Gulf crashing like an unhinged *deus ex machina* onto the world stage.

Luce wrote privately that trouble seemed to follow him wherever he went. And so we come to the Kuwait Crisis of 1961. Luce supported Britain's relinquishing authority in Kuwait, so long as the concomitant promise of "assistance" was backed by a willingness and ability to provide it. On behalf of the British Government (and in a deliberately low-key event) Luce signed on 19 June 1961 the formal instruments by which Britain's obligation to defend Kuwait was replaced by a treaty of friendship and Kuwait's independence. These events were followed by an immediate revival of Iraqi territorial claims, a flurry of consultations between the Gulf and London, and rapid implementation, at the express request of the Kuwaiti Amir Abdallah, of contingency plans for deployment of British forces.

Here, in a private letter of Monday, 3 July 1961, is how Luce described the fateful day:

I flew back a day early from Muscat.... As it was, I got back just in time – it was obvious by then that there was a very real and imminent danger of an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Iraq already had sufficient forces in the Basra area to overwhelm the small Kuwaiti army, and it would only take the Iraqis 24 hours to get from Basra to Kuwait town and the oilfields. But there was information also that they were moving tanks from Baghdad to Basra, which could be for only one purpose. The Ruler appealed for our help, which he was entitled to do under the exchange of Notes which we had made only 10 days before. This was on the Friday morning....The final response to the Ruler's appeal was given from London on Friday night – we got it ... at 3.0 a.m. on Saturday morning; at 8.0 a.m. I was in Kuwait telling the Ruler what we were going to do, and at 11.0 a.m. I watched the Marine commandos landing by helicopter from Bulwark, a tank squadron preparing to come ashore and the first Hunters flying in....

As enthusiastic as Luce seems here, he recognized from the start that the likely outcome was stalemate, which would be easy for the Iraqis to maintain but awkward for the Kuwaitis and their British allies. The crisis in fact almost immediately changed from a military confrontation to a political problem, mainly over what we would today call an “exit strategy”. Luce himself, in order to manage things better, moved temporarily from Bahrain to Kuwait.

The metaphors applicable to world-wide reaction to these events occupy a narrow spectrum from “crying wolf” to “jumping the gun”. The creation of an inter-Arab peace-keeping mission to relieve British forces was Luce’s prescription; indefinite British military presence risked alienating the Kuwaitis and the foreign Arab population from the ruling family. Here again, characteristically, in his own words, is Luce:

We finished the withdrawal of our troops from Kuwait on 11th October. The F.O. flapped a bit in the last stages.... It’s very difficult to get London to take a calm view of these things. The whole arrangement of the Arab League force has all along been a calculated risk, which the Ruler decided to take for political reasons (rightly, in my view).... I believe that the presence of the Arab force will act as a deterrent... [but] we have to be ready ... to go back again really quickly.... It’s not a comfortable position for us, but as long as we want Kuwait to remain independent, we have to accept it.

A personal aspect of Kuwait’s changed status was Luce’s fear that, with the appointment of a British ambassador there, he might be left at Bahrain without what he called “a worthwhile job”, and he warned the Foreign Office that he would in time be considering his position. But the Kuwait crisis had also revealed the precariousness of the Gulf principalities and of Britain’s ability to defend them, and there was plenty to do. For the medium term Luce saw no alternative

to a continuing British military presence. But mindful of eventual withdrawal, he above all saw the need for a political solution to the problem of Gulf security. As he had in South Arabia, so now in the Gulf Luce proposed a degree of interstate cooperation and improved relations which, in whatever form it might take, he called Peninsula Solidarity.

By what magic does the immemorially liquid become suddenly solid? Neither the defense of Kuwait in 1961; the continuing threat from Iraq; the long, drawn-out Dhofar rebellion; the changing of the guard in Sharjah and Abu Dhabi; the intractable interstate border disputes; the looming challenge of Iran, which occupied a great deal of Luce's time and energy, especially over its claims to Bahrain; the inveterate religious differences, with their demographic and political implications; nor indeed the uncertainty surrounding the eventual British withdrawal would materially alter the underlying trend. Without something like what Luce envisaged, in effect a general settlement in the Gulf that at least placated the major states and associated the minor emirates, there would be no security for them or for British interests.

There is time here only for a brief word about Luce's "representational" duties, routinely and mistakenly dismissed as anachronistic and absurd. His experience as Private Secretary in the Sudan was invaluable. Later, in Aden, and now in the Gulf, Luce's performance was businesslike and relatively informal. Representational duties had political significance complicated by the internal situation of each state and, especially, by inter-state relations: there always seemed to be a good reason to postpone or move up a visit, to issue or withhold an invitation. The files are filled with references to the potential for misunderstanding had Luce visited one shaykh right after another shaykh had been visited by a third shaykh. Some of this was tedious. But, in his own words, Luce "always enjoy[ed] seeing the Amir" of Kuwait. He was comfortable in his Sudanese Arabic, though he wrote out his speeches in phonetic Roman script. And this is as good

a place as any – though I might have mentioned it in connection with the Sudan or, later, with Luce’s shuttle diplomacy in the Gulf in 1970-71 – to note that he suffered often from air-sickness.

The arrival of Arab League troops during the Kuwait Crisis was more easily arranged than their ejection later. By the end of his tenure as Resident Luce had expended much time and effort on keeping the Trucial States “on the rails”, as he put it, against the blandishments of Nasser’s Egypt, which, through the League, promised significant development aid; Luce’s attempts to compete were hobbled by the Treasury in London, which was “utterly obstructive” in his words. In a tightly-argued memorandum in November 1964 he reflected on the position of Bahrain, Qatar, and the shaykhdoms which, as he saw it, faced three dangers: external (from the UAR and Iraq); internal (from a growing educated opposition to autocratic rule); and, third, a lack of *British* confidence. “The ruling families of the Gulf”, he wrote, were “still command[ed] the allegiance of the great majority of their people”, and it would be dishonorable and illogical to “disown them” now.

Any plan to change Britain’s relationship with the Gulf States should therefore “shed” aspects that detracted from their sovereignty; should avoid strengthening hostile elements; should aim to improve their governance; and should avoid changes drastic enough to “drive them into reinsuring elsewhere”. Having already advocated federation of the smallest emirates – the states other than Bahrain and Qatar – Luce warned against anything that might impede realization of that goal.

Little enough had been done to bring that about: the nine states met – for the first time – only in 1965, and a joint Development Office was the culmination rather than the beginning of a

program of association: the cliché about herding cats comes to mind; pessimism was pervasive: the Foreign Office constantly reminded Luce of the failure everywhere of federations. Nevertheless, that any progress at all was made was at least in part a result of Luce's efforts, and when he retired in 1966 it was with a sense of steady, albeit too slow, progress.

Much in the diplomacy of the ensuing several years is still familiar: concern for the unimpeded flow of oil, speculation about the likelihood and results of political upheaval, and the need to secure the Gulf principalities. But much, also, now seems wholly irrelevant, notably the fear of pan-Arabism and communist contagion. A great deal of strategic thinking in the 1960s was devoted to the management of Iran, where the Shah was seen as both a danger to the Gulf States and a bulwark against the Soviet Union. In the Defence Review of 1965, which was in effect another cost/benefit analysis, the conclusion was reached that

Our policy should ... be to work towards withdrawal, by preparing the Gulf States to meet the situation after we have gone ... and by seeking to carry the Shah of Iran with us....

It had by now been admitted generally that the Aden base would soon be lost but that British interests in Arabia could be defended if facilities in the Gulf itself could be built up. The Review concluded, therefore, that "the cost of continuing the Kuwait commitment after withdrawing from Aden may be regarded as the price payable for staying in the Gulf".

Even that price proved too high. The British government's continuously deteriorating fiscal position seemed to *require* what Labor's anti-imperialist rhetoric had only *demand*ed: complete withdrawal from the Gulf as soon as possible. But the Defence Review Working Party's report of June 1967 overflowed with wishful thinking. The United States should, for example, *be asked* to

assume the defense of Libya; *perhaps* Saudi Arabia could assume responsibility for the Gulf, *provided* the Shah could be reassured; *if* Kuwait requested an end to the British commitment, relations with the smaller states *might not* be *too* damaged; and so forth. This was late-night coffee-talk, not a blueprint for policy.

Withdrawal having been decided, however, the Foreign Office held that an “*announcement* now [September 1967; my emphasis] would be politically disastrous” because it would “destroy the Rulers’ confidence “. Well, scuttle is both a temporal and a kinetic concept. After much confabulation in Whitehall about the relative merits of “early departure” and “delayed departure”, it was decided that delay was a “euphemism for indefinite postponement”. Besides, it was said, no matter when withdrawal occurred, instability was inevitable, and political and economic interests could suffer; ideal conditions might take forever to emerge. Why, then, delay at all? But as late as November 1967 the FO told the Gulf rulers that Britain intended to maintain its bases there. When, in mid-January 1968, therefore, the British Government announced its intention to withdraw completely by 1972, there was consternation.

Old hands, Arab and British alike, were unsparing of criticism. The ruler of Bahrain foresaw redoubled Iranian claims to his kingdom. The ruler of Abu Dhabi could hardly look for protection to Saudi Arabia, which laid claim to much of his territory. The rulers of the five northern Trucial States were at sixes and sevens, fearful that Britain would “sell them down the river” to Iran. At the very least, it was widely agreed, all efforts should be made to resolve the principalities’ disputes with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and each other during the time remaining. There was justifiable shame in Whitehall, and rueful certainty that the precipitate decision to speed up complete withdrawal would be seen as the result of party-political pressure rather than budgetary necessity.

Yet there was no turning back. A secret memorandum by the FCO Planning Working Party in December 1969 makes sensational reading even today: British policy, it stated, should be based on five “principles”: “disengagement ... from the Arab/Israel dispute”; “disengagement from inter-Arab affairs”; “judicious support for Iran”; “cautious management of Britain’s assets”; and acting in concert with ... Western Europe (even with France)”. This was politics with a capital “P”, and redolent of a flyweight foreign policy.

All this is background to Luce’s last official position, as the Foreign Secretary’s Personal Representative for Gulf Affairs.

The Conservatives returned to power in the election of June 1970. Having castigated the previous Labour government for recklessly *announcing* withdrawal from the Gulf, they wished to be seen to be trying to salvage something from the wreck. The objects of their solicitude, the Gulf Rulers, declined rescue or, rather, couldn’t decide between the devil and the deep blue sea. The new Foreign Secretary, Alec Douglas-Home, therefore called Luce out of retirement in July with an omnibus brief as shuttle diplomat.

Why Luce? In a word, credibility. If Douglas-Home had wanted a yes-man there were plenty of candidates. But since retiring as Resident in 1966, Luce had not faded away. In appearances before learned societies and service groups, and in published pieces, Luce had let his views be known. Before actually appointing him Douglas-Home even mentioned his name to the Shah who, in the Foreign Secretary’s inimitable words, “put forward no objection”. The terms of reference were liberatingly and dangerously broad:

You are appointed as my personal representative for the co-ordination of general policy towards the Persian Gulf area. Your efforts will be especially directed to the resolution of

disputes and differences in the area, to the creation of a Federation of Emirates and the establishment of a situation in which British interests will be safe-guarded.

Any suspicion that the Conservatives would attempt to restore the *status quo ante Labore* was dissipated by the Gulf rulers themselves. Lining them up resembled one of those tests of dexterity where one tries to maneuver pips into holes: just as the player is about to get the last one in, two or three of those already in place fall out. So in the Gulf, plans were adduced for Unions of Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Four and Three; I have wondered if some inscrutable mandarin contemplated a union of One, but I suppose that that would require the forensic talents of an Archbishop of Canterbury. In an case Abu Dhabi's and Dubai's agreement in February 1968 to a form of union, and the Dubai agreement of the Nine later that month gave hope, but in successive meetings of the Supreme Council of the embryonic federation fundamental issues (e.g. sovereignty, fear of Iran) were sometimes obscured by trivial ones (prestige, poor diction). On more than one occasion Luce had to shuttle among the capitals simply because the parties could not agree on where to meet or refused to meet at all.

By 1970 it was Bahrain that would not be maneuvered into federation, then Bahraini-Qatari disagreement stood in the way, then the Shah raised anew his requirement of the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs before he would withdraw objections to *any* union. Three rounds of shuttling involved all the emirates, Tehran, Riyadh, Baghdad and Cairo, Beirut, Switzerland, Ankara, hundreds of separate meetings, aborted meetings, postponed or cancelled meetings, failures of interlocutors to show up, and Luce's alternating treatment as a VIP or nonentity.

After Luce's third round of talks, in January-February 1971, Douglas-Home finally made a statement of Government policy. Subject to further negotiation, and assuming that a union of the emirates could be formed, a Treaty of Friendship would provide for British military assistance in the form of training, secondment of officers, possible stationing of personnel, supply of equipment, joint exercises, port facilities for the Royal Navy, over-flight rights, and consultations. Although he did not say so, this would achieve, or retrieve, much the same position as existing arrangements, but without a specific commitment to defend the Gulf States.

Luce's last attempt at creating a Union of Nine foundered in May 1971, when the intended Nine could not agree to attend a meeting. In a high-stakes poker game he was merely the dealer; Saudi Arabia held a full house, the Shah of Iran had a Royal Flush. In August and September Bahrain and Qatar decided to fold, took their winnings, and went home to declare independence; while each of the smaller emirates kept bluffing. What was left now for Luce was to bring the game to an end without a showdown. The establishment of the UAE in August 1971 was perhaps the best that could have been expected: a group of Six, later expanded to Seven.

By that point – late 1971 – the dispute between Iran and Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah over the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs remained unsolved. The British position was insolubly awkward. As against long support of Arab claims stood the current policy of tilting towards the Shah. Even the etymology of “tunb” was at issue: in the files it's rendered as “hill”, “rope”, and “bad fish”. The Iranian ambassador in London, Amir Afshar, writing twenty years later, hinted at Luce's endurance:

Sir William Luce and I used to negotiate in London. Having reached certain points of understanding, we would go to Tehran and discuss them before the Shah. Having heard

the Shah's views, Sir William Luce would go to the emirates discussing the points with [the] rulers of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah, from there going to London to brief his government. We then resumed the talks in London, repeating the same procedure.

Afshar's involvement was one of many complications. The Foreign Office too-gladly deferred to Luce: as Anthony Parsons wrote in a confidential minute, Luce's knowledge of the issues was "so encyclopaedic that he will be able to explore in detail every conceivable possibility of extracting concessions from the Shah". Anglo-emirati relations, inter-emirati relations; the involvement of Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, even of Japan and of course the United States; the repercussions of the Arab-Israeli dispute – all these and more figured in. Then there was the American lawyer, Northcutt Ely, improbably representing the Ruler of Sharjah. In 1985 he reminisced:

The Shah ... was in fact supremely contemptuous of all Arabs. Sir William Luce ... told me that when the Shah spoke of Arabs, his lip "curled in scorn". Luce said he had read that expression in novels, but had never seen anyone actually curl his lip in scorn. When Luce got home, he tried it in front of a mirror, but couldn't do it.

The announced date for Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf was approaching rapidly. The clock was ticking. Sir William shuttled between Tehran and Sharjah at an increasing tempo, bringing to Shaikh Khalid the latest version of the Shah's terms. On each occasion Khalid would refuse to agree, and demand better terms.

Finally, in late October, Sir William returned to Sharjah with what he called the Shah's "final offer", and pressed for an answer.

In the event, of course, during Luce's renewed shuttle diplomacy a rough compromise was suggested that would shelve the issue of sovereignty while, ultimately, allowing the Shah to occupy the islands. Sharjah made a separate peace; from the top of his tent Shaykh Khalid refused, even after frank disclosure that Britain would not intervene. That position, against an elaborate scrim (called Operation Pensum) of patrols, warnings, but on no account actual military resistance of an Iranian incursion, was intended as a sort of double bluff.

The day before Britain's commitment to the Gulf principalities expired, on 30 November 1971, the Shah's forces occupied the disputed islands. There was much head-scratching over the timing, but everything had been choreographed in advance by the British, Iranians, and Sharjah. Douglas-Home reported to the Cabinet, with praise that might later have seemed faint, that Luce "deserved [their] warm congratulations" for the "reasonable hopes for stability" that could now be entertained.

In 1958, two years after Luce had handed over the keys in Khartoum and attended the flag-raising on Sudanese Independence Day, a coup overthrew the government the British had left behind there.

In 1967, six years after Luce had left Aden, his prescriptions summarily rejected, the ramshackle structure that had been cobbled together there were overthrown in a revolutionary upheaval.

Luce's efforts as Political Resident in the Gulf to create Peninsula Solidarity may fairly be judged to have failed even before he retired: in this case the fault lay as much with local potentates as with London, but not with him.

Now, given the mess he'd been handed in 1970, Luce had succeeded as liquidator – husbanding the assets and avoiding bankruptcy. There had been neither a bang nor a whimper, for the world had not come to an end.

I should like to close with brief generalizations about salient points of Luce's career. It is in the nature of things that we tend to pay more attention to those present at the creation of empires – the soldiers, law-givers, and administrators – than to those who preside over dissolution. But it was an animating insight of Luce in his successive positions in Khartoum, Aden, and the Gulf that *how Britain left* was ultimately more important than how long she stayed. Preservation and even enhancement of British influence was what mattered. Nor was that tenet incompatible with concern for local peoples, in the Sudan and, especially, in the Gulf. For what informed his policy was the belief that preservation of British influence in the Arab world served Britain and Arabs alike.

Luce was a *big* thinker, but he saw the necessity of taking small steps to reach long-term goals.

He was a *creative* thinker: his handling of the politics of self-government and self-determination in Khartoum was a set piece; the thawing of relations between the Aden Government and the Imam of the Yemen, which I have not had time to mention today, showed him at his best, confident and imaginative; in the Gulf he championed Peninsula Solidarity, and foresaw the

possibility of a wider treaty organization; he worked tirelessly to bring about federation of the Gulf emirates; his personal touches – notably two “informal” visits to Yemen when he was Governor of Aden, and a visit as Political Resident to Saudi Arabia in 1965, were his idea, even as the Foreign and Colonial Offices urged caution and delay; his policy at Aden of developing the economies of the Protectorate, while never implemented, was clearly the right one.

All this he did while retaining the trust of his many interlocutors in both the British Middle Eastern Establishment and the Arab world. On the whole it was a career of weight and importance, much of it behind the scenes, worthy of study and, if I may say so, worthy of emulation.