

**THE UNITED STATES, BRITAIN AND  
APPEASEMENT, 1936-1939**

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BRITAIN AND  
APPEASEMENT,  
1936—1939

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Palgrave Macmillan

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1981 978-0-333-26169-9

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*First published 1981 by*  
**THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD**  
*London and Basingstoke*  
*Companies and representatives*  
*throughout the world*

ISBN 978-1-349-16571-1

ISBN 978-1-349-16569-8 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-16569-8

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# Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Esmonde Robertson of the London School of Economics who first encouraged me to take up the subject of American appeasement, and to Professor A. E. Campbell of the University of Birmingham who provided constructive criticism whilst supervising the topic as an Oxford D.Phil. thesis. Grants from the Scottish Education Department and the American Council of Learned Societies financed research in Britain and the United States. A research fellowship at New College, Oxford, allowed time for reflection and writing. I am grateful to the following individuals and institutions for access to papers and for permission to quote: the University of Birmingham Library; the Library of Congress; the University of Delaware Library; the University of Columbia Library; the Houghton Library, Harvard; the National Archives of the United States; the Public Record Office; the US Navy Yard, Washington, D.C.; the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library; the National Library of Scotland; the Scottish Record Office; and Mr Kenneth John Young who generously allowed access to the Arthur P. Young Papers. Finally, I would like to thank the staff of Rhodes House Library, Oxford, for bearing with me during my periodic raids on their stack in search of bound copies of the *New York Times*.

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*September 1979*

# Introduction

Previous work on the origins of the Second World War has largely avoided broad consideration of Anglo-American relations in the critical period 1936–9. British historians of European appeasement, such as Taylor and Gilbert,<sup>1</sup> have devoted their efforts to a critique of Anglo-German relations which ignores the role of the United States in British policy. America, when considered at all, is merely dismissed as an isolationist power with no real influence on European affairs.<sup>2</sup> Writers on Far Eastern developments during the period, such as Louis,<sup>3</sup> have naturally devoted greater attention to the American role, but any attempt at a synthesis of the American impact on British policy in both Europe and Asia remains lacking. American historians have failed to redress the balance. The standard work on Roosevelt's foreign policy, Langer and Gleason's *The Challenge to Isolation*,<sup>4</sup> devotes minimal attention to the pre-war period and is mainly concerned with events after 1939. When Anglo-American relations before 1939 are considered, it is generally in works devoted exclusively to the situation in the Far East such as Borg's *The United States and the Far Eastern Crisis*.<sup>5</sup> Offner's book, *American Appeasement*,<sup>6</sup> fails to remedy this situation. Offner discusses American policy towards Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1938, but his book is unsatisfactory, partly because it is marred by the author's strong personal bias against appeasement, and partly because the narrative is not taken beyond Munich, when crucial changes in American policy occurred. Offner does not discuss the shift from appeasement to containment which took place in October 1938, a change which predated Chamberlain's decision to abandon conciliation and which led to friction between Washington and London. By 1939 American policymakers had come to believe that Chamberlain was the agent of selfish City interests, which were not above handing over Europe to Hitler in return for a guaranteed share of its trade. Nor does Offner emphasise the central part played by the German 'moderates' – bankers, industrialists and army officers – in American appeasement before 1938. This group stood

not only for an Open Door economic order in Europe, but also for cooperation with other industrial powers against Japan in the Far East. Leading advocates of appeasement, such as Sumner Welles, were well aware that cooperation with the 'moderates' was the key to an Open Door system in Europe and Asia and hence to the American goal of a stable world and an export-led recovery from the Depression. By appeasement Welles hoped to avoid the alternative, an expanding totalitarian system led by German and Japanese 'extremists', which would exclude the United States from world markets and undermine its position in Latin America. American policy was thus based on a world view which Offner ignores.

After the 'moderates' were purged in 1938 and Hitler had embarked upon an obviously expansionist course, American policy moved from appeasement to containment. Langer and Gleason discuss the origins of the change but do not consider its domestic implications. The American role in containment was to supply Britain and France with arms, but they were to be paid for by the liquidation of Allied assets in the United States. Hopkins, for one, believed that such foreign orders would relieve unemployment and help the Democrats win the presidential election in 1940. Moreover, the United States, although a non-belligerent, was to have a substantial voice in any peace settlement in return for its material assistance. This meant that the demand for an Open Door world could again be brought forward, as indeed it was in the Atlantic Charter of 1941. Prior to December 1941, American policy can be viewed as an attempt to secure a stable world, open to American trade, without the actual deployment of military strength. This was the aim of appeasement, as it was of containment after Munich.

This book, therefore, attempts to fill a gap in the historiography of the thirties, first with a detailed study of American policy between 1936 and 1939, and secondly with an examination of the American impact on British foreign relations in the classic era of appeasement. Several important questions are considered in the course of the study. What was the American conception of the German problem and its relationship to the crisis in the Far East? How did Roosevelt's solutions differ from Chamberlain's ideas? Why did the United States abandon appeasement before Britain and how successful were American efforts to persuade Chamberlain to adopt a stiffer line with Hitler? What impression did the Americans form of British policy in Europe and the Far East, and

were their suspicions in any way justified? The answers to such questions explain the considerable degree of mistrust which marked the attitude of the Roosevelt administration towards the Chamberlain government.