Introduction

Strategy is defined by paradox. As Clausewitz formulates it, warfare is a struggle in which each party attempts to impose its will on the other. Conflicting wills create paradoxes, in which the right choice may be the least logically obvious one. This interplay of forces cannot be separated from strategy’s political element. War is a political activity – politics is, in part, the domain of the will.

The relationship between politics, strategy, and history contains another paradox. Deriving strategy from purely historical assumptions helps create military organizations that “fight the last war,” rather than recognize the conditions that define the contemporary balance of power. Conversely, deriving strategy from abstract analyses of capabilities and assumptions of human rationality provides an inaccurate model of both politics and conflict.

Good strategy is a mean between fighting the last war and abstractions, however rational. Strategy is political. Since man is by nature political, history is simply politics reiterated in different circumstances. Examining history helps the strategist to identify political universals within strategic and geographic limits, deriving “lessons” that are as close as possible to timeless. History trains the strategist to understand particularity, thereby cultivating the practical requirements for statesmanship and, by extension, strategy-making.

Mankind’s relationship with the sea is ancient. The Hebrew Bible recounts the Noaic Flood, in which God, angry at the world’s wickedness, sent a great storm to wipe it clean. As the tale goes, all of creation rode out the storm in a massive ship – captained by the eponymous prophet. In more historical terms, the first human civilizations sprouted alongside the

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banks of major rivers, relying on the waterways for transportation and agriculture. The desire for new products, new land, and a hunger for adventure nourished trade, creating the great seafaring peoples of the Mediterranean, whose polities and empires defined Western history. One can see a similar trend in Asia. Successive monarchs discovered that maritime transport was far more efficient than moving goods over land—a fact which holds to this day, despite man’s conquest of the skies.³

Nearly every major empire—Athens, Rome, China, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, England and France—has derived significant political power from control over a major body of water or maritime chokepoint. The only exception, the Mongol Empire, proves the rule—the united Khanate fragmented in under a century, while each portion of it was assimilated by the cultures of conquered peoples. States have resisted the tide of history solely because of their naval power. The Maratha Confederacy, the most powerful political unit on the Indian subcontinent in the 18th century, confronted and defeated the Portuguese, British and Dutch at sea multiple times. An internal political crisis finally gave Britain a strategic opening. Still, it took Britain three wars and four decades to defeat the Marathas.

Pericles observed that “if happiness requires freedom and freedom requires courage, do not shrink from the dangers of war.” Preserving one's freedom requires war, which in turn requires seapower. Seapower is integral to the happiness of nations.⁴

Nevertheless, history contains examples of nations that willingly surrendered their naval power. Maritime power is expensive and difficult to maintain. Free regimes with good political leaders have had seemingly valid, logical reasons for relinquishing naval supremacy. Venice turned away from the sea to adapt to Europe’s changing geopolitical landscape in the 15th and 16th centuries. Britain also surrendered global naval supremacy in response to shifting geopolitical trends and finance. Both states attempted to replace maritime strength with land power, fostered by territorial expansion and alliances. Both viewed land power as a cheaper, and more reasonable, alternative than seapower.

Both were politically and strategically wrong. Venice’s attempt to pivot from sea to land helped transform it into yet another player in the Italian

balance-of-power contest, ultimately condemning the city-state to political decline and irrelevance. Britain’s choice to abandon global naval supremacy mortgaged its Empire and ensured its diminished status in the 20th-century.

Exploring the reasons for each state’s pivot away from seapower and the other choices available to them at the time offers enduring lessons about politics and strategy. Most important – the individual choices of statesmen, rather than the structural conditions a state faces at the time, are critical in determining its survival. As the West’s rivals increase in strength and ambition, American political leaders and strategists would benefit by remembering the importance of statesmanship.

Desponsamus te, mare– Venice and the Sea

Analyses of international politics are biased towards large political actors. Empires usually possess greater access to resources than smaller city-states. Paradoxically, however, smaller actors, with their greater organizational efficiency, can manipulate geopolitical conditions and achieve regional primacy.

Venice is a paradigmatic example. Using maritime power, a city-state with a population that never exceeded 200,000 people managed to dominate the Mediterranean world until the 15th-century, and despite such strategic mistakes as attacking Constantinople in 1204 and failing materially to assist the Byzantines two-and-a-half centuries later, successfully resisted the Ottomans for another 300 years. Venice survived until the end of Europe’s first Imperial age, only succumbing to Napoleonic power in 1796. Its prosperity and expansion rested on its maritime power. Similarly, when Venice turned from the seas, it became like Samson shorn. La Serenissima lost its power and its ability to compete with larger, better-organized adversaries.

Founded as an Adriatic trading post in the early 6th-century, Venice became a refuge from the increasing violence that accompanied the Western Roman Empire’s political disintegration. Initially under Byzantine suzerainty, Venice was caught between Byzantium, the Lombards, and the growing Frankish-Carolingian Empire. Geography allowed Venice to resist external invaders. By 803-804, the Byzantines had recognized de facto Venetian independence, while the Carolingians, unable to take the city, ceased

attempting to extend their sovereignty over it. Venetian dukes, known as Doges, began expanding the city-state’s influence in Italy, gaining control over the surrounding towns. Venice first exercised its naval power in the 830s-840s: the Venetians dispatched a 60-galley fleet to support Byzantium in its wars against its near Eastern Arab rivals.

Venice began its ascent to great power in 1000. Having carefully husbanded its naval resources, the Venetian fleet purged the Adriatic of pirates, and conquered Dalmatia’s petty principalities, weakened as they were by internecine warfare. It was then that the Sposalizio del Mare ceremony was first performed – the Doge led a procession of ships out of the harbor at Lido, and then presided over prayers for the extension of Venetian power over the seas. In later centuries the line “Desponsamus te, mare, in signum veri perpetuique domini (We wed thee, sea, as a sign of true and everlasting domination)” was added to the ceremony. Venetian policy first assured, and then abdicated, veri perpetuique domini of the seas.

The rise of Venetian power in the 11th through 14th centuries cannot be understood without examining its ruling regime. Three points are critical. First, the mercantile nature of the republic created a robust middle class that fused with the aristocracy, undermining the power of individual aristocrats. Venetian society was stratified, but those in power possessed decentralized—and therefore “nationalized”—interests, resulting in a political class more likely to embrace the common good rather than the merely private one.

Second, the regime was intentionally mixed, balancing factional interests through different policy-making organs. This stimulated discussion and debate over policy and strategy in which councilors and senators examined strategic issues from the position of the common good, rather than from their own factional interests.

Third, the Venetian government could act without public accountability in times of crisis, particularly after the institutionalization of the Council of Ten. The Venetian regime was designed to think strategically, rather than factionally – one can attribute Venice’s careful strategy to this political system.

6 Ibid., 25.  
7 Ibid., 32.  
Starting in the 11th century, Venice was faced with a fundamental strategic choice. It could engage in the developing Italian balance-of-power system, and compete with Florence, Milan, Genoa, and other rivals. Or it could recuse itself from the Italian system and pursue maritime supremacy. The latter choice would require a much longer-term strategy.

Venice took it. Naval power takes decades to develop. It requires industrial infrastructure, specialized training, and a consistent revenue stream, along with political commitment to a specific economic system. Naval powers seldom gain the immediate spoils of conquest. But the ultimate benefits of maritime supremacy far outweigh the costs of achieving it. A state with a miniscule population compared to its rivals was thereby able to dominate the Mediterranean and become a major European player on equal footing with Byzantium, the Spanish Kingdoms, France, and the Holy Roman Empire.

All of Venetian strategy was divided into three parts. First, Venice conquered locations in the Adriatic and Eastern Mediterranean, including Dalmatia, several Greek islands, Crete, and Cyprus. Venice controlled little physical territory compared to nearly every other European power. However, its island and coastal outposts precisely matched the trade routes that ran from the Levantine Basin to the rest of Europe. Venice linked its maritime outposts together, and policed the Eastern Mediterranean’s waterways with one of the most powerful and militarily competent navies in the world at the time.

Second, Venice created the Arsenal, a cluster of shipyards and armories that was Europe’s largest industrial hub until the 1760s. Each workshop in the Arsenal produced a specific product, enabling labor specialization, increased efficiency, and technological innovation. The Arsenal’s engineers created the innovative “frame-first” construction technique, which replaced the Roman-developed “hull-first” method. It is said that in times of crisis the Arsenal could produce a galley in a single day. Even if untrue,

12 Jakub J. Grygiel, Great Powers and Geopolitical Change (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2006), 84-86.
13 Horodowich (2009), 90-92.
the Arsenal’s production techniques were astounding for Medieval Europe – they are noted in Dante’s *Comedia*.\(^{15}\)

This industrial project allowed the Venetian Navy to recover from potentially ruinous losses. The War of Chioggia with Genoa in the late 14\(^{th}\)-century is a good example.\(^{16}\) Genoa, one of Venice’s greatest maritime rivals, had occupied a small fishing port of Chioggia, in August 1380. The town itself was of no economic importance, but it blocked an access point to the Venetian lagoon. Prolonged Genoese control of Chioggia would have threatened Venetian access to the Adriatic, and by extension, its survival. Several months of intermittent skirmishing, followed by a major naval confrontation, yielded a strategic victory for Venice, but savaged the Venetian and Genoan combat fleets. Venice and Genoa concluded a peace settlement the following year, which at first seemed favorable to the latter. However, both sides had accumulated significant public debt, which would take up to two decades to retire.\(^{17}\) Venice, however, was able to field full combat fleets soon after the conflict, and by 1400 had rebuilt its navy. Genoa, lacking the industrial capacity the Arsenal system provided, was virtually eliminated as a naval power.

Third, Venetian power relied on savvy diplomatic maneuvering. Venice’s decision-makers set no goal higher than the polity’s strategic interest. Every enemy could become a partner, while most allies were erstwhile adversaries. Like Richelieu in 17\(^{th}\)-century France, Venice’s leaders distinguished between the temporal salvation of the State and the eternal salvation of the soul.\(^{18}\) Hence Venetian willingness to convert the Fourth Crusade, convened in 1204 as an expedition against the Ayyubid Sultanate, into an attack on their commercial rival, the Byzantine Empire. The Doge at the time, Enrico Dandolo, orchestrated the attack at an age variously estimated between 85 to 95 years old– and commanded the invasion while fully blind.

This confluence of strategic factors catapulted Venice to Mediterranean dominance. By the early 15\(^{th}\)-century, Venice dominated the trade routes between East and West. Its string of overseas bases and colonies tied together by maritime power, and girded with the Arsenal’s industrial capacity, ensured that any political player seeking access to the riches of the

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17 Ibid., 224-226.
Mediterranean and beyond would need to negotiate with the Venetians, or initiate a foolhardy military struggle.

Structural factors subtend international political relationships. No state, not even the most powerful, can escape the constraints of shifting economic and political trends. However, the disintegration of Venetian power illustrates the primacy of political choice.

The rising Ottoman Empire confronted Venice with its first structural challenge. 14th-century Anatolia was politically fractured. Byzantine rump-states, and the reborn Empire itself, competed with a dozen or more Turkish Bayliks.19 The Balkans was similarly splintered. Petty duchies and principalities, nominally organized under a supreme authority, competed for local power and interest. No competitor held the upper hand. The first Ottoman leaders ruthlessly maneuvered between rival political actors, crushing each one in turn when the circumstances permitted aggression, and maintaining a tense peace otherwise. Much like their future Venetian competitors, the Ottomans benefited from a centralized state apparatus, the likes of which no other political unit in Anatolia could operate.

Despite a brief setback after Ottoman defeat in 1402, the growing Sultanate consolidated its control over Anatolia, and began launching raids into, and later conquered, the Balkans. There was a clear logic to early Ottoman strategy: Turkish forces progressively separated Byzantium from any European partners over land, intending eventually to descend on Constantinople and topple the Empire.20

Venice had a clear interest in these geopolitical developments. Starting in 1422, Venetian possessions in Greece, largely coastal, came under attack. As always, Venice’s erstwhile Byzantine rival became a potential ally against this new threat from the East.

Growing Ottoman power threatened to crush the critical toe-holds Venice had created from the Adriatic across the Aegean to the Black Sea. Its maritime possessions would logically be the next target, after the Ottomans dispatched Byzantium. Depending upon Ottoman objectives, the rising Empire could prove to be the greatest threat Venice had ever encountered.

This was the critical policy issue. Venetian strategists and statesmen were confronted with the most difficult, and significant, question in inter-

national politics – of what nature was the Ottoman regime? Structural pressures have a say in creating state policy. Larger states will naturally somewhat dominate, even threaten their smaller neighbors, and rising powers always upset the delicate balance of any established system. But no state is monolithic, working with a single rational mind. Every polity has a complex decision-making process, with several relevant personalities. These multiple personalities are inseparable from a state’s identity – culture, religion, and self-image. They create an international image. But understanding how these elements interact requires inhabiting the mind of one’s adversary, deconstructing every ethical and political presumption, and seeing the world as they see it.21

Venetian statesmen failed at this. They assumed that the Ottoman Empire was much like any other state. Natural geographical and military factors would slow Ottoman momentum. After a handful of decisive defeats, like every other rival, the new Sultanate would seek a deal with the master of the seas. Thus, Venice left Byzantium to its fate. Despite 1,000 years of separation, the City of Constantine fell just as the City of Romulus did – bathed in conquering fire. Historian Michael Critobulus, later writing a history for Mehmet the Conqueror, reported that Emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos, upon witnessing the fall of the city, ripped off his Imperial finery and charged to his death as a common soldier. As the city burned, Venetian war fleets stayed in port.

Venice estimated wrong. The Ottoman Empire could not be treated like any other European actor. Perhaps, after another century of warfare against a Byzantine-Venetian alliance, Ottoman sultans would have abandoned their expansionist ambitions, and struck a deal with Venice giving the latter control of the Eastern Mediterranean. And absent effectively applied maritime power, it is unclear how the Ottoman Empire could have prevented Venice from supporting Byzantium – much like Sparta was powerless against the Athenian long walls. In the event, the conquest of Constantinople and the death of Byzantium simply inflamed Ottoman ambitions. Venice would be locked in a struggle over the seas until the late 16th-century that would culminate in the fleet action at Lepanto in 1571.22

But even the Venetian and allied victory there could not reverse the Republic’s decline, because of its second strategic failure.

Venetian strategy was premised upon control of the Eastern Mediterranean, which in turn assumed that the Levantine basin would remain the nexus of international trade. Columbus’s discovery of the Americas, alongside Portugal’s expansion into the Indian Ocean and the northern/western European states’ design of deep-hulled vessels that could reach Asia by rounding Africa’s southern tip, threatened to overturn this equilibrium. Venetian control of the Eastern Mediterranean no longer guaranteed the Republic’s maritime power.

Hence, Venetian statesmen were faced with a second choice. They could either attempt to recoup Venice’s maritime strength using creative policy measures, or pivot towards the land, and use Venetian maritime wealth to raise armies and expand the Republic’s security perimeter. Indeed, Venice began to gravitate towards the latter option in the early 15th-century, attempting to roll back Milanese expansion in the Italian *terrafirma*.

It is no coincidence that, for the most critical three decades of Ottoman expansion, between 1423 and 1453, Venice was preoccupied fighting land wars against Milan and its allies. Despite winning tactical and strategic victories, Venice was never able to create a stable balance with Milan through force alone. A year after the Fall of Constantinople, Venice *de facto* acceded to the Treaty of Lodi, which established formal boundaries between Venice and Milan.

Venice did experience four decades of relative peace in Italy, despite the Treaty of Lodi’s abrogation in 1483. Nevertheless, the later Italian Wars demonstrate the dangers of turning from the sea. Despite its wealth, Venice could never have hoped to compete with Europe’s great powers on land. Even Machiavellian citizen-soldiers, with their patriotic zeal, would not have matched the discipline and training of professional German, Swiss, and Spanish pikemen.

Athenian warships, rather than Spartan phalanxes, preserved the ancient Greek world against repeated Persian invasion. The same would have been, and was indeed, similar in the Venetian experience. Venice’s European rivals, fearing Ottoman expansionism, could not cannibalize Venetian naval power.

Could creative strategic thinking have helped Venice combat changing structural trends? Egypt was a potential partner against Ottoman expansionism. More important, the Mamluk Sultanate in Cairo sat along a potential corridor between East and West. A partnership between Venice and Egypt could have allowed the Venetians to mitigate the effects of the 16th-
century’s transatlantic trade – indeed, a greater volume of shipping moved through the Mediterranean than across the Atlantic until the early 18th-century. Selim the Grim, one of the most strategically shrewd Ottoman Sultans, conquered Egypt in 1517. One cannot doubt that he feared a partnership between the Mamluk Sultanate and a European power.

Statesmanship links Venetian ascendancy and decline. The Venetian regime purposefully encouraged strategic thinking, which in turn enabled a polity with a fraction of the population and territory of Europe’s empires to dominate the Mediterranean, and become the West’s foremost medieval power. Venice did not lack statesmanship during its decline. Indeed, Venice remained politically relevant into the 18th century, in no small part because of commanders and statesmen like Sebastiano Venier and Paolo Sarpi, the latter of whom inspired the American founders. But Venetian political leaders gravely miscalculated the threat of the Ottoman Empire. Even the best of regimes make mistakes. But Venetian miscalculation condemned the Republic. Nearly two centuries after Sarpi uttered *Esto Perpetua* on his deathbed, Venice was devoured by Napoleon’s armies, succumbing to history.

Exhaustion: Britain and the Sea

Modern man accuses his ancient antecedents of lacking “historical consciousness” – the understanding of the social, political, and cultural distinctions that separate past, present, and future societies. This consciousness makes history intelligible. The contemporary observer can observe progress and regress, triumph and tragedy. This, of course, requires temporally privileging the present position in history, as Hegel would term it placing ourselves at history’s “end.”

While ancient man certainly lacked historical consciousness, however, he cannot be said to have ignored his own temporality. His history involved beginnings and ends, strung together cyclically over mythological eras and, in turn, human experience. He eschewed speaking of history, and in-

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stead observed *histories*, each unique to its own culture and civilization, each with its own beginning and end.²⁵

Historical periods end, of course, with a culminating moment that signals a shift in a society’s and civilization’s self-image and role in the external world. That moment may only be visible in retrospect, and often involves violence. Britain, however, is unique. Its history ended on 5 July 1945, with the Labour Party’s landslide victory in the first post-war general election. The United Kingdom had survived its “supreme exertion for freedom, for right, and for truth,” after which its citizens chose to turn inward, electing a government that would transform Britain’s regime into an administrative welfare state.

The Britain that died in 1945 was not England as such. Today’s United Kingdom has rendered itself up to political torment over questions of European integration and fringe arguments about diversity. But today’s Britain is a ghost of the England that once ruled a quarter of the world’s population and was suzerain over one fourth of its landmass. That England was born between July and August 1588, when through tactical skill, diplomatic maneuvering, and *fortuna’s* blessing, Elizabeth’s kingdom repelled the Spanish Armada.

Control of the seas was a compass to the earliest English kingdoms. Viking freedom of maneuver at sea allowed Scandinavian raiders to identify weak points along the English and Scottish coastline. Comparatively small forces were able to crush the petty Anglo-Saxon polities. Viking raiders transformed into colonizers, and after only 80 years all but one English kingdom had fallen to the invaders. It took a leader with Alfred the Great’s strategic vision to turn the tide, and to establish an effective maritime presence. After fighting the Danes to a standstill, Alfred commissioned warships built to outclass the average Viking long ship and defend the southern English coastline.²⁶ Notwithstanding, a century and a half later Norman invaders landed in the south of England and crushed the Saxon kingdoms.

This Norman heritage drew England into the first “Struggle for Mastery in Europe.” Successive English dynasties never surrendered their interests in France, resulting in nearly constant warfare for the next four centuries, culminating in the Hundred Years’ War. Ironically, it took not only the

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loss of its French possessions in 1453, but also the death of every male heir in both the houses of Lancaster and York, finally to sever England’s ties to the Continent. It was then that England could begin to flourish.

The Elizabethan victory in 1588 not only secured England from invasion, it also solidified its role as an independent Protestant power that sought political autonomy from Europe, not to rule it, as France and Spain did. Elizabeth was known as the “Virgin Queen.” Part of the rationale for the Spanish Armada was to punish Elizabeth for refusing to marry into the Habsburg line. As Venice was wedded to the sea, Elizabeth was wedded to a sea-girded England.

Britain’s regime in part explains its strategic success. Montesquieu was the first succinctly to describe England’s uniqueness, arguing that it bucked the trifold classification of regimes in *Spirit of the Laws*. England lacked the civic virtue of the ancient republic. Economic equality was antithetical to the English system, which thrived on commercialism and competition. Nor was England’s “principle” honor – the nobility that a monarchy requires either numerous or politically relevant enough to define its regime. But England was not despotic. The monarch was forced to share power with Parliament – each branch of the regime checked the other, while the common citizen jealously guarded his individual liberty, despite his political apathy.

This mix produced two results, both of which explain England’s rise, and the United Kingdom’s subsequent strategic effectiveness. First, the English regime was economically dynamic. This created a hunger for power that enabled it to sustain major setbacks – like the loss of the American colonies after 1783 – and still project power. Second, English society’s commercialism combined with the vestiges of its feudal aristocracy to allow a political class to coexist alongside a commercial one. The English regime was not corrupted, but rather translated its commercial power into political expansion, coordinated by a well-trained class of statesmen.

Much like Venetian strategy, Britain’s possessed three defining characteristics. First, Britain maintained a powerful enough land army to stay relevant in Europe’s continental conflicts, while never creating a ground force large enough to conquer continental territory on its own.

This gave Britain outsized influence in its coalitions – even before it established global maritime supremacy, British support was the deciding factor between victory and defeat. This precise balance allowed statesmen like

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John Churchill to emerge. Marlborough linked operational and theater strategic successes with Britain’s political goals, placing himself and his country at the center of the Grand Alliance, dictating policy to the Holy Roman Empire and Habsburg Spain. Indeed, Britain remained an indispensable partner in any 18th-century land war in no small part because its political success during the War of the Spanish Succession allowed it to maneuver between potential allies better than any other power.

This first factor enabled the second – Britain’s wholly practical diplomatic maneuvering in Europe’s fluid alliance system. Unsentimental foreign policy allowed Britain to capitalize on sudden changes in the balance of power. The so-called Diplomatic Revolution in 1756, in which Britain jettisoned its 25-yearlong alliance with Austria in favor of an alliance with Prussia, solidified by paying a subsidy, exemplifies Albion’s “perfidy.”

Third, and most important, throughout the 18th-century Britain engaged in a sustained effort that used its supreme naval power to capture strategic chokepoints, build colonial networks, and link together its overseas possessions. Britain’s capture of Gibraltar in August 1704 inaugurated its imperial period. Not only did Britain control transit between the Mediterranean and Atlantic, it also dominated North America, securing exclusive access to American resources, and denying any hostile power the ability to cultivate overseas markets. The Royal Navy linked colonies and strategic chokepoints together, policing international sea lanes and, in times of conflict, converging to seek out and destroy enemy forces.

Two clear shifts in the late 18th-century – the loss of Britain’s American colonies and the Revolution in France – forced British statesmen to adjust their strategy. They replaced the American colonial empire with the Indian imperial one, while refocusing on naval power. The United Kingdom relied upon natural balance of power dynamics, alongside its stranglehold on Europe’s littorals, to contain Napoleon’s expansion, and eventually suffocate the French Empire. Britain’s five-year campaign in Iberia, conducted alongside Portugal and its erstwhile Bourbon Spanish enemies, undermined Napoleon’s power. But, as the Oracle at Delphi told the Athenians more than two thousand years earlier, Britain’s floating walls of wood preserved its freedom. In the event, it took no more than every man doing his duty, alongside a one-armed one-eyed admiral’s tactical brilliance, resolve, and life, to win the day.

The United Kingdom’s victory over Napoleonic France inaugurated Britain’s second imperial period. Two important differences deserve note. First, Britain’s imperial focus shifted from the Americas to India, giving it a vested interest in global sea control, rather than Atlantic primacy. Second, Britain was forced to formalize the European diplomatic system. Having experienced the costs of intervening after a disruption in the balance of power, British statesmen, particularly Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh, created a system designed to release stresses in local conflicts, while making a general war contrary to the interests of all, and providing diplomatic outlets for major crises.\footnote{Henry Kissinger, \textit{A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-1822} (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957), 4.}

The term “Splendid Isolation” characterizes British policy between Napoleon’s defeat in 1815 and the pre-Great War ententes in 1907. Britain remained aloof from European confrontations, only becoming involved in the Crimean War to check Russian designs against the Ottoman Empire. The Royal Navy was the world’s most powerful force. It guaranteed British control over international chokepoints, while ensuring that the UK could dominate Europe’s littorals, and deny any potential challenger access to overseas trade.

But “Splendid Isolation” was not Britain’s initial policy choice. Lord Castlereagh, alongside Austrian Foreign Minister and Chancellor Klemens von Metternich, designed a system that required Anglo-Austrian engagement to balance Prussian, French, and Russian interests.\footnote{Ibid., 145-147.} Britain could restrain Prussian ambition in central Europe, thereby allowing Austria to keep the region divided, and out of French hands. British maritime power, along with Austrian diplomatic pressure, would limit Russian designs against the decaying Ottoman Empire. France, while divested of revolutionary spirit, would have no need to fear a central European coalition, given Austria and Prussia’s arrangement. Indeed, the Holy Alliance between the stalwart conservatives Austria, Prussia, and Russia could only work with British involvement as an active balancer. With Britain de-escalating conflicts between the three members, each would receive a free hand to pacify internal unrest, most importantly Austria in Italy.

Lord Castlereagh, of course, succumbed to a madness of unspecified origin, robbing Britain of a personal link to the diplomatic system. And by the randomness of fate, rather than the logic of interest, Britain withdrew from Europe.
The subsequent half-century is well chronicled in European history. The “Vienna System” that Castlereagh and Metternich had created became brittle. And Metternich was forced to rely upon the Holy Alliance’s ideological underpinnings, rather than working with Britain to maintain the European system’s balance. The first shock came in 1848. While the revolutions were not successful, they still undermined the conservative ideological links that bound together Central and Eastern Europe’s monarchs. While the liberal Grossdeutsche German intellectuals of 1848 established the framework for a united Germany, the Kaiserreich that emerged in 1870/1871 was one of blood, not of reason.

Britain remained aloof despite two great-power conflicts in under five years. Like all of Europe’s statesmen, Britain’s leaders assumed that Austria would handily defeat the upstart Prussian state. But after 1866, there is little strategic excuse for not recognizing the potential threat Germany posed to the European balance of power. Louis-Napoleon had isolated every potential ally by stoking nationalist movements and dragging Russia and Britain into an inconclusive Eastern war. But Marlborough’s political shrewdness was lacking. Britain permitted the consummation of the German Empire, at the expense of European stability. Austria became a German appendage. Central Europe, united under Germany, became the second-ranked European power.

Hence, Britain’s choice to remain aloof limited its options. Despite the challenges that change posed, the UK’s decision to eschew continental politics restricted its options and permitted the creation of a systemic-political monster. A united Germany, with its population and economic power, would always have the potential to upset the European balance of power and trigger a general war. Like any royal line, the House of Hohenzollern contained men of uneven quality. Friedrich III, Kaiser Wilhelm I’s immediate successor, was an accomplished military leader and outspoken liberal. He and his British-born wife, Victoria, hoped to rule as co-monarchs and reform the Kaiserreich, replacing Bismarck’s autocratic Prussian technocracy with a cabinet-style system. It is impossible to say if this could have restrained German ambition, as liberal internationalism tempered the fires of Weltpolitik. But Friedrich III ruled for only 99 days, dying of throat cancer on 15 June 1888. His temperamental, ambitious, conservative son succeeded as Kaiser Wilhelm II. Statesmanship, like virtue, is not hereditary. Absent Bismarck’s restraining hand, it was highly likely that Germany would drag the continent into a general war.

32 Ibid., 312-313.
Structural changes began to accelerate in the 1880s. Within Europe, German coal and steel production began to outpace Britain’s, hollowing economic superiority. Outside of Europe, first the United States, and then Japan, emerged as independent economic powers. Britain could no longer rely upon economic coercion to preserve the political balance: in a future crisis, force would be necessary.

From these economic shifts arose a new political situation. Britain’s strategy from Castlereagh’s death to the 1880s relied upon two premises. First, undisputed British naval supremacy would allow it to balance any European coalition if needed, and ideally would preclude any challenge to the European order. Second, and more important, Britain’s control of the European littorals would functionally equate to global sea control.

Germany’s rise jeopardized the first of these premises. Structurally, the “German question” transformed into the “German problem.” The Kaiserreich’s economic power and population automatically jeopardized the European balance of power, regardless of Germany’s precise foreign policy orientation. Until 1890, however, British policymakers could ignore the structural threat Germany posed. Chancellor Otto von Bismarck understood the pervasive threat Germany would present to the other great powers, and therefore engaged in a delicate balancing act, restraining German ally Austria to cultivate good relations with Russia, and keep France isolated. Although the Triple Alliance of 1882 nominally created a central European coalition, Austro-Italian enmity cast doubt upon the arrangement’s viability, doubts that would be confirmed in 1915. Thus, Britain could deny that the fundamental structure of European politics had changed – that is, until Bismarck was forced from office in 1890.

Without the Iron Chancellor’s leadership, Balkan friction between Russia and Austria could not be diffused peacefully. Austria could not avoid Balkan brinksmanship. Doing so would have encouraged internal division within an already fragmented Empire. However, without countervailing diplomatic agreements like the Reinsurance treaty, which Bismarck’s successors immediately abandoned, there would be no means of restraining Russia during a Balkan dispute absent pure coercion.

Between 1890 and 1905, British statesmen began to recognize that two competing European alliance structures had formed – France and Russia on the one hand, Germany and Austria on the other. Britain’s naval power alone, however, did not deter Germany. Even after British victory in the Anglo-German naval arms race, and Britain’s loose affiliation with the Franco-Russian alliance, British naval power failed to restrain German planners. Britain was never willing to truly maintain absolute independent global naval supremacy. Even in a European context, this fleet would need
to exceed the combined fleets of Germany, Austria, France, and Italy – even if all four became German allies or proxies, this force could have confronted and contained a German-dominated Europe without any allied assistance. If one combines the forces operated and under construction in 1914, this would total 48 dreadnoughts.\textsuperscript{33} Of course, this force was financially impossible unless funds for social welfare programs were redirected to the Navy: in 1914, Britain would have needed to field at least fifty dreadnought battleships and battlecruisers.\textsuperscript{34} Independent British naval power was therefore never as potent as the UK’s political leaders assumed it would be.

Early 18th-century Britain lacked European naval supremacy. However, it compensated for this by actively participating in the European balance of power and using moderate land force and money to gain political leverage amongst coalitions. By retreating from the continent in the 1820s, Britain allowed the political connections it had cultivated to disintegrate. Rather than serving as an active balancer that could dictate to other powers, it was viewed as a passive one that reacted to structural changes – thus, Britain’s still considerable naval power did not deter its adversaries.

But the second premise of British strategy, that control of the European littorals, alongside key international chokepoints, would ensure global sea control, is arguably more significant. If true, Britain may have been able to build a massive fleet and deter Germany through its overwhelming maritime superiority. However, by the 1890s, both Japan and the United States became strategically relevant naval powers.\textsuperscript{35} In 1906, a combined US-Japanese fleet included 26 battleships to Britain’s 61, while in 1914, the two powers fielded 12 dreadnoughts to Britain’s 22.\textsuperscript{36} To maintain absolute global sea control, the Royal Navy would therefore need to increase fleet size by approximately a third – a seventy-dreadnought fleet would have crippled the British economy absent restructuring.

While 15th-century Venice miscalculated, its statesmen directly confronted the issues the city faced. The same cannot be said of Britain’s leaders. While some, Joseph Chamberlain foremost among them, proposed

\textsuperscript{33} Information collated from: Paul G. Halpern, \textit{A Naval History of World War I} (Annapolis, MD: The Naval Institute Press, 1994), 7-20.

\textsuperscript{34} Note: Dreadnoughts under construction are included in fleet totals, because if Britain were to rely exclusively on seapower, it would have needed to take into account all projected and actual European capabilities.


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
converting Britain’s empire into an Imperial Federation, within which each former dominion would share the costs of Imperial defense, British leaders were never able to confront the policy problems that faced them. Maintaining naval supremacy would have been financially ruinous, while actively engaging in the European alliance system would have required providing concessions to America, Japan, and various continental partners. But British statesmen believed that the UK still held global naval supremacy with all its logical advantages, while ignoring the changes in the international balance of power. Unlike Venice, Britain did not turn from the sea. It instead was blind to the realities it faced.

Politics has a metaphysical, cyclical quality. At some point, the bill must come due. Unwilling to pay in coin, Britain was forced to settle its debts in blood – the Empire lost over one million soldiers, of whom nearly four in five were British.

**Conclusion – American Power**

Venice and Britain are similar cases insofar as both abandoned sea control. However, each case provides distinct lessons for the United States of America today.

The Venetian experience demonstrates the eternal relevance of the regime. It may be true that, over time, the logic of the international system “socializes” every regime, forcing it to abide by certain political standards, if only rooted in the balance of power. But this socialization process takes longer for some regimes than for others. Regimes confident in their own identity and driven by stern ambition are unlikely to submit to systemic pressures and abide by global norms. This is as true for the Ottomans in the 15th-century as it is for China in the 20th and 21st. Like the Ottoman sultanate, Chinese power has only grown over the past three or more decades of “socialization” attempts. Indeed, a regime as rooted in historical experience, and as confident in its own nature and mission as China’s is, may never divest itself of expansionist, transformational impulses. Resistance, and a tense peace, may be the only option for free polities.

Venetian statesmen can be accused of miscalculation, both in their perception of the Ottoman regime and their understanding of the European balance of power. But they cannot be accused of ignorance. Venice’s leaders examined and confronted the issues they faced, and made decisions that, while wrong, were reasonable given the circumstances.

One cannot absolve Britain’s leaders so easily. The political threat Germany posed was visible for at least 25 years before the Great War. Even
when Britain’s statesmen recognized the threat, they were unable to look past their historical experience, falsely assuming their once-matchless naval power had not been eroded. Once circumstances and money moved the confrontation to land, the strategy bankrupted the country.

States that depend on the seas for their trade and security require not only undiminished attention to maritime strategy, but the good judgment needed to unify politics with strategy. Absent them both, the consequence is bloodily losing primacy. Whether near-future US policy makes the maritime choice remains to be seen.

Works Cited


