To what extent was British grand strategy during the interwar period a failure?

Introduction

British grand strategy during the interwar period was more of a success than a failure because it consisted of the most feasible strategic choices given the constraints on the government and the intelligence available (Layne 2008: p. 399; Neville 2006: p. 202; Taylor 1961: p. 25; Kennedy 1981a: p. 225; Charmley 1989: p. 212). Ultimately, the British were in a relatively weaker military position with respect to Germany and the other Axis powers at the start of World War II. This state of affairs resulted from factors outside the control of the British government opposed to a failure of grand strategy. When formulating a foreign policy, the ideal choice is often not available (Kissinger 1994: p. 683; Neville 2006: p. 202; Schroeder 1976: p. 242). During the interwar period, the actions of the British government were limited by incomplete information, a declining economy, and pacifist public opinion (Murray 2009: p. 402; Schroeder 1976: p. 242; Layne 2008: p. 299). With those restrictions, the British government made the most rational choices, even if those decisions did not bring about the desired results.

British grand strategy during the interwar period can be separated into two eras. The first era began with the end of World War I and extended through 1933 when British rearmament commenced (Murray 2009: p. 406). The first period of British interwar strategic thinking has been largely characterized by the “Ten Year Rule.” The “Ten Year Rule” instructed British services to plan their budgets under the assumption that the United Kingdom would not participate in a major war in the coming ten years. The second era began in 1933 and ended in 1939 (Murray 2009: p. 406). During this timeframe, the British government pursued a simultaneous policy of appeasement and rearmament. The British government made several political concessions to Germany in an attempt to avoid war. Among these concessions were a
military reoccupation of the Rhineland, the unification of Austria and Germany known as the 
Anschluss, and the German annexation of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia (Barros et 
Britain was undertaking a rearmament program to better prepare its military for a conflict with 
Germany.

This paper proceeds to examine each of these policies in turn. In the first part of the 
paper, the “Ten Year Rule” is discussed. Many commentators criticize the “Ten Year Rule” for 
leaving the British military woefully unprepared to rearm against the rising threat of Germany 
(Murray 2009: p. 407; Peden 1979: p. 179). That view ignores that the British economy, 
combined with domestic opinion, made the continuing existence of the “Ten Year Rule” a 
political necessity. Furthermore, the impact of the “Ten Year Rule” has been overstated. The 
second segment of the paper explores the policy of appeasement. While appeasement has a 
pejorative connotation, Britain’s military and economic weakness, combined with inaccurate 
information, made it the most logical choice. Lastly, British rearmament is examined. British 
rearmament is seen as lackluster, especially when compared with Germany’s extensive military 
increases. Once again, however, rearmament was limited by economic and political 
considerations. As a result, rearmament targeted the areas of the armed forces most crucial to 
British security.

The “Ten Year Rule”

Initially introduced in 1919, the “Ten Year Rule” was renewed until 1932 (Murray 2009: 
p. 407; Ripsman and Levy 2009: p. 159; Reynolds 1991: p. 115; Peden 1979: p. 7). Both the 
principle of the “Ten Year Rule” and its continuous renewal have been judged as a strategic 
deficit, hindering the British armed services from having a sufficient base force from which to
rearm (Murray 2009: p. 407; Peden 1979: p. 179). Criticisms of the “Ten Year Rule” fail to recognize several pertinent factors. First, given the economic and political situation in the immediate aftermath of World War I, the “Ten Year Rule” was logical when it was first initiated. The domestic pressures against war and for economic recovery mandated that course of action. Economic demands and public opinion continued to constrain defense spending throughout the tenure of the “Ten Year Rule.” Secondly, despite the depiction of the “Ten Year Rule” as an inflexible principle of British grand strategy (Reynolds 1991: p. 115; Ferris 1983: p. 860; Peden 1979: p. 7; Neville 2006: p. 122; Kennedy 1981a: p. 231), there was leeway for the armed services in the planning of their budget until at least 1926 (Ferris 1983: p. 862).

In order to properly understand the implementation and continuation of the “Ten Year Rule,” it is important to understand pressures both internal and external to the British government during the interwar period. As a democracy, British foreign policy formation was not only governed by international requirements, but also subject to domestic approval (Putnam 1988: p. 424; Schweller 2004: p. 188). In the aftermath of World War I, the British economy was decimated and the public was war weary (Murray 2009: p. 393; Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 159; Reynolds 1991: p. 116; Kennedy 1981a: p. 226). Defense spending during World War I had been massive. It accounted for eighty percent of government expenditure in 1918 (Reynolds 1991: p. 114). Following the armistice, the general public naturally supported substantial cuts to the defense budget for the sake of economic recovery (Neville 2006: p. 122; Kennedy 1981a: p. 226). As a consequence, the “Ten Year Rule” was an appropriate response to domestic concerns.

The interwar British government has been criticized for beginning to cut defense spending without agreeing to international disarmament treaties with other countries beyond Germany (Peden 1979: p. 3-4). Negotiating disarmament treaties would have been a lengthy
process. Given the widespread economic devastation in Europe, the choice to cut defense spending without disarmament treaties was not an oversight, but a rational choice. Across Europe, other economies were similarly hindered by the economic consequences of World War I. Not only were most countries responsible for substantial war debts, but the Central Powers were also further crippled by reparations (Neville 2006: p. 6; Wolf 2010: p. 435). Widespread inflation across Europe, as well as damage from the war requiring repair, contributed to a bleak economic outlook for Europe in the post-World War I era (Wolf 2010: p. 341, p. 347). The rest of Europe, like Britain, was focused on economic recovery, not increasing their military strength. As a result, there was no immediate threat to British security and no pressing need to negotiate treaties or fear military action. In 1919, the domestic pressures and the international requirements for British defense spending aligned. As a result, the implementation of “Ten Year Rule” was not only logical, but strategically appropriate when it was enacted.

Beyond these external domestic pressures, the British government was not a unitary actor. Rather, it was composed of different factions with competing and divergent interests. Treating strategic decisions in international politics, such as the “Ten Year Rule,” as the choice of a singular actor obscures the nuances of that choice (Allison and Halperin 1972: p. 42). Instead, the “Ten Year Rule” is better understood through the Bureaucratic Politics Model outlined by Allison and Halperin (1972: p. 43). Using this paradigm, the continuation of the “Ten Year Rule” was a result of the compromises between various departments of the British government to maximize their own interest (Allison and Halperin 1972: p. 43; Ferris 1983: p. 864).

While the “Ten Year Rule” is characterized as the central tenet of British defense planning during its tenure (Kennedy and Imlay 1986: p. 126; Reynolds 1991: p. 115), this view
is overly simplistic. It was also not an inflexible principle guiding every decision the British
government made with respect to defense planning (Ferris 1983: p. 861). Consistent with the
Bureaucratic Politics Model (Allison and Halperin 1972), service branches tended to disagree
with the “Ten Year Rule” when it did not align with their interests. On the other hand, the
Treasury aimed to utilize the “Ten Year Rule” to limit military spending (Peden 1979: p. 3) Both
the Navy and the Air Force argued that expenditures in their department outweighed the
importance of budget planning with respect to the “Ten Year Rule” (Ferris 1983: p. 862). The
departments did not just argue against the “Ten Year Rule,” they actively ignored the policy in
some instances. For the first two years of its existence, no branch of the British armed forces
planned their budget in accordance with the “Ten Year Rule.” It was not until in 1922 that the
Army began to comply with the principle, but the Navy and the Air Force did not follow suit
(Ferris 1983: p. 864). Only in 1926, seven years after the “Ten Year Rule” was enacted, did the
Treasury department establish control of the armed forces’ budget estimates (Ferris 1983: p.
864). The interactions between the service branches and the Treasury demonstrate that the “Ten
Year Rule” was not an uncompromising principle guiding defense spending. At least through
1925, there was some degree of maneuverability in defense planning and spending despite the
“Ten Year Rule.” While it is undeniable that the Treasury eventually used the “Ten Year Rule”
to further its influence in limiting the spending of the armed forces (Ferris 1983: p. 884; Peden
1979: p. 7), in the fourteen year period it was in effect, the Treasury was only able to enforce it
for its purposes for about half of that time.

Even if the Treasury had not restrained military spending before the repeal of the “Ten
Year Rule,” it is unlikely there would have been substantial domestic support for increased
government spending (Schweller 2004: p. 164; Ferris 1983: p. 877). The British economy was
still recovering from war time debts while the “Ten Year Rule” was renewed. In fact, payment for the national debt accounted for thirty percent of total government expenditure for most of the 1920’s (Reynolds 1991: p. 114). At the same time, Britain was also contending with decreased export markets because of the rise of the economies of the United States and Japan (Reynolds 1991: p. 99; Kennedy 1981b: p. 52-53). In 1931, Britain’s economic condition took a downturn with the onset of the worldwide economic depression (Reynolds 1991: p. 118; Ripsman and Levy 2009: p. 159; Neville 2006: p. 15; Taylor 1961: p. 89). Further, anti-war sentiment across the population also remained high throughout this time period (Murray 2009: p. 396; Sklanes 1998: p. 593; Mills 1993: p. 1; Neville 2006: p. 15, 52; Kennedy 1981a: p. 271-272). The dire state of the economy during the interwar period, combined with public opinion against war, made it unlikely that there would have been enough public support for defense spending on any sort of level that would have allowed Britain to be fully prepared for the onset of World War II, even if the Treasury had not enforced the “Ten Year Rule.”

Appeasement

Once Germany proved to be a credible threat in 1933, the British government undertook a double policy of appeasement and rearmament. In order to understand appeasement, it is crucial to determine the British government’s viewpoint of Germany’s aims during the 1930’s. There is significant debate regarding the outlook of the government at the time. Often, the British interwar government, and in particular, Neville Chamberlain, is portrayed as being naïve with respect to Hitler’s objectives (Cato 1940: p. 59; Murray 2009: p. 427; Barros et al. 2009: p. 194; Ripsman and Levy 2007: p. 46). Others commentators argue that the British government did understand the full scope of Hitler’s intentions, but simply did not have the capacity to deal with them (Barros et al. 2009: p. 197; Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 163). Generally speaking, the
appraisal of Germany’s intentions by the interwar government falls between these two poles. The British government did not recognize the full extent of the growing threat of Germany at the time, but it did realize some degree of the potential danger. Notably, Britain began to rearm in 1933 after Germany withdrew both from the League of Nations and disarmament negotiations (Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 161). Without some recognition of a credible threat, the British government would not have undertaken the costly effort to rearm.

Chamberlain was not naïve to Hitler’s intentions, but rather pragmatic. During his tenure as Prime Minister, Chamberlain was not convinced that Germany was an immediate threat to British interests because Germany’s true intentions were neither concrete nor conceivable (Charmley 1989: p. 8; Barros et al. 2009: p. 175; Johnson 2005: p. 665). Labeling Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement towards the Axis powers as naïve is a result of hindsight because Hitler’s true intentions were unthinkable at the time (Barros et al. 2009: p. 175; Watt 1976: p. 124).

During the time, it was quite reasonable to assume that Hitler only aimed to expand German influence in Central and Eastern Europe (Barros et al. 2009: p. 176; Reynolds 1991: p. 113). Expansion in those areas posed little threat to Britain itself (Charmley 1989: p. 8; Schweller 2004: p. 196; Reynolds 1991: p. 111; Neville 2006: p. 29; Schroeder 1973: p. 224, 236). More importantly, Chamberlain did not rule out that Germany could threaten Britain one day. He was rational in attempting to limit British involvement in distant conflicts that posed little danger to British security. That logic was reinforced because, at the time, Britain was believed to be relatively weaker militarily than Germany (Ripsman and Levy 2007: p. 48), and therefore, lacked the ability to realistically confront Hitler’s advances.

Shortly after the outbreak of World War II, however, Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement began to develop a pejorative reputation. In 1940, a book entitled Guilty Men was
published that indicted Chamberlain, among others, as foolishly failing to prepare for war (Aster 2008: p. 444; Hucker 2008: p. 536; Stedman 2011: p. 1-2). Churchill’s memoirs of the interwar period reinforced this narrative (Hucker 2008: p. 636; Stedman 2011: p. 2). Within this interpretation, certain individuals were designated as “anti- appeaser.” These individuals were portrayed as both fully comprehending Hitler’s intent and advocating the proper course of action to prepare Britain for World War II (Stedman 2011: p. 234). But, the stance of the “anti- appeasers” was more nuanced than this understanding (Neville 2006: p. 21; Johnson 2005: p. 651; Hughes 2013: p. 689). Few “anti- appeasers” either truly recognized Hitler’s unlimited aims or steadfastly opposed appeasement.

Anthony Eden, who was Foreign Secretary under Chamberlain, is a primacy example of an “anti- appeaser” (Mills 1993: p. 3; Kennedy 1981a: p. 286; Cato 1940: p. 21; Neville 2006: p. 41; Roberts 1994: p. 12; Charmley 1989: p. 32). The intensity of Eden’s opposition, however, is debatable (Neville 2006: p. 56; Charmley 1989: p. 32). An event illustrative of the conflicting outlooks of Eden and Chamberlain was their reactions to the Anschluss, the unification of Germany and Austria, in February 1938. Chamberlain sought to open talks with Italy in an attempt to drive a wedge between Hitler and Mussolini. Eden insisted that Italy must show a sign of good faith, namely moderating its intervention in the current Spanish Civil War, before diplomatic talks could begin. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were unable to bridge the divide, and as a result, Eden tendered his resignation.

Eden did demand reassurances from Mussolini, but this episode also illustrates Eden was willing to negotiate with Mussolini, albeit on the terms Eden demanded. With respect to Germany, Eden was even more flexible to the idea of negotiations with Hitler than with Mussolini (Rose 1982: p. 913; Neville 2006: p. 59). The difference between Chamberlain’s and
Eden’s approach to appeasement was a matter of tactics and degree, rather than Eden being truly opposed to appeasement. It is over-reactive to condemn Chamberlain as being naïve to the intentions of the Axis powers, when Eden, a figure remembered as an “anti appeaser,” had some sympathy that negotiations could bring about positive results.

Appeasement did not result from naivety, but rather from strategic considerations. During the interwar time period, Germany was not the only threat to Britain. The United Kingdom also had to contend with both Italy and Japan (Murray 2009: p. 427; Layne 2008: p. 405; Thompson 2007: p. 413; Sklanes 1998: p. 593). The British armed forces could not grapple with all those threats, and the economic state of the United Kingdom left the country unable to prepare the armed forces adequately (Reynolds 1991: p. 124; Neville 2006: p. 49; Kennedy and Imlay 1986: p. 126-127). The Dominions of the British Empire further exacerbated the imbalance between capabilities and demands. While Britain retained the responsibility for the defense of its far-flung Empire, the vulnerable Dominions did not contribute monetarily to the defense budget (Reynolds 1991: p. 123). A tougher stance in international affairs required a stronger British military force and an economy resilient enough to support that military. Through diplomacy, Chamberlain aimed to delay some of those threats until British economic, military, and foreign policies could align to protect both the United Kingdom and the British Empire (Charmley 1989: p. 29; Layne 2008: p. 409).

The attempts to delay multiple threats served another strategic purpose. It gave Britain time to rearm to a sufficient level to effectively engage Germany in combat if that became necessary (Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 150; Sklanes 1998: p. 603; Charmley 1989: p. 210; Johnson 2005: p. 660). Not only would this benefit Britain if it were to go to war, a stronger military would also strengthen its bargaining position with respect to the Axis powers (Ripsman
and Levy 2008: p. 172). Public opinion and economic weakness ensured that rearment was bound to be a slow and lengthy process (Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 162; Ripsman and Levy 2007: p. 46; Reynolds 1991: p. 118; Kennedy 1981b: p. 55). Delaying the start of any conflict with Germany would allow Britain to strengthen its military (Barros et al. 2009: p. 179). Once rearment was complete, even if war with Germany was not inevitable, London would still have been able to pursue a tougher foreign policy with Germany.

When the United Kingdom did go to war in 1939, Germany was in a more favorable position than it had been in 1938 when Britain pursued its policy of appeasement during the Sudetenland crisis (Barros et al. 2009: p. 177; Press 2005: p. 159; Reynolds 1991: p. 128). This was not a failure of strategy, but rather, a failure of intelligence. The shift in the balance of power towards Germany during that year is discernible now only because of hindsight. At the time, Germany had undertaken efforts to mislead Britain about the balance of power (Taylor 1961: p. 18). These efforts led Britain to consistently overestimate the strength of German forces during the 1930’s (Reynolds 1991: p. 127; Neville 2006: p. 86, 119; Taylor 1961: p. 19). The British government cannot be indicted for failing to recognize an opportune moment to confront German aggression without proper information regarding relative strength. Part of Britain’s failure to take advantage of a more favorable balance of power in 1938 is incorrect information. Thus, it was poor intelligence rather than a strategic deficit that influenced the decision in the Czechoslovakia crisis (Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 180; Neville 2006: p. 86).

It cannot be ignored that in 1938, some members of the British government suggested it would be strategically beneficial to engage Germany in war now rather than later (Ripsman and Levy 2007: p. 57; Barros et al. 2009: p. 175). With respect to the Sudetenland crisis, the perception of Hitler’s intentions is once again crucial to the discussion (Ripsman and Levy 2007:
Throughout the 1930’s, while it was becoming increasingly clear that Hitler had expansionist tendencies, it was still not a foregone conclusion that his aims were unlimited in 1938. War with Germany would be devastating. Costs would be high in both human and financial terms. Crucially, Hitler’s annexation of a portion of Czechoslovakia did not immediately threaten British security (Schweller 2004: p. 196; Reynolds 1991: p. 111; Charmley 1989: p. 9; Neville 2006: p. 35; Schroeder 1976: p. 229). Of course, a single country’s domination of continental Europe is a concern to Britain, but if Britain was to risk conflict with Germany, it had to be sure that Hitler’s aims were unlimited and dangerous to the United Kingdom (Ripsman and Levy 2007: p. 59; Thompson 2007: p. 413; Barros et al. 2009: p. 175). Certainly, there was a risk in delaying war. But, there was also a risk in engaging in an unnecessary war in 1938 (Ripsman and Levy 2007: p. 42; Schroeder 1976: p. 242; Charmley 1989: p. 73). Hindsight allows one to discern both Hitler’s intentions and the balance of power in 1938. Contemporaries did not have that advantage. As a result, their decision to delay war in 1938 is the best strategic decision Britain could have made with the information available to them.

One alternative to appeasement was alliances. Eden favored either an alliance with other European powers or with the United States. While this alternative had its advantages, it also raised issues of implementation. By entering an alliance with other European powers, namely France, Britain could hope to check the growing strength of Germany. At the same time, however, those collective security agreements would diminish the country’s ability to decide when it entered the war. If an ally were attacked, Britain would have been bound by treaty to assist. To avoid entangling itself with European alliances, Chamberlain reserved for Great

Far from rejecting an Anglo-American alliance, Chamberlain believed it would be an asset to the British cause (Charmley 1989: p. 43; Sklanes 1998: p. 600; Stedman 2011: p. 144). But he disagreed with Eden, and other proponents of an Anglo-American alliance, over the likelihood of America to commit. In 1938, Chamberlain was more inclined to the view that, despite some indications that America was preparing to become more involved in European affairs, the United States was unlikely to agree to an alliance (Reynolds 1991: p. 122; Sklanes 1998: p. 599; Charmley 1989: p. 43; Stedman 2011: p. 140). Given that in 1937, the United States Congress had passed its third neutrality act (United States Office of the Historian; Neville 2006: p. 93), Chamberlain’s view was reasonable for the time. To Chamberlain, appeasement of Germany was the most practical, not the most palatable, course of action.

Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement is neatly summed up in his quote from January 1938: “In the absence of any powerful ally, and until our armaments are completed, we must adjust our foreign policy to our circumstances, and even bear with patience and good humor actions which we should like to treat in a very different fashion,” (Sklanes 1998: p.593-594). Chamberlain chose appeasement, not because of an overly optimistic view of Hitler’s intentions, but rather because a lack of viable alternatives. It was a rational assessment of alternatives that went wrong.

Rearmament

As noted above, appeasement did not take place in isolation. While the Chamberlain government did make concessions to the Germans, at the same time, it was increasing Britain’s military strength (Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 180; Schweller 2004: p. 188). From its inception
in 1933, British rearmament has been viewed as inadequate (Cato 1940: p. 113; Neville 2006: p. 12; Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 176-177; Reynolds 1991: p. 113-11; Murray 2009: p. 405). But, despite the traditional critique of British rearmament, it was actually more robust than critics claim (Neville 2006: p. 13; Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 176-177; Thompson 2007: p. 413). Throughout the 1930’s, the British defense budget steadily increased. In 1933, at the outset of the rearmament, the defense budget accounted for 15% of total government spending. By 1938, however, that number had increased to 38% of expenditures. In real terms, the defense budget went from 107.7 million pounds to 397.5 million pounds, an increase of 269%, in only six years (Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 176).

Britain’s rearmament program has been unfairly compared to that of Germany. As a democracy, Britain had less leeway in determining how much of the economic resources it could devote to its military programs (Schweller 2004: p. 200; Neville 2006: p. 37. 123). The British government faced difficulties in terms of balancing rearmament with economic stability. Resources and labor necessary to produce military equipment diverted from industries that would be devoted to creating exports (Layne 2008: p. 407; Schweller 2004: p. 171; Reynolds 1991: p. 119; Kennedy and Imlay 1986: p. 126; Kennedy 1981b: p. 55). As a result, greater military production led to decreased economic strength. This dilemma only exacerbated the declining British economy of the 1930’s (Reynolds 1991: p. 118; Murray 2009: p. 406; Kennedy and Imlay 1986: p. 125). Germany was not immune to this difficult trade-off. Not only was the German economy similarly strained by the massive rearmament program, but it also lacked the requisite raw materials to sustain such an effort (Press 2005: p. 146; Murray 2009: p. 404). The crucial difference between Britain and Germany, however, was that Germany did not have to respond to domestic political pressures from the negative impact military rearmament had on the
economy. Plainly, democratic governments must be concerned with its constituents’ opinions. As a result, policy makers in a democracy may not be able to undertake the controversial policies that a non-democracy in a similar position will pursue (Schweller 2004: p.168-169; Neville 2006: p. 37, 123; Murray 2009: p. 408). Within Britain, the economy had already been negatively impacted by both World War I and the economic crisis of 1931. War weary citizens prioritized social programs over military spending (Schweller 2004: p. 190; Charmley 1989: p. 29; Kennedy 1981b: p. 54). The leaders of Britain had to be conscious of the additional economic strain rearmament would place on it constituents (Schweller 2004: p. 188).

Beyond public pressure, the British government during the interwar period had another motive for not overextending its economy during the rearmament period. A strong economy tends to be an asset in an extended conflict. Often, within the British government, the Treasury referred to the economy as the “fourth arm” of the defense (Reynolds 1991: p. 118-119; Layne 2008: p. 406; Neville 2006: p. 124). It was believed that the already strained German economy could not support a protracted conflict (Press 2005: p. 146; Reynolds 1991: p. 118-119; Layne 2008: p. 406). The aim of British rearmament was not only to bring its military forces to a level comparable with Germany, but to do so at a rate that would sustain Britain’s long-term economic capabilities in case of the war. It was believed that a long war, rather than a short one, favored the British (Ripsman and Levy 2007: p. 57; Neville 2006: p. 124; Kennedy and Imlay: p. 127). As a result, rearmament was undertaken with the utmost care with respect to the economic burden. In an ideal world, the British government in the interwar period would have been able to undertake a massive rearmament program while at the same time sustaining its economic health. Unfortunately, that was simply not possible. Balancing economic strength and a substantial
rearmament program is the best strategic decision given the circumstances of the interwar government.

The Chamberlain government has been criticized for a perceived preoccupation with the economic position of Britain (Reynolds 1991: p. 133; Neville 2006: p. 123). Under Churchill, however, the wisdom of the interwar policy of attempting to maintain economic strength while rearming was confirmed. During the beginning of World War II, the British government under Churchill nearly went bankrupt as a result of the economic strain of the war effort (Cohen 1991: p. 51; Kennedy and Imlay 1986: p. 126; Murray 2009: p. 404). The Lend-Lease agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom helped save Britain’s war effort from succumbing to the economic consequences (Murray 2009: p. 405; Kennedy 1981b: p. 60). The establishment of the Lend-Lease treaty was a great achievement for Churchill. But, it would have been unwise for Chamberlain to rely on the strength of American economic support when rearmament was undertaken in the 1930’s. Though he attempted to draw the United States closer through economic agreements during this time (Sklanes 1998: p. 602; Neville 2006: p. 93), the United States remained isolationist, and therefore, was viewed as unreliable. As a result, a better course of action during the interwar period was to preserve British economic strength than rely on the chance that an outside government may provide economic support for a war effort.

Another critique leveled at British rearmament during the interwar period is that it failed to adequately prepare for a land war in continental Europe (Murray 2009: p. 297). It is true that Britain prioritized Navy and Air Force rearmaments over preparations for the Army (Reynolds 1991: p. 117; Ferris 1983: p. 882). Once again, this decision stems from limits upon Britain’s grand strategy rather than a lack of desire to adequately prepare for a ground war. While ideally, the government would have rearmed the three branches of the military equally, it did not have
the economic capability to do so (Kennedy and Imlay 1986: p. 125.) As a result of the various constrictions, the British prioritized their various commitments and armed accordingly. With these priorities in mind, the British government “targeted” the two branches it deemed most critical to British security—the Navy and the Air Force (Ripsman and Levy 2008: p. 177; Kennedy 1981a: p. 272; Neville 2006: p. 127; Stedman 2011: p. 165). For an island like the United Kingdom, the Navy and the Air Force are better sources of defense than a ground army (Reynolds 1991: p. 110; Murray 2009: p. 398). After the defense of the homeland, the defense of the Dominions and the protection of trade routes abroad were deemed the next most crucial concerns (Schroeder 1976: p. 224; Layne 2008: p. 402). These interests were also best served by the Navy and the Air Force. The last priority, and the only priority to require a ground force, is the defense of British continental allies, such as France. Ultimately, the wisdom of prioritizing the Navy and the Air Force paid off. During the Battle of Britain, the Royal Air Force was instrumental in staving off the German Luftwaffe, and preventing a full scale invasion of the United Kingdom (Neville 2006: p. 132; Werrell 1986: p. 704).

Conclusion

British interwar grand strategy represented the best choices available to the government. Throughout the interwar period, the British government was consistently constrained by incomplete information, poor economic performance, and public opinion. Because the ideal strategic choice was often unavailable, the British government was required to make the most optimal decisions. While the goal of interwar British grand strategy was to have the United Kingdom to be in a stronger military position with respect to the Axis powers, no available options would allow Britain to accomplish that vision. Instead, Britain had to be pragmatic and
accept the best decision given the circumstances. As a result of that pragmatism, the British grand strategy should be judged as a success rather than a failure.

The “Ten Year Rule” resulted in a lower base from which Britain could rearm. At the same time, it was not an inflexible principle guiding all of British defense policies. Armed forces did attempt to secure bigger budgets, and until the mid-1920’s, they were able to do so with some success. Ultimately, however, the public was war weary and the economy was declining. Public opinion and economic concern would not allow for an increased defense spending without a substantial threat.

Once Germany became a credible threat, the British government undertook a double policy of appeasement and rearmament. Despite the traditional criticism of appeasement, it was the only viable option. Britain lacked allies and the military strength to oppose Germany militarily. Without a clear indication that Hitler had continental domination as his end goal, it made little sense to oppose Germany militarily until Britain had rearmed.

But, due to Britain’s declining economy, rearmament was destined to be a slow process. As a result, the British government took a realistic approach to it. In line with that pragmatic reasoning, the British government did not want to overextend the economy in the name of rearmament. The Navy and the Air Force—deemed crucial to British survival—were reinforced first. That decision was often criticized, but it ignored that a strong economy is necessary for a sustained war effort. British grand strategy cannot be judged based on either the end result or the benefit of hindsight. Instead, it must be viewed in light of the context of the constraints placed upon the government at the time. With those in mind, the interwar government made the best viable decisions.
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