

# HARRY S. TRUMAN BOOK AWARD

A Virtual Event Presented by the Truman Library Institute  
Thursday, July 15, 2021 | 6 p.m. CDT

**Featuring Derek Leebaert**

Author of *Grand Improvisation: America Confronts the British Superpower, 1945-1957*

**In Conversation with Jason Parker**

Professor of History and Cornerstone Faculty Fellow, Texas A&M University

**Moderated by Morgan Jorgensen**

Donor Relations and Events Manager, Truman Library Institute

## PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

JORGENSEN: Hello. I'm Morgan Jorgensen, the donor relations and events manager for the Truman Library Institute. Welcome to "Grand Improvisation" with Derek Leebaert, the 2020 Harry S. Truman Book Award winner. Established in 1967, the Harry S. Truman Book Award recognizes the best book published within a two-year period that focuses on Truman's life, career and/or aspects of his administration.

Special thanks to Mary and John Hunkeler who endow the Book Award program with a generous gift to our Stay TRU capital campaign and are watching the program tonight. Mary and John, thank you for your long-standing support of the Institute.

The spectacular new Truman Library is now open, and fundraising for the capital campaign is still ongoing. To book your tickets to the museum or support the campaign, visit our website at [trumanlibraryinstitute.org](http://trumanlibraryinstitute.org). Thank you to our supporters near and far who have already joined the campaign and made possible this new chapter of Truman's legacy.

For this evening's program, Derek will be joined in conversation by Jason Parker, Truman Library Institute board member and chair of the Harry S. Truman Book Award committee. Jason is a professor of history and the

cornerstone faculty fellow and Texas A&M University. At the conclusion of the 45-minute presentation, there will be a 10- to 15-minute Q&A session. Questions can be submitted during and immediately following the remarks via the Q&A feature at the bottom of your screen. Now, it is my pleasure to turn the microphone over to Jason Parker.

PARKER: Thank you Morgan, and thanks to everyone for joining us this evening. I regret we can't all be together in person at the Truman Library tonight, but I suppose the silver lining is that this is a larger audience than we could have fit into the auditorium there, even a gathering in the new and improved version that just opened up. It's not every day that one finds oneself in the presence of a real-life Renaissance man, but it is our collective privilege to do so tonight. It is my honor and pleasure to introduce Derek Leebaert.

I knew of Derek's highly acclaimed scholarly works before this one but it wasn't until I chaired this committee that I learned of his many other accomplishments. Derek got his undergraduate degree at Vanderbilt University, went on to earn a master's at Columbia and a doctorate in economics at Oxford. He's kept a foot in the academic world, more or less, since then, holding fellowships at Harvard, The Smithsonian, teaching foreign affairs at Georgetown and founding three enduring periodicals, including the prestigious academic journal *International Security*.

In his day job, so to speak, he is a technology executive and a cofounding partner of the consulting firm, MAP AG, Management Alignment Partners. In his free time – hard to imagine that there's any left – he served in U.S. Marine Corps, was a founder of the National Museum of the U.S. Army and is a trustee of the U.S. Army Historical Foundation at Providence Hospital in Washington D.C.

He's the author of a half-dozen other excellent books besides this one, including a trilogy with MIT Press on the IT revolution, 2002's *The Fifty-Year Wound: How America's Cold War Victory Shapes Our World*, required reading in many graduate seminars; 2006's *To Dare and to Conquer: Special*

*Operations and the Destiny of Nations, from Achilles to Al Qaeda*, required reading at the U.S. Special Operation's Command; *Magic and Mayhem*, from 2010, subtitled, *The Delusions of American Foreign Policy From Korea to Afghanistan*, should be required reading at the Pentagon, Foggy Bottom and the White House.

This last is true as well, the book we are here to honor tonight, *Grand Improvisation: America Confronts the British Superpower, 1945–1957*. Our 2020 Truman Book Award committee consisted of five historians from across the country, myself, the late Curt Cardwell, Amy Sayward, Tom Zeiler and Nicole Sackley who had the privilege of reading all of the many books submitted for the prize.

We judged based on the quality of the archival research, the originality and depth of the historical analysis and on the caliber of the probes. As I read on my announcement on behalf of the committee at the time, in an especially competitive field of contenders, Derek Leebaert's *Grand Improvisation* rose to the top as an excellent examination of the relationship between United States and United Kingdom in the post-World War II era. Leebaert offers a nuanced and sophisticated reading of the Anglo-American special relationship from VE Day to Suez, showing that the postwar transition from British to American world primacy was slower, rockier and more improvised than is commonly thought.

Deeply researched and engagingly written, *Grand Improvisation* is the most worthy recipient of our prize. As committee chair, it is my privilege to present – virtually, yes, but wholeheartedly – the Truman Book Award to Derek Leebaert for *Grand Improvisation*. Congratulations Derek. I hereby pass the mic over to you.

LEEBAERT: Thank you Jason. Here indeed is the award that I'm indeed honored to have. What I would propose to do is to speak for 15 minutes laying out the theme of my argument, then we can get into the details of the subject of the Truman administration's foreign policy and what came after in a Q&A and we can drill

down into fascinating questions, say, such as the origin of the Truman Doctrine itself, or NATO, or the Korean War. But let me first emphasize the timeliness of our conversation tonight because, again, America confronts questions of its altered place in the world.

There is talk, certainly here in Washington, about a new Cold War, as in the rise of another competitive superpower, in China, the same decision-making conclaves are all spending time on issues that are not too different from what were debated after World War II, but there is a myth and what I try to do in *Grand Improvisation* is to go beyond that myth.

It's assumed that when World War II ended, the British Empire – the largest, grandest in history, covering a quarter of the world's land surface – was too weak and dispirited to carry on with its long-time imperial role and that a newly confident, prosperous, well-armed America then came forth and, as so many historians have romanticized it, carried the baton of world leadership as the previous hegemonic power, as academics called it, retreated and, therefore, America very quickly created the world order, the structures and the alliances that we know today. But I would argue that that is not at all what happened, and there is new material that goes far in explaining why.

The term superpower itself was coined by a professor in 1944. It has a specific definition. It means a great power that also has the ability to project its power anywhere on the planet, that has an ultramodern arsenal, that has fully established intelligence apparatuses and that also has a network of global relationships to leverage such power. By that definition, very quickly after World War II, there was only one true superpower on the planet in contrast to America, still with its insular tradition being, perhaps, a global super island state.

The Soviet Union, which had been designated as one of the three superpowers in 1944 wasn't quite that. Beyond espionage and sabotage, it couldn't project its power beyond the Eurasian land mass. The United States very quickly demobilized, and the military budgets of the late '40s stand

witness to our traditional insularity. The British, however, demobilized far slower and less than did the United States and the Soviet Union.

America is also an immigrant nation, and so many of us have really come here to get away from distorted politics of the old world. That too emphasizes the insularity in the United States that is much deeper than even today is understood. By 1946, Churchill had left as prime minister. We faced a very shrewd, very adaptive, very determined British suzerainty in London. It was now a labor government, but there's a big difference in understanding the labor government that has often been overlooked, and that is that these were tough, bear-knuckled hombres who knew Stalinism, who did not have many of the illusions about Soviet Russia, that indeed FDR and, arguably, Churchill held right up until the end.

These were tough labor union leaders who would literally fight Soviet influence in the street creating their labor organizations, and who used the word "Nazis" in describing Stalinism and indeed did it to their faces, of the Soviet diplomats. These were men who had no intention at all of retreating from Britain's global role, and they would continue to assert their power for the next dozen years, or the labor government, until 1951, when Churchill returned to power – which itself is a whole extraordinary story because Churchill's peacetime premiership has been looked at in only the most cursory fashion by all of his biographers and, at the time, many of his contemporaries believed that he was the most articulate and indeed, perhaps, equally forceful as he had been during the war years in confronting the United States from 1951 until he left office in 1955.

It was not until the Eisenhower administration and not until 1956 that America explicitly avowed a Declaration of Independence from the British Empire. Vice President Nixon said that, henceforth, America would assume the foreign policy leadership of the free world; that had decidedly not been the case before. Only then, in 1956, at the time of Suez, of course, did the *Economist*, a magazine reflecting British establishment opinion, admit that Britain is no longer a superpower.

During those dozen years, there was ongoing contention between London and Washington in the role that the United States would assume in the world and what significance the British Empire held for the United States. It was not until the mid '50s, when Britain still had the strongest military force in Western Europe, when it was just about still leading in jet aviation technology and in other industries of the future, that Americans started to get a bit in their teeth after the Korean War and to acknowledge that a larger, more assertive U.S. role had to be conducted.

There is another key part about the American postwar global presence that is always overlooked: everyone, with nary an exception in the United States and Washington in 1945, expected the return of the depression. Fear of the depression would overshadow nearly all U.S. decisions for a decade after World War II. The demobilization of 10 or 11 million men was expected to send unemployment rates sky-high. There was still no understanding of Keynesian Dynamic economics.

All of this factored into the decision of why America was very slow out of the gate in assuming the global role that is always presumed to have happened. We see this time and again: the U.S. reticence to lead, the insularity of the American public, the slashed military budgets in the late 1940s. We can drill down into issue after issue, which didn't quite occur the way we commonly believe, whether it's the Truman Doctrine, the founding of Israel, the origins of NATO or, indeed, beginning of the Korean War itself. All of these issues were framed by a greater complexity.

Ultimately, and let me conclude these opening remarks, ultimately, in 1950 there emerged a singular document that is one of the most important as well as relatively unknown documents of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is NSC 75, of which the far better known NSC 69 is nearly a spinoff, a national security document that is today, ideally, a high-level agency-wide, department-wide, U.S. government consensus on a particular issue.

NSC 75, which emerged in June, 1950 on the cusp of the Korean War, had a handful of conclusions. One, the British Empire and its Commonwealth had not remotely retreated since 1945; it had merely adjusted as in the sub-continent and in its relations with its dominion. Nor would the British Empire retreat in the foreseeable future. The conclusion also stated that the Empire was impossible to replace because of the deployments, the scale and the technologies it possessed and that the value of the British Empire, as long as anyone could see, would be as a valuable outer fortress for the United States, but as far as *replacing* the Empire, that was a bridge too far, too expensive, unlikely and unnecessary, and we would be living with the British Empire and Commonwealth for a long time to come, in the conclusion of NSC 75, which is titled, "America in the Future of the British Empire".

Let me close on those provocative notes, and then in our discussion, perhaps, we can get into the specific policy issues, how they were arrived at, perhaps the people that were making these decisions and, ideally, we can cover new ground.

PARKER: Thank you Derek. That was a wonderful summation of an insightful and provocative addition to the scholarly literature which does the valuable service of rethinking some of these things we think we know. It's very healthy to go back and revisit. NSC 68, as you mentioned, is, of course, catechism of our classes. NSC 75 belongs in those conversations too, and you rarely see it. Your work was one of the few I can think of in recent history to really highlight it. I praise you for that because it deserves a center stage.

I also wanted to praise your prowess, just as a writer to a writer; it's beautifully written, and that means a lot. Everyone listening, this is not just a book by an acclaimed historian for other historians; it is extremely accessible to the lay reader, as well as to the specialist. It also, as Derek just laid out, lays out some challenges for the conventional wisdom, I think very much successfully, for the most part. I identified a couple of certain bigger historical literature contributions, and we can drill down to the specific things a little bit later on. I found myself persuaded that the 1945 passing of the baton myth

really can't stand up to scrutiny by the time you take all the contingencies as well as the paper trails ...

Indeed, it's tough to argue at the end of this book that there's really much to the special relationship besides the retroactive, shall we say, utilitarian deployments of the trope by those who needed it for various reasons. I enjoyed the way the book helps to reframe the postwar away from the Cold War. As you know, that's a long-running parlor game for historians to argue about when exactly the Cold War begins. This is actually one of the things I find useful for hooking students, it's almost like a gateway drug if I can say, "All right, everybody knows when World War II begins, you've got invasion of Poland, you've got Pearl Harbor... When did the Cold War begin?" and everyone scratches their heads.

I say, "You're scratching your head for a good reason because there's a half dozen good candidates and you have to prioritize what you think are the Cold War's qualities that help to make it finally take its definition," but that itself can become a kind of an intellectual trap. It becomes almost a self-fulfilling prophecy, which your book pulls us away from. That's very good.

I like as well, the final large contribution that I identified, was the way that you deflated the notion of grand strategy; it's right there in the title, but "grand strategy," like the "special relationship," is something that gets written up after the fact often by actors like Cannon who himself wanted to take some authorship of something quite so grandiose. Maybe that's what we should call it, a "grandiose strategy" instead of "grand strategy," but substituting improvisation for strategy is a useful and, I find, persuasive corrective.

Now, it might be, because I read this right in the thick of the pandemic and other lock-down madness, the year of 2020 was so chock-full of events itself that it seems fitting to read a narrative that covers only 12 years, but it is so packed and you really were excellent at highlighting the fluidity, the connectiveness and the speed with which all of these events are unfolding in

the interest of pushing back against the idea of the passing baton in 1945 in the name of trans-Atlantic partnership.

I wanted to ask, Derek, just by way of getting a broader conversation going, your *Fifty-Year Wound* book, of about 20 years ago, splits the Cold War into three sections, three parts, and this book matches, more or less, with the first section of that book. I have to ask, and I'm hopeful: is this the first of a trilogy? [Laughter] Are you going to do further books on the next couple of phases, because this is a valuable contribution and, if you took that original *Fifty-Year Wound* structure and spun it out into this...

I don't know what the exact connection you found between writing that one and writing this one, I'd be interested in your process, but you've got two more phases of the Cold War that you could give this treatment to even as you were pulling us away from that framing. Maybe this is the further work of that is to get us outside of that mental prison.

LEEBAERT: Thank you for the encouragement but the *Fifty-Year Wound*, which came out nearly exactly two decades ago, is what got me interested in the larger questions of how Americans make decisions about foreign policy, how we see the world, how deep our insularity might be, and, not least of all, here is the largest empire in history, the British Empire and Commonwealth, and it seemed highly unlikely that, "Kabam!" all of a sudden it turned out the lights and retreated to being a small island in the North Atlantic. There was an inherent mystery there I wanted to understand. That was the motivation for getting into *Grand Improvisation*.

PARKER: I see. That makes excellent sense and it does point me to another question which made me wonder, if you would continue the story into the '60s, for Britain, by the time you get to the end of your book, you're only 10 years away from the announcement of the withdrawal from east of Suez, which ends up in your last pages, if we're talking about a 12-year period after 1945 that is so jam-packed with various kinds of events, many of which we witnessed and would need to rediscover, you're not even 10 years past that

and you're already seeing the ebb of British superpower though, when can we say that the superpower of '40s...?

LEEBAERT: The British acknowledged it not only after the debacle at Suez but with Sputnik in October 1957. By then it was clear, there is no competing with the grand superpowers, certainly with a Soviet Union and also with the United States. But where America truly got the bit in its teeth to, in my opinion, start spreading itself too thin in trying to fine-tune the planet, was with the Kennedy administration and the rousing rhetoric of, "No price is too great," and then America's frontier is now, "We're not only on the line but on the make," and this expensive militaristic interpretation of America's interest.

That had not occurred in the Truman era nor during the Eisenhower administration. It was a new approach to the world and one that opened up, perhaps, lots of difficulties that we still live with today.

PARKER: It is true that the distance traveled, not to get us away from Truman and from your book, but the distance traveled between Kennedy's inaugural address and the Nixon doctrine some eight years later, from, "Paying your price, bearing your burden," to, essentially, "We're going to help people help themselves and peel back out of this way of frontline thinking" ... it's quite astonishing.

There too, to loop back to the question about the next phase of this, into Britain in the '60s and its full ebb, William Roger Louis says that the Suez crisis is what really did it, it's what brought this, the scramble out of Africa, it's when the book ends, from the Congress of Berlin to the Suez, and you have high colonialism and then the decolonization and fairly rapid succession. I'm curious to know, because not many authors can include anecdotes in their footnotes about a conversation they had with Lord Mountbatten, but you have [Laughter] had in this book: How do you pull together the kind of research when it involves such an extensive personal and rich personal history in your life, images – sorry, go ahead.

LEEBAERT: What historians enjoy, as you know so well, is primarily getting into the archives. That's when everything rests, to have the thrill of seeing documents that perhaps have not been held, let alone read, since Harry Truman might have last looked at it with Dean Acheson, and there's the prospect that you or I could be the first to discover those documents as, indeed, one comes close with NSC 75, given that it was so tightly held and then I had to get it declassified. We see, however, exaggeration and being misinformed, such as the significance of NSC 68 in contrast. Another joy is being able to puncture those myths and to lay out other stories that might be more credible with the documentation.

PARKER: Yes, it is also, I find, always humbling to try and see the event through the document and through the eyes of the people who wrote and read it at the time. I found myself, in writing my books, to become more sympathetic to people who I didn't expect to become more sympathetic to. I know in your book you come in quite harshly on George Cannon, which you're not the first but it's true, he has almost exalted status in many circles and it was well-done puncturing. Were there any figures besides, perhaps Ernest Bevin, who you came away from this process with the greater admiration for than you did...?

LEEBAERT: I'm pretty sure. Yes, probably the greatest secretary of the treasury in U.S. history, certainly since Gallatin in the post-Revolutionary days. That was John Snyder, who was Harry Truman's closest friend. They worked hand-in-glove during the Truman Committee years of World War II. Snyder did what America is very good at, mobilizing our resources, financial and focusing them on a specific objective. He had a superb relationship with Dean Acheson and George Marshall, as, of course, he did with Truman.

I came away with a new understanding of the clout, when done correctly, of the U.S. Treasury and of the great treasury secretary.

PARKER: Snyder is, you're right, a lesser known and underappreciated actor. He's one of a couple of folks who popped out of your pages. James Webb would be another one who tends to get – is in the shadows of people like Acheson.

LEEBAERT: The reason for that is because Cannon and Acheson were such dazzling writers. They wrote the story and, in the case of Cannon, intellectuals see someone such as themselves. They are inclined to heroise Cannon, whereas, if one looks deeply – and no one has previously, I would argue, looked deeply enough – one finds a lot that is simply untrue in the Cannon memoir, that just don't stand up to scrutiny. Those assertions get repeated too often, year in and year out.

What I would like to put on the table, just for one second, to perhaps provoke [our] understanding about those Harry Truman years that, in the Truman Doctrine, for example March 1947, the administration, Dean Acheson especially, was utterly bluffed into those commitments in Greece by the British. The documents from Ernest Bevin make that very clear; he was casting a net and pulling in the U.S., and he could use British resources much better elsewhere.

Another provocative finding, on the Berlin blockade, the United States was fully ready to retreat from Berlin in June 1948 when the Soviets blockaded. That was a pivot point of history, arguably. A retreat from Berlin could have undermined everything but it was the British determination to send in reinforcements and to demand that the United States step up to the plate; only with a long delay did Washington say, "Okay, we'll stay too." Time and again we see these provocative pivot points.

PARKER: That's a valuable addition because it's true that both of those stories are told in an America-centric way in most cases, the Truman team especially but, more broadly, that this is Washington really waking up to the responsibilities that it now finds on its shoulders. I disagree a little bit on the Truman Doctrine just because I think that it does mark an important break in the intellectual history of this team. This is where they began to get it and, importantly, connected it backwards to the Nazis as the British labor folks had already done but to see the text of the Truman doctrine and not hardly find the word "communist" in it, it says totalitarian, which makes a really great...

LEEBAERT: Then it's a terrorist, it's an antiterrorist measure because we were fighting terrorists in Greece. You're entirely correct, the Truman Doctrine itself is a seminal event but it's just that the assumptions behind it were misguided because we were certain the British were going to leave Greece in, essentially, the middle of the civil war and open it up to, perhaps, Soviet expansion. My point was, according to British documentation, no, they had no intention of leaving.

PARKER: Thank you. I don't want to pull us way from those things and out of the Truman years but I wanted to ask just as a matter of not so much structure but coverage, I found you did a great job on the waterfront. There were only a few things that popped up into my head that I would have liked to see more on but let me ask you as the writer, are there things you wish you could have covered? You had 500 pages and you covered, pretty much, everything one could ask for but are there things you had to leave on the cutting-room floor that you would have loved to spend more time with?

LEEBAERT: One could go on endlessly about the downsides of American foreign-policy making. To be sure, Truman, Acheson and Marshall were cautious men, as was much of the American public at that time about our role in the world. That caution, step by step, got lost. Eisenhower and Dulles, these were cautious men. You can see their reticence when you get involved in Southeast Asia, Vietnam but then, very quickly, that caution was abandoned in the early '60s.

One could write tomes about American foreign-policy making. For example, our appointee system that doesn't rely, perhaps, on a grand powerful foreign service as it did at the time, certainly, in Britain but political appointees. What are the consequences of that? These procedural issues one could go on and on about with great fascination, perhaps.

PARKER: Indeed. Specific topics, the only one that really jumped out the largest that I wish that you had been able to cover but I'm glad to be able to ask you about now is the Point Four Program, is an early version of soft power. I don't know

if in your analysis of superpowers that hard power matters so much more that we can ignore it but this is – everyone knows the Marshall Plan, much less well-known is Point Four, which they went out of their way not to characterize it as a Marshall Plan for the world but which they did see as part and parcel of a broader thinking about how to handle communism as a global force.

One of the ways that Point Four was supposed to do it, for those who don't know, it's essentially an aid and technical development program for countries that are on their way to developing, helping to improve agriculture in Iran and things like this. It's an early version of USAID. It's called the Technical Cooperation Administration. It's underappreciated part of the Truman portfolio. I wondered if that was something that had crossed your radar as you were producing this and decided consciously, or not, perhaps, to skip over this particular topic.

LEEBAERT: You're entirely correct, it is a superb example of soft power, which I try to address in general terms, such as locust irradiation in the Middle East, which cost us nothing to do yet paid enormous dividends. Perhaps I did slide the Point Four Program but, by that stage, one can also get lost in so many programs, names, policies and so on. Part of the challenge of being a historian, as you know so well, is, what does one leave out because it's like sculpting, you have to know what to keep ashore but, most important, what to leave out. Regrettably, one can't include everything if one wants to have a literary narrative.

PARKER: Of course. No, it's just an axiom that any book could be twice as long if you just went on and on about whatever it is. You're right that the real art of it is to find that sweet spot. I don't want to monopolize any further, I see we have some questions piling up in the Q&A. I have some things we can maybe circle back to but let me just hand it over to Morgan if she wants to play MC and work us through some of the questions.

JORGENSEN: Absolutely. Thank you, Jason. Our first question this evening is from John Hunkeler who, at the beginning of the program, we recognized with his wife

Mary for being the folks that endow the Truman Book Awards. Thank you again, John and Mary. His question is, "How does the Iron Curtain speech by Churchill play in this game?"

LEEBAERT: That's a pivotal question. Churchill gave his Iron Curtain speech in March 1946, and right from the beginning it was extremely controversial because Churchill envisioned and asked for a global U.S./British empire military alliance. The Americans had no such enthusiasm for that. Indeed, what had not been known is the Churchill's son Randolph was also in the United States during that visit, although he was not there with his father; he stayed in Washington. He started telling highly influential journalists, like the columnist Walter Lippmann, that the British intention was very much to bring America into global conflicts.

He had said, Randolph did, "We've done it before and we'll do it again." They were searching for a backstop to the British Empire. That speech in itself became extremely controversial and got lots of pushback at the time.

JORGENSEN: Excellent. Our next question is from Ryan. Ryan asks, "What do you make of the revisionist idea that Truman could have avoided conflict with Stalin and prevented the Cold War?"

LEEBAERT: That's an ongoing debate, but my study of Stalin and Stalinism would say there was very little possibility of that, of preventing a confrontation one way or another with Stalinist Russia. Even if FDR had survived, it's often been said, they would have reached some accommodation. No, this was one of the world's foremost massacre-makers of history. Unlike Hitler, however, he wasn't a reckless gambler; he was far smarter.

It is improbable there would have been any Soviet invasion of Western Europe, but it would have been a push until the democratic France collapsed and much of Western Europe went with it. It was expansionist, in my judgment, and utterly murder-mongering as well.

PARKER: I would add too that, just by coincidence, within a few days of Roosevelt's death, April 1945, right as Truman is about to ascend to the White House, [that] Stalin's team, not his pen directly but his Politburo, was sending orders to Western European communist parties saying, "Get yourselves ready, the war's going to be over soon and we're going to get back to work."

So, the Cold War is always going on in Stalin's mind. One of my favorite factoids I teach is, I say, "The Soviets are past masters at espionage." During the war about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of their espionage assets were deployed in the West, not against Hitler within their life-and-death struggle. That's a very tallied statistic.

JORGENSEN: All right. The next question is from Michael. Michael asks, "What was the attitude of U.S. military leaders who had served in and worked with the U.K. during the war?"

LEEBAERT: The attitude of U.S. military leaders toward their British counterparts is mixed. The British chiefs of staff really harshly disdained so many of the Americans on very poor grounds. Field Marshal Alan Brooke, who was Churchill's primary military advisor, thought even George Marshall was amateurish, but here one sees a lot of bitterness surfacing. Though, there were always abrasions, even on the military front, and that's why Eisenhower ultimately was so important, because Eisenhower was a superb manager, diplomat and conciliator, which is why FDR appointed him.

That testiness in the military relationship did carry on through the Truman era. The Americans very consciously ended the combined chiefs of staff of the wartime years. No matter how much the British importuned, we were not going to create it at the start of the Cold War.

JORGENSEN: Excellent. Our next question is from Ryan. Ryan asks, "When you are searching for new historical documents and materials, at what point do you begin looking for classified documents? How do you become aware that something you need is classified?"

LEEBAERT: Let me here talk about my work at the superb, unsurpassed Truman Library. Yes, one can ask the marvelous archivists to bring out boxes and to guide a researcher through all the thousands – and millions, indeed – of pages, but after a while a researcher will start seeing gaps. For example, a document NSC 75, referred to by Dean Acheson and George Marshall as being pivotally important and then you don't see an NSC 75 in the archive, you see NSC 68, which is an intriguing spinoff, and you see NSC 68 reflecting elements from a larger body at work but where is that larger body of work?

That's where an historian, a researcher says, "I want to start a declassification process and see the original that has not yet been declassified."

JORGENSEN: All right. Our next question is from Steven. Steven asks, "If the British bluffed the U.S., vis-à-vis Greece, was it done with the express purpose of bringing the U.S. out of its insular tendencies, as manifested before Pearl Harbor, and make of the U.S. a more robust world actor?"

LEEBAERT: Yes, absolutely. The intent is clear. The fear of Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, a top labor organizer, was that it was all too likely patterns would repeat and that the United States, as after World War I, would go back to its insular ways and that the British Empire would be left to its own devices in a world utterly flat, France was a thin reed as was Italy and it faced predatory Stalinism.

This was a deliberate effort by Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin to pull the United States into global political – not global but into political military engagement against the Soviet Union, yes, and to backstop the British Empire but, remember, the empire itself was dominant in the Middle East, as it would be, essentially, until the time of Suez. What they couldn't control of that was an ever-larger U.S. interest in the Middle East, exemplified at first by the oil companies and then, after Korea, with a more political military twist.

PARKER: It predates [\[Unintelligible\]](#) a little bit but people like Bevin in choosing to go this route could play back to the Four Policemen of Roosevelt's [\[Unintelligible\]](#) and say, "All right, they're already onboard in principle with the idea of regional responsible actors, we just have to get them further in and then backstop our own power while we're at it."

LEEBAERT: This is why the entire topic that we're addressing, and indeed the work of the Truman Library and the Truman history itself is so vitally relevant to what's happening now. How many times are we seeing headlines and read in articles about a new Cold War or about how insular the American public is about fear of getting into future forever wars, or how we want to leave allies and indeed NATO itself at an arm's length?

All of this is vital to what we're talking about now. American scholars of Russia are startled by the parallels between the rhetoric of Putin and of earlier Soviet rhetoric after World War II. All these issues are coming to the fore.

PARKER: You see the same thing in China. They just celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. Xi Jinping is very consciously channeling some of – anyone who studied Mao will see some familiar outlines in Xi Jinping.

LEEBAERT: Jason, I have a footnote. These books, the book we're talking about tonight, "Grand Improvisation", and also the book from 20 years ago, "The Fifty-Year Wound: True Price of America's Cold War Victory", those have been translated by the Chinese at great expense by Shanghai People's Publishing because, not that they're my books but that Chinese leadership is making a great effort to do a study of American Cold War history and particularly the American replacement, as they call it, of the British Empire, how did this all happen? Of course, presumably, they are seeing insights for themselves.

JORGENSEN: Excellent tee up for our next question from Tom who asks, "Did Great Britain's recognition of the communist government in China demonstrate that

it was still a world payer at that time in contrast to the United States' aversion to China?"

LEEBAERT: Yes, it did and it created an enormous controversy in the United States when Britain proceeded very quickly to recognize the new regime of Mao Zedong in January 1950. We had gotten assurances over and over from Foreign Secretary Bevin that that would not happen. Then, out of the blue, it did. As the questioner emphasized, it very much was due to Britain asserting itself on the global stage.

Indeed, remember that Britain dragged its feet for a long time on the founding of Israel, about a year they would not recognize the founding of Israel for a variety of reasons but when it came time to recognize China and the U.S. said, "Don't," Bevin actually said, "Do you want us to drag our feet the way we did on Israel?" which, of course, the U.S. didn't. It's a way that you can see these leaders of these two global powers, the British Empire and the United States, still jousting with each other. How they dealt with the People's Republic of China is a fascinating test case.

JORGENSEN: Excellent. We have time for a few more questions here. Our next question is from Ralph. He is thanking Dr. Leebaert for this great lesson about America, the British Empire and the world. Then he says, "The role of George Marshall is not given enough credit," in his opinion, "Who is the 2021-plus George Marshall? Maybe not an American."

PARKER: Marshall was a unique individual in his pretty natural composure. He was like a statue pointing back to the old republic of early American days, of the civilian relationships with proper military power. It's hard to find another example, and to be sure, one cannot audiolize Marshall, however, because there are disturbing racial issues in his leadership but Marshall by and large is a master of civil military affairs as a developer, above all, of talent, certainly including Eisenhower, in his ability to work with American President Franklin Roosevelt and, to be sure, Harry Truman. He's really unsurpassed. It would be beyond me to offer anyone to compare nowadays.

JORGENSEN: Excellent. Speaking of not idolizing anybody too much, Richard asks, "Could you expand a bit on your criticism of Cannon? As an old Princetonian, we were led to lionize his historical significance."

LEEBAERT: That is unfortunate because there are a few redeeming features in the character of George Cannon, not just his personal values but the dissembling in his memoirs, outright falsehoods as about the length of the long telegram, which he grossly exaggerated and knowingly exaggerated, about his decrying ability of the superb secretary of the treasury, John Snyder. These are outright falsehoods.

Cannon's biographers have not drilled deep enough, as I argue, to reveal these falsehoods time and again, not just during the Truman administration but his interaction with Eisenhower, the utter disdain Franklin Roosevelt as being intellectually inferior and then did toward almost anyone, to Eisenhower, to Dulles and on and on. My summation is that Cannon requires a far more skeptical, a deeper look, and perhaps not by his fellow intellectuals who just assume that his sparkling writing is testimony to the truth.

JORGENSEN: All right. We have time for one more question. This one comes from Mike. Mike says, "My dad grew up during the Great Depression and it formed a lot of lifetime habits. I found it interesting that you indicated the Great Depression lingered for a decade or more in our thinking. Without being an event Americans lived through, what are your thoughts about the pandemic and its impact on our future?"

LEEBAERT: First let me thank Mike for that superb question. The last hearings on the Hill about the return of the depression were in 1954 and '55. It affected time and time again decisions about America's role in the world but there is a tricky thing about the Cold War. National security very quickly became more important to the United States than did the economy and the economic wellbeing of its citizens. Drawing parallels between the Great Depression and today is exactly the subject of my next book, which is the new understanding

of Franklin Roosevelt and the four key lieutenants who worked most closely with him, from the earliest days of the administration right through the end of the president's state.

The depression, as your dad, our grandparents know, affected so much of the decades after World War II, the values, the policy-making, the fears of returning to that ceric time.

JORGENSEN: Excellent. That is the perfect question to end on. Thank you all for joining us today and congratulations once again to Derek Leebaert for wining the 2020 Harry S. Truman Book Award. To learn more about the postwar relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom, you can purchase "Grand Improvisation: America Confronts the British Superpower, 1945–1957" anywhere books are sold including Rainy Day Books right here in Kansas City. Tickets are now on sale to visit the all new Truman Library. Reservations are required in advance. As always, members enjoy the benefit of free year-round access to the museum. To become a member or purchase your tickets, visit [trumanlibraryinstitue.org](http://trumanlibraryinstitue.org).

Derek and Jason, thank you again so much for joining us this evening and thank you all for joining us to celebrate this Truman Book Award. Have a great evening.

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