Six Moments of Crisis: Inside British Foreign Policy by Gill Bennett. Oxford University Press, 2013. xvi + 223 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-958375-1, Hardcover, £20.00

Dean White*
Independent Scholar

As Harold Macmillan will forever be remembered for the quote "events, dear boy, events", Gill Bennett would surely have us remember her latest book by "people, dear boy, people". Her study of six key foreign policy crises concentrates very much on the people making decisions in each crisis; for Bennett this means the Cabinet. She contends early on that one golden rule of government is that "government policy is made by government ministers, not by officials, special advisers, Brussels or Washington" (p. 4). Whilst students of bureaucratic government, proponents of the CNN effect, or conspiracy theorists may disagree, this belief in the primacy of the Cabinet shapes the remainder of the book.

The crises Bennett chooses for analysis are the decision to send troops to Korea, the Suez crisis, application for membership of the EEC in 1961, the withdrawal of British troops from east of Suez, the expulsion of 105 KGB agents from the UK in 1971 and the decision to send a task force to the Falklands. In each case Bennett concentrates on a particular Cabinet meeting to illustrate how and why each decision was made and the role of individual Cabinet ministers in each case. She draws on various sources, including the official minutes of Cabinet meetings, notebooks of the various Cabinet Secretaries, published diaries, biographies and autobiographies. Given Bennett's previous role as Chief Historian to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, I have to say I was hoping for more insider revelations – perhaps a "through the keyhole" of Number 10. However, whilst Bennett's interpretation of events is clearly shaped by her insider status at the FCO, her sources are all publicly available and thus there is very little in the book that could be described as salacious gossip or the spilling of state secrets.

In terms of the events covered, it cannot be denied that each is a significant crisis in the Cold War era. Unquestionably, we could all name other incidents that we would like to have seen covered – the Berlin blockade, Zimbabwean independence, German reunification or Vietnam – but the six crises taken together do cover the key themes and issues affecting British foreign policy in the period. Sadly though, given the dependency upon official documents, and therefore the restrictions of the thirty year rule, the book makes no commentary on contemporary issues. Certainly, given Bennett's conclusion that British foreign policy is shaped – but not led – by Washington, consideration of the 2003 invasion of Iraq or the intervention in Afghanistan would have certainly added to the book. Maybe in a second edition at some time in the future Bennett can address these more contemporary events and describe her own role in advising ministers.

One criticism of the book is that the conclusion is woefully short. Bennett does too little to draw the six crises together and identify themes, lessons and continuities. There are however a number that are evident across the six crises. First is the sheer scale of government and the demands placed on Cabinet ministers. As Bennett makes clear, no decision is made in a vacuum. At any one time ministers are dealing with a myriad of events and issues and must bear in mind considerations other than the crisis at hand, whether that be constituency matters, budgetary

* Dean White is an independent scholar having recently completed his PhD thesis, on British foreign policy towards Rwanda, at Northumbria University. He can be contacted at deanwhite99@gmail.com

concerns, or in some cases their personal health. Whilst as historians, we may like to focus on one particular subject with laser intensity Bennett warns us that this generally is not how Cabinet ministers operate. Secondly, ever present through all six crises is consideration of the American position. Bennett emphasises throughout that Cabinet decision makers were always conscious of the view in Washington; the likely response from the US, and particularly from the White House, seems to have been a question considered in all six crises. The third consistent theme is of a country struggling with its identity and position in the world. Certainly the first five studies paint the picture of a former great power wrestling with decline. The sixth crisis, the recapturing of the Falklands, might for many be the turning point when Britain regained its international self-confidence. However, by only covering the decision to send the task force to the South Atlantic, Bennett does not show us or comment on this turnaround. The final continuity is the habit of ministers to draw on previous experience in their decision making. For example, during the Suez Crisis Eden looked back at his experiences in the 1930s and then some thirty years later ministers drew on lessons from Suez when discussing the Falklands. Bennett concludes with a justification of diplomatic history and of the role of FCO historian, "there is no doubt that in the realm of foreign policy making, history can be a constructive tool" (p. 175).

There are obvious weaknesses in the book – it ignores the arguments of opponents; it does not provide any fundamentally new interpretation of events; by concentrating on one meeting in each case it fails to fully explore the development of decision making (particularly relevant to the example of entry into the EEC); and it is completely devoid of theory. However, Bennett makes no claim that this is what her book is for. Instead this is a book about decision making in the real world from one perspective and in that regard it delivers what it promises. In terms of an exploration of Cabinet decision making, Bennett has given us an enjoyable and informative read.