The British Empire was a testament to the greatness and superiority of the society, government, and culture of the British people. For young men, the great maps of the British Empire were intoxicating, illustrating the immensity of Britain’s possessions and fueling British beliefs of the importance of the imperial mission (Attlee 6). Even though the Empire spanned the entire globe, one possession stood above all the rest. In 1960, at an Oxford lecture on the British Empire, former Prime Minister Clement Attlee stated, “At the dawn of the century the Indian Empire was by far the most populous of all countries under the British Crown. The possession of India dominated our strategy” (Attlee 28). This self-acknowledged greatness of the British crown, coupled with the importance of India, were underlying factors of the British reactions to the events between WWII and the final partition in 1947. In this paper, I will argue that Britain’s stated belief in its own benevolence towards India is severely undermined by its own actions, the prevailing situation within India, and international influences. First, I will examine Britain’s handling of the “India question” from 1946 to 1947, and how, as presented in The Times, Britain viewed its own results. Second, I will explain how various factors within India forced the defeated British to give into Indian demands. Third, I will examine to what effect Britain’s new post-war status and relations with the United States forced Indian independence. Finally, I will reveal how the British strived to preserve their international image and economic presence within the subcontinent.

The sheer number of articles from 1946 to 1947 within The Times pertaining to the “India question” is proof of India’s importance to the British people.2 As comprehensive as this coverage is, there are numerous issues that I discovered with The Times as a source. First, although the issues take place in another country, there is an overwhelming focus in The Times on the British side of the issues. There is, in two years of coverage, rarely a direct quotation from an Indian, and many articles follow this theme: “They [the Congress Party] have added that the Constituent Assembly, as a sovereign body, could not consistently with its self-respect deliberate while British troops remained on Indian Territory or words to that effect.”3 For the readers, this lack of direct Indian quotations

1 Between these dates, there are 502 articles. 285 of these are “News”, 38 are “Advertising”, 97 are “Editorial and Commentary”, 39 are “Business”, with the other 43 belonging to a host of other categories.
2 “India in Perspective”, The Times, March 11, 1946, col. C.
3 “More Queries in India”, The Times, May 22, 1946, 4, col. D.
would have certainly created a distance between themselves and the Indian perspective of the same events. Second, besides an occasional letter to the newspaper, every article comes from an unknown editor or correspondent. Obviously, this presents a major issue if one desires to research the backgrounds of the writers in order to analyze what biases may occur within the reporting. Third, in the two years before the partition, The Times never published an article that linked Britain’s past actions to India’s present problems. I believe this complete lack of historical connections presents a major problem when attempting to analyze the reasons behind independence.

Following the end of WWII, with Clement Attlee as the newly-elected Prime Minister, the Labour Party began to implement measures to facilitate the process towards Indian independence. One of their first actions was to commission a “Cabinet Mission” of three Government officials who would, according to Attlee, “act in association with the Viceroy in discussions with leaders of Indian opinion on the problems arising out of the early realization by India of self-government.” At the time, tensions between the Muslim League and Congress Party were high, as the League demanded a separate country, while the Party insisted that India could never split into separate lands. The Cabinet Mission was, up to that point, the most serious attempt by the British Government to solve the political situation through dialogue.

I believe that the manner in which Britain handled its Cabinet Mission illustrated a severe lack of concern for the Indian’s situation. When the idea of the mission was announced, Attlee stated that the Cabinet Mission “would have the powers to negotiate with the Indian leaders within the terms laid down by the Cabinet decision....[and] anything arising out of the discussions would be subject to legislation and would come before the House.” Immediately, when questions were posed to Attlee asking for greater clarification of the Mission’s objectives, he responded, “The Government are not expected to encourage a full-dress debate on India

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4 For instance, within these two years, there is no mention of the fact that the British jaled the entire Congress leadership during WWII, where they languished in jail without trial for the entire war. Moreover, there is no mention of the oppression the Indians suffered under the British Raj.


6 The members of this Cabinet Mission were Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the Secretary of State for India, Sir Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade, and A.V. Alexander, the First Lord of the Admiralty.

7 “Cabinet Mission for India”, The Times, February 20, 1944, 4, col. B.

8 SarDesai, India, 307-308.


10 The idea of a Cabinet Mission was announced on February 20, 1946.

11 “Cabinet Mission for India”, The Times, February 20, 1946, 4, col. B.

12 Some questioned that arose were the time limits of the Mission, its authority over or with the current Viceroy, and whether it would represent the Indian parties or make the decisions for them.

http://commons.colgate.edu/car/vol5/iss1/5
before the mission leaves.”13 Two months later, on March 16, Attlee again had to clarify the intentions of the mission.14 It seems that, in a mission of such importance, the objectives would have been clearer. Even The Times correspondent in Delhi seemed confused: “Once everybody has been heard, the mission will, it is assumed, get down to business on the real issue of the future.”15 Through these confusions and assumptions, Attlee, at the end of 1946, in a speech to the House of Commons on the status of the Cabinet Mission, continued to stress the British honesty: “we have said that we have had legal advice which confirms that the statement of May 16 means what the Cabinet Mission have always said was their intention.”16 Yet, the poor organization of their most important mission failed to support the British notions of their own truthful “intentions”.

Beyond its lack of organization, the actual decisions of the Cabinet Mission further defeated the British claims of honesty. While Attlee addressed the house on March 16, 1946, the situation in India looked poorer every day. The provincial elections of 1945 had destroyed any vestiges of alliance between the rival Muslim League and the Congress Party.17 Though a country-wide minority, Jinnah’s Muslim League had gained overwhelming majorities in the Northern Muslim-majority areas of Bengal and Punjab, which subsequently increased its hopes for a new Pakistan.18 In light of these circumstances, it is understandable why Attlee’s response created such a disturbance within India: “We are very mindful of the rights of minorities and minorities should be able to live free from fear. But we cannot allow a minority to place a veto on the advance of the majority.”19 When the Cabinet Mission arrived in India, this statement was the first issue on which the officials were questioned, for upon its answer rested the authority for either party:

Question time found Lord Pethick-Lawrence immediately asked to clarify Mr. Attlee’s [previous statement]... Congress publicists have taken this as conceding to the communities they represent all the prerogatives that attach to a majority of the voters in a homogenous democratic country; and the Muslims have drawn the inference that it implies coercion of their community into a system of government which could place them at the mercy of the Hindu majority.20

Being pressed for great clarification, Lord Pethick-Lawrence, realizing the implications of his answer, “closed the subject with the reply that the British Government regarded the Muslims as

13 “Cabinet Mission for India”, The Times, February 20, 1946, 4, col. B.
14 “The Instrument of Decision for India”, The Times, March 16, 1946, 8, col. A.
16 “Government Statement on India”, The Times, December 12, 1946, 4, col. F.
17 Das, Fateful Events, 129.
18 Sardesai, India, 308.
20 “Issue Before India”, The Times, March 26, 1946, 4, col. G.
one of the great communities in India.\textsuperscript{21} The failure to provide a clear answer became an essential reason behind the incompatibility of the parties.

In the midst of this tension, the Cabinet Mission issued its proposals on May 16, 1946,\textsuperscript{22} and chose to govern the country under the weak “Union of India”. This “Union” diminished the Cabinet’s credibility, for it is impossible to understand how such a large continent would have been administered by such a weak central government.\textsuperscript{23} Under the auspices of the plan, the Cabinet Mission had attempted to please the Congress with a unified India, while subsequently leaving open the prospect for the League’s desire of a partitioned Pakistan.\textsuperscript{24} The Interim Government later formed at the end of the year was similarly a failure.\textsuperscript{25} Shockingly, when the Mission returned to England, the Parliamentary Labour Party passed a resolution of congratulations for its work in the negotiations that had “contributed materially to the achievement of India’s independence.”\textsuperscript{26}

With the failure to solve the tension diplomatically, the situation within India had become too much for the British to handle. After a year of political disasters, Mr. A. Creech Jones, the Colonial Secretary, claimed, “We must win the increasing understanding, cooperation, and confidence of the Colonial peoples, and help them move to the realization of their dreams and genius.”\textsuperscript{27} Yet, Britain would announce its date for withdrawal just two months later, with or without a Government in place. Contrary to Mr. A. Creech Jones, I believe that the situation in India had forced Britain to do the exact opposite of “winning an increased understanding”. Even before 1946, conditions in India had deteriorated significantly,\textsuperscript{28} and British confidence in its ability to rule had been shaken considerably by two major rebellions during WWII.\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, violent and uncontrollable riots between Muslims and Hindus damaged any claims of British control upon its own colony.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{21} “Issue Before India”, \textit{The Times}, March 26, 1946, 4, col. G
\textsuperscript{22} “Proposals for Future of India”, \textit{The Times}, May 17, 1946, 3, col. A.
\textsuperscript{23} Das, \textit{Fateful Events}, 134. This “Union of India” embraced both British India and the Princely States, and would deal with foreign affairs, defense, and communication. Provinces could, by a majority vote of its legislative assembly, only call for a reconsideration, and not a direct change, in its constitution only after ten years, and then in ten year intervals after that.
\textsuperscript{24} When the proposals were set forth, only the Indian Muslim League accepted them.
\textsuperscript{25} Das, \textit{Fateful Events}, 137-138. The explosive riots occurring in the country would have been difficult for any country to deal with. With a Government sharply divided on itself on almost all major issues, it was impossible.
\textsuperscript{26} “Cabinet Mission to India”, \textit{The Times}, July 04, 1946, 8, col. G.
\textsuperscript{27} “Britain and the Colonials, Mr. Creech Jones on the New Policy”, \textit{The Times}, December 07, 1946, 2, col. C.
\textsuperscript{28} “Help Still Needed in India”, \textit{The Times}, January 12, 1944, 2, col. D.
\textsuperscript{29} Sardesai, \textit{India}, 304-305.
Finally, a massive famine had struck the continent, and, sensing Britain’s inability to help, the Indians had turned to the United States for support. With the country in shambles, the British were faced with two decisions: To maintain direct British power in India by sending in more troops, or to transfer power to an Indian government. The British, facing the humiliation of losing its most prized possession, took the second choice, but masked the situation as a gift. With the Cabinet Mission deemed a failure, and the Interim Government falling apart, a Times correspondent explained just how tense the political situation had become:

The impatience of members of the Congress Party at the continuance of the present state of affairs in the Interim Government and the stubborn refusal of Muslim League members to return to constitutional courses... are overshadowing Indian political today.... while this spirit of obstructionism animates Indian politicians there is little chance of India’s making rapid or smooth progress towards independent nationhood.

Britain, in the face of the continuous riots, the uncontrollable famine, and the political crisis, did what any “sensible” government would do. Just three days after “Frustration in India” was published, Attlee announced that Britain was leaving India permanently.

I believe that British defeatism was illustrated best in a debate on Attlee’s February 20th decision within the House of Lords. Even in the face of heated opposition, the Labour Party was able pass the motion through the argumentation of Lord Halifax, who had stated that “he was not prepared to condemn the Government’s action unless he could honestly and competently recommend a better solution.” I believe Halifax’s pessimism illustrates how the British felt defeated. Moreover, it was a clear contradiction from the policy espoused by Mr. Butler, a Conservative MP, less than a year previously: “No solution should be reached in a hurry for the sake of reaching a solution.” After just eleven months, the Government had abandoned Mr. Butler’s ideology, proving beyond a doubt its lack of

32 “Mr. Hoover and India”, The Times, March 18, 1946, 3, col. E. 
33 K.C. Yadav, India Divided 1947: Who did it? Why? How? And What Now? (Delhi: Hope Indian Publications, 2006), 79. Though these seem like two different options, in the end the British, according to Yadav, really had only one choice, which was to evacuate the country. 
34 “Crucial Year for India”, The Times, January 02, 1946, 3, col. D. 
35 “Frustration in India”, The Times, February 17, 1947, 3, col. C. 
37 “No Division on India in the Lords”, The Times, February 27, 1947, 4, col. F. 
38 “Disorder in India”, The Times, April 09, 1947, 5, col. B.
sincerity for the plight of the Indian people. Although the situation within India had become uncontrollable, the British persistently espoused its own blamelessness in the events. Mr. Attlee, in a speech to the House of Commons in the beginning of 1946, claimed that “It would be a great mistake to stake out the claims of rival communities. We may be quite sure that will be done anyway. There have been faults on all sides and on both sides. We should be looking to the future rather than harking back on the past (Cheers).” I believe this quote reveals Attlee’s attempts to ignore the idea that two hundred years of British subjugation had nothing to do with the present situation. The British consistently ignored the role they played in the mess, and often blamed the Indians for their own problems. In a Times editorial on March 23, 1946, an editor, examining the current Indian political climate, stated, “The present Government of India is no fit instrument for the purpose [of obtaining freedom].” This is ironic, considering the fact that Britain had built that former government. Moreover, when communal violence erupted in Northern India, the British quickly pointed fingers at the very structure it had created. In the midst of the failed political situation, the communal violence, and a ravishing famine, the British still found a way to transfer the blame onto the Indians:

They (the British people) know that it is for the Indians themselves to make the promised land of freedom one in which all can share in their birthright, and that should they fail within 15 months to satisfy the legitimate aspirations of all communities, they can blame no one else for the ensuing confusion.

According to the British, under the new time-table, the Indian parties, in the midst of chaos, could now only blame themselves for failure. In addition to the pressure of a chaotic India, international forces would also play a role in the British acquiescence. As the dust of World War II settled, the British began to realize that their position on the world stage had changed dramatically. Throughout the war, Britain had faced large account deficits and exhausted resources, leaving it heavily impoverished and reliant on the United States for loans.

41 Sardesai, India, 307. This previous Government consisted of the Executive Council loosely held together by Viceroy Wavell.
42 “Disorder in India”, The Times, April 09, 1947, 5, col. B.
43 The idea that the situation in India was fully the responsibility of the Indian Government was echoed in many articles throughout the coming months: “Report on India”, The Times, May 06, 1947, 5, col. B; “The Transfer in India”, The Times, May 12, 1947, 4, col. D.
45 Donald Markwell, John Maynard Keynes and International Relations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 219. Britain’s exports had dropped while its imports continued to increase through WWII.
and supplies. Before the war, the United Kingdom had been the creditor to the rest of the world to an amount around £3,500 million, but by the end had become a debtor of almost the same sum, and was struggling to preserve its world-power status: “The question which the economists ask, however, is whether Britain...will in fact be able to afford for any length of time to keep in the field—and, what is more, to arm and equip—[its]armies.”

Meanwhile, the United States had emerged not only militarily victorious but economically as well. In the face of increasing British weakness, the United States was determined to replace itself as the new world power of the postwar order. Through the implementation of the Lend-Lease Act the Americans challenged the imperial preference system that offered Britain trading advantages in its colonial markets. The United States accomplished this coercion through the creation of the International Trade Organization, which facilitated trade liberalization, the curbing of cartels, and the overseeing of intergovernmental commodity agreements.

Just five days after the decision on February 20, General Marshall, the United States Secretary of State, announced that “American relations with India had assumed new significance with the arrival here of India’s Ambassador-designate...and the declaration by Mr. Attlee that the British Government would transfer power into responsible Indian hands.” Indeed, the United States had taken many measures to increase its presence within India, both politically and economically. The immensity of the Indian market, with its large consumer base and abundant resources, had been too enticing for the U.S. to resist. By the end of 1951, just 4 years after partition, the United States had greatly increased its exports into the country, while consequently diminishing Britain’s dominance. Over the next few years, the United States penetrated further into India, issuing extensive measures to

the December 1945 British support for U.S. proposals for the International Trade Organization to “oversee the elimination of discrimination in conjunction with reduction of trade barriers”.

52 “U.S. relations with India”, The Times, February 26, 1947, 4, col. C.
55 Yadav, India Divided 1947, 90. In the year 1948-49, the British had exported 1,530 million rupees worth of goods into India, with the United States at 1,087 million rupees, the former at 28.2 percent of total international imports, and the latter at 20.0. In four years, the British had fallen to 21.7 percent of the total, with the United States rising to 27.6. This is a 14 point swing in four just years!

49 Robert Skidelsky, “Imbalance of Power,” Foreign Policy, no. 129 (2002), 48. The Lend-Lease not only kept Great Britain in the war, but was used by the U.S. administration as a lever to pressure Britain to sign on to America’s plans of a new postwar world order.
51 Markwell, John Maynard Keynes, 233. British subservience to the U.S. can be seen in
prepare the ground for a future financial infiltration of the country. As a down-
payment for the war support, the steady growth of American influence was one of the many pressures that influenced the British decision on the “Indian question”.57

In addition to the new economic pressure from the U.S., Britain had received sharp criticism from the international community over its handling of the India situation. One Russian article, commenting on the failures of the Cabinet Mission, described the British role as “a Power striving against an India national movement...[that] the sinister shadow of British imperialism [was] banking on a deadlock... [making] a dead letter of all British plans to withdraw from India.”58 Earlier in the year, some United States politicians had made the same accusations59. Britain was very defensive in its responses to these accusations,60 for, with its own colony in disarray, it was equally important for the British not only to maintain peace, but to protect its global image. To promote its image of goodwill, The Times often discusses how British actions revealed the “true” sincerity of the Government: “The fact that we were sending a mission of Cabinet rank, carrying the highest authority, was a high proof of the sincerity of our desire that India should take her rightful place, for her own sake and the sake of mankind.”61 Moreover, when the British were criticized for their decision on February 20, to abandon India, a correspondent in Delhi noted that “The fact remains that the Labour Government, by setting a date for the transfer of power to the Indians, have left India and the world in no doubt about the sincerity of their actions.”62 Arguably, this last quotation illustrates how Britain’s desire to prove its good nature to the world had pressured it into acquiescing its greatest possession. It is clear that, through all the previous examples, what ultimately pushed India’s independence were not the legitimate concerns of the British for their Indian brethren, but rather Britain’s own selfish motives.

Though they stressed the new political independence they had acquiesced, Britain was able to retain an economic influence within the country. Mr. G. Nicholson, a member of the ten-man delegation sent to India in February 1946, believed that, despite its independence, a British presence would remain within the country: “The links between the two countries were so strongly rooted that he believed that they would never be severed.”63 Because the British had been so

56 Yadav, India Divided 1947, 90-91.
58 “British Role in India”, The Times, October 22, 1946, 3, col. C.
59 “India Statement in Both Houses”, The Times, May 17, 1946, 8, col. A.
61 “The Instrument of Decision for India”, The Times, March 16, 1946, 8, col. A.
63 “The Problem of India”, The Times, March 14, 1946, 2, col. B.
involved in the making of a new constitution, they remained entrenched in the Indian economy. British capitalists still held the main ownership of Indian coalmines, tea and rubber plantations, and oil deposits and refineries. Another British connection was the airline industry: “Viking would be the first modern air liner to go into service in India. It had not been selected because it was British but because it was the best for its purpose.” Just a few months later, air travel had greatly increased in India. In the year after the partition, British capital still constituted a main component in the control of Indian foreign trade and banking. It seems that the words of Mr. P. D. Saggi, the head of the Indian Nationals Overseas Congress, had ultimately come true: “While there were differences among his countrymen on whether India should remain within the British Commonwealth of Nations, there was no difference of opinion on that India...would remain...for a long time to come a great market for British goods.” For the time being, Britain’s economic interests had been saved.

It is not uncommon to blame the imperial powers for how they handled their “possessions”. In fact, many historians are quick to illustrate how colonial rule has created everlasting problems for many of today’s youngest nations. In light of the events of partition, Britain’s controversial decision-making, and its own views of its “great effort”, are more shameful and deserving of blame. After deciding to split the country into two separate pieces on such short notice, millions of Muslim and Hindus were forced to fell from India to Pakistan or vice versa. Almost immediately after the partition on August 15, 1947, problems with partition began to arise. Ultimately, over one million people died from the mass migration. Today, the effects of this British decision are still evident, as Muslims and Hindus continue to die in fighting over Kashmir. Though they would, at the time, have disagreed, words are never an excuse, and the British decisions in India would ultimately be some of the worst mistakes in the Government’s history.

64 Yadav, *India Divided* 1947, 86.
65 “Kardomah Limited (In Incorporated Under The Companies Act, 1862, A The Liverpool China and India Tea Company, Limited)”, *The Times*, June 16, 1947, 7, col. A. Profits in this company had increased almost 200% from 1940 to 1947.
66 “Vickers Viking For India”, *The Times*, August 09, 1946, 2, col. G.
67 “Air Travel in India”, *The Times*, October 2, 1946.
68 Yadav, *India Divided* 1947, 87. In June 1948, Britain continued to hold 85 percent of the foreign holdings of Indian Government securities, or 188 million pounds, and 72 percent of foreign business investment in India, with a market value of 282 million pounds, for a combined total of 470 million pounds, which represented one-quarter of total British overseas capital in 1948.

69 “Future Trade in India”, *The Times*, January 06, 1947, 4, col. E.
70 “India’s Peril”, *The Times*, August 30, 1947, 5, col. B.
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