



The Prime Minister as World Statesman

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Executive Summary

- The idea that a country's political leader should also be its prime negotiator is essentially a 20th century conception.
- Modern summitry was pioneered by Neville Chamberlain in 1938. It was made possible by air travel, made necessary by weapons of mass destruction, and made into household news by the mass media.
- Since the Cold War, the opportunities for decisive personal diplomacy have declined, even for US leaders. In the electronic age, communication takes place all the time without direct contact; summit meetings are mostly multilateral and institutionalized (G8 or European Council).
- Yet British prime ministers, like most national leaders, still aspire to be world statesmen – confident that they can make breakthroughs that are blocked lower down, sensing political dividends at home, and also relishing a change from the tedium of domestic politics.
- For would-be world statesmen, pointers from the past include trying to see the world from the other person's chair, watching your national stereotypes, working in tandem with your advisers, and playing it long.
- In general, history has something to offer policy in three ways:
 1. Case studies from the past that may ring bells for current leaders.
 2. A larger sense of process, beyond normal political short-termism.
 3. A mode of thought – thinking in time – applicable to all problems.

Introduction

'It is not easy to see how matters could be worsened by a parley at the summit.' Winston Churchill coined the term 'summit' in February 1950, during the dark days of the Cold War, but the practice of summitry is much older. Indeed it might seem to be almost immemorial, rooted in some form of primeval negotiation between tribal leaders. Yet, for much of recorded history, leaders have shied away from face-to-face encounters with their counterparts, for three main reasons:

- **Security:** journeying to meet another leader could be hazardous. You might be attacked en route or even at the meeting itself, as happened to John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy, in 1419 during France's civil wars, when he was cut down by the Dauphin's bodyguard as they parleyed on a bridge near Rouen.

- **Status:** in the pre-modern age, travel took a long time. If you journeyed three or four weeks to the court of a fellow leader this was a clear sign of your inferiority. Hence the attraction of meetings on the borders of the two powers – a practice continued during the Cold War by superpower summits in neutral capitals such as Geneva or Vienna.
- **Bureaucratization:** The development since the 16th century of professional diplomacy – resident ambassadors and specialist foreign ministries – also tended to marginalize leaders. Strong monarchs such as Frederick the Great or Napoleon still acted as their own foreign ministers but in the 19th century diplomacy was increasingly left to the diplomats. An exception might seem to be the Congress of Berlin in 1878, when Disraeli was acclaimed for his role in resolving the Russo-Turkish war, but the groundwork for the agreements was laid quietly in advance by his Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury.

The heyday of modern summitry, 1938 to 1991

Prime ministers and presidents really emerged on the world stage in the 20th century. The Paris peace conference of 1919 was a foretaste but, in my judgment, modern summitry was invented by Neville Chamberlain during the Czech crisis in September 1938 when he flew to Germany three times in a fortnight to confer with Hitler. Churchill called this 'the stupidest thing that has ever been done' but, once premier in 1940, he could not resist the same temptation, criss-crossing the world to parley with Roosevelt and Stalin. At their Teheran conference in 1943, when someone joked that the Big Three were like the Holy Trinity, Stalin said that Churchill must be the Holy Ghost because 'he flies around so much'.

Thus began the classical age of summitry, lasting roughly half a century from the late 1930s to the end of the Cold War. Modern summitry was made possible by air travel, made necessary by weapons of mass destruction and made into household news by the mass media.

- **Air travel:** Disraeli took four days to get to Berlin, whereas Chamberlain flew to Munich in four hours. During the Cold War jet aircraft made journeys even quicker. So technology opened up the prospect of political leaders being world statesmen while keeping a grip on events at home. Woodrow Wilson had signally failed to do this in the pre-air age while spending six months in Paris in 1919.
- **Weapons of mass destruction:** for Chamberlain the aeroplane was both an opportunity and a threat. If an aircraft could take him quickly to Germany, another aircraft could drop German bombs on London. This was the nightmare Chamberlain sought to avoid by meeting Hitler, a nightmare made even more lurid in the nuclear age. All the Cold War summits revolved around the arms race and the danger of a Third World War.
- **The mass media:** classical summitry flourished in the era of the newsreels and television, when the means of communication were controlled by a few major corporations often closely connected to the state. Even in the 'free-

market' USA, the three TV networks (ABC, NBC and CBS) were key conduits for images and ideas. Nixon's path-breaking visits to Beijing and Moscow in 1972 were 'prime-time' summits, geared to how everything would play on TV back home.

This era of classical summitry offered enormous opportunities for political leaders to represent themselves as world statesmen. In Churchillian vein, Harold Macmillan saw himself as broker between the superpowers, visiting Moscow and Washington. Margaret Thatcher took a similar line in the 1980s. But with such opportunities also came dangers. If summitry worked (or could be depicted as a success), then there were huge political payoffs – Macmillan's trip to Moscow helped win him the 1959 election – but when things went wrong at the summit, the costs could be enormous. Kennedy's disastrous meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961 prompted the Soviet leader to place missiles in Cuba and spurred Kennedy to try to retrieve his credibility by drawing a line in Vietnam.

The changing character of summitry since the Cold War

Since the end of the Cold War, these three conditions for summitry have been much less applicable. Consequently, the scope for political leaders to act as world statesmen has changed significantly.

- **Communications:** in the days of Chamberlain and Churchill, air travel was the main way to talk with foreign leaders. Churchill spoke with Roosevelt a few times on the telephone; Macmillan used it more often with John F. Kennedy but the phone remained a supplement to their personal meetings. The last two decades, however, have seen a revolution in telecommunications. Leaders can now talk with their counterparts as much as they wish on mobile phones, while e-mails facilitate instant written communication. In this network of perpetual contact, face-to-face meetings are less necessary.
- **Threats:** WMD are still with us, but the nature of the threat has changed. In the Cold War, a few countries – notably the superpowers – controlled most of the world's weapons of mass destruction. If there was agreement between those few key players, then the world seemed relatively stable. Now WMD have proliferated, especially in Asia and the Middle East; they have also been miniaturized, so that small-scale terrorist groups have the potential to inflict massive damage on civilian populations. For a would-be world statesman in the Cold War, there were a few places that mattered, notably Washington and Moscow, but that is less true today.
- **The media:** today, the mass media has become far more individuated. Instead of being tied to a few key newspapers or TV channels, people now derive their news and information from a multitude of sources, thanks to the cable and satellite revolutions and, even more, to the internet, with its democratic or, at least, demotic character. Consequently, the wannabe world statesman has a harder job ensuring that his achievements are recognized, both at home and abroad.

I am not talking here of a total sea-change. Leaders still feel an indispensable need to talk face-to-face; a few capitals, notably Washington, retain disproportionate weight in world politics; and when a prime minister visits the White House he can be sure to grab the headlines (at least in Britain). But the conditions for high-profile, high-impact summity have been eroded, and that should be recognized. Moreover, much modern summity is now **institutional not personal**, in other words meetings of several leaders conducted within the framework of the G8 or the European Council.

'Lessons' from history

Given these changing circumstances, the 'lessons' one can draw from classical summity may be of limited utility to a would-be world statesman. Nevertheless, I believe some come suggestions can be made. I have developed these more fully in my book *Summits* (pp. 397-402) from which some of the case studies are taken. Here are few big themes.

1. **Know the Other.** Try to understand your opposite number as a person. Trite to say, but hard to do. For instance, Kennedy knew before his Vienna meeting that Khrushchev considered him to be young and inexperienced. What none of JFK's briefing papers told him that his own date of birth (1917) was the same as that of Khrushchev's eldest son, Leonid. What's more Leonid had been a decadent womanizer for much of his youth (exactly what KGB reports were saying about Kennedy). I think Khrushchev, in effect, saw his own son across the table at Vienna and could not take Kennedy seriously. Had Kennedy realized this, he might have accepted State Department advice not to meet at the summit until he had proved himself as President.
2. **Think politics.** You do this all the time at home. All policy initiatives are calculated with one eye on domestic political impact and you will go into any diplomatic meeting with the same concern. But also try to understand your opposite number's political needs. In 1962 Kennedy OK'd the Pentagon's decision on cost grounds to cancel the Skybolt missile project. Only after this caused an Anglo-American crisis did he realize that he'd failed to appreciate Skybolt's political significance for Macmillan, as the basis of the PM's claims that Britain was still a nuclear power.
3. **Beware nods and winks.** Politicians are adept at giving their listeners the impression of agreement, or at least sympathy. That's one reason why they get to the top. As statesmen, however, they are often slow to realize when that is being done to them – Tony Blair's meetings with George Bush in the run-up to the Iraq War being a case in point. Blair desperately wanted U.S. support on issues such as Palestine to help with opinion back home. According to one official, 'Bush listens politely, agrees that the points being made are good. He says things like: "I'll do what I can." As soon as Tony is in the air on the way back home Bush forgets the conversation and we know he has forgotten. There have been several moments when Tony really felt Bush had got it. Tony would say things like: "We are really on the same page. Bush has finally clicked." Then a few hours later soberness would set in and he would realise he hadn't.'

4. **Watch your stereotypes.** Once promoted to ministerial level, politicians hold a variety of portfolios in rapid succession. They need to be quick learners and many of them prove to be. But foreign relations are usually a venture into the unknown, even for experienced ex-ministers, and many recent premiers have not been Foreign Secretary. Although the necessary information can be absorbed, many would-be world statesmen process it through simplified, even crude, images of other countries derived from popular culture or early personal experience. Margaret Thatcher's suspicion of Germany was rooted in World War Two. After one meeting with Helmut Kohl, she got into the plane home, kicked off her shoes and groaned, 'He's so *German*.'
5. **Pace yourself.** To a surprising degree, veteran politicians behave like schoolboys in a chocolate shop when they get to the summit – carried away by their excitement. But that adrenalin rush at the start won't last; jet lag and probably delhi-belly will set in (remember George H. W. Bush throwing up over the Japanese premier on live TV in 1992?). International meetings tax mind and body, yet you have to stay physically and mentally alert all through. At the summit, the tortoise may well outperform the hare – as Menachem Begin showed at Camp David in 1978.
6. **Cultivate teamwork.** A wannabe world statesman usually believes he alone can make the breakthrough and naturally craves the credit himself. But marginalizing specialist advisers is usually a recipe for disaster (Chamberlain in 1938, Eden in 1956, Blair in 2003). A successful world statesman is likely to be in creative tension with his advisers. Sometimes he keeps them at arms length to build personal relations with his opposite number; but he needs their expertise to avoid egregious errors and to craft watertight agreements. Reagan developed just such a creative partnership with George Shultz and the State Department and it helped to bring the Cold War to a peaceful end.
7. **Play it long.** Dramatic one-off interventions rarely pay off, either diplomatically or politically – the statesman as *deus ex machina*. Better to work persistently and with your team on a few significant projects, even if they don't promise quick results. The efforts by John Major, Tony Blair and their advisers on Northern Ireland are an example (the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998).

History and policy

What, more generally, can history 'teach' policy? To pose the question that way is rather presumptuous. Most academic historians know little about the current *modus operandi* of government departments; few of them comprehend the torrential rush of events, which drowns all chance of reflection, or the ferocious glare of the media, which turns almost every issue into a matter of spin. So any suggestions must be offered with due humility.

That said, here are two ways in which I believe the work of diplomatic historians has something to offer policymakers:

- **Case studies** from the past that may ring bells for current leaders.
- **A larger sense of process**, beyond the short-termism of normal politics.

Using historical moles. I would also suggest a more indirect role for history. It is now commonplace for departments to appoint scientific advisers, to alert ministers and officials to the scientific facets of current problems. A few departments already have in-house historians, notably the FCO. But many senior civil servants, even some top-level politicians, have been trained as historians, at least at the undergraduate level. I suggest that ministers make more use of their historically trained advisers and that these advisers tout their expertise more vigorously. They are useful historical moles, already in place and familiar with the workings of Whitehall.

Thinking in time. History is popularly seen as a body of information – ‘facts’ about the past. But I believe it is essentially a way of thinking – thinking in time, taking seriously the temporal dimension of human existence. Policymakers, under relentless pressure for instant decisions, tend to ask ‘**What’s the problem?**’ in the hope that they can then come up with quick answers. The historian’s approach is first to ask ‘**What’s the story?**’ – meaning how did we get into this mess? Tracing the way in may help point the way out. Getting the story right takes time, of course – perhaps more time than a busy PM feels he has at his disposal – but the result can be much better policies.

Some further reading

- Cyril Buffet and Beatrice Heuser, eds, *Haunted by History: Myths in International Relations* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1998).
- David H. Dunn, ed., *Diplomacy at the Highest Level: The Evolution of International Summits* (London: Macmillan, 1996)
- Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1986).
- David Reynolds, *Summits: Six Meetings That Shaped the Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin 2007).
- Hannah Slavik, ed., *Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy* (Malta: DiploFoundation, 2004).

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