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The Federation persuasion: Identity, sovereignty, and decolonisation in the Indies East and West

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Abstract

Postwar decolonisation in the global South sparked a range of political imaginaries and experiments in postcolonial governance. Among the most prominent and least understood of the roads not ultimately taken was that of federation. The federal model seemed to offer something to almost everyone—Cold War hegemony, metropolitan officials, anticolonial nationalists, ‘pan-’ racial visionaries—and a dozen such unions were proposed or attempted after 1945. Yet almost none lasted even a decade before shrinking or collapsing. Their demise, despite occurring at the height of the Cold War, had little or nothing to do with that conflict. Rather, the concurrent rise and fall of two such unions—the West Indies Federation and Malaysia—demonstrates that they succumbed to a number of fatal flaws, above all one that connects this decolonisation story to the long territorial-imperial era preceding it: the centrifugal force of the ethnopolitical identities embedded within them.

Keywords: decolonisation; federation; empire; Cold War

‘[For] many Europeans’, a French journalist noted a few years after the First World War, ‘present-day nationalism is nothing more than seventeenth-century feudalism . . . [It] must be crushed, just as feudalism was crushed.’¹ This seemed common-enough sense amid the rubble and horrors that European hyper-nationalism had wrought. But as prediction it looks in retrospect near-perfectly wrong. Far from ending in European ashes, the strange career of the nation-state, proceeding recognisably but unevenly since the eighteenth century, soon resumed its worldwide ascent. The construction of the nation-state vessel, roughly 200 times over 200-plus years but especially in those three decades of decolonisation after 1945, saw numberless collisions of identity, ideology, and interest in the pursuit of Wilsonian ‘self-determination’ and postcolonial territorial sovereignty.² These collisions sparked a lively and long-running scholarly debate, but the ultimate triumph of the nation-state model had until recently largely obscured what Michael Collins coins the ‘federal moment’: the postwar rise and fall of what might be called the federation persuasion, offering alternatives to the singular-national units that ended up filling the atlas. As Manu Goswami, Cemil Aydin, Pankaj Mishra, Fred Cooper, Gary Wilder, and others have shown, while the unitary nation-state ultimately became the norm, its rise did not preclude various actors from imagining alternate scenarios out of empire, from among what Goswami calls ‘an open-ended constellation of contending political futures’. Cooper concurs on the importance of ‘freeing

¹De Vogue to Laguerre, attached to C. D. Jackson to Laguerre, 18 January 1949, folder ‘de Vogue, Robert’, Box 47, C. D. Jackson Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS.

²Bradley Simpson, *The First Right: Self-Determination and the Transformation of International Order* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2025).

ourselves from the presumed normality of the nation-state form’ as this reveals ‘the political units . . . imagined and constructed at different points in history’.³

As scholarly investigations into this moment have proceeded, three of its features are particularly striking—and all raise questions about the actual potential and deeper meaning of the ‘federal moment’. One feature is the sheer range of these projects and imaginaries: regionalist, confessional, racial/ethnic, ethnolinguistic, geographic, technocratic, developmentalist, and other schema. Some harked back to earlier iterations of political collectivity whether top-down or bottom-up in nature, which handed down the language used by postwar reformers and technocrats. That language is and was slippery, but a rough taxonomy includes three main genera: commonwealth (loose affiliation entailing optional cooperation and no shared constitution); confederation (constitution optional but some form of coordination presumed); and federation (closer union under a constitution distributing shared powers of government). The interwar years, especially the colonial crises of the 1930s, had brought the federal idea along with the rest of the taxonomy into favour amid a flurry of pan-, regional-, and even world-scale imaginaries as possible solutions to the deepening economic and political problems of world depression and wavering empires. This turn toward globalist thinking and cooperative politics attracted support at both ends of the metropole-colony axis, as Or Rosenboim, Mark Mazower, and Wilder have recently shown.⁴ Moreover, the model frequently rhymed with the romantic, identity-inflected hymns of nationhood as thinkers from Woodrow Wilson to Vladimir Lenin to Mohandas Gandhi to Marcus Garvey to Aimé Césaire grappled with the relationship between ‘race’, autonomy, and nation along lines distinct from those of the imperial West.⁵ Cooper and Wilder note both the fluidity of these terms and the breadth of these imaginaries, as French-empire figures like Léopold Senghor echoed early twentieth-century British Empire predecessors like Casely Hayford: ‘for Senghor, federalism . . . corresponded to a new epoch of world history’—an epoch of, in Adom Getachew’s phrase, ‘anticolonial worldmaking’.⁶

³Michael Collins, ‘Decolonisation and the “Federal Moment”’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 21–40; Manu Goswami, ‘Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms’, *American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (December 2012): 1431; Eva-Marie Muschik, ‘Managing the World: the United Nations, Decolonization, and the Strange Triumph of State Sovereignty in the 1950s and 1960s’, *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 1 (March 2018): 121–44; Frederick Cooper, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 40; Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (Columbia University Press, 2007); Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2012); Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton University Press, 2014); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Duke University Press, 2015); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴See the introductory chapter, ‘Federal Experiments’, for an early comprehensive treatment of federations: R. L. Watts, *New Federations: Experiments in the Commonwealth* (Oxford University Press, 1966). On the spread of ‘federalist’ sentiment, for example, a 1942 Indian National Congress resolution declared that ‘the problems of the modern world . . . demand a world federation’. Gandhi quoting INC Resolution, cited in Ryan Irwin, ‘Imagining Nation, State, and Order in the Mid-Twentieth Century’, *Kronos* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 91. On the broader rise of cooperativism along federated lines, see Wilder, *Freedom Time*; Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton University Press, 2017); Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The Rise and Fall of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (Penguin, 2012); Talbot Imlay, *Clarence Streit and 20th-Century American Internationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁵As Partha Chatterjee argues, ‘the most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a *difference* with the “modular” forms of the national society propagated by the modern West’. Chatterjee, ‘Whose Imagined Community?’, in *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 26. Michael Goebel concurs, noting that ‘the mutual complementarity of national and pan-national imaginations had been an integral part of anti-imperial visions of world order from long before World War II’. Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 20.

⁶‘Democratic federation’, for Senghor, ‘would create a civilization for a new era of human history’. Wilder, *Freedom Time*, 156–7. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

However, the second, and related, feature of the ‘federal moment’ is the unevenly understood array of subcategories that grew from these visions. Among the better-studied are those referenced above by Cooper et al.: the mostly French Empire visions of unions that integrated the imperial centre and broadened its core ‘national’ identity. These produced ‘a range of alternatives, including forms of federal or confederal institutions that balanced . . . desires for autonomy and cultural expression with an interest in participating in a wider ensemble that in some sense remained French’.⁷ Although such hopes were ultimately dashed, these explorations of alternatives to the nation-state model do suggest its contingency rather than its foreordained triumph. However, these have in the literature tended to overshadow the more numerous federation projects—largely but not exclusively in the British Empire—that did not encompass the imperial centre, and were not alternatives to the ‘nation-state’ but rather a pluralistic variation on it. Moreover, several of these actually, albeit briefly, came to pass before their hopes, like those of their French Empire counterparts, were similarly dashed. By mid-century, such federations had become a popular vehicle for late- and postcolonial transitions.⁸ The model diffused power among levels of government and geographical regions to balance internal interests, offering in the words of Jane Burbank and Cooper ‘a layered form of sovereignty’.⁹ The more ambitious of these sought not just a viable constitutional architecture in a defined aggregate space but a newly cast inclusive national identity as well—an attempt, as it were, to create a multi-ethnic ‘nation’ and a multi-level ‘state’ in a multi-unit territory simultaneously. In most such British Empire experiments, the federation model married metropolitan *realpolitik* and elite-nationalist romance; it offered stability to the allied American hegemon; continued influence, economic advantage, administrative practicality, and in some cases a means of delaying decolonisation to the metropolises; the potential for planned development and economic viability to local elites; and an expression of solidarity for proponents of class-based and pan-racial ideologies alike. For proponents of varying stripes, the combination could be well-nigh intoxicating. The model’s panacean indeterminacy allowed all parties to see in it what they wished.¹⁰

The third and perhaps most significant feature of the postwar ‘federal moment’ is the stark brevity of its shared arc. The integrative-expansive French Empire projects and the standalone-regional British Empire projects virtually all met the same quick fate in the same short span—so much so that in retrospect it is fair to question the power of these projects to have forged an alternate present.¹¹ Despite widespread support and comforting promise, most federations did not last even a decade in their original forms, and in some cases neither launched nor lasted in any form at all, the ‘moment’ ending as sharply as it had arisen. More than a dozen collectivities of various kinds were proposed, designed, or launched in the two decades after 1945, in most of the retreating European empires, a handful of

⁷Cooper, *Citizenship*. On the flow of these ideas across linguistic, cultural, and imperial barriers, see Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁸The British Empire alone attempted six; a dozen others were sketched and/or created in the French and Dutch empires, and in post-colonial areas, between the 1940s and 1960s. Watts, *New Federations*, 3–5. Portugal was a partial outlier, amending its constitution to declare its overseas colonies ‘provincias ultramarinas’ but within a unitary as opposed to a federated state.

⁹Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 10. See also Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafica, Afroasia* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

¹⁰Many proponents voiced scepticism about metropolitan-sponsored federation projects, even as they supported in principle the notion of cooperating along various ‘pan’ lines. See Talbot Imlay, ‘International Socialism and Decolonization during the 1950s: Competing Rights and the Postcolonial Order’, *American Historical Review* 118, no. 4 (October 2013): 1105–32; Anne-Isabelle Richard, ‘The Limits of Solidarity: Europeanism, Anticolonialism, and Socialism at the Congress of the Peoples of Europe, Asia, and Africa in Puteaux, 1948’, *European Review of History* 21, no. 4 (December 2014): 519–37; Cindy Ewing, ‘“With a Minimum of Bitterness”: Decolonization, the Right to Self-Determination, and the Arab-Asian Group’, *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 2 (July 2022): 254–71.

¹¹See the critiques of Cooper in, e.g., Samuel Moyn, ‘Fantasies of Federalism’, *Dissent* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 145–51; and Richard Drayton, ‘Federal Utopias and the Realities of Imperial Power’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 37, no. 2 (August 2017): 401–6.

newly independent states, and Europe itself. The roster includes the Central African Federation, the United Arab Republic, the Mali Federation, ‘Eurafrique’, India, Nigeria, the European Economic Community, the French Union, and the Dutch and British Commonwealths.¹² Those federations that did survive in anything resembling their original design did so only by retaining either their map or their constitution—but not both—or by enduring coercive state-power, civil war, or revolution.

The collective failure of these short-lived attempts to align juridical sovereignty with pluralist politics in vehicles for decolonisation raises many questions. The intuitive answers on offer—ideological clash, geographic realities, misguided strategies, economic incompatibilities, legal-constitutional obstacles—fail to satisfy. A comparison of two British Empire entities suggests a compelling explanation, illuminating the larger phenomenon of the federation projects’ rise and fall—and with it the bewildering variety and capaciousness of mid-century ‘federalist’ thought, by turns redefining the metropole, sustaining metropolitan influence after decolonisation, consolidating postcolonial power, or manifesting a cooperative identity, and in all cases redrawing the map. The two unions examined here reached to the opposite ends of the earth, from the West to the East Indies: the West Indies Federation (WIF) and the Malaysia Federation. Both the WIF and Malaysia housed a region-specific British need for a stable and gradual transition to independence, and for the retention of security assets and political influence afterwards. Both also stirred the passions of pan-racial activists who had long contemplated what it meant to be non-white in an imperialised world, and who saw in federation a vessel for their visions. Both federations engaged the close attention of the United States for geostrategic-*cum*-ideological reasons, since each resided in a sensitive Cold War neighbourhood. Local and colonial sources are crucial to telling the story of any given federation-case in depth. However, notwithstanding their ideological and imperial limitations, more accessible American and British archives offer a valuable bird’s-eye perspective, comparative and contemporary, on the broader federation phenomenon as it unfolded at various locales in real time. Finally, the juxtaposition of these two particular federations, in their vastly different regional and cultural contexts, traces the abrupt parabola that they and most constituents of the postwar ‘federal moment’ shared. The story evokes a longer-running theme in post-Westphalian global history: the quest to reconcile identity, pluralism, and autonomy within stable polities, for which the inherited models of the long territorial-imperial era proved ill-suited to an emerging world of self-determining nation-states. The federations’ fates, notwithstanding the best-laid plans of metropolitan technocrats, nationalist elites, and pluralism enthusiasts alike, were ultimately decided by centrifugal dynamics of ethnopolitical identity and insularity that their newfound ersatz collectivities could not contain.

‘Warning from the West Indies’: ‘Islandism’ and federation in the British Caribbean

The idea of federation had surfaced intermittently for nearly as long as the British Empire had existed. Long before London entertained thoughts of decolonisation, officials occasionally talked of applying the federation model, for administrative convenience. Their imperial peer-rivals had done so on contemporaneous occasion, as in Paris’s construction of the federated colony of French West Africa in 1895.¹³ But in the British Empire, the proposition tended to run aground on local elites jealously guarding their autonomy.¹⁴ Despite London’s occasional enthusiasm, and despite the examples of mostly successful nineteenth-century federations in North America and

¹²This roster itself demonstrates the fluidity of federal experiments. For example, the 1935 Government of India Act created a federation that its British sponsors hoped, to no avail, would avoid partition—but its 1947 successor states of India and Pakistan each drafted ‘federal’ constitutions in its wake. Nigeria in 1954 replaced its nominally unitary structure with what Watts calls ‘an orthodox federal constitution’, later amended for independence in 1960. Watts, *New Federations*, 3–4, 17–18, 29.

¹³Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford University Press, 1997).

¹⁴In the seventeenth-century West Indies, for example, a federation of sorts was proposed as a common defence against piracy. Elisabeth Wallace, *The British Caribbean: From the Decline of Colonialism to the End of Federation* (University of Toronto Press, 1977), 86.

Australia, and of a 'white dominions' proto-Commonwealth, the idea of formal consolidation gained little ground until after the First World War. The League of Nations mandate system showcased the virtues of consolidation, and colonial activists—especially veterans back home from Europe—increasingly sought reform, on behalf of ethnopolities disfavoured under the League regime.¹⁵ Yet the prospect of eventual federation in the non-white areas of the empire was embryonic at best. The remaining empires were at their geographic apogee and their sentinels saw federation talk for the most part as idle musings.

The chaos of the 1930s lent the idea new respectability. The Great Depression brought the metropolises near to insolvency, and their unprofitable colonies thus became, in Disraeli's phrase, 'millstones' around the metropolitan neck. Reorganisation along federal lines offered a way to reduce the dependencies' burden on the imperial fisc. Day-to-day colonial life worsened during the Depression, fuelling labour and social unrest. This prompted a policy watershed: the acknowledgement, however conflicted, of a metropolitan duty to undertake colonial reform.¹⁶ Less tangibly, a succession of 'race' crises stirred consciousness among colonised peoples and diasporas. The echoes of the brief 'Wilsonian Moment' after the First World War, and its consonance with Lenin's call for self-determination; the stirrings of Japanese assertion of an Asia ruled by Asians; the drawing of the Sykes-Picot, Sevres, and other lines across the Arab 'nation'; and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia galvanised intellectuals from W. E. B. DuBois to Sayid Qutb, and sparked new thinking about how to awaken and fuse non-white and colonised peoples.

Any one of these elements on its own might have introduced the federation concept into discussions of colonial reform. The financial burden of the non-profitable colonies, and the quickening of race-consciousness among Third World majorities and First World minorities alike, each pointed to federated notions of reorganisation. The endpoint of such reorganisation, it bears noting, was ambiguous. The first impetus did not necessarily entail independence. The second did not so much define a polity as dream one. Nonetheless, the combination assured that any discussions of the empire's future would sooner or later arrive at the idea of reorganising parts of it along federated lines. This would prove to be the case in varying ways across most European empires, pushed and pulled by fits and starts by metropolitan technocrats, colonial elites, and anticolonial nationalists. Hashing out the terms and meanings of federation's constituent parts—governance, identity, belonging, and autonomy—played out differently from one empire to another. Similarities and differences with, for example, the French story that Cooper, Wilder, et al. tell are vividly illustrated by the British Empire entities that subsequently appeared in the South and Caribbean Seas.

The bloody turmoil of the 1930s' Caribbean set a milestone in the region's history. A contemporary account declared it a 'warning from the West Indies' for the rest of the empire.¹⁷ Daily life in the colonies would have left Dickens speechless. Beginning in 1934, social and labour unrest became an annual and often violent event. Turmoil, riot, and suffering were nothing new in West Indian history, but two things set the 1930s unrest apart.¹⁸ One was its scale, encompassing the whole region and recurring over half a decade. The other was its coincidence with prevailing intellectual currents, above all the promotion of colonial reform and greater self-government by colonial actors, and the rise in race-consciousness across the African diaspora.¹⁹ The lot converged

¹⁵Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Glenford Howe, *Race, War, and Nationalism: A Social History of West Indians in the First World War* (University of the West Indies Press, 2002).

¹⁶See Part I of Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁷William Macmillan, *Warning from the West Indies: A Tract for Africa and the Empire* (Irwin, 1936).

¹⁸O. Nigel Bolland, *On the March: Labour Rebellions in the British Caribbean, 1934–1939* (James Currey Publishers, 1995).

¹⁹See Richard Hart, *Towards Decolonisation: Political, Labour and Economic Developments in Jamaica 1938–1945* (University of the West Indies Press, 1999); and Ken Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings: The Jamaican Labour Rebellion of 1938 and its Aftermath* (Springer, 1978).

in the writings of West Indians such as Marcus Garvey, Richard B. Moore, C. L. R. James, and George Padmore. Viewed from London, Kingston, and Harlem—and Paris and Washington—alike, the unrest was a Caribbean sea-change.

Its ultimate impact on the colonial regime, though, was unclear. Few called for immediate self-government; a Crown commission endorsed only limited reforms, envisioning instead ‘improved’ imperial rule.²⁰ African diasporan, and to a great extent American, opinion disagreed. The notion of federating the colonies was still mostly *sub rosa*, and vague at best. But Black intellectuals from Garvey to DuBois to Walter White to Ralph Bunche were rethinking the lines of race and reform in ways that favoured solidarity over insularity.²¹ The impact of the Second World War—especially the August 1941 Atlantic Charter—deepened their conviction. The war also permitted Washington to weigh in on Caribbean matters after the September 1940 Bases-for-Destroyers Deal, pressing in March 1941 for the creation of the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission (AACC) as an exercise in regional cooperation. The AACC was premised on the idea that regional problems transcended the national flags that flew over insular colonies, and should be addressed accordingly.²² The Commission exemplified inter-island cooperation, manifested a prototype of the federation idea concurrently being sketched by Black Atlantic voices, and would later officially promote the idea of regional union.²³ That idea existed symbiotically, if at some definitional level paradoxically, with the proto-nationalist sentiment then finding expression among island and diasporan elites. Some strains of this sentiment were insular to particular islands, but even many avatars of these felt this to be compatible with a region-wide solidarity. Historian Eric Duke traces the surging interest across the western-hemisphere Black diaspora in ‘nation-building as part of the broader struggle for self-determination and the liberation of black peoples’, such that a 1945 *Chicago Defender* poll found ‘95 percent of respondents believed it was time to establish a federation’.²⁴

The end of the war, and the ascension of a Labour government in Britain, helped to bring British policy more in line with these leanings. At a 1947 conference in Montego Bay, Colonial Secretary Arthur Creech-Jones announced the goal of a West Indies Federation as a vessel for the transition to eventual independence. From London’s point of view, the vessel would organise the transfer of power similar to the process then underway in South Asia, channel West Indian

²⁰The Moyne Commission’s findings guided the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940. See Cary Fraser, *Ambivalent Anticolonialism: The U.S. and the Genesis of West Indian Independence, 1940–1964* (Praeger, 1994), 42–9. See also Colonial Secretary to War Cabinet, 15 November 1944, CO 852/588/11/60303, The National Archives, London (hereafter, TNA); and U.S. Embassy-London to State Department, 8 March 1940, 844C.50/7, Central Decimal File (CDF) 1940–1944, Record Group 59: Department of State Records (RG 59), US National Archives, College Park, Maryland (hereafter, NARA).

²¹See Wilder, *Freedom Time*; Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2014); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2004); James Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and African, 1935–1961* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Cornell University Press, 1997); and Jason Parker, “‘Made-in-America Revolutions’? The “Black University” and the Decolonization of the Black Atlantic’, *Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (December 2009): 727–50.

²²Memorandum of Conversation, Taussig, Stockdale, et al., 18 April 1941, 844C.50/13, CDF 1940–1944, RG 59, NARA.

²³Taussig to FDR, 23 June 1942, FW 844.00/981/2, CDF 1940–1944, RG 59, NARA. See also Herbert Corkran, *Patterns of International Cooperation in the Caribbean* (Southern Methodist University Press, 1970); White to Hull, 23 April 1941, 811.34544/927, CDF 1940–1944, RG 59, NARA. One reason the Caribbean had such visibility as the ‘prototype’ was the presence of Taussig at discussions of colonial questions. William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941–1945* (Oxford University Press, 1978), 345, 435, 440–1; Speech, ‘Possibilities of West Indian Federation’, Rayford Logan, Division of Social Sciences of Howard University Graduate School, 24 June 1943, folder: ‘Speeches—June 21, 1943’, Box 166-23, Logan Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center (MSRC), Howard University. See also chapter 2 of Jason Parker, *Brother’s Keeper: The United States, Race, and Empire in the British Caribbean, 1937–1962* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁴Eric Duke, *Building a Nation: Caribbean Federation in the Black Diaspora* (University Press of Florida, 2015), 135.

nationalism in constructive ways, consolidate the colonies into a viable economic unit, and preserve a measure of British influence in the region. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) held a follow-up conference to Montego Bay in New York, endorsing the idea and confirming the interest of African American elites and West Indian expatriates.²⁵ A series of London conferences in the 1950s set up the timetable and structure of the union, coincident with similar conferences of like purpose for other British Empire areas entering transition and consolidation, such as central Africa. At its planned inauguration date of April 1958, the WIF would have internal sovereignty, with external relations to be handled by London until full independence in the 1960s. Some warning signs hinted that support was not unanimous. Domestic opposition could be found in Jamaica and Trinidad, the most populous and richest colonies.²⁶ In Jamaica, the mercurial Chief Minister and leader of the opposition Jamaican Labour Party (JLP), Alexander Bustamante, was by turns inclined against, lukewarm for, and stridently opposed to his island's participation in the WIF.²⁷ In Trinidad, the East Indian minority lacked such a larger-than-life figurehead, but expressed their concerns about being 'swallowed up' by the region-wide Black majority that the WIF would create.²⁸ In both islands, London could count on charismatic political leaders—above all Norman Manley (Jamaica) and Eric Williams (Trinidad)—who advocated federation. But the at-times opportunistic opposition, arguing that an ephemeral and expensive collective-regional nationalism would impede the gains that insular national independence could potentially bring, was consistent enough to give pause to anyone who saw the WIF as inevitable.²⁹

In retrospect, it is clear that this opposition turned on more than just popular politics. Rather, it reflected two basic uncertainties and one extraneous crisis. The two uncertainties—one structural, one sentimental—bedevilled all federation projects to greater or lesser degree. The structural problem was to design the constitutional architecture for a federation of between eight and twelve territories up to 1,500 miles apart.³⁰ The roster of potential members ran the gamut in terms of population, wealth, and resources. Finding a tax structure that would not overly burden the richer islands; delineating the rules of internal migration; and balancing federal versus unit powers all proved contentious. The sentimental problem centred on the challenge of creating a West Indian identity to supersede insular ones. Such an identity existed more in the writings of diasporic intellectuals—even as many of them disagreed on the desirability of federation—than on the ground in the colonies.³¹ Finally, the extraneous event—the Chaguaramas crisis, over Williams'

²⁵Trevor Munroe, *The Politics of Constitutional Decolonization: Jamaica 1944–62* (University of the West Indies Press, 1972), 118. On Montego Bay, see Fraser, *Ambivalent Anticolonialism*, 106–10. US Consulate-Kingston to State Department, 18 December 1945, 'Confidential Correspondence 1945', Box 5 (1945), Record Group 84—State Department Consular Post Records (RG 84): Kingston, NARA. See also Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 98. Harlem's support for federation was pronounced, and essential. Manley to Williams, 6 August 1947; Domingo to Manley, 25 August 1947; folder: 4/60/2B/12, Political/General Papers, Norman Manley Papers (NMP), Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town, Jamaica (hereafter, JA).

²⁶Manley privately acknowledged to Williams that building a viable federation would be 'a far harder fight with a far more doubtful outcome than I would care to admit in public'. Manley to Williams, 23 May 1946, folder: #114, Eric Williams Memorial Collection (EWMC), University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad (hereafter, UWISA).

²⁷For some, the federal idea was a diversion away from greater self-rule. Munroe, *Decolonization*, 118–21. By 1950, for example, Manley had already lost support from some who thought his pro-federation position impeached the sincerity of his *Jamaican* nationalism. McFarlane, 'The History of Self-Government in Jamaica', June 1950, MS 1893—Walter McFarlane Papers, National Library of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica.

²⁸Selwyn Ryan, *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago: A Study of Decolonization in Multiracial Society* (University of Toronto Press, 1972), 76.

²⁹The US hope was that despite early signs of weakness, a federation could check leftist advance. US Consulate-Port-of-Spain to State Department, 6 October 1952; US Embassy-London to State Department, 3 March 1952, 741E.00/3-352, CDF 1950–1954, RG 59, NARA.

³⁰Barbados Governor to CO, 30 July 1953, CO 1031/1082, TNA.

³¹See, for example, Richard B. Moore, 'Federation: West Indians in U.S. Look to Jamaica', *Daily Gleaner*, 26 June 1954; and the Trinidadian calypso 'For now that we have set up our Federation/The next step will be full Dominion/And then to take our place, our greatest ambition/In that galaxy of peoples, a Commonwealth nation', *New York Times*, 7 April 1957; US Consulate-

campaign to evict the US naval base from that site, in order to build the federal capital there—greatly complicated both internal and external relations before and during the WIF's first years. Variations on the two uncertainties beset virtually all contemporary federation projects then underway, and all parties involved watched their peer-experiments unfold in real time—whether French Empire counterparts giving up on federation's most expansive possibilities as Paris replaced the 'French Union' with *La Communauté*, or British Empire peers adjusting constitutions and timeframes for federal sovereignty.³²

Despite its difficulties, the federation remained to most elites concerned with the Caribbean, if not so in broad swathes of popular opinion, the least-bad vehicle for decolonisation. Getachew notes that for proponents like Williams, its import was larger still: 'federation offered an institutional structure through which postcolonial states could secure nondomination in the international sphere while realising self-government domestically'.³³ At its April 1958 launch, it contained ten islands in a loose structure that kept much sovereignty in insular hands, but gave tax and migration authority to a weak central government whose organisation favoured the smaller, poorer islands.³⁴ External relations remained the prerogative of London, although London's retreat and the American regional role could bring US and West Indian interests into conflict. The rise of anti-Americanism, and the communism that might follow it, around the Caribbean littoral gave Washington pause.³⁵ Only a month after the WIF's launch, Vice President Richard Nixon was mobbed in Caracas. Soon after, Fidel Castro's triumph in Cuba introduced an unknown variable into US assessments. As the 'American Lake' began looking more unstable, US interest in the WIF rose, which the Eisenhower administration increasingly viewed as a showcase of decolonisation done right, and a bulwark against Castroism.³⁶

However, within the WIF, the opposition had never faded away.³⁷ Bustamante blasted Manley on Jamaican membership in the federation on grounds of both cost and principle, but underlying these attacks was a valid worry.³⁸ In 1947, federation had been proposed as the road to self-rule for the whole of the West Indies. By 1960, it seemed to many Jamaicans more of a roadblock. Bustamante argued that Jamaica could and should 'go it alone' in order that the island not simply

Kingston to State Department, 7 December 1948, 'Confidential Correspondence 1948', Box 8 (1948), RG 84; Kingston, NARA; McDowall to NAACP, 27 October 1947, 'BWI 1940–1949', Box A155, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress. On nationalist intellectuals and federation, see Birte Timm, *Nationalists Abroad: The Jamaica Progressive League and the Foundations of Jamaican Independence* (Ian Randle, 2016); Duke, *Building a Nation*; and Colin Palmer, *Inward Yearnings: Jamaica's Journey to Nationhood* (University of the West Indies Press, 2016).

³²S. R. Ashton and David Killingray, eds., *British Documents on the End of Empire (BDEE)* Series B, Vol. 6—*The West Indies* (UKNA—Stationery Office, 1999), 64: Annex E. For broader coverage of the Chaguaramas crisis, see Colin Palmer, *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Fraser, *Ambivalent Anticolonialism*; John Mordecai, *The West Indies: The Federal Negotiations* (Allen & Unwin, 1968); Parker, *Brother's Keeper*; US Consulate-Kingston to State, 13 August 1957, 'Chaguaramas'; US Consulate-Port of Spain to State Department, 1 May 1958; Dulles to US Consulate-Kingston, 14 May 1958, 'Chaguaramas #2 1958', Box 1, Classified Records 1956–1958, RG 84; Kingston, DSR, NARA.

³³Getachew, *Worldmaking*, 139.

³⁴'We knew this, [but] it was a price we had to pay to get West Indian agreement.' Lennox-Boyd to Secretary of State/Commonwealth Relations, 5 November 1958, PREM 11/ 2880, TNA.

³⁵Minutes, State-JCS Meeting, 8 May 1959, folder: 1959, Box 1, State-JCS Meetings, RG 59, NARA; US Consulate-Port-of-Spain to State Department, 18 March 1959, folder: General 1959, Box 3, Classified Base Agreement Files 1941–61, RG 84; Port-of-Spain, NARA; Special NIE 100-3-59, 'Threats to the Stability of the US Military Facilities Position in the Caribbean and Brazil', in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* 1958–1960, Vol. V, 362–9.

³⁶Memorandum of Discussion at 437th Meeting of the NSC, 17 March 1960, in *FRUS* 1958–1960, Vol. V, 427–33; 'Situation and Prospects in the West Indies Federation', Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), 30 January 1961, 'American Republics 1960–61', Box 149, Records of Policy Planning Staff 1957–61, RG 59, NARA.

³⁷Williams told the US Consul General that 'he felt odds tipping slightly against . . . federation'. Telegram, US Consulate-Port-of-Spain to Secretary of State, 10 April 1961, folder: Jamaica January 1961–July 1962 – A, Box 123, National Security Council Files: Countries, John F. Kennedy Papers, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA (hereafter, JFKL).

³⁸US Consulate-Kingston to State Department, 23 August 1961, folder: Political Affairs 1961, Box 4, Classified Records 1959–62, RG 84; Kingston, NARA; Manley to Williams, 4 August 1961, '4/60/2A/19', Political Papers-Subjects, NMP, JA.

exchange subjection to London for subjection to Port-of-Spain. Bustamante's attacks forced Manley to agree to a September 1961 referendum on Jamaican participation in the WIF. The oppositions in some of the other islands had voiced similar misgivings, but none so loudly and demagogically as Bustamante—and none of the other islands except Trinidad could equal Jamaica's population, relative wealth, and influence. All parties pro- and con- knew that however Jamaica went, so too would go the Federation. Manley, and the US, British, and smaller-island officials quietly rooting for him, predicted an affirmative result.³⁹

The predictions proved wrong, as Jamaicans voted by a 54–46 margin to leave the WIF. Bustamante's crusade, drawing strength from genuine popular misgivings and sheer political opportunism, had handed him a victory and the Federation a defeat.⁴⁰ Shell-shocked Crown officials and colonial leaders set about trying to assemble a 'rump' union from the remaining territories.⁴¹ Trinidad, however, now found itself in the 'Jamaican' role—the largest and richest remaining island—and soon made the same choice, announcing in January 1962 that it too would be leaving. In August, Jamaica and Trinidad achieved independence. The would-be WIF was dissolved in April 1962; its remaining members proceeded haltingly to independence over the next decade.⁴²

The collapse of the WIF dashed all manner of plans. Island elites hoping to build a viable postcolonial state; dreamers seeking a vessel for collective identity of a class, regional, or racial stripe; metropolitan strategists hoping to prolong British influence after independence; and American officials banking on an anti-Castro bulwark all saw their efforts turn to dust. It was at least small consolation that the collapse was orderly and legitimate. Orderly, given the regional alternative of the Castro path; and legitimate, given that the Jamaican electorate had decided, for sound if debatable reasons and by a democratic if inconvenient process, that the costs of federation outweighed the benefits of solo independence. Historian Colin Palmer highlights the disconnect between Jamaican voters and pro-federation elites: the decade between Montego Bay and the WIF launch 'was a short time for the development of a West Indian consciousness. The discussions that took place occurred among the leaders and not with the people [whom] the referendum gave . . . the voice they never had in the making of the [WIF].'⁴³ A Trinidadian calypso captured the sense of betrayal felt in the bereft remaining islands: 'Don't behave like a blasted traitor/how the devil you mean you ain't federating no more?'⁴⁴

Most striking about the Jamaican voters' choice are its roots in insular identity. Historians blame an array of both internal and external factors for the referendum outcome, including what Duke calls the 'strong islandism' that surged in late-1950s Jamaica and Trinidad alike as key to the federation's collapse.⁴⁵ Bustamante had railed against the cost of union, its infringement of Jamaican sovereignty, its constitutional imbalances, and its unfair burdens. Yet given the referendum's margin, these might have been accommodated if voters had felt themselves as

³⁹US Embassy to US Consulates-Kingston/Port-of-Spain, 13 September 1961; US Consulate-Kingston to Secretary of State, 18 September 1961; US Consulate-Kingston to Secretary of State, 18 September 1961 (#2), Box 4, Classified Records 1959–62, RG 84: Kingston, NARA.

⁴⁰US Consulate-Kingston to Secretary of State, 27 September 1961, folder: (unlabelled), Box 4, Classified Records 1959–62, RG 84: Kingston, NARA. See also Ashton and Killingray, eds. *The West Indies*, 158.

⁴¹Report, 'Future of West Indies Federation in Doubt', prepared for Bundy, 25 September 1961, folder: West Indies, General 1/1/61–7/30/63, Box 204a, National Security Files: Countries, Papers of John F. Kennedy: Presidential Papers, JFKL; US Consulate-Kingston to Secretary of State, 29 September 1961, folder: (unlabelled), Box 4, Classified Records 1959–62, RG 84: Kingston, NARA. See also Ashton and Killingray, eds., *The West Indies*, 163.

⁴²Commissioner/Port-of-Spain to Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, 23 January 1962, folder: 10824-F-40/#7, Box 5398, RG 25 (Records of the Department of External Affairs), Canadian National Archives, Ottawa, Canada (hereafter, CNA); Commissioner to Under-Secretary of State, 21 April 1962, folder: 10824-F-40/#7, Box 5398, RG 25, CNA.

⁴³Palmer, *Inward Yearnings*, 182.

⁴⁴'Mighty Sparrow', in Gordon Rohlehr, 'A Scuffling of Islands: The Dream and Reality of Caribbean Unity in Poetry and Song', in Kenneth Hall and Myrtle Chuck-A-Sang, eds., *The Caribbean Integration Process: A People Centred Approach* (Ian Randle, 2007), 71–3.

⁴⁵Duke, *Building a Nation*, 246. See also Timm, *Nationalists Abroad*, 400–2.

‘West Indian’ as they did ‘Jamaican’. The fact that the former identity was essentially an abstraction invented recently by expatriate intellectuals residing abroad, while the latter was an everyday one lived by the populace at home for centuries, helped to seal the WIF’s fate. Lingering vestiges of broader British Empire identity had given way to an island consensus for independence—but the nature of that sentiment as reflected in the vote attached more to local-insularity than to regional-solidarity. To the chagrin of West Indian intellectuals, British and US officials, and pan-Africanists like Kwame Nkrumah watching from afar, the WIF’s fall suggested the difficulties of accommodating both collective identity and constitutional design in a context of decolonising self-rule. A despondent C. L. R. James wrote a friend that ‘the present crisis is the most desperate that the West Indies have faced since emancipation . . . The idea of a West Indian nation cannot dissolve.’⁴⁶ Nkrumah nonetheless pleaded to no avail with Manley, Williams, et al. to salvage the WIF for its symbolic importance: ‘the establishment of a powerful West Indian nation would substantially assist the efforts we are making in Africa to redeem Africa’s reputation in world affairs [and] people of African descent everywhere’.⁴⁷

The urge to merge? Communalism, nationalism and *merdeka* in Malaysia

A similar process a world away, in the East Indies, hoped for a happier result. As with the Caribbean, the war had called the future of the Malayan colonies into question. The fall of Singapore in February 1942 suggested, in the words of the Japanese liberators, the arrival of ‘Asia for the Asians’. The Japanese seemed especially well suited to play the part. Their 1905 victory over the Russians had marked, in Tim Harper’s phrase, ‘a global turning point. Where the unity and common purpose of the west had earlier seemed to cow Asian countries, Japan’s victory reversed this perspective.’⁴⁸ Their surge through Southeast Asia four decades later again catalysed both Asian nationalism and pan-Asianist thought in regional networks.⁴⁹ An anonymous Malayan poet living under the Japanese occupation captured this feeling in verse, no doubt to the occupiers’ liking: ‘The Malayan race/with Nippon’s help summon courage/To shout “long live the New Malaya”’.⁵⁰ The brutality of the occupation convinced many on both sides of the Johore-Singapore causeway that the actual translation was instead ‘Asia for the Japanese’. The conquering Japanese General Tomoyuki Yamashita conjured Asian unity—the ‘Great Spirit of Cosmocracy’—in addressing his captive Malayan audience, but his troops’ behaviour put pan-Asianism in bad odour at ground level.⁵¹ The wartime Japanese Empire nonetheless signalled that the peacetime British Empire, should it return, would not mean an eternal white-supremacy but a transitional regime.

Yet if the war invigorated nationalism across Asia, it also uncovered communal fault-lines within Asia.⁵² This was especially true in Malaya, where Malays, Chinese, and Indians lived in

⁴⁶James to LaCorbiniere, 23 October 1961, folder #105, Box 5, C. L. R. James Collection, UWISA.

⁴⁷Nkrumah to Manley, 8 June 1962, ‘4/60/2B/27’, Political/General Papers, NMP, JA.

⁴⁸Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Belknap Press, 2021), 33.

⁴⁹See, for example, Mohammed Hatta, ‘The Anti-Colonial Congress in Brussels in the Light of World History’, in *Portrait of a Patriot: Selected Writings by Mohammed Hatta* (Walter de Gruyter, 1972), 185–99. See also Paul Kratoska and Ben Baston, ‘Nationalism and Modern Reform’, in *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Volume 2: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 249–324. On regional networks, see Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). On Japan’s impact on Pan-Asianism, see Sven Saaler, ‘Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Overcoming the Nation, Creating a Region, Forging an Empire’, in *Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Colonialism, Regionalism, and Borders*, eds. S. Saaler and J. Victor Koschmann (Routledge, 2006), 1–33; and Prasenjit Duara, ‘The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism’, in *Nations under Siege: Globalization and Nationalism in Asia*, ed. Roy Starrs (Palgrave, 2002), 63–102.

⁵⁰Anonymous, published in *Semangan Asia*, March 1943, in Ahmad Kamal Abdullah et al., eds., *History of Modern Malay Literature*, vol. 2 (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 1992), 9.

⁵¹Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (Belknap Press, 2005), 206–19.

⁵²Meredith L. Weiss, ‘Contesting Race and Nation: Malay Dominance and Multiracial Coalitions in Malaysia’, in *Nations under Siege: Globalization and Nationalism in Asia*, ed. Roy Starrs (Palgrave, 2002), 200.

varying proportions and proximity. In most districts, Malays formed the majority, by up to four- or five-to-one. The exception was Chinese-majority Singapore. Peninsular society had historically sustained an interethnic *entente*, in which non-Malays lived under the Malay monarchy.⁵³ British rule had sought not to disturb this arrangement, working through the Muslim-Malay-dominated structure to run the multi-communal colonial regime. The Japanese occupation gravely damaged the *entente*. As part of their strategy for defeating the Chinese-led resistance, the Japanese favoured Malays over Chinese and promoted an ethnic Malayan identity that Japan believed it could ultimately isolate and dominate after the war. After the Japanese defeat, these wartime machinations sparked an explosion of interethnic tensions that would undo the Malayan Union—brokered by the returned British in 1946—two years after its birth.⁵⁴ This owed principally to the opposition of ethnic Malays, whose formation of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) under the leadership of Johore's Onn bin Jaafar helped prompt the British to create the Federation of Malaya in 1948.⁵⁵ The Federation was to remain under British protection for the decade-long transition to *merdeka* ('independence'). Its initial map included nine peninsular states plus the Straits Settlements of Penang and Malacca, and its prospects seemed as dubious at the start as the Union's had been. But even the loudest voices of resistance, like that of the Indonesian communist Tan Malaka, agreed in principle on its endpoint: 'On the ruins of this Malayan Union a "One Hundred Percent Independent *Merdeka*" must be erected.'⁵⁶

The British sought to overcome the communal strains of peninsular society via the creation of a multiracial 'national' identity able to undergird a stable, sovereign federation. This, in turn, was essential to constructing a federated bloc that could achieve London's 'ultimate objective': the preservation of British influence following the transfer of power.⁵⁷ Most Malayan nationalists shared this goal—albeit to varying degrees and for different reasons, namely as a vehicle for decolonisation, a means for defusing communal tensions, a tool for domestic political advantage, or a guarantor of Malay primacy—and in principle supported the British effort. The nationalist poet Dr. Burnhanuddin Al-Hetmy, rallied his countrymen and women of all stripes: 'On the ruins of Melaka fort/We build the soul of independence/Be united every race/Defend the rights of justice inherited.'⁵⁸ After the Second World War, even before the communal violence had died down, the restored British and awakened Malayan nationalists could envision the elements of the colonies' present and future transition. Here as in British Empire federations elsewhere, 'divide and rule' gave way to 'conjoin and leave'.

However, it was perhaps already too late. Anticolonial war in next-door Indonesia posed an implicit question to Malaya: if a hybrid national identity could be created, should it not serve the purpose of independence rather than of continued (if temporary) British rule? The question became more pointed after Indonesia won its independence in 1949, and Indonesian intrigues would play a key role in the formation of Malaysia a few years hence. More ominously, the 1948 launch of the Malayan Emergency—twelve years of guerilla war against insurgents who were overwhelmingly Chinese and communist—seemed a continuation of the wartime interethnic violence, overlaid with an ideological veneer. In hindsight, one might argue that this was both

⁵³Barbara Andaya and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 2nd edn. (University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 340–1.

⁵⁴See Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation, 1941–46* (National University of Singapore Press, 1983); Anna Belogurova, 'The Malayan Communist Party and the Malayan Chinese Association: Internationalism and Nationalism in Chinese Overseas Political Participation, c. 1920–1960', in *Decolonization and the Cold War: Negotiating Independence*, eds. Elisabeth Leake and Leslie James (Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁵⁵A. J. Stockwell, ed., *BDEE Series B, vol. 3 – Malaya* (1995), Part 1, 8, 19, 22. See also Yeo Kim Wah, 'The Anti-Federation Movement in Malaya, 1946–1948', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (1973): 31–51; and Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (Allen Lane, 2007), 213–14.

⁵⁶Quoted in Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, 217.

⁵⁷*BDEE: Series B, vol. 3 – Malaya*, Part 3, 346.

⁵⁸'Melaka Fort', Dr. Burnhanuddin al-Helmy, in Abdullah et al., eds., *History of Modern Malay Literature*, vol. 2, 22, cited in T. N. (Tim) Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13.

harbinger and accelerant of the clashes to come; the conflict made it simultaneously more urgent and less easy to plan the ten-year transition to federation.⁵⁹ While it stoked efforts to build a Malayan identity and state capable of fending off the guerillas, it also raised the prospect of an eventual ‘Greater Malaysia’ including Chinese-majority Singapore, whose residents uncomfortably resembled the guerillas behind the Emergency.⁶⁰

The Emergency backlit the negotiations over the *merdeka* constitution.⁶¹ If the Emergency’s violence, as Harper puts it, ‘condemned Malaya to communalism’, especially Malay versus Chinese and Muslim versus non-Muslim, it was not the only force fuelling antagonism.⁶² The constitution itself, seeking to overcome these tensions, enshrined some of them. The document specified Malay as the national language and Islam as the national religion.⁶³ For Malays, this was the minimum required. Malays feared that the new polyglot identity endangered the predominance that came with their population-majority, and would leave them just another ethnicity in ‘their’ own country. Non-Malay-Muslims resented the engraving of that predominance into the charter. Thus, as Harper concludes, ‘*merdeka* left a lot of unfinished business’. Principal among this was the notion that multiracialism would be written into the constitution less as an avowal of a truly-shared national identity than as a ‘business deal’.⁶⁴ Yet given the Emergency, it could hardly be otherwise. The violence was ostensibly ideological but practically communal. Neither the best official British efforts nor the sincerest good intentions of elite peninsular community leaders could be sure of overcoming it.⁶⁵

The August 1957 *merdeka* constitution established the independence of the Federation of Malaya, comprised of eleven peninsular states, even as the Emergency ground on. The Emergency was only one of the questions that the founding left unanswered. Another was the ultimate future of Singapore, which was set on the path to insular self-government. In some respects, Malaya’s prospects were good. Its products were in high demand, offering a sounder economy than most ex-colonies.⁶⁶ Its leaders, especially Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, were to London’s relief anti-communist and equivocal about the British Empire, unlike many of their firebrand counterparts around the Afro-Asian world.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, it was clear to British officials that these assets might not suffice. Communal tensions persisted, even within the Tunku’s multiracial Alliance Party whose majority had sharply eroded in an electorate riven by division between elites and masses, the emergence of the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, and a sevenfold increase in Chinese voters—portending to nearby observers that ‘the chances of the Malaysians maintaining their ascendancy over the long term are not considered good’.⁶⁸ These domestic uncertainties, in

⁵⁹US Embassy-Malaya to State Department, 1 May 1962, 797.00/5-162, Box 2199, CDF 1960–1963, RG 59, NARA; BDEE Series B, vol. 3 – *Malaya*, Part 1, 12; Part 2, 141, 218.

⁶⁰FRUS 1955–1957, Vol. XXII: Southeast Asia, 453. See also Danny Wong Tze Ken, ‘Malaysia during the Early Cold War Era: The War in Indochina and Malaya, 1946–1963’, in *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia*, eds. Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann (Stanford University Press, 2009), 258–74.

⁶¹BDEE Series B, vol. 3 – *Malaya*, Part 2, 143, 218; Part 3, 346.

⁶²Harper, *End of Empire*, 12.

⁶³A. J. Stockwell, ed., BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia* (2004), 124 (Annex B).

⁶⁴Harper, *End of Empire*, 340.

⁶⁵BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 71.

⁶⁶See A. J. Stockwell, ‘Malaysia: The Making of a Neo-Colony?’ *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 26, no. 2 (1998): 138–56.

⁶⁷BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 71, 144. See also ‘Malaysia’s Foreign Relations’, Canadian Embassy-Malaysia to Department of External Affairs, 19 January 1965, Lot Files 67D267, State Department General Records – Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs – Records Relating to Malaysia and Singapore 1963–66, Box 2, RG 59, NARA; and ‘Speech by Malayan Delegation’, Asian Peoples’ Anti-Communist League 3rd Annual Conference (Saigon), 27 March 1957, Cold War International History Project digital archive, accessed 17 December 2024, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/asian-peoples-anti-communist-league-third-annual-conference-speeches-and-reports>.

⁶⁸Commissioner to Under-Secretary of State, 20 February 1958, folder: 50397-40/#3, Box 5363 (Main Interim 197), RG 25, CNA; BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, lx. The Alliance Party convened three communal parties: UMNO, Malayan Chinese Association, and the Malayan Indian Congress.

combination with the prospect of external intrigues from Indonesia, threatened the twin goals of the Malaya Federation: preserving peninsular integrity and British influence. The Federation as constituted, in short, left important interests unprotected as the 1960s dawned.⁶⁹

These vulnerabilities overlapped in Singapore, but they would soon reach across the South China Sea to Borneo. Seen from London, these vulnerabilities were mainly of a security and ideological nature. But they were also intertwined with the communal issues shelved but not settled by the 1957 constitution. The British priority was to retain the base at Singapore. Nor was this uniquely a British concern, as the Malayan, Australian, and US governments—eyeing Indonesian designs and Indochinese developments—concurd.⁷⁰ Yet none counted the base as fully secure in a Chinese-majority Singapore that housed an unknown number of communists. Singapore had been left outside the Malayan Federation precisely because of its demographics, and their purported ideological sympathies. Integration, the Malaysians had warily argued, would mean the end of Malayan predominance, given the Chinese numbers. By contrast, British and Singaporean officials, above all Chief Minister Lee Kuan Yew, saw federation with the peninsula as inevitable and desirable.⁷¹ The city-state's postcolonial chances otherwise seemed slim. It depended on Malaya for markets, materials, and indeed for survival—not only for necessities like water but also strategically in the face of a hostile Indonesia. But given Malayan resistance to the idea of adding Singapore, officials set about doing what they could to insulate the island from radical politics that might endanger moderate leaders like Lee and British assets like the base.

In 1961, they found an unexpected ally, when the Tunku spoke publicly of the 'inevitability' of closer union. The Tunku's pronouncement put him in line with Lee across the causeway and with London, although he mistrusted Lee and proceeded cautiously.⁷² Lee had grown more supportive of federation in the face of a political challenge from the left; he believed that union would empower him to neutralise the challengers, or better yet, convince the departing British to do that dirty work themselves. Moreover, the regional environment now seemed propitious, as the unpredictable Sukarno appeared indifferent to the expansion of Malaya into areas still British-ruled. The lingering Indonesian threat appears to have been a key factor in changing the Tunku's stance against any merger that would include Singapore. But this change had unfolded only slowly and behind the scenes.⁷³ The Tunku's newfound public willingness to rethink his previous reluctance and consider merger made the summer of 1961 a 'window of opportunity'.⁷⁴

However, all parties intuited that the process of federation would face obstacles, and scratch wounds not quite healed. Even before negotiations began, the possible permutations of 'Malaysia' ran through the players' minds. The base-line option was to add Singapore to the peninsular federation, although this risked a threat of a Moebius-strip nature. Singapore's Chinese population included radicals who had begun to box in Lee's government—and whose brethren had, in many minds, sustained the Emergency.⁷⁵ It was far from certain that Lee would win out over what American observers called the 'Singapore Reds'—the restive leftist factions in his People's Action Party (PAP), which by summer's end would split off to form the Barisan Socialis

⁶⁹BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 29.

⁷⁰Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia, 1961–1965: Britain, the United States, and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 66; BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 157. Australia and New Zealand agreed, regarding regional security. Jones, *Conflict*, 147.

⁷¹BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 32, 33. See also Pingtijn Thum, *Nationalism and Decolonisation in Singapore: The Malayan Generation, 1953–1963* (Routledge, 2023).

⁷²BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 39. See also US Consulate General-Singapore to State Department, 2 June 1962, 746f.00/6-261, Box 1718, CDF 1960–1963, RG 59, NARA. He had earlier given British officials encouraging private signs. BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 22. Not all in London were on board; as Mohamed Noordin Sopiee notes, key British players in Whitehall and Borneo had yet to be persuaded. Mohamed Noordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation* (Universiti Malaya, 1974), 138–40, 147–9.

⁷³BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 10, 19.

⁷⁴Jones, *Conflict*, 70.

⁷⁵BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 133.

(Socialist Front)—even if federation gave him the tools to do so.⁷⁶ Moreover, even absent the communist presence, the Singapore Chinese numbered 1.3 million—meaning that integration with the peninsula would swing the demographics against Malays, whose 3.5 million would then roughly equal the federation-wide Chinese numbers. To Malays, adding Singapore thus meant adding a population potentially threatening *either* as an ideological/security menace, *or* as an ethnopolitical one independent of communism—and perhaps as both.⁷⁷

The obvious solution lay in a Malaysia that added more than just Singapore, and it was to be this prospect—the city-state plus Britain’s Borneo territories—that became the focus of negotiations in November 1961.⁷⁸ The Tunku required inclusion of the Borneo territories as a *sine qua non*, since this would secure a Malayan majority. Yet this solution brought its own problems. First, at least two of the territories had Chinese minorities. Their addition would still balance out Singapore, but the fears about their possible loyalties were the same as in the city-state. Second, the British were uneasy about the ‘readiness’ of the Borneo colonies to join Malaysia, given their ‘primitive’ state of political and economic development.⁷⁹ Third, the Borneo territories would risk friction with Indonesia, since they would share a land-border with that country which claimed 70% of the island. Nonetheless, if all these elements of the drawing-board ‘Malaysia’ bore various risks, they were still seen as preferable to the status quo, generating an internal momentum that made Malaysia seem a desirable end in itself.

Obstacles to that momentum appeared during the ‘design process’ between late 1961 and mid-1963. The biggest one, the struggle to define Malaysian citizenship, echoed contemporaneous dilemmas in the WIF and other federation experiments caught between local identity loyalties and putative membership in a new broader polity. The struggle had two main facets: how to acknowledge, balance, and delimit its ethno-communal components within ‘Malaysian-ness’, and whether such a pan-ethnic citizenry could then successfully be forged into a unified national identity. These questions haunted the proceedings. In November 1961, for example, Lee presented Singapore the terms of federation that the Tunku required—terms which entrenched hierarchy within the new polity, favouring ethnic-Malay ‘nationals’ over non-Malay ‘citizens’.⁸⁰ In a referendum the following September, Lee only secured approval of this ‘Malaysia’ by election chicanery, thereby artificially sustaining the momentum to federation.⁸¹ Other obstacles included the Brunei revolt of December 1962, which removed that sultanate from consideration for inclusion, and Indonesia’s declaration of *konfrontasi* (‘confrontation’) towards Malaya/Malaysia in January 1963. These and more technical issues complicated talks as the federation’s launch deadline of summer 1963 approached.⁸² Washington watched nervously, as what Kennedy had lauded as ‘a bastion of security in a vital part of the world’ seemed to shake with each tremor of the Malaya-Indonesia dispute.⁸³

⁷⁶S. R. Joey Long, *Safe for Decolonization: The Eisenhower Administration, Britain, and Singapore* (Kent State University Press, 2011), 186; Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 124.

⁷⁷‘Malaysia’, 26 April 1965, Lot Files 67D267, State Department General Records – Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs – Records re: Malaysia and Singapore 1963–66, Box 2, RG 59, NARA.

⁷⁸BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 73.

⁷⁹BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 31, 43, 91. The exception was Brunei, whose politics were reasonably stable and thus seen as more easily integrated into a federation.

⁸⁰Jones, *Conflict*, 77; Memorandum of Conversation, Baldwin and Ghazali, 31 October 1961, attached to US Embassy-Malaysia to State Department, 2 November 1961, 746f.00/11-261, Box 1719, CDF 1960–1963, RG 59, NARA; ‘The chief threats to the new Federation’, concluded the State Department, ‘will be communal antagonisms, easily aroused because of the ethnic diversity found in each of the component states’. *FRUS* 1961–1963, Vol. XXIII: Southeast Asia, 327.

⁸¹Memorandum Prepared for Senator Mansfield – ‘Malaysia’, undated (21 December 1962), 797.00/12-2162, Box 2200, CDF 1960–1963, RG 59, NARA.

⁸²J. A. C. Mackie, *Konfrontasi: The Indonesia-Malaysia Dispute, 1963–1966* (Kuala Lumpur, 1974), 124–6; BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 184, 185.

⁸³*Straits Times*, 29 December 1963, forwarded in US Embassy-Malaysia to State Department, 7 January 1964, POL 32-1 – Political Affairs & Relations – Indonesia-Malaysia, Box 2321, State Department Subject-Numeric File, RG 59, NARA.

Border skirmishes in the Borneo territories, and what he saw as British skulduggery behind the scenes, prodded Sukarno to persist in the *konfrontasi*.⁸⁴ He accused the Tunku of being a British stooge, and Malaysia of being proof that colonialism endured in Asia.⁸⁵ As Malaysia was inaugurated in September 1963, mobs in Indonesia rioted for days, burning the Malaysian and British embassies. The violence reminded all parties that tensions would persist—and hinted at future violence at home, given the communal fault-lines of Malaysia's population.⁸⁶ All this underlined a central irony of Malaysia's birth. An American observer noted that Malaysia had expected to emerge to regional cooperation and good feeling as the manifestation of the end of colonialism in Southeast Asia—but instead, its very existence was threatened by internal fissures and external antagonism.⁸⁷

Signs on both fronts throughout 1964 were discouraging, and pointed to an irresistible resolution. That summer, friction between Malays and Chinese in Singapore exploded into rioting. The riots also reflected the rift between peninsula and city-state, which could not find enough common ground to overcome communal bad-blood.⁸⁸ The existence on paper of a federation offered hope that something akin to national solidarity was possible. Blood, ash, and riot offered stronger evidence that it was not. The 'business deal' of Malaya's *merdeka* constitution could not accommodate Malaysia's expanded geography and altered demographics. After the violence, Lee in Singapore and the Tunku in Kuala Lumpur made lukewarm gestures of reconciliation to each other—and impassioned affirmations to their constituencies. By early 1965 it was clear that Malaysia as constituted would not survive. In September, Singapore departed the federation, producing 'Malaysia 2.0' of Malaya and the Borneo territories.⁸⁹ As Barbara and Leonard Andaya write, 'the threat of communal violence was apparently the crucial factor in the government's decision to separate Singapore from Malaysia.'⁹⁰ Thus did, and does, a Malaysian federation continue to exist—but not in the dimensions for which the idea had been first advanced, and not for the rationales originally cited by its British, Malayan, and Singaporean sponsors.

Conclusion

The vocabulary of the 'federation persuasion' during its mid-century vogue is disorientingly fluid—which is surely, in retrospect, a chief explanation of its appeal across the departing empires, the arriving new states, and Cold War superpowers alike. This conceptual language owed its parentage to diverse visionaries across the empires, and to metropolitan technocrats of varying

⁸⁴US Embassy-Malaysia to State Department, 6 November 1963; Barnett to Bell, 7 November 1963, POL – Political Affairs & Relations – Maphilindo, Box 3981, State Department Subject-Numeric File, RG 59, NARA; BDEE Series B, vol. 8 – *Malaysia*, 184, 185; Jones, *Conflict*, 172; Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Cavendish, 1998).

⁸⁵US Embassy-Sudan to State Department, 5 December 1963, POL 3 – Organizations & Alignments – Malaysia, Box 3977, State Department Subject-Numeric File, RG 59, NARA.

⁸⁶US Embassy-Japan to State Department, 3 December 1963, POL – Political Affairs & Relations – Maphilindo, Box 3981, State Department Subject-Numeric File, RG 59, NARA.

⁸⁷Willard Hanna, *The Formation of Malaysia: A New Factor in World Politics* (American Universities Field Staff, 1964), 244.

⁸⁸Memorandum of Conversation, Chye, Bundy, et al., 16 December 1964, POL 2 – General Reports & Strategies – Malaysia, Box 2450, State Department Subject-Numeric File, RG 59, NARA; Lau, *A Moment of Anguish*, 161–75; Memorandum of Conversation, Tunku et al., 17 September 1964, POL 2 – General Reports & Strategies – Malaysia, Box 2450, State Department Subject-Numeric File, RG 59, NARA.

⁸⁹Moore to Moscotti, 18 January 1965, Lot Files 67D267, State Department General Records – Records Relating to Malaysia and Singapore 1963–66, Box 2, RG 59, NARA; US Embassy-Malaysia to State Department, 14 August and 24 August 1965, POL 15 – Malaysia, Box 2455, State Department Subject-Numeric File, RG 59, NARA.

⁹⁰Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 288. Historians debate the post-independence persistence of these tensions, even as they distort scholars' understanding; Rachel Leow laments this 'thematic emphasis on the communalism of the recent past that has tended to dominate'; Rachel Leow, *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

rank and anonymity across the decades. In the interwar era, global North actors had envisioned its application up and down the scale: regionally, ‘Atlantically’, continentally, even globally. After the war, metropolitan officials and colonial elites sketched, often cooperatively, an array of federations as, respectively, vessels of influence and vehicles for decolonisation. Either of these sometimes cross-purposes could affect the speed of the federating process, as could the intervention of other actors. The appeal of the idea proved as wide as the careers of most federations proved short. Most postwar experiments in federation could claim at least the grudging support of the metropolises, key nationalist elites, colonial pluralities among non-elites, and one or both of the Cold War superpowers. All hoped that pluralistic polities could be created to sustain the new unions’ constitutional design through the transition to sovereign, viable, postcolonial independence. But the long British experience in ruling fractious communities from Belfast to Bangalore might have given pause. At a minimum, the Janus-like nature of ‘self-determination’—as expansive and slippery a phrase as anything in the ‘federation’ lexicon—meant that the same sentiment that toppled imperial rule in a planned federation could then undercut cooperation among the single-state former members.⁹¹

As the federal experiments went forward, most proceeded to meet similarly early ends as single-state units spun off from their assembled entities. As Burbank and Cooper remark, ‘by the late 1950s movements to remake or terminate colonial rule were finding that whatever new political forms’ like federations ‘they could imagine, the territorial state was what they could get. National imaginaries were as much a consequence as a prior condition of this dynamic.’⁹² As the federations’ failures cascaded amid political clashes and unrealised hopes, a door closed: ‘what was imaginable in 1946 but not in 1966 . . . were multiple alternates to empire that did not presume the end-point was the nation-state’.⁹³ Yet this framing overlooks those examples in which a federal-structured, freestanding, postcolonial nation-state was the goal all along—and which nonetheless came shortly to naught in ways strikingly similar to almost all such experimental collectivities of the era. Whether integrative as in the French Empire cases, or standalone as in the British and postcolonial iterations, everywhere the trajectory was largely the same. Additional research in global South archives is needed to further flesh out the internal dynamics of each federation case. Employing the present evidentiary base to study the two very disparate cases at hand, however, allows for some tentative conclusions about the factors that contributed to the broader arc they shared, and about the overarching meaning of the ‘federal moment’ in postwar history.

Ideology cannot be discounted as a factor, since both the West Indies and Malaysian federations found themselves centre-stage in regional theatres of the Cold War. Yet in neither case was ideology ultimately decisive in the union’s breakup, even as it intermittently infused local political battles with, by turns, centripetal or centrifugal force. Strategic concerns played perhaps a larger role in elite calculations at all three points of the colonial-metropolitan-superpower triangle. Yet the strategic factor can much better explain the origins of the federations than it can their demise. Their design made strategic sense on paper; their breakup made none. Geography—an influence traceable in the rhetoric of Bustamante and Lee—offers another potential explanation, since in both cases the breakup followed a waterline. But it is difficult to see this as dispositive, especially given the parallel arcs of contemporary unions that were geographically contiguous, such as the Central Africa Federation. The intellectual and political challenges of designing a constitutional federal structure loomed perhaps largest; striking and sustaining such balances is difficult in the best of circumstances. The ranges spanned by the parties—of member-units larger

⁹¹Self-determination [was] an enormously contested idea that could be appropriated—however cynically—for wildly different ends, from decolonization to pan-Asianism and Pan-Islamism, from the creation of a black belt state in the Southern United States, to a continent-straddling German empire.’ Simpson, *The First Right*, 43.

⁹²Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 414.

⁹³Cooper, *Africa in the World*, 64.

and smaller, richer and poorer, polyglot and homogenous, and ‘advanced’ or ‘backward’—would have challenged any Jamaican Jefferson or Malayan Madison drafting a structure that integrated parts to whole.

Even the apparently straightforward issue of federal citizenship proved difficult—and revealingly so. In the two federations, obstacles to political compromise and constitutional design were ultimately insurmountable because they grew from fundamental, unresolved questions of identity and power. This connects the diverse federation experiments laterally to one another, and backward in time to the ‘pan-’ visions of national and racial identity that had long helped to drive anticolonial nationalism. In so doing, they raised a question they could not fully answer, one that had lingered since Wilson, Lenin, DuBois, and others spoke grandly of ‘national self-determination’: who belongs to the nation, and what does it mean in sentiment and practice to do so? The question haunts the arc of the federation experiments, for when the moment of truth arrived, the answer was insular and particularistic rather than expansive and cosmopolitan. Whatever being ‘Malaysian’ or ‘West Indian’ meant to citizens of the two unions, it appears to have meant less than being Malayan or Chinese, or Jamaican or Indo-Trinidadian, within them. Popular scepticism within these ethnopolities about the necessity of federation to achieve independence helped to derail these projects. Self-identified ‘peoples’ proved reluctant to share a political house if they believed they could have one to themselves—especially if they came to see the shared house as an external imposition, or one that traded subjection from one ‘foreign’ power to another. The inability to accommodate and fuse these pre-existing identities into a new supra-national one suggests the limits of romantic, pan-racial visions of solidarity as successors of empire, and suggests the impossibility of metropolitan aspirations to preserve influence and stability long term via such inorganic entities, such as Frankenstein federations.

The federation persuasion broadly writ did leave its legacy here and there. CARICOM and the ‘Windies’ cricket team embody an approximation of the cooperative impulse underlying the WIF, as do Malaysia’s use of federalist structures in its governance, and its membership in ASEAN alongside Singapore.⁹⁴ Some technical ‘federations’, such as Yugoslavia, endured as long as centralised coercion could hold them together. Others, formed after the peak of the federal moment had passed, such as St. Kitts-Nevis and the United Arab Emirates, remain intact. Polities from Scotland to Spain have reorganised along federated lines, many thus far peacefully and successfully in the six decades since the ‘federal moment’. However, most of these fall short of the scale and ambition of that moment’s mid-century experiments. The highest-profile entity that has survived since that time, the European Union, has weathered successive shocks—to its currency, its demography, and thanks to Brexit, above all to its membership—as it has expanded its remit beyond the original modest design toward ‘ever-closer union’. The difficulties of this last-standing major postwar entity suggest another set of dynamics at work, connecting back to the West Indian and Malaysian denouements, and to the reverberations of decolonisation more broadly. What might be called ‘Wilsonian’ questions haunt the modern era—and preoccupy scholars’ own imaginaries. Historians’ recovery of the contingency of the postwar moment—of the imagined federal ‘roads not taken’ out of empire—hints tantalizingly at the plasticity of modern sovereignty-arrangements, and implies the prospect of transcending the default model of the nation-state. However, the picture is incomplete if it does not account for contemporaries like the WIF and Malaysia 1.0, whose experience argues otherwise—those attempted, standalone, pluralist federation experiments whose short lives met the same fate as the more expansive postwar imaginaries. As the world of modern nation-states continues to emerge from the long territorial-imperial era—struggling to reconcile historical wounds, geographic realities, and collective identities—these forgotten attempts at federated nation-statehood have as much significance for

⁹⁴Hilary Beckles, *The Development of West Indies Cricket: Vol. 1, The Age of Nationalism* (University of the West Indies Press, 2000); S. Rajaratnam, ‘ASEAN: The Way Ahead’, *The ASEAN Reader* (ISEAS, 1992).

understanding the history, and indeed the prehistory, of the twentieth-century atlas as for grasping the convolutions of the twenty-first.

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