Matthew Engel

That's the way it crumbles

The American Conquest of English

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Beyond living memory and before recording devices, it is not at all certain how people spoke and what words they used. The written language is only a guide. I have tried in this book to work out when, how and why American words might have entered the British vocabulary. This is an art not a science. And there will be honest errors. But I am certain that any words I have mistakenly categorised as American will be more than cancelled out by the Americanisms I have omitted.

I would be delighted to receive politely worded suggestions for amendments and additions at engel.england@gmail.com. Where appropriate, changes will be made in any subsequent editions.

In the text, words and phrases that went into common British use that I believe to have been minted in America are in ***bold italics***. Words that originated in Britain and were then re-imported from the US are marked in ***bold italics*** with a †. OED stands for the Oxford English Dictionary.

'That's the way the cookie crumbles and the ball bounces.'

– Lew Burdette, Milwaukee Braves baseball pitcher, after his team lost the 1958 World Series to the New York Yankees.

Fran (Shirley MacLaine): 'Why can't I ever fall in love with somebody nice like you?'

Bud (Jack Lemmon): 'Yeah, well. That's the way it crumbles. Cookie-wise.'

– *The Apartment,* directed by Billy Wilder, 1960.

INTRODUCTION

THERE'LL BE BLUEBIRDS

In 1942 Vera Lynn, 'the Forces' Sweetheart', recorded a song including the refrain that, perhaps more than anything else, summed up the British attitude to the Second World War:

There'll be bluebirds over
The white cliffs of Dover
Tomorrow
Just you wait and see.

Those fifteen words said it all: this horror would not last for ever; Britain would just have to keep a stiff upper lip and it would soon be over. The air would no longer be filled with Spitfires and Messerschmitts, and the characteristic sights and sounds of the English summer skies would return. That's what we were fighting for.

Lynn's popularity, cemented by other hits like 'We'll Meet Again', was almost universal. As one historian of war songs put it, her lyrics would 'articulate fairly basic emotions for those unused to expressing emotions of any sort'. That was an important service to a nation with a stiff-upper-lip epidemic.

There were some dissenters, however. For a start, there was my father, Flight Lieutenant Max Engel, who couldn't stand the sound of her voice: 'She ruined my war,' he would say. More influentially, but just as unsuccessfully, some of the top brass in both the BBC and the Army thought she was bad for morale. The corporation's controller of programmes called for waltzes, marches and cheerful music with 'more virile lyrics' and the 'elimination of crooning, sentimental numbers, drivelling words, slush, innuendoes and so on'.

And then there were the ornithologists, whose successors wince to this day whenever they hear that opening line. The bluebird is an American bird, a kind of thrush, found in three different forms across the United States. There never were any bluebirds over Dover or anywhere else in Britain, before or after 1942. Not one, ever.

It is a well-loved bird in the US, among the smaller percentage of the population which cares about such matters there: the bluebird kills a lot of pests in gardens, and culturally has a longstanding association with good times ('the Bluebird of Happiness', 'Mr Bluebird's on my shoulder', 'I'm always chasing rainbows, waiting to find a little bluebird in vain').

How then did such a palpably alien symbol become the embodiment of Britain's wartime spirit? John McEwen, *The Oldie*'s ornithological columnist, has tried to argue that Lynn was right: swallows, Britain's bluest bird after the kingfisher, often gather for a pre-migratory party over the Kent coast, and that they constitute blue birds, if not exactly bluebirds. Others have tried to find a connection to the blue uniforms of the RAF.

The most convincing explanation came from the singer herself, in her long and revered old age as Dame Vera. 'It's American,' she said in 2007, just after her 90th birthday. 'You don't get bluebirds over here, do you?' Her tone, according to *The Times*, was apologetic. The composer, Walter Kent, first saw the white cliffs nearly fifty years after he wrote the song; the lyricist, Nat Burton, who died young, almost certainly never saw them at all.

Does any of this actually matter? There is such a thing as artistic licence, after all. And we all make mistakes. On their own, those lyrics would merely be an obscure curiosity. But the bluebirds have to be

seen as part of an invading force that proved far more effective than the Luftwaffe. Largely unseen, unending, seemingly unstoppable. The American language.

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The history of the two major strands of English – British and American – now falls into two equal parts. British settlers arrived on the American continent in the early seventeenth century: the best-known group, the Pilgrim Fathers, reached Massachusetts in 1620. The British prevailed against all comers and ensured that the new-found land would become first a British colony and then an English-speaking independent nation. For the first 200 years these Americans took the language they brought with them and shaped it to their own ends.

And then, round about 1820, they began exporting the words they had themselves created, or retained in stock long after the British had made the words redundant. The Americans did not foist their language on Britain; the British found it useful, attractive or both. This process sped up as America outstripped in population and power what was once the mother country. In 1928 a single technological advance increased the speed of travel exponentially, and the process continued rapidly after peace returned to the white cliffs.

Now, as we approach 2020, the American words the British invited into their homes are in danger of taking over. And it has become possible to imagine a time – 2120 would be a plausible and arithmetically neat guesstimate – when American English absorbs the British version completely. The child will have eaten its mother, but only because the mother insisted. This book is an attempt, feeble though it might be, to try to ensure that prediction does not come true.

Much of what follows is the story of how the cultural relationship between Britain and America has turned upside down over the centuries, how that has affected the British vocabulary and created Britain's current self-imposed verbal enslavement.

It is also a *cri de cœur*, a call to arms, a ***wake-up call.*** Forgive that last cliché, but it has all the hallmarks of a classic Americanism. Until about the nineteenth century, it seems the British didn't wake up, they

just *woke.* They understood well enough that waking involved getting up. Maybe adding the *up* at all was American influence: adding the likes of *up, down*, *in, out, to* or *from* to a verb is often but not always an indicator of that.[1]

However, turning a verb into an adjective and then compounding it to create a new phrase is exceedingly American. In any case I think the whole idea of a wake-up call must be American. Until quite recently being woken in a British hotel normally involved the night porter bringing in a pot of tea, fresh milk, a china cup and saucer and a morning paper. There might not have been a phone in the room at all.

But that's not the kind of wake-up call I mean. Somewhere along the line the phrase turned into a metaphor. The earliest such use I have so far found is an ice hockey report in *The New York Times* in 1975. Over in Britain it popped up in a headline in the *Guardian* only two years later, but appeared again only very sporadically until the 1990s. By the first four years of the twenty-first century the *Guardian* was reporting wake-up calls – some real, most metaphorical – at an average of two and a half times a week.

In the chapters that follow there will be references to hundreds of other words and phrases, many of them now totally integrated into the community and accepted as upstanding members of society, their American origins forgotten. There can be no question of deporting them. Who would sign the order? Go far enough back, and everyone in Britain has foreign blood.

What matters here is context. The United States has now become the chief source of new vocabulary because its technological and cultural dominance has become overwhelming. The technology alone would not be enough; it is the cultural sway that really matters. The consequences of this are felt across the world, not just in Britain, and not just in countries where English is the primary language.

It has become entirely imaginable that our descendants will inherit

1 Technically I believe this constitutes adding an adverbial particle to create a phrasal verb. Such terms will be used very sparingly in the pages ahead because I don't really understand them myself.

a world that is essentially American. Some of the old languages and customs would undoubtedly persist, though in some cases perhaps just as curiosities. Worse fates may yet await this planet, but this one alone would offer a dull, grey future to humankind.

In the crisis of intellectual climate change, Britain is the equivalent of the coastal plains and islets most likely to be swamped by rising sea levels, because here the American inundation is already well under way. It is not that no one cares; I have evidence that they do. But no one has worked out what to do about it.

***

Let us get two things straight right now: this crisis is not the Americans' fault; and this is not an anti-American book. The United States is the dominant force in the world partly because of its size, wealth, industrial might and military strength. Because it is a magnet for the world's talent. And because the most potent, the most beneficial, the most important idea on the planet is an American invention: 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'.

Each new technological breakthrough has strengthened America's place in the British imagination: steamships, the telegraph, electricity, the telephone, aviation, radio, cinema, television, satellites, the internet. But there are still significant cultural differences. One is that Americans read the Bible more zestfully than the British – and Chapter 11 of Genesis might encourage them to believe that homogenisation was an entirely wholesome development.

'And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech,' it begins. Noah's descendants decided to build a tower that would reach to the heavens. God, feeling threatened, decided to confound them by muddling up their languages until they could not understand each other. And the Tower of Babel failed as a building project because of a communications breakdown among the workforce.

God's views on the current situation are somewhat opaque. But the Babelisation process is undoubtedly being reversed. At the start of 2017 there were thought to be about 7,000 extant languages in the world, from Aari (Ethiopia) to Zuni (New Mexico). At least 220 have been

wiped out in the past fifty years; some researchers suggest that in the next century almost half the survivors will go, which would mean one language vanishing – when its last speaker dies – every ten days. One, just one, of those 7,000 is now assuming the role of global language, the one that would be employed by the workers on the modern Babel. It is English, but a form of English, and that form is primarily American.

This developing linguistic monoculture clearly has many pluses for communication. But it is also a catastrophe for the delicate cultural ecology of our planet. In the disappearing rainforests of New Guinea and the Amazon, tribal languages, built up over millennia, just curl up and die. In France, the rock singers perform in English and the kids all say 'c'est ***cool***' to the irritation of their parents, while the elite tries frantically to erect linguistic walls.

In what one might call the minor English-speaking countries, starting with Britain, the advantages of this arrangement are obvious. Who needs a second language? If there is a hotel in the world where the receptionist does not speak English, it probably doesn't have plumbing, never mind room service. We can get by; if all else fails we can just gesticulate or shout. And we can absorb most of the US-inspired neologisms without even noticing.

Older people do notice, especially when an American usage starts to drive out a British one. And there is often a wider form of Americanisation lying behind it. It is hard for *film* to hold on against ***movie*** because movie is the more common word in America, and most of the films we watch are American-made and focus on American life with American scripts and a made-in-Hollywood world view as the message. ***Fries*** began to compete with chips in Britain when McDonald's arrived. Now ***cookies*** are appearing in profusion.

And that's the way the language crumbles.

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In 1998 Peter Preston, the former editor of the *Guardian*, published a well-received novel, *51st State*. It had a remarkably percipient premise. A chancer of a British prime minister calls a referendum about Britain's continuing membership of the European Union, wanting and

expecting the answer Remain to shut up his rebellious backbenchers. He loses, and is obliged to resign to be replaced by a Cabinet minister with no fingerprints on the original decision.

Spot on so far. What happens next is that the economic consequences of the fictional Brexit are so horrendous and intractable that Britain is forced to accept an offer of perpetual hospitality from another country: the United States.

What might be called 51st Stateism is always an underlying theme in British political consciousness. Indeed, it can be dated back long before there were fifty states. The journalist W.T. Stead said Britain should be absorbed by the US in 1900, at which point Britain could have ranked 46th. In 1946 Churchill swatted away a suggestion that Britain might become the 49th state. In 2016 there was even a 51st State Rock Festival in North London.

But it is far from an exclusively British concept. The phrase '51st State' is of course used in the two places that most plausibly aspire to the title: Washington DC and Puerto Rico. In Canada it is a regular part of political discourse, nearly always as a term of disparagement. It crops up in places as improbable as Poland and Albania.

Subject to how things really do play out in post-Brexit Britain, my sense is that Preston overstates the ease with which the British would shrug off the symbols of independence like the monarchy, and understates the way in which Britain has already given away the reality. Quite early in the book the new PM does look back to the days when he wore ***short pants*** rather than short trousers. It is not clear whether this is an accidental authorial Americanism, a deep-laid clue to what might soon be about to happen, or an editing decision to help American readers.

I think the idea of Britain being formally annexed by the US is a fantasy. The British would come over all patriotic and huffy, and unite against it. The process of subjugation is going well enough without anyone drawing attention to it. In foreign and defence policy the British long ago gave away almost all their independence of action. Now they are losing independence of expression.

***

I first broached this subject in public in 2010. I had gradually become ever more irritated by the constant usage, in conversation and in the media, of words that only a few years before had been confined to America. I was wittering on about this over dinner to my friend Marilyn Warnick, the books editor of the *Mail on Sunday* and a long-established transplanted American. 'Don't talk about it. Write it,' she said.

So I did, initially for her newspaper. And it went, as the Americans said first, ***viral***. It appeared under the heading 'Say No to the Get-Go' and received well over a thousand emails, nearly all supportive. Most of the readers added their own unfavourite Americanisms, some of which really were Americanisms and some of which weren't. Gratifyingly, very few of the emails began '***Hi Matthew***'.

The single column turned into a series until, after two months, I wearily pulled the plug myself. A year later I took the subject on to the BBC Radio 4 programme for such hobby-horses, Fourthought. This time there were over 2,000 responses – again almost all supportive. Except that the thesis also reached the ears of the online lexicographical community, some of whom have not quite learned the niceties of civil disagreement and disputed my right to offer an opinion at all. One American said it was none of my business because I was not a 'qualified lexicographer'.

It was true that there were complexities involved that I had not fully comprehended, especially the extent to which words we regard as American had their origins in Britain. But the greater truth is that if my teenage daughter talks to her friends about kicking someone's ***butt***, it's not because she is in touch with the terminology of cooperage or grouse-shooting. If she says ***ass*** it's not because she's self-consciously reverting to the eighteenth-century pronunciation of *arse*. If she says ***gotten*** it's not because she's part of an intellectual movement trying to restore the Tudor use of the past participle of *get.* It's because, in common with almost every other member of her generation, she has been watching too much American TV.

The old view among 'qualified lexicographers' is that correct language was something to be determined by an elite. Anything that failed to meet certain standards – though those standards themselves were constantly changing – would be characterised as dialect,

regional, slang, cant, vulgar or, most damningly, a barbarism. But this kind of prescriptivism is wholly out of fashion. Now lexicographers usually see themselves as descriptivists, there to record the mysterious routes that words take, not to impede their flow (while perhaps in some cases seeking to deter contrary opinions).

In British newspapers these two opposite poles are represented by Simon Heffer of the *Daily Telegraph*, a member of the do-as-I-say school, and Oliver Kamm of *The Times*, a do-as-you-like man. Me, I instinctively lean towards the Kamm school, in a yes-but kind of way. I am all for the latest neologisms, if they are elegant, expressive and useful. ***What's not to like?***[2] This, however, is a situation that demands more than relaxed complacency. It is an existential crisis.

I have spent my adult life writing in English: three to four million published words, mostly in the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*, which means some of the words were long ones. I have spent even more of my life speaking English. The writer Gyles Brandreth once estimated that an average person would say 860,341,500 words over the course of an average lifespan. Not being the strong, silent type, I am probably already well over the billion mark, nearly all those words being in British English. One way and another, I think that gives me some right to use up yet more words to fret about the future of the language. It has changed around me, as happens in every generation. And that change has primarily involved the absorption of American words into everyday English usage.

This is part of a much broader picture, involving at least five different phenomena.

1. The emergence of English as the unchallenged global language, a role once envisaged for the artificial constructions of Esperanto or Volapük.
2. The infiltration of English words into other, less robust, languages. *C'est cool, n'est-ce pas?* Not necessarily.

2 I am myself trying to propagate the phrase *teenile dementia*: the mental illness suffered by humans between puberty and maturity, often transmitted by reverse heredity as they drive their parents mad.

3. The ongoing takeover by the dominant form of English – American English – of all other variants, not just British but also Australian, Canadian, Indian, Singaporean, wherever.
4. The decline and probable extinction of small languages, unless their speakers have the resources and the willpower to protect and preserve their traditions.
5. The collapse of old dialects and accents. This really is unstoppable, if modern civilisation continues. A century ago, there were hundreds of distinctive and identifiable local accents in Britain. There are still a few dozen, and even some new ones, caused by immigration, but the old ones are rapidly merging, sometimes in startling ways. Recent research suggests that even in Scotland people are beginning to acquire a Londonish twang from watching too many episodes of *EastEnders*.

The spread of the American language can be seen as a triumph for the nation's one great unifying belief: capitalism, which proved superior to Soviet Communism in spreading human happiness. But unfettered capitalism led to Victorian children being sent up chimneys. Likewise free trade is a desirable objective; but if it is not sensibly regulated, then powerful entities bully less powerful ones out of the market.

And the same goes for free trade in words. It is healthy and, in the modern world, inevitable. But the terms have to be fair. If America has a near monopoly of the whole business, it is a disaster.

Dame Vera herself was conscious of the problem and tried to overcome it in her work. 'I didn't use Americanisms and my accent stayed English,' she said during her long and happy post-war life.[3] 'I stopped listening to American singers' records so that I wouldn't self-consciously copy them.' I'm just a bit sorry that she didn't dare speak up in 1942 and demand the right to change 'bluebirds' to 'swallows'. Which would have worked just as well. But she kept a ***stiff upper lip***. Which is an Americanism.

3 She reached 100 in March 2017.

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At the start of this century I spent two years living in Maryland, on the edge of Washington. We have close family ties there and made wonderful friends. I have been to the US on dozens of other occasions, for work, pleasure and sometimes both: to all fifty states, from Denali, Alaska to Key West, Florida. I adore baseball, *Doonesbury*, *The Simpsons*, *Breaking Bad*, the works of Philip Roth, the Coen Brothers and Leonard Cohen.[4]

As a writer, there are few things I enjoy more than prowling through some small Midwestern town, hearing the lonesome whistle of a freight train – a place where everyone is up for a chat and will compliment me on my accent and then help me explore the ways in which our cousin-countries are different. I once wrote a column headlined 'Fifty ways to love America'. The number was constrained only by the space available.

It is difficult to write a novel without the letter E, but it has been done.[5] It would be totally impossible to write a coherent book in English without words imported from the United States. Just as it would be unthinkable to get by without the benefit of American inventions.

But the joy of America for an Englishman is that it *is* different, often subtly and unexpectedly so: two nations – 'divided,' as the old line attributed to G.B. Shaw has it, 'by a common language'. That division is getting narrower, a direct result of Britain's cultural cringe. I love my own country too and I want to keep loving it for itself, not as a cheap imitation.

When I wrote my *Mail on Sunday* series the editors shared my indignation about the strange conflation ***get-go*** ('the outset, the very beginning' – Oxford English Dictionary), which had apparently

4 Canadian, I know, but he was also an observantly Jewish Buddhist, so let's not over-classify.

5 *Gadsby* by E.V. Wright (US, 1939) and *La Disparition* by Georges Perec (France, 1969), translated E-lessly into English by Gilbert Adair (UK, 1994). In all cases, the author's name on the cover was exempt.

crawled out of an American freighter in an English port and then started breeding, like the beetle that killed Britain's elm trees.

I assumed that *get-go* (or *git-go*) was a graduate of the Midwestern School of Pointless Tautology, like *you betcha.* It turns out to be a Black American word, which appeared in the 1950s, possibly deriving from a 1958 Hank Mobley number called 'Git-Go Blues'. The oppression felt under slavery and in the ghettoes has enriched all forms of English, not least in the usage of that lovely word *cool* that so entrances French teenagers. *Get-go* fits into a different category: it is a word picked up amid the constant cacophony of American influence, one which the British started to assume was part of their own language.

It is inelegant, repetitive, etymologically ludicrous: a parrot-word, its uselessness pointed up by the fact that it is normally used only in the phrase 'from the get-go': it's not portable or adaptable. It actually seems to be an inferior variation of the perfectly reasonable Americanism ***from the word go***, first recorded in the ghosted life story of Davy Crockett in 1834 ('I was plaguy well pleased with her from the word go') before making what might have been its English debut in a *Daily Mirror* football report in 1905.

Get-go has travelled a little faster. It first reached *The New York Times* in 1968 in a first-person piece from a gang leader-turned-writer from the New York district of Spanish Harlem. The paper's reporters picked it up and stuck it in the most inappropriate sentences ('From the get-go, the Pope was impressed' – 1990) and it appeared intermittently, mainly in sports reports, thereafter. Later in the 1990s it began creeping into the British media.

In 2010, while I was in the midst of writing my *Mail on Sunday* columns, the politician Michael Gove used *get-go* in an interview on BBC Radio 4. Gove was then Britain's Education Secretary, the most prescriptive in history, a man who, had he not been dismissed, might have got round to ordering all children to speak Latin in the playground. Heroically, the interviewer John Humphrys upbraided him and got a rare apology.

Curiously, I have never ever heard *get-go* in conversation, either in America or Britain, which may be testament to my own sheltered

life, not having spent enough time in Spanish Harlem or, far more terrifying, the Gove household. I'm not prescriptive: if a word works, we should buy it, whatever it is and wherever it's from. This one, in my view, does not and it is a symptom of a terrible condition: mindless ***copy-catting*** of another country's language.[6]

If we are to stop this, it is necessary to understand the process. And it's time to tell the whole story. From the get-go.

6 *Copy-cat* looks as though it must be an Americanism: cited as 'a favourite term of my grandmother' by the Maine writer Sarah Orne Jewett in 1896; not spotted in Britain until 1918.